Well Played Retrospective

The Past, Pandemic and Future of Video Games, Value and Meaning

EDITED BY:
Drew Davidson, Ira Fay, Clara Fernandez-Vara, Jane Pinckard, & John Sharp

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DREW DAVIDSON, IRA FAY, CLARA FERNANDEZ-VARA, JANE PINCKARD, & JOHN SHARP

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Well Played Reflections

DREW DAVIDSON, IRA FAY, CLARA FERNANDEZ-VARA, JANE PINCKARD, & JOHN SHARP

Well Played is a concept of providing in-depth close readings of video games that parse out the various meanings to be found through the experience of playing a game. The term "well played" is used in several senses. Initially it was in two ways. On the one hand, well played is to games as well read is to books. So, a person who reads a lot of books is "well read" and a person who plays a lot of games is "well played." On the other hand, well played as in well done. So, a hand of poker can be "well played" by a person, and a game can be "well played" by the development team. Jose Zagal has articulated a third way of considering well played in an ethical sense. So, players should consider how to play well in terms of not cheating, and developers should consider how to make games that treat players respectfully. And Bernie De Koven's *The Well Played Game*, is a spiritual precedence to joys of playing well.

Well Played started as individual presentations at conferences, and evolved into a series of books, an on-going journal, and sessions of content at a variety of different events. Throughout, sequences in games are analyzed to illustrate and interpret how various components of the game come together to create a fulfilling experience that leads to a literacy and mastery of playing games. The goal has been to help develop and define a literacy of games as well as a sense of their value as an experience. Well Played starts with the assumption that videogames are a complex medium that merits careful interpretation and insightful analysis.

Around Halloween in 2020, the Well Played Journal started its 10th volume. Looking back, the first "well played" presentation and article was in 2003, with the first book coming out in 2009, and the first journal issue released in 2011. We thought this would be a good time to both celebrate and reflect on Well Played, what it is, and how it has worked well or could be better. This collection shares a sense of the value and meaning of all of the books, presentations, essays, videos, and issues across the years.

We were planning to host a Well Played event, but this past year has been heart-wrenchingly defined by the pandemic, which has impacted all of us in so many ways. We are trying to do as best we can, but in terms of the journal, it has caused everything to go more slowly. So much so that for the first time the journal didn't publish any issues for a year, so we're going from volume 8 to volume 10.

Thinking of a Well Played retrospective during these times caused us to notice the solace we found playing games, as well as the new ways we were playing (e.g. over videoconferencing, or through virtual tabletop services). As such, we issued a call for essays that articulate how games have been a part of our pandemic experiences, and the value and role games have had in people's lives this past year. This is not meant to make light of the pandemic, but to acknowledge how games have seemed to help a lot of us in getting through this.

This Well Played retrospective, along with companion essays on games during the pandemic, capture a critical history of Well Played and highlight how much games can matter in our lives. The retrospective essays and the pandemic essays have resonant themes, so we've woven them together to share a written tapestry of Well Played and games, value, and meaning.

We want to thank the contributors, presenters, reviewers, designers and players who've engaged with Well Played across the years, and this past year. Without you all, we wouldn't have been able to have such amazing and insightful conversations around the value and meaning of games.

What follows below is an annotated timeline looking back on how the concept of Well Played started and developed across the years.

Well Played Annotated Timeline

DREW DAVIDSON

2003

International Conference on Entertainment Computing

At ICEC (hosted at CMU), I gave a presentation that inspired the idea of Well Played. I wanted to explore the gameplay experience of Ico on the PlayStation 2 console. And I thought it would be more effective to play the game live for the audience, to better highlight and illustrate the points I was trying to make about the gameplay experience (plus it was local, so the tech setup was fairly easy). As part of an academic conference, I also wrote a paper that was included in the proceedings that was the basis for thinking about gameplay solely through text.

2005

Media in Transition

I enjoyed the format of presenting a game while also playing it live, so I did a similar presentation (and paper) at Media in Transition (at MIT), that focused on Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time.

2007

Games+Learning+Society (GLS)

I gave an even more in-depth presentation and playthrough on Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time at GLS (at UUW-Madison). This was the first time I explicitly defined the concept of Well Played.

2008

GLS

I ended up doing another Well Played presentation at GLS that focused on Portal. And at this point, I started getting invited to give Well Played presentations at other events. Having written up several Well Played papers as well, I thought a book full of essays from a variety of contributors would be an interesting expansion on the Well Played idea. So, I started inviting potential contributors, ranging from game developers, professional journalists, passionate bloggers and academics studying games to make a book together.

Meaningful Play Conference

I gave a presentation on World of Goo at the first Meaningful Play Conference (and it was one month before the public release of the game). Kyle Gabler, an alumnus of the ETC, was the designer on World of Goo, so I was able to talk with him, and Ron Carmel, the developer, about the game. I also participated in beta testing of the game, which allowed me to also include in-depth information on the design and development process.

2009

Well Played 1.0

We published the first Well Played book through ETC Press. It was the third book published by the press, and it included 22 essays on a nice mix of games. There was such a positive response to the initial invitation, that we were already planning a second and third book.

GLS

I gave a Well Played presentation at GLS that focused on Prince of Persia. Having the interesting experience of including a designer in the process with World of Goo, I wanted to try this live. I was lucky that Francois Emery, the Ubisoft lead level designer, and James Paul Gee, who served as

discussant, both agreed to join me. I think this presentation opened up new insights as the gameplay experience analysis now included discussion on how the game was created and how design decisions were made.

2010

Well Played 2.0

ETC Press published the second Well Played book with another collection of 22 essays. And the third book was already in the works.

GLS

I gave a similar joint Well Played presentation on Uncharted 2: Among Thieves at GLS 6.0 with Richard Lemarchand, Naughty Dog Co-Lead Game Designer, and James Paul Gee returning as discussant. Once again, it was interesting to have a discussion around the gameplay experience in relation to the design and development process. Plus, it was fun to have different interpretations from Rich on what certain moments in the game meant.

Meaningful Play

I gave another Well Played presentation at Meaningful Play, this time discussing Invasion!!, a transformational game created by an ETC graduate student team for the Chicago Field Museum to raise awareness of invasive species. I was joined by Andy Korzik, and ETC graduate student who was one of the programmers/designers on the team, and we had a good discussion around the gameplay experience and the development process.

2011

There started to be a growing interest in the concept of Well Played, which led to discussions with more academic and industry events about hosting Well Played sessions and presentations. This seemed like a good opportunity to open it up to more people.

Well Played 3.0

ETC Press published the third Well Played book with 23 essays. And the presentation sessions at these three different events (along with the three books) helped to expand the concept of Well Played as people had different takes and methods to how they explored and explained the experience of playing games. It was fun to see conference presentations inspire thoughtful discussions, and at IndieCade the developers of the game were in attendance as well.

Well Played Journal

The continued interest expressed in participating in Well Played, led to the idea of starting the Well Played Journal, and we published the first issue this year. The journal is peer reviewed with an editorial advisory board, and it accepts submissions in relation to announced calls around thematic and topical issues, often guest edited by experts in the field. We've averaged 2-4 issues per year (and the 10th volume was an inspiration for this retrospective look at Well Played).

GLS

GLS hosted sessions this year.

I gave a talk on Sword & Sworcery EP. While he wasn't able to attend, I had some great talks with Craig Adams (superbrothers), the game's creator, that informed the talk.

Sandbox Summit

I gave a presentation on MineCraft at the Sandbox Summit.

Digital Games and Research Association (DiGRA)

DiGRA hosted sessions.

IndieCade Festival

IndieCade Festival hosted sessions.

2012

- Well Played: volume 1 number 2.
- Well Played: volume 1 number 3.
- Well Played: volume 1 number 4 romance. Jane Pinckard ed.
- Well Played: volume 2 number 1.

GLS

Hosted sessions.

2013

- Well Played: volume 2 number 2 theories. John Sharp ed.

IndieCade East

Hosted sessions.

I gave a presentation on Thirty Flights of Loving with Brendon Chung, the game's creator. It was a lot of fun as the game was short enough to be completed live, and Brendon was open to various interpretations of the game experience.

GLS

Hosted sessions.

I gave a presentation at GLS on Gorogoa, which was in demo form at the time. I was able to have some good talks with game's creator, Jason Roberts. He wasn't able to attend, but it helped contextualize the game he was designing and developing.

IndieCade

Hosted sessions.

DiGRA

Hosted sessions.

2014

- Well Played: volume 3 number 1.
- Well Played: volume 3 number 2 seriously weird. Emily Flynn-Jones ed.

Purdue University

I gave a talk at Purdue on the history and philosophy of Well Played. I was invited by Samantha Blackmon as part of Purdue's David Hutton Interdisciplinary Lecture Series.

Games for Change

Games for Change started hosting sessions of Well Played presentations at their festival.

DiGRA

Hosted sessions.

GLS

Hosted sessions.

2015

- Well Played: volume 4 number 1. Sean Duncan and Caro Williams eds.
- Well Played: volume 4 number 2 learning and games. Stephen Jacobs and Ira Fay, eds.
- Well Played: volume 4 number 3 diversity in games. Jane Pinckard and Clara Fernandez-Vara eds.

Museum of the Moving Image

The Museum of the Moving Image in New York hosted a year-long series of Well Played presentations based on games that were made in New York.

SxSW

I also gave a presentation on Crossy Road and Monument Valley at SxSW.

Games for Change

Hosted sessions.

DiGRA

Hosted sessions.

GLS

Hosted sessions.

IndieCade

Hosted sessions.

2016

- Well Played: volume 5 number 1. Ira Fay ed.
- Well Played: volume 5 number 2.

Games and Media Summit

The Games and Media Summit hosted sessions

Games for Change

Hosted sessions.

GLS

Hosted sessions.

Meaningful Play

I gave a presentation at Meaningful Play on verby noun games (i.e. Crossy Road, Faily Brakes, Flappy Bird, Looty Dungeon, Rodeo Stampede, Shooty Skies, Steppy Pants, Disney Cross Road, Land Slides, and PacMan 256). Hands down the most games I've ever played in one presentation.

2017

- Well Played: volume 6 number 1 let's play. Moses Wolfenstein. ed.
- The journal did an experimental Let's Play all video issue hosted on YouTube. It was an interesting experiment to try and blend what we try to do with Well Played in the Let's Play format of gameplay walkthroughs with more analysis. We hope to do it again!
- Well Played: volume 6 number 2 european videogames of the 1980s. Clara Fernandez-Vara and Bennett Foddy eds.
- Well Played: volume 6 number 3.

Stanford University

I gave a talk on an overview of Well Played at Stanford. Ingmar H. Riedel-Kruse invited me as part of Stanford's mediaX Interactive Media & Games Seminar Series.

Games for Change

Hosted sessions.

VR for Change

We also had sessions at VR for Change.

IndieCade

Hosted sessions.

2018

- Well Played: volume 7 number 1.
- Well Played: volume 7 number 2 meaningful play and games for social emotional learning. Susan

E. Rivers and Heidi McDonald eds.

Well Played Singles

Brad King (ETC Press Editor) had the idea of publishing popular culture Singles, longform essays aimed at the general public. And we decided to also do this with Well Played. These Well Played Singles are meant to go beyond just the gameplay analysis to include an overall look at a game's importance in our culture in general.

The Pleasure of Playing Less: A Study of Incremental Games Through the Lens of Kittens

The first Well Played single is published on Kittens.

Physics Is Still Your Friend: World of Goo @ 10

For the 10th anniversary of World of Goo, I revisited the game with Kyle and Ron, and this gave me enough content to write the second Well played Single.

Meaningful Play

I gave a Well Played presentation at Meaningful Play on the 10-anniversary of World of Goo. I was able to catch up with Kyle Gabler and

Ron Carmel again. They had continued to keep it up-to-date and released on almost every available platform possible. It was a joint 10th anniversary for both Meaningful Play and World of Goo.

Connected Learning Summit

We hosted sessions at the Connected Learning Summit in 2018.

Games for Change

Hosted sessions.

2019

- Well Played: volume 8 number 1 connected learning summit 2018.
- Well Played: volume 8 number 2 intergenerational play. Eric Klopfer ed.
- Well Played: volume 8 number 3 the sporting mindset. John Sharp ed.

A Cure for Toxic Masculinity: Male Bonding and Friendship in Final Fantasy XV

The third Well single is published. It focused on Final Fantasy XV.

Games for Change

Hosted sessions.

Connected Learning Summit

Hosted sessions.

2020

2020 was heart-wrenchingly defined by the pandemic, and it impacted all of us in so many ways. In terms of Well Played, it has caused everything to go more slowly. So much so that for the first time the journal didn't publish any issues for a year, although two issues are almost completed.

Games for Change

Hosted sessions.

IndieCade

Hosted a retrospective session on Well Played @ Indiecade.

During the pandemic many of us have found some solace playing games, as well as playing games in new ways (e.g. over videoconferencing, or through virtual tabletop services). For a companion to this retrospective, we invited authors to submit essays that articulate how games have been a part of their pandemic experience, and the value and role games have had in their lives this past year. By analyzing these gameplay experiences, we hope to highlight how importanat games can be in our lives.

2021

- Well Played: volume 10 number 1 escape rooms. Clara Fernandez-Vara and Ira Fay eds.
- Well Played: volume 10 number 2 playable theatre. Celia Pearce and Nick Fortugno eds.
- Well Played Retrospective

Games for Change

Hosting sessions.

Connected Learning Summit

Hosting sessions.

Looking forward, we still hope to host a Well Played event in the future when we can. The journal will continue with thematic calls and issues, and we'll continue hosting Well Played sessions at various events. We're open to submissions around singles, and we're looking at new books, videos and more to keep exploring the ways games can be well played.

1. Celebrating Well Played

RICHARD LEMARCHAND

It's easy to forget how differently we thought about games a decade ago. We were only just starting to move beyond conversations about whether this popular entertainment form could also be considered art, and indeed, whether games were even meaningful at all. Thanks to the excellent books, papers, and talks of the previous few years, forward-looking people were already getting to grips with the fundamental characteristics of games, best practices for creating them, and a lot of interesting philosophical analysis of the way that games spring into meaning-rich life when encountered by players. But we were also still casting around, looking to make new conversations around games that would serve us in industry, academia, and in public, and that might expand game culture in fresh directions.

Though I'd been aware of the first Well Played talk in 2007, and the release of *Well Played* 1.0 in 2009, my first professional encounter with Well Played came in 2010 when Drew Davidson invited me to speak with him at the Games, Learning, and Society conference to be held in June of that year.[1] (Drew is the director of the Entertainment Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon University, and the Well Played founding editor.) I spent twenty years working in the mainstream of the game industry at MicroProse, Crystal Dynamics, and Naughty Dog, before becoming a full-time professor in the USC Games program in 2012. In 2010, I was working on the *Uncharted* series, I'd gotten involved with the IndieCade conference, whose community had hugely broadened my thinking about what games could be, and I had recently started the GDC Microtalks whose brilliant speakers gave deep, insightful, and often hilarious five-minute lectures. At Naughty Dog I was surrounded by progressive game-lovers who kept putting me onto books, articles, academic programs, scholars, and new games that fed right back into our work. My colleague Robert Cogburn showed me Tale of Tales' *The Graveyard*, which helped inform the design of the "peaceful village" sequence in *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*.[2] So it was in this tremendously exciting climate, full of a sense of possibility and new frontiers, that Well Played entered my life.

Drew proposed that, at Games, Learning, and Society (GLS), we would talk about the gameplay and creation of *Uncharted 2*, for which I'd been the co-lead game designer. I leapt at the chance, since the conference's excellent reputation preceded it, and Drew is a good friend. Drew explained to me that he would play a few sequences from the game live in front of our audience, would talk about the experiences he had playing, and would draw me into conversation about what we were thinking or had intended as we designed it.

So, in midsummer, sandwiched between the many wonderful talks of GLS, Drew and I stood on stage in a beautiful old lecture hall at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Drew with a Dualshock controller, me with a notebook in my shaking hands, and a big screen full of *Uncharted 2* behind us. At this point, and despite all the talks I'd heard and great books I'd read, I had something of

a chip on my shoulder about how much (or rather, how little!) I really knew about the theory of game design in a general sense; I felt like I just had a lot of specific techniques for designing and implementing character-action games. Now I was among game academics, who had devoted their entire professional lives to the study of games. I felt a bit intimidated!

Drew began playing through some parts of *Uncharted 2*, which had come out the previous fall. Drew is a kind, measured person who doesn't shy away from speaking directly, and often has a mischievous twinkle in his eye. As he played, Drew gave the kind of close reading of the game that is familiar to everyone who loves Well Played, and even though we'd planned things in advance, I was still fascinated by his analysis. Back then, it was quite rare for a game designer to hear a detailed scholarly breakdown of their work. We discussed the game's opening, an *in medias res* sequence that pushes the player into the middle of the action in the middle of the story, and distracts them with cinematic action while quietly teaching them the game's core mechanics. We talked about the allied-NPC system, and the ways in which a friendly character can guide the player, give social context to build empathy, and make it easier to tell jokes. Drew mentioned that his partner enjoyed watching the game with him, but preferred when he played on Easy, when the combat went by more quickly. This idea stayed with me, and informs my current thinking about how good it would be to have more narrative action games without any combat (an idea whose time I feel is rapidly approaching). The session went well, and Drew and I also wrote an article about *Uncharted 2* for the book *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age*, which became my first piece of published scholarly writing.[3] (I'm very fond of our chapter—Drew gives the same great analysis of *Uncharted 2* I'd been wowed by, including an excellent meditation on our human nature as an interweaving of homo ludens and homo narrans.)

I needn't have been scared, standing on that stage. The professors and students in the GLS community were anything but intimidating; they welcomed me with warmth and patience, and the conversation at the conference was exciting and constructive—one of those wonderful atmospheres where you can feel comfortable saying when you don't know or understand something, and which I now try to reproduce in my classes. I enjoyed the experience of GLS tremendously, and by talking with Drew and the other scholars around us, my appreciation for broader, deeper ways of looking at games grew. I realized that I understood more about games than I'd thought, and how much more I could learn. It won't surprise you to know that this experience played an important role in putting me on the path to my full time position in the USC Games program. Our article later made its way into *Well Played* 3.0, and I remain very grateful to Drew for extending me that invitation.[4]

* * *

Now here we are, eleven years to the month after that talk, and gosh, how things have changed. The world of games has gone through multiple renaissances in the past decade, as designers have broadened their range of verbs for player action, and embraced new narrative styles and themes. We've seen countless innovations in the design, craft, and play of games, scads of new genres, radical rises in the quality of storytelling and performance, the blossoming of diverse communities around games, and improved representation in games. At the same time, Well Played has flourished, with

talks, books, journal articles, and "singles" that showcase the best in games scholarship, and that track the multiple paradigm shifts in games that have taken place. There has been a long-running sequence of Well Played IndieCade talks that pair a designer with a player-critic, drawing together scholarship and practice in very rich ways. And Well Played has become a valuable part of Games for Change (G4C), from Tracy Fullerton's close reading of *Gone Home* and Nick Fortugno's sharp take on *Papers, Please* in 2014, all the way up to Sabrina Culyba's extraordinary session with her daughter Hazel about their experiences of *The Sims* 4 at G4C in 2020.[5] It's my feeling that the body of work that makes up Well Played will become ever-more influential as time passes, as it's discovered by new generations of students and scholars.

I played a lot of games this year, as I tried to find a path through the lockdown that would give me the energy and disposition to be a good teacher and to finish the book I was working on, but the games I played more than any other were those made by my students. My students never fail to astonish me, with their creativity, the freshness of their perspectives, their optimism, and the enthusiasm they have for making things. They're inquisitive and generous, and always want to know more about *how* and *why* and *whether we should.*

I think that accessible scholarship is perennially important. Game scholars come from so many different disciplines that it sometimes seems you have to have taken a dozen degrees to begin to approach our field. As scholarly works, the talks and essays of Well Played are highly accessible, and offer countless entry points to games scholarship for people from every walk of life. Crucially, the Well Played journals are Creative Commons licensed, and are available to everyone for free on the ETC Press site, so there isn't any of the gatekeeping that can exclude marginalized scholars, developers, and critics.

With its wide-ranging subject matter, incredible authors, and close-reading approach to games as interactive textual fields potent with meaning, the Well Played series has brought incredible value to our thinking about games. However old Well Played is by the time you read this, I want to wish it a very happy birthday, and to thank the many authors, editors, and speakers who have made contributions. Your words help people who love games: scholars, designers, critics, and players alike. I feel that, thanks to you and everyone who is moving games forward, we're back in another of those incredibly vibrant times, rich with possibility, and with countless new game renaissances waiting in the wings. Well done, Well Played.

(Thanks to David Carlton for his memory-jogging blog post at malvasiabianca.org, which helped me write this piece.)[6]

Notes

1. Davidson, Drew, ed. 2009. *Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: ETC Press.

2. Naughty Dog. 2009. *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
3. Davidson, Drew, and Richard Lemarchand. 2012. "Uncharted 2: Among Thieves - How to Become a Hero." in Steinkuehler, C., K. Squire, and S. Barab, eds. *Games, Learning, and Society: Learning and Meaning in the Digital Age.* Cambridge University Press.
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5. Fullerton, Tracy. 2014. "G4C14: Tracy Fullerton / Well Played Series (Gone Home)." *YouTube*. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAcgSORBL0E); Fortugno, Nick. 2014. "G4C14: Nick Fortugno / Well Played Series (Papers, Please)." *YouTube*. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQR3xhC9hJA); Culyba, Sabrina, and Hazel Culyba. 2020. "Well-Played: Sims 4 Co-Play with a Kindergartner." *YouTube*. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c3VFqH48FQ).
6. Carlton, David. 2010. "Gls 2010: Thursday." *Malvasia Bianca*. Retrieved June 9, 2021 (https://malvasiabianca.org/archives/2010/06/gls-2010-thursday/).

2. Well Played, Well Learned

CONSTANCE STEINKUEHLER

It's hard to imagine any serious attempt to make sense of videogames without actually playing them, but that is indeed where social science research on this new medium began, with studies of games in terms of only their most obvious features (such as the boxes they came in). Even today, empirical research on games, particularly research that pursues the white whale of all whales, "videogame effects" (violence, addiction, learning, and the like) routinely treats the medium as a monolith, assuming for example, that all action games are more or less alike and that it is therefore perfectly reasonable to have, say, *Call of Duty: WWII* stand in for *Super Mario Galaxy 2* or *Red Dead Redemption* for *Portal 2*. In my own home discipline of educational psychology, design is rarely regarded at all; instead, interventions are valued only for the way they manifest of some theory of mind, as if one can factor form from content.

The social sciences – psychology, sociology, education, and the like – have always struggled between two competing understandings of media, an active media model versus an active user model (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2016). From the former "active media" perspective, media is an active agent that influences its more or less passive consumers. Here, a close examination of actual gameplay experience is unnecessary. Since the game is conceived as a stimulus that affects or even causes behavior, only an examination of inputs (causes, here typically measured in dosage terms such as time or amount of treatment) and outputs (consequences or effects) is needed. From the latter "active agent" model, however, the game that matters is the game as played by the players. Here, the game is action and interpretation, so one must get right to the muck of it, right to the close examination of ongoing gameplay and its temporal, material, and social contexts.

But such close examination of interactive media is hard. Unlike television or film, games are dynamic and temporally unfold only as a result of game player intentions and choices. The game as I play it is not often the game as you play it. Thus, their analyses require investigation of not just the aggregated consequences of play of a specific game title but also sincere attention to individual differences, the idiosyncratic ways in which different players negotiate a path through the game space, what sense they make of that path, and perhaps even sometimes why. A similar problem plagues our conversations about games among parents and teachers and policy makers. We say a lot about the lives of young people without much examination of the experiences and activities of kids or what meaning they make of it. We talk about screen time and regulate quantity because it is tremendously strenuous to talk about quality in a meaningful way. Discussion of the nature and value of gameplay requires an understanding of the game as played, the context of play, and the experience of it (Steinkuehler, 2016). Discussion of the quantity of play takes only a stop watch or calendar.

In this way, the *Well Played* series is a kind of balm for what ails us. Well-played essays offer us in-depth, close readings of games in all their detail to understand how their *mechanics* combine to create *dynamics* that in turn lend themselves to particular gameplay experience or *aesthetics* (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004). In other words, how games become first person experiences.

And it is their capacity to give others a first-person experience that makes games such a potent learning intervention. Games allow learners to experience phenomena first hand that are otherwise remote, like understanding the inside of cell by navigating through the body as a virus (Corredor, Gaydos, & Squire, 2013) or entering the period and place of Emerson's *Walden* (Fullerton, 2017). Games allow one to master rule sets, interrogate complex systems, collaborate in an unfolding narrative, try on new identities, and participate in joint activity with people halfway across the globe. Such capacities are all theoretical and impotent, however, until a player picks up the controller and makes first one choice, then the next. The unfolding gameplay as experienced by the individual player is the intervention in learning. You can corral it, but it remains underdetermined if it is to remain a game (because uncertainty is a necessary part of every definition of a game: Costikyan, 2015, Malaby, 2007). All t0o often in education circles, we assign games and measure outcomes based on "treatments" that we actually know little about.

Games, Learning & Society

This is why our Games+Learning+Society (GLS) conference has featured Well Played live sessions and published essays from the very inception of the *Well Played* Journal itself. The GLS conference was designed to foster in-depth conversation and social networking across diverse disciplines including game studies, education research, learning sciences, industry, government, educational practice, media design, and business. Throughout these years, our continued commitment has been to reinvent learning both in and out of formal schools through the promise of games and simulations. The *Well Played* series has always been a vital part of this effort, with *Well Played* sessions becoming a key part of our conference in 2011, our 7th annual GLS conference which comprised the inaugural issue of the *Well Played* journal itself.

This partnership has been vital to our community over the years, producing 29 scholarly papers over just six (6) years, nearly all of which were focused on learning in the context of popular titles in the mainstream imagination. Eighteen (18) focused on commercial titles ranging from *Minecraft*, to *Metal Gear Solid*, from *Grand Theft Auto* to *Elder Scrolls Online*. Nine (9) focused in indie titles ranging from *Stanley Parable* to *Super Meat Boy*. Only four (4) focused on intentionally educational titles such as *Doki Doki Universe* or *Soteria*. Across them all, regardless of game genre or title or type, the details of gameplay experience (aesthetics) are carefully and convincing connected to learning and learning game design.

Take for example the work by Jiménez (2014), who analyzes the AAA educational game *Rocksmith 2014* to understand how the game was designed to teach guitar and whether it succeeds. In this article, the author gives a first-person account of attempting to learn how to play a real guitar from 60 days of gameplay, as boasted by its makers (Ubisoft). Detailing the transition from guitar novice to guitar comfortable, Jiménez's self-study shows how three key game's elements combine for a compelling learning experience: variety (multiple modes and goals of play including simple experimentation), immediate and specific feedback (on not just when you hit a chord but whether its correctly executed), and mission suggestions (allowing the player to select their own goal for game/guitar play from within a limited set of missions). What is noteworthy about this piece is how the author uses his own gameplay experience over time to build an account and detailed explanation for how these three game design choices combine into a compelling learning pathway for the player. The author concludes "From a well-played standpoint, *Rocksmith 2014* is both well done, and well read (Davidson, 2008) since it serves as an excellent next step in creating a model example of a music game that has the potential of providing a meaningful and utilitarian experience for budding guitarists while also serving as an artifact for the learning game community." (p.112).

A second example of rich gameplay analysis that gives us clues as to how games might be designed to work for learning is Dan Norton, founder and chief creative officer of the educational games studio Filament Games. In contrast to Jiménez (2014), Norton's work focuses on a game with no intention to teach at all, the card game *Magic the Gathering*. In his article, Norton (2015) explores how *Magic* cards change the basic fundamental rules of the game and how this dynamism provides players the space to enact their own playstyles and identity and to participate in the game's design as a co-designer of sorts. Card decks become a kind of story, allowing a player to choose their means of competing to win or, perhaps in some cases (like Norton's goat deck), entertain rather than compete at all. Here is the genius of the paper, though: While these gameplay dynamics obviously lead to a wildly popular and successful commercial card game title, Norton's focus is instead on how such design choices might be used successfully in learning games to reduce the common pressure to tame the phenomena of the world into some well-defined problem space with a single set of representations (simplifications, always) and rules and instead allow some of the muck of life back in. To allow some of the messy complexity of the signified back into the signifier as a way to led the player roll into the deep. "Learning game designers," Norton writes, "should at least weigh the benefits of adding depth purely to increase the fidelity of the learning objective, even if at the expense of immediate clarity. Some problems are fun because they are obscure." (p.200) So rather than strip down and tame reality in order to have a tractable, manageable model of it in a game, Norton suggests a richer alternative: keep some of the complexity and let players develop their own novel ways to deal with it.

A final example of analysis of gameplay and its relationship to learning is Eric and Oren Klopfer's essay (2016) on *Kerbal Space Program*. Here we see an emphasis not on built-in game mechanics that intentionally or fortuitously teach but rather the social context of play and its constitute role in shaping understanding. In this article, the authors detail how the complexity of the physics model in a single player title fosters intergenerational interactions between father (MIT scholar Eric) and son (savvy gamer and nascent game designer Oren) around a game designed as single

player. Father with physics knowledge can help son with less while son with better game skills aids father in play strategy. The result is a game that fosters learning not merely through its content and mechanics (although another separate argument could be made for this aspect, to be sure) but through the shared parent-child interactions its complexity fosters. Other aspects of the game design also encourage these interactions: the tight feedback loops that provide fodder for shared interrogation, the iterative turn-based nature of the building tasks that allow reflective talk, even the overall high level of difficulty that confounds and demands more talk and strategy. Certainly, the fact that Eric's son Owen joins him in this analysis makes the article's main thesis all the more noteworthy. But how else would we get to the specific ways that games matter to us as learners without attending to the detailed experiences we have with them, not just as a human-computer interaction but as social interaction as well? Attending to the context beyond the boundaries of the digital game is crucial to fully accounting for the experiences they allow.

Across these three examples, we see how first-person game accounts of not just intentionally educational games but also commercial entertainment ones provide insight into how game design choices, rules and representation, and even elements beyond the game (here, its social context) contribute to specific experiences of the player, experiences which are the fodder out of which learning in games must arise. Learning game designers have always relied upon their own experiences with interactive media to guide their research and design; what *Well Played* gives us is a way to make these intuitions shareable, more reflective (by the very nature of their articulation), and thus more available for interrogation.

Looking Forward

As we shift into this new calendar year, new US federal administration, and new lease on life as the pandemic eases its global grip, we at GLS are looking forward toward this next decade of scholarly work, including the role of *Well Played* in those efforts. The idea that games have impact – here, impact in terms of learning – is obvious when one considers their ability to give designed first-person experiences to their players. After all, what experiences don't shape our knowledge, skills, and dispositions in some way, at least in the trivial sense? The question then is, how do we shape the impact games have? What design choices can we make to amplify the aesthetic experience we aim for and lead to those conclusions, inferences, experiences, solution paths and meanings we hope to share with our players?

Well Played essays are a tool and resource for us to share close "readings" of games with our colleagues in order to better understand how their design elements, contexts, and content generate some meanings and not others. Of course, for that to work well, we need to do better at playing not only commercial and indie entertainment titles but also our own educational titles as well. The dearth of learning games represented in GLS *Well Played* essays is part of a broader pattern in the games and learning community: While we all play commercial and indie titles, few of us are avid gamers of the

titles made by our own community. And we should be. When we fail to appreciate and carefully attend to one another's design work, we doom ourselves to learning every lesson the hard way: through failure.

But not only should we spend more time playing educational titles from our own community; we should also reflect on them in ways that are shareable and interrogatable.

Interrogation of those gameplay experiences has been a regular part of live well-played sessions at the GLS conference, a kind of generative conversation back and forth between well-played presenter and audience. While the journal essays have not yet included such conversation, perhaps they one day might. One might imagine bending the print medium toward transcripts of player conversation or using digital means to enable annotation and comment. In these ways, we may well find ourselves rediscovering the "worked examples" in the domain that Gee (2010) and others envisioned over a decade ago – a kind of open process of sense-making that generates new insight, new research, new design, and new collaboration.

Until then, perhaps other game related events in academics might also feature *Well Played* sessions so that attentive conversation about the moment-to-moment and level-to-level dynamics of gameplay experience can augment our hermeneutic-like accounts of play and the meaning of play. In these ways, we can find patterns in the effects of media not based on the inherent quality of games but on the commonly shared experiences of their players, on the basis of "active users" rather than "active media." Social sciences like mine have much to learn from the humanities about the role of interpretation of "stimuli" in their quest for their while whale of "video game effects." In my view, Well Played are one crucial tool for these efforts; attending to them just might help us create games that are more effective yes, but also more engaging and more humane.

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3. (Pandemic) Play-Testing Copresence and Kairotic Spaces in Quarantined Academic Streaming

DAVID KOCIK, RAINER W. DALTON, MORGAN FORBUSH, ERIK KERSTING, JANELLE MALAGON, CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON, & CASEY O'CEALLAIGH

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, nine members of the Serious Play Collaboratory clambered into Curtin Hall 902 and Twitch-streamed Brace Yourself Games' *Crypt of the NecroDancer* (2015). Bopping along to the music, we took turns tackling the first level, passing along the controller, and laughing as each member invariably met their demise. As the mics went cold, we discussed which rhythm game would come next and shared in the usual parade of goodbyes that comes before spring break. There was very little indication that the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) would finish the semester virtually, or that "see you soon" would be relegated to a virtual space. Since the pandemic closure no member has returned to 902, no controllers have traded hands. Before the pandemic, our shows followed a streaming model focused on couch-co-op play and multiple camera angles to capture everyone in the room. Due to the pandemic, Serious Play could no longer access campus facilities, requiring us to begin streaming from home. Serious Play members were forced to use recording equipment from home and Discord to accommodate completely virtual streams. Needless to say, there have been growing pains in the transition from partially analog to fully digital.

Serious Play is an interdisciplinary collaborative of graduate students and faculty at UWM critically engaging with and actively researching ludic environments and their related cultural formations. Serious Play is advised by two principal faculty members, Stuart Moulthrop and Thomas Malaby. All our members, regardless of expertise, have had to rework exactly how to build community and produce knowledge in the not-quite familiar social and technical environments we now work in. As Serious Play moved to a virtual space, new and existing members had to navigate unfamiliar social and technical environments, altering how we engaged in community-building and knowledge production through our Twitch streams. Since the space of Serious Play has now, for the first time in seven years, extended into our living rooms, we believe there's extreme value in characterizing the sociality and construction of the Collaboratory's digital space. We argue that Serious Play operates as a kairotic space within the institution of UWM and therefore, while fostering a sense of copresence slightly removed from spaces in academia, extends certain institutional norms.

This article will separate the discussion of these experiences of those within the Collaboratory into three sections. Reflecting on a stream of Double Eleven's *Prison Architect* (2012), Dalton, Forbush,

and Kocik explore the challenges of establishing social connections and performing as gamers and scholars in the organization's main variety show, *Lunch Zone*. Next, Kersting and Malagon detail the affordances and barriers in transitioning their competitive gaming show *The Arena* to a virtual environment featuring casual games like InnerSloth's *Among Us* (2018). Finally, Olson and O'Ceallaigh discuss the difficulties of playing analog games in virtual environments on the show *Board Meeting* using Berserk Games' *Tabletop Simulator* (2015). Through our narratives, we highlight the importance of Twitch and games as social and academic spaces and the benefits and drawbacks of engaging with these spaces solely digitally.

Copresence in a Kairotic Space

Our narratives and experiences of play highlight the limitations and affordances present when copresence is generated within an all-digital kairotic space. We examine the positioning of power within the institution of academia and the issues of accessibility therein from our perspectives as both graduate students and researchers in Serious Play. Before moving online, our status within the academic institution was made clear through our shared physical space: a streaming lab on the top floor of a university building. Our move to stream from home forced us to reconceptualize how we maintained copresence in a digital kairotic space. In this section, we will discuss the way that moving our collaborative online affected individual members, our experience on specific shows, and Serious Play as a whole.

Originally coined by Goffman (1966), copresence has often been conceptually limited as the effect the presence of humans has when sharing physical spaces. However, as Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2013) argue, copresence, "the *perception* of mutual entrainment between actors," occurs in physical space, online environments, and even between human and non-human actors, constituting as a "continuous, intraindividual variable" between the actors (169). Expanding on previous definitions, Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2016) posit that copresence resides not in physical proximity but the various perceptions and entrainment of mutual attention, emotion, and behavior between individuals within shared spaces. Scholars have applied updated definitions of copresence to online gaming spaces, including social network games (Wohn, 2016), MMOs (Banks and Carr, 2018), and augmented reality games (Apperley and Moore, 2019). Diwanji et al. (2020) have investigated how the interactive elements of the Twitch interface may foster a heightened sense of copresence for streamers and audiences.

For Serious Play as a group, the move from a physical to a virtual streaming space recontextualizes the various perceptions of copresence between members. Before the pandemic, each member attending a stream occupied the same room and focused on the same computer set-up, assuring some form of mutual attention on the same physical object. Members involved in the stream also appear on the face cam, becoming part of the performance for the Twitch audience and fostering shared behaviors of attention to the stream and the chat. Although the degree of perceived shared attention and behavior

may have differed between Serious Play members during streams, the general sense of copresence between those in the room was easy to recognize. In transitioning online, the methods of recognizing and perceiving this mutual attention and behavior have changed. On shows like *Lunch Zone*, where only one member plays the game we stream, spectating members must watch the Twitch stream from their computers, shifting the locus of shared attention from a single screen to a network of individual computers. Serious Play members mostly communicate using voice chat, requiring members to rely on audible vocal cues for perceptions of shared behavior and emotion. This shift has had profound and varied effects on our shows and institutional organization.

Our status as an academic organization at UWM also affects the spaces and relationships we have access to, leading us to investigate how our place within academia has also affected our transition to online environments. Through her work in disability and accessibility in academic settings, Margaret Price (2011) coins the term *kairotic space* to refer to informal events with high professional risk, including panel Q&As and student-instructor conferences. These informal spaces are often seen as easy to navigate and unworthy of study, in turn devaluing the social and academic impact they have. Because many people navigate kairotic spaces with ease, scholars often overlook the inaccessibility of academic spaces, particularly for those with difficulty navigating social environments (Price, 2011). As "less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged" (Price, 2011, p. 60), kairotic spaces represent steep barriers to entry and/or occasional challenges for many individuals navigating academic spaces, not just those with physical or mental disabilities. As an official organization with faculty advisors on the periphery of UWM, Serious Play is such a kairotic space, where graduate students congregate on campus to perform as friends, students, streamers, and colleagues.

As the pandemic fundamentally altered the space we stream in, it also adjusted the forms of access available for Serious Play members. Because our on-campus location was in a corner of the ninth floor of Curtin Hall, it was difficult to physically access for some individuals, and not all members had keys to access the space. Yet, the physical space on the UWM campus provided audio, video, and game recording equipment that several members were not able to afford on their own, allowing low-income graduate students with opportunities to share resources. Through the transition to virtual streaming, members now stream from their homes, lowering the physical barriers to accessing the UWM campus. However, because of limited access to the campus, members also had to buy and learn how to operate their own equipment, games, and software, establishing new barriers to streaming and playing games for the organization. So, while the methods and perceptions of social copresence have been affected, access to streaming from home paired with the barriers of limited technological capabilities has also affected Serious Play's ability to stream and share their work online. Most importantly, the barriers are different for each member, particularly those who do not yet have established social and institutional connections. In our reflections below, we ask: how is Serious Play both a supportive copresent environment of mutual attention, emotion, and behavior and a kairotic space of some power imbalances? How has the shift online affected how we feel that copresence and kairotic space and in turn how we play games?

Almost but Not Quite Synchronous on *Lunch Zone*

Since the 2013 inception of Serious Play, our flagship show *Lunch Zone* has been streamed nearly every single week, acting as the social and academic heart of the organization. The show operates as a space for new members to learn the ropes of streaming, so the troubles created by the pandemic transition from analog to digital were particularly present around *Lunch Zone*. For new members, they had increased difficulty establishing close relationships as friends and colleagues during the past year. Such difficulties extended to the relationships between graduate students and the advisory faculty. Reflecting on a *Lunch Zone* stream of *Prison Architect*, Dalton, Forbush, and Kocik explore how streaming via the pandemic affected their perceptions of copresence and academic kairotic spaces in virtual environments.

The creation of a virtual *Lunch Zone* consolidated the social environment of Serious Play, limiting how new members could establish and build relationships. *Lunch Zone*'s one-hour block had to become the whole social package. Primary engagement shifted to three programs: Twitch, Discord, and the game-text. While Twitch and Discord act as a stage and audience respectively, the game serves a dual role as an exigence for social participation and object of collective commentary. Serious Play members therefore juggle audience engagement through vocal performance and Twitch's text-chat. The result is a further blurred set of social interactions where all parties make do with four to 14 seconds of lag. Participants had to reconcile disparate temporalities, making the shared attention, emotion, and behavior of an in-person stream nonreplicable. Despite this disjointed latency, virtual spaces afford new ways to connect and build relationships through games.

Perhaps the affective qualities of this mutual entrainment are best exemplified by our stream of *Prison Architect*. Entering the game's sandbox mode, the *Lunch Zone* crew deliberately designed an absurd prison space, placed it on the moon, and hired no guards and hundreds of gardeners. As Kersting left the sandbox mode for the story mode, the crew anticipated a similarly silly narrative. The game took a turn toward depictions of gratuitous violence and nudity; we reacted in a cascade of utter disbelief. Thrust into the story of a death row inmate killing his wife's lover, the entrainment of shared attention and emotion was evident. Kocik stared in stunned silence, O'Ceallaigh mocked the nudity in the scene, and Dalton yelled "This wasn't on the wiki!" Because Forbush's internet was slower, she was about 20 seconds behind the group, and she kept joking while others responded to the violent scene. Upon seeing the grisly scene, Forbush's reaction matched with the rest of the group. Despite the delay, the Serious Play members fostered a "belief that others are mutually entrained" with their perceptions of the game (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2012, p. 169). The delay between each member's response provided levity to a heavy moment in the game. Moments like these solidify connections with established members of Serious Play, making us feel more comfortable as friends, gamers, and scholars. The delay afforded members the space to react to depictions of graphic violence and sex individually, assuaging embarrassment members may have felt in a physically co-present space.

This is not to say that *Lunch Zone* fosters unmitigated utopian copresence, or that members always believe that they are mutually entrained. Serious Play's position as a university-sponsored entity also positions the stream as a kairotic space. This particular kairotic space extends into Serious Play's interior communication platforms, providing both opportunities for impromptu knowledge production between colleagues and a high-stakes environment where pressure exists to prove oneself as a skilled gamer and scholar. Several members noted during the stream of *Prison Architect* they were happy we were online, because seeing the same explicit nudity and violence on campus with advisors would be much more uncomfortable. Had we played the game in-person, *Prison Architect* may have breached the hierarchical relationship between advisor and student, and even in virtual spaces, shocking moments in games can challenge established relationships among students and advisors. Moments like these remind us that our performance as streamers and students are inherently linked during *Lunch Zone*. Serious Play streams let us build affective connections, make friends, and establish ourselves as game scholars at UWM, but the power differentials present in the kairotic spaces of academia still manifest, particularly when playing games with mature content that challenge the professionalized spaces of the academy. *Lunch Zone*, then, does not constitute some "magic circle" estranged from the rest of the institutional context; it provides supportive copresence & reifies institutional norms in equal measure.

Going Big and Going Home on *The Arena*

In March of 2020, Kersting and Malagon were faced with moving a couch-co-op show into everyone's living room. Specifically, Kersting and Malagon host *The Arena*, a weekly live stream dedicated to competitive video games. Each month of the show is situated around a genre or concept such as fighting games or speedrunning. Since the show's inception in 2019 its cast has consistently grown, allowing us to approach the titles we play from a diverse range of personal and academic experiences. *The Arena* facilitated an arcade-like space, where hosts and guests huddle in the lab around one screen, switch seats and controllers, cheer each other on, and hug it out after particularly intense matches. Shared attention, emotion, and behavior was easy to perceive as we all crowded around one screen. Yet, after March 2020, none of these embodied experiences could be replicated, requiring us to rethink how we stream competitive games. Our early efforts to continue the show virtually were awkward, low-energy affairs that left us more drained than invigorated. Streaming became not just a competition with virtual foes, but also with the specter of the show as it was before the pandemic. We had to acknowledge that *The Arena* would not, could not be the same. We stopped trying to *replicate* our show, instead using the affordances given to use through completely virtual streaming. Streaming remotely provided different affordances and limitations compared to the collaboratory recording environment. With each of us using our home computers, we could play competitive and party games as a group that we could not play before, and game subscription services like XBOX Game Pass offered a rotation of games at a low cost. Reaching for free-to-play games or online services like Chess.com

was our way of making do. Certain styles of episodes, particularly ones focused on deep academic commentary, proved difficult online, but other improvisational styles proved to be entertaining and educational.

To maintain the energy of *The Arena*, we returned to the basic premise of the show: to experience the thrills of competition. Before the pandemic, the show focused mostly on competitive games that often-had high barriers to entry for less experienced players. As more members joined *The Arena* virtually, we found party games to be much more invigorating. Games that facilitated large groups and had low barriers to entry like *Among Us* and *Fall Guys* (2020) became recurring features. Serious Play members could easily join the stream for a few rounds of the game, which would be more cumbersome on campus. *Among Us* also gave us fertile ground for getting to know one another as gamers, friends, and graduate students. When thrown into the role of the imposter, we learned each other's more subtle tells, called each other's bluffs, and tested out how best to spin a lie. Working together as crewmates helped us focus our shared attention, behavior, and emotion to the goal of defeating the imposters. Both elements of the ensuing roleplay facilitated a different sense of copresence than the arcade-like space of an in-person stream. Despite our physical distance, party games like *Among Us* helped us maintain and develop new relationships through completely virtual competition. For over a month of our show, we cheered one another on as we battled for the golden crown, threw suspicion on potential imposters, and created a foundation from which we would continue to grow as fellow scholars and friends.

During a dark year, *The Arena* became a bright place for lighthearted competition, academic growth, and friendly chatter. Conversation on *The Arena* is spontaneous, responsive to chat's questions or interests, and engaged with our experience of playing the game in real-time. This spontaneity is essential to generating kairotic spaces and encourages the group to experiment with different playstyles. Our ability to play using multiple computers facilitated a renewed interest in the battle royale genre and team-based games, which had previously been unwieldy in a physical space using one computer. Games like *Among Us* facilitated virtual teamwork that helped us maintain a sense of lighthearted competition, allowing us to focus on each game's competitive scheme. These party games facilitate perceptions of copresence (Campos-Castillo and Hitlin, 2013, p. 169) by directing the players' attention and emotion toward a shared goal. The week-to-week virtual production of *The Arena* acted as a sort of infrastructure, where copresence and improvisation could lead to members operating within a digital kairotic space. With UWM's announcement of a face-to-face fall semester, our member's minds have been occupied with what a return might mean. Perhaps a reverse-cultural shock awaits us.

Making Do with Virtual Cardboard on *Board Meeting*

One of Serious Play's oldest shows *Doctors and Dungeon Masters*, a D&D streaming show, met for the last time on March 11th, 2020. As a tongue-in-cheek sign off at the end of our discussion portion

of the show, the Dungeon Master, O'Ceallaigh, asked: "Any thoughts before we leave forever?," not realizing it would be the last time they would hold an in-person session for the campaign. In this section, Olson and O'Ceallaigh discuss the challenges of shifting tabletop games to a completely digital format. The ongoing pandemic has presented a set of unique challenges to the worlds of analog and tabletop gaming, both highly social hobbies that traditionally revolve around face-to-face interaction between players. COVID proved itself to be an exercise of "making do" for tabletop players during the shift from face-to-face to digital platforms, and tabletop gamers created a bricolage of gaming practices based on the resources available at the time, which they then grew as socially distant gaming proliferated. These new ways of playing often involve digital technologies and platforms dedicated to tabletop roleplaying games, like the Vorpal Board. Similarly, the *BoardGameGeek* website launched a "Distance Gaming Guide" that offers users tips on how to play games "with their friends and family, wherever they are in the world, while staying safely at home." For members of *Board Meeting*, these new practices and technologies were difficult to implement, but *Tabletop Simulator* (*TTS*), an independent videogame software designed to replicate the in-person gaming experience within a digital environment, has facilitated new forms of play previously unavailable in an analog format.

Given the emphasis on face-to-face and/or in-person interaction, analog and tabletop games played for Serious Play construct a kairotic space, in which graduate students and faculty interact and improvise in situations that could potentially have high stakes for the students. Analog and tabletop games demonstrate all of Price's criteria of kairotic space but the most important one for our purposes is the emphasis on a real-time unfolding of events. The transition from physical spaces to online spaces has altered the real-time temporality of analog and tabletop games. For Serious Play broadly and *Board Meeting* specifically this shift has impacted our mission: facilitating conversation about games *as we play*. The temporality of those academic conversations cannot happen as rapidly or naturally because so much time goes into ensuring the movement of digital pieces around the virtual board game space. While these technologies and virtual spaces fundamentally alter the play experience by somewhat removing the material aspects of board, card, and roleplaying games, they also provide numerous affordances, such as transcending distance and allowing for easier scheduling of gameplay sessions.

We can speak to these challenges and affordances from both a personal and institutional perspective, having used many of these digital workarounds, both as part of the Serious Play and in our casual gaming groups. Throughout the pandemic, *Board Meeting* managed to continue streaming sessions of board games like *Betrayal at the House on the Hill* (2004) and *Chaos in the Old World* (2009) by using *Tabletop Simulator* (*TTS*). Players often joke that using *TTS* is like playing a board game using chopsticks, and we similarly had trouble adjusting to the new software (Twice, 2020). *TTS* features a steep learning curve, and even knowing all the keyboard shortcuts and interface tricks fails to prevent the occasional slip-up. A user might accidentally move the table and knock over the digital pieces or grab an entire deck of cards when reaching for one. Tiles, cards, documents, and playing pieces are difficult to keep track of in the virtual environment, particularly for games that require players to build the game board as they play.

At the same time the platform offers numerous affordances such as scripted setup (i.e., setting up the game automatically) and remote access. *TTS* moves analog games "from a single physical location to a digital space that can be accessed remotely" (Stolee, 2020, p. 11). One player can create a *TTS* server and then invite their friends to "join them at the digital tabletop regardless of geographic distance" (Stolee, 2020, p. 11-12). Indeed, *TTS* has allowed the members of *Board Meeting* to continue gaming despite our inability to congregate in one location. In addition, TTS allows us to try new games thanks to the Steam Workshop, which houses thousands of game mods created by both fans and developers. The program has allowed Serious Play members to explore new games, fan works, and even experiment with their own digital set-ups.

Although *TTS* presents new challenges and limitations, it is still reminiscent of tactical adjustments players make playing analog games and TTRPGs. In-person, plenty of game masters forego expensive, painted miniatures on a battle map and instead use coins, small objects, or pieces of candy. A cat jumping onto the table or an accidental knock-over of a drink disrupts the game much like microphone issues or connectivity problems do. In a way, then, the technical glitches unique to the digital environment contribute to the shared attention, emotion, and behavior that players feel when participating in face-to-face play sessions. Players are forced to navigate these virtual yet tactile glitches together. The digital environment thereby generates a sense of copresence such as that fostered by in-person gaming. As any individual player navigates a new environment, their fellow players make do with minor interruptions to gameplay through constructive correction.

Conclusion

In moving to at-home streaming, our preconceived notions of camaraderie, space, and play have been tested. Discord and Twitch have become the main sites of interaction during the pandemic, forgoing the informal conversations that occurred in the shared space of Curtin 902. During streams like that of *Prison Architect*, new members use these virtual environments to build and maintain relationships with graduate students and advisors. Difficult competitive games have been discarded for party titles like *Among Us*, fostering copresence through virtual teamwork. Analog gaming has shifted to a hybridized virtual environment, where programs like *Tabletop Simulator* replicate some of the perceptions of copresence of in-person gaming. For Serious Play, these shifts have coincided with a similarly large shift in infrastructure. No longer able to access the UWM campus, we've had to be inventive in finding access to games and streaming equipment on a graduate student budget. As we transitioned to virtual environments, we operated within emerging digital kairotic spaces distinct from those at UWM. Moving off campus removed Serious Play from its direct connection to academic space, but remnants of group hierarchies remained and were particularly evident to new members. The various struggles and triumphs of transitioning online reflect how games can foster a perception of copresence and friendship online while still echoing the power differential of many gaming spaces.

Through the new challenges presented by the pandemic, we've developed versatile practices that may remain come Fall 2021. We found physical proximity and instant synchronicity aren't necessary for us to perceive the mutual entrainment of shared attention, emotion, and behavior. Streaming from home using Twitch and Discord still allows Serious Play members to make personal connections and foster meaningful relationships. And while virtual streaming didn't completely erase the high-risk engagement and inaccessibility of academic kairotic spaces, the option to stream from home does allow more members to fit in streams with their schedules. Once we can get back on campus, Serious Play plans to implement a hybrid model. For shows that rely on physical cohabitation of space or require complex set-ups, like *Board Meeting*, we'll return to the collaboratory in Curtin Hall. But for smaller shows, we're likely to continue streaming from home.

As we reflect on our experiences in the pandemic, we have come to understand online streaming on Twitch and Discord in a different light. The completely virtual format of streaming during the pandemic complicated how we understand copresence and navigate the kairotic spaces of the academy with our advisors, cohosts, and audiences on Twitch. Serious Play has adapted to the challenges of isolation and continued to foster academic discussions on our streams, and this process of adaptation has challenged us to redefine what it means to share space and learn together. The questions raised will continue in members' research in the coming years and define our graduate experience. Perhaps most importantly, we found that academic streaming and serious play doesn't always require a recognized institutional space to flourish.

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4. Well Played

CHRIS BELL

In 2012, I agreed to participate in a series of Well Played sessions at the IndieCade games festival in Culver City, Los Angeles.

Each speaker would choose one game from the festival's finalists — many of which were acclaimed titles by prominent indie developers—play the game, and give a talk to a live audience analyzing the game in the spirit of Well Played.

The big, well-known titles of the year had already been selected by other speakers, and so I was left to speak on games I didn't recognize. Naturally, I grew nervous—perhaps I had just agreed to talk at length to a live audience about a game I wouldn't admire (a silly thought in retrospect, as all the finalists were worth admiration, but a thought nonetheless).

It was then that I stumbled upon the strangely named Gorogoa—a game I knew nothing about.

And within seconds upon playing it, I was in awe.

Gorogoa quickly performs magic tricks with the player at the helm, slicing and converging time and space as a boy, compelled by his thoughts and imagination, seemingly constructs and deconstructs the world around him as he chases after a mythical Dragon.

While playing, I imagined myself as the boy—young once—enamored by the grandness and majesty of the world. Creating worlds and secrets for myself, longing for magic portals and doors to far-away places—my thoughts seemingly more real than the world itself. Thoughts I still have.

Gorogoa seems to cast the player as the boy's subconscious, manipulating his thoughts and perceptions to help him along his journey. Unlike games where players control an avatar directly, Gorogoa gives players the magic ability to cut, paste, divide, and overlay spaces around the boy, enabling him to cross space and time, often without moving a muscle.

The boy is transfixed on understanding his world—dense cityscapes of objects and icons rich with metaphor accompanied by arcane symbols and mythic illustrations, characters, creatures, and architecture.

There is a seemingly spiritual devotion to the boy's pursuit. That with enough research, enough gazing at the world, enough committed exploration, that they may come to witness something greater.

It's a feeling I know all too well and one I've sought to capture in my own games, and so I reached out to Jason Roberts, Gorogoa's creator, to better understand the boy and his quest, so that I may better discuss it on stage through Well Played.

Like his game, Jason is soft-spoken, considerate, and contemplative—an empathetic soul who hasn't let their incredible skills, craftsmanship or artistry affect their ego.

I was surprised to discover that this was their first game—that they had worked in software for a while and this had become an important side-project, brewing over years.

We chatted about how well the game captured and spoke to me. The way it effortlessly portrays grand ideas—like the power of imagination—condensing entire worlds, emotions, and histories into single, inanimate objects.

We spoke about our inspirations, and the ways we often try and capture the ineffable.

And we spoke about the boy, driven to understand. Seemingly alone in his pursuit as he wrestles with time, purpose, history, and truth, trying to wrap the whole of his consciousness and the world around him into something solid. Something he can grasp. Like an apple.

When it came time to give the talk, I honestly didn't need to do much. The game spoke for itself. And so after describing my relationship with the game to the audience and exposing some of its magic, I invited Jason on stage to discuss it with me.

Overall, this format worked well—an artist with dense, multifaceted art, paired with a game designer who'd already proven to do a thorough reading (playing) of his work, giving Jason the assurance that the art he'd so tirelessly created would receive the critical analysis and attention it deserved.

And so we got to talking. And I was delighted to hear my reading of the game wasn't too far off.

From then on, we'd grow to become good friends. I'd continue to give feedback on Gorogoa as it developed, playing the latest builds and seeing what new magics Jason would come up with.

And I trust the same would be true for other developers given a similar opportunity.

By committing our time and consideration to other creators' works—by playing them "well"—we earn their trust and respect and open them up to being able to talk about their work in ways they feel comfortable. Ways that respect and acknowledge their art.

This is at the heart of Well Played. An honest, thorough, and responsible analysis of an artist's work.

And so I encourage developers to engage in future Well Played sessions, and through them, discover the new relationships that will surely bloom between creators like Jason and those of us who commit the time and energy to analyze, understand, discuss, celebrate, and ultimately play their works *well.*

5. How Well Played Helped Me Play My Career in Games

HEIDI MCDONALD

In a very real sense, I owe my career in video games partly to the Well-Played Journal.

When the financial crisis of 2008 hit, I was the stay-at-home mom to three school aged children. My husband at the time was the sole breadwinner for the household, though I did some consignment quilting and freelance writing on the side in order to have some "mad money" of my own. My outlet for adult interaction was to serve as an elected official, as a member of the council for Edgewood's Borough Council. My husband worked for IBM, and had the misfortune of being part of a mass downsizing of 500 employees. Suddenly, our lives were thrown into disarray when we no longer had any household income.

Both of us were suddenly trying to get jobs in order to keep the house and ourselves fed. I had an award-winning writing portfolio to my name, so began applying for jobs in writing and corporate communications (the field I'd worked in prior to staying home with the children). My husband found a new job quite easily, but, I came in as the second-place applicant two different times for jobs I could have really excelled at. The reason? I didn't have a degree. Despite an impressive portfolio, I'd never finished college, and both applicants who had beaten me had lesser portfolios, but degrees.

Once we were out of financial danger from my husband's job loss and securely back on our feet, I got angry, determined never to be a financial liability to my family again. When our youngest child went to Kindergarten that fall, I let my term on Council expire without running again, and I enrolled in Chatham University at the age of 39. My classmates were literally half my age. This was at its clearest when the Dean sent out letters requiring all students to sign a pledge to refrain from alcohol use. I wrote the Dean back explaining that I was of legal drinking age before my classmates were born, and respectfully, my alcohol consumption was none of their damned business. (I never received a response, but I was never required to sign that pledge, and they re-visited the idea of sending these letters to their adult students). Anyway. It was a trip.

I decided on a double major: Communications to legitimize the work I'd already done, and Film and Digital Media to teach me competitive new skills. Two things happened during my time at Chatham that changed the trajectory of my life, both which would eventually involve the Well-Played Journal.

First, I attended a Creative Careers symposium, held at Carnegie Mellon, with my professor. On the way there, he asked me which seminar I would be attending, because he would be going to the one on video games. "Wait," I said. "There was a video game one?!" When we got there, I pocketed my ticket to the "Broadcast Media" seminar and snuck behind my professor's back into the Video Games seminar. (I still keep that unused ticket to remind myself that sometimes, you need to follow your gut and make

a choice different than the one you'd expected to make.) At the seminar, a woman named Sabrina Haskell spoke about her job as a game designer at a local company called Schell Games. I instantly had my mind blown in three simultaneous ways:

1. Video games is a job??? Of course people make video games, as I'd been playing them since I was eight years old. But, I'd never really thought about the people who make those games. I guess I just assumed that they were all programmers, and that was something I thought was out of my league. In any case, hearing that there were actual jobs involved with making video games was a new realization for me that day.
2. Women do that job?? This surprised me. If my prior assumption had been that the only people making games were programmers, I associated programmers with being male. It's not that I didn't think women could be engineers…I'd simply never met any and had never heard of one before. This was fascinating to me. She didn't make it sound as though one absolutely needed to know computer programming to be a game designer, and that changed everything for me.
3. There's a company here in Pittsburgh who makes games? What? I couldn't believe my ears. I *needed* to know more about this.

After the symposium, I begged my professor to invite that woman to our Media Literacy class to talk with us about her job. I was the annoying student in the front who asked too many questions, so I'm sure I stuck out like a sore thumb between that and, you know, being 40 while everyone else in the room was barely 18. I asked Sabrina for her card and if it was okay to email her sometime if I had more questions. We kept in touch for the rest of my time at the university, and by the time I'd screwed up enough courage to ask about internships, Schell Games was just starting pre-production on a game that would have a massive amount of written content, and their company's only writer was busy on another project.

I began there as a Design Intern in July of 2011, under Sabrina, as the narrative designer on the game that would become *PlayForward: Elm City Stories*. I didn't need to watch the Owen Wilson movie, *The Internship*…I was living in it. Their oldest intern ever, I am exactly three weeks older than the CEO, Jesse Schell. It was through this internship that I was hired right out of school when I graduated in 2012, at the age of 42.

The second thing that happened during my time as a student that would have a ripple effect through my future: my last semester before graduation, I ended up having to take a Communications 101 class. How annoying, right? I hadn't been able to take it sooner because of scheduling issues. One assignment we received was, "do a study on any aspect of any medium that interests you." Which, okay, I knew I was going to write a paper about video games, but didn't know what my subtopic should be.

Right around that same time, there arose an internet flap between one person on the BioWare Forums, and the writer of my favorite game, *Dragon Age: Origins*. A player had complained about the fact that there were homosexual romance options coexisting with the straight romance options

in the game, saying, this content offends him, and as he represents the majority of their player base, they should stop putting that content in their games because that's what the players want. Narrative Director David Gaider personally responded (something that *never happened*) to this player, reminding him that BioWare games are for everyone, that gay content is optional, and if he didn't like it even being available at all, the player was welcome to play a different game.

I thought Gaider was really brave and wonderful for taking that stand, but it left me with some questions. Did that player on the forum really represent "what players want?" Do people enjoy the romance in games as much as I do? Upon playing *Dragon Age: Origins* I was so upset that my romance with Alistair hadn't turned out the way I wanted it to that I replayed the entire 80-hour game to get it to turn out favorably. I had to be the only person nerdy enough to do something like *that*, right? Suddenly, I knew what my paper would be about: romance in single-player RPG's and the player behavior around that.

Looking for sources on that topic, I found…none. Which either meant that there were sources out there I was unaware of, or that somehow, I was asking a new question that nobody in games had looked at before (which I figured was probably really unlikely since folks had at that point been making video games for around 35 years). I went to my internship and asked Jesse Schell for advice: he is a professor at Carnegie Mellon, so at least would know where to point me to other sources. He graciously offered to check into it for me. Three days later, when I was summoned to his office, he told me that I'd stumbled onto an entirely new question and encouraged me to pursue answers to it. I developed an online survey about how and why people romance in single player roleplaying games, and distributed the link among my Schell Games co-workers and on social media.

When coming up with the survey, I thought about how people behave in real life when trying to attract a romantic partner. Match.com, a popular online dating service, has an intake questionnaire that's based around identifying yourself in relation to a series of adjectives, and identifying your ideal partner in relation to those same adjectives. I therefore copied down their adjectives and asked respondents: In relation to this descriptor…

- Does it describe you in real life?
- Does it describe the character you play when you're playing an RPG video game?
- Does it describe your ideal romantic partner in real life?
- Does it describe your ideal romantic partner character when you're playing an RPG video game?

Respondents were also asked demographic questions and to identify why they romance in RPG's, as well as what romances they have encountered in such games and what their favorite romanceable NPC's were in video games. When I went to my first GDC a few weeks later as a volunteer, I had the link to my survey printed up on business cards with my name and contact information on them, and passed the cards out to everyone I met.

My survey ended up with a data set of over 500 people, I gathered and interpreted the data, and wrote my paper. I found out some interesting things from the data, including:

- Male players tended to play characters who are far from who they are in real life, but tended to romance the same type of character they would in real life. Female players tended to play characters who are close to who they are in real life, but tended to experiment wildly with their NPC romance options.
- Of the 5 most-mentioned RPG's that contained romance, three of them were BioWare titles; among male players, the favorite romanceable character of all time was Ashley from *Mass Effect*, and among female players, the favorite romanceable character of all time was Alistair from *Dragon Age*.
- The number one reason that all players played romances in these games were related to a desire to experience a richer, deeper story; male players typically also said that they romanced in order to get game perks specific to that romance (like spells or special equipment) and female players typically romanced in order to see how that romance affected the larger story and the world of the game.

I wrote these findings in the paper that I turned in at Chatham, and presented it at a media conference they held there. Simultaneously to all of this, the Well-Played Journal was putting together a special issue that happened to be about romance in games (Volume 1, Number 4), so co-workers at Schell who were alumni of the ETC and also had completed my survey, told me about it and encouraged me to submit my paper.

My paper was accepted and published in the issue! I felt a little intimidated, being an undergrad, and thinking that as a newcomer to the industry I would have anything important to add to the landscape. Somehow, they determined that what I had to say was important, and that was very validating.

Once I'd had my paper published in a journal, giving it greater legitimacy, I was encouraged to put together a talk proposal for GDC Online in Austin. Sheri Graner Ray, the person who had hired me into the company and a valued friend and mentor, assisted me with that proposal. I was both elated and terrified when that acceptance came. A professor at Chatham also suggested I submit to the Feminists in Games conference in Toronto…and it got accepted there, too! Suddenly I had to learn how to put together a conference deck and to give lectures. Chuck Hoover, another co-worker at Schell who was Director of Production at the time, offered to look at my slides and give me pointers, as he had given lectures before. When he saw my slides, he had some notes for me, but also said, "You're going to be taking this one all over the world."

I laughed at Chuck, but I shouldn't have. Those conference talks begat more, bigger conference talks all over North America and Europe, and participation in narrative think tanks. It led to more interpretations of my data, to a new survey, to new data and new papers and conference talks; it led to my co-founding the IGDA's Romance and Sexuality SIG with Michelle Clough, and finally, to my book published in 2017 by CRC Press, *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games*.

All the while, I was gaining experience in my game career. I worked at Schell Games as a writer and designer until October of 2015, when I got hired as the Creative Director for the iThrive Games Foundation, doing outreach, education, and third party creative direction on the projects funded by

the Foundation. While there, we tossed around the idea of publishing a juried academic journal that would combine the ideas of games and social emotional learning. Already having my contacts at the Well-Played Journal, iThrive put together a special issue of Well-Played which I recruited the editorial board for from my conference contacts, and acted as the point person to coordinate the call for papers and submissions. That journal became the test issue for the journal that is now known as The Journal of Games, Self, and Society, also published by ETC Press.

I left iThrive at the end of 2018 when the organization decided to go in a different direction. I spent two years freelancing as a narrative designer, getting to work on some well-known titles such as *Star Trek Timelines*, *Chapters*, *Storyscape*. It was that freelance experience combined with my independent romance work and my time with Schell Games and iThrive, that landed me at my current position as Lead Narrative Director at Fusebox Games, the British company responsible for *Love Island The Game*. During a pandemic, when so many folks are out of work, I get to stay inside the house and be paid to write love stories. I am grateful for this every day, and am in a constant state of wonder as to how I went from stay-at-home mom to ten year veteran of the video games industry, author, lecturer, and recognized expert in game romance.

I have always been what our friends in QA call, “an edge case.” My life has taken many unexpected turns and things have unfolded in unexpected ways. When I look back on it all, I think a lot about how a big part of my success has been people like Jesse Schell, Sheri Ray, Chuck Hoover and others holding the door open for me; I think about how so much of it was just fortuitous timing, the universe putting me in the right place at the right time. When I was asked to contribute something to the Well-Played retrospective, I considered it a chance to show how the journal had directly contributed to my story and to my success in the industry — a chance to thank them. And I do thank them, for seeing value in questions asked a decade ago by an ancient undergrad propelled only by intellectual curiosity and a Communications 101 assignment.

6. (Pandemic) Green Forests, Blue Skies

Finding Solace in the JRPG

RACHAEL HUTCHINSON

Introduction

In this essay, I reflect on my gameplay in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. I explore how pandemic play was noticeably different to my regular habits of play, scheduling, setting objectives and engaging emotionally with the gameworld. The game environment emerged as the most important aspect of the game text for me, a shift in perspective made possible by the overwhelming demands of real-world obligations. This essay offers a chronological narrative of my changing gameplay and the evolution of meaning-making I found in two game texts: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) and *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix, 2006).

To contextualize my experience, I hold a full-time position at the University of Delaware, with commitments in teaching, research and service. I live with my husband, two daughters and many pets, and tend to fit my gameplay in and around the time I devote to family and work. In busy semesters I schedule two hours of gameplay once or twice a week, clocking in at 9.30 or 10.00pm and playing to midnight or so. It is very rare for me to play games during the day, as office hours, teaching, writing demands and other work-related tasks need to be completed between the hours of 9.30am and 3.30pm, while children are in school. This regular, dependable schedule has allowed me to complete many long narrative games as well as shorter arcade-style games. I access console games in my living room, having collected various PlayStation and Nintendo consoles over the years, and access arcade games in pinball galleries, museums, and large game conventions. I also play games on my Kindle and phone, as well as handheld devices such as a PlayStation Portable and PlayStation Vita. In short, access to games has not been a problem, while time is a scarce resource and must be scheduled carefully.

In the sudden pivot to online teaching in March 2020, I gained an extra two hours of commute time per day. Although I realized much of this would be offset by family commitments, I rejoiced in the idea of 'extra time' that I could use on research projects and gameplay. Then came a spring and summer full of worry, anxiety, sleeplessness, odd ailments, quarantine, state lockdowns, protest marches, online conferences and more anxiety. My schedule went out the window. Close-reading gameplay was impossible. Finishing any of the Japanese roleplaying games on my research list for a new anthology was not going to happen. Lamenting my choice of long, story-based console games for a research topic, I considered going back to arcade games or other short-form game structures for new work. But galleries, museums and conventions were now off limits, restricting play to what was already in

the house. In the midst of the pandemic I found instead another way to play those long-form games. It was not a new method but an old way of play in which I found new value—just being in the space of the gameworld, and immersing myself each day in the faraway environment of 'anywhere but here.'

Green Forests in *Breath of the Wild*

Nintendo's blockbuster game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) captured the attention of my whole family, and I played it through twice before the pandemic. My first playthrough was purely for enjoyment and exploration, finishing the narrative but not achieving full completion. The second playthrough was more experimental for the purposes of a journal article, partly inspired by playthrough descriptions such as Westerlaken's (2017), as well as comments by the game designers on various possible modes of play (Kollar 2016, Fujibayashi et al 2017). Finishing the narrative again, I turned my attention to a completion playthrough, attempting to locate and finish all the shrine puzzles in the game. This is still in progress. Story completion has been a major consideration in some of my previous work (Hutchinson 2017), and working with my students in class has raised many interesting questions of how to play a game. In a class of 50 students, about ten chose *Breath of the Wild* for their class assignments, and showed ten different modes of play in their end-of-semester game blogs. Story completion is not at all important to some students, while others cannot rest until they have completed every puzzle, every side quest and so on. But all my students seemed to agree that progress of some kind was worthwhile. I took this for granted until I watched my 8-year-old daughter play the game. Remote learning at home, she had ample time to play in the afternoons following online school.

I came to think of her style of play as 'Link has a job.' In several town locations in the game, my daughter would play make-believe with Link, having him get up early in the morning and report to a figure of authority in the town, work all day at mundane, repetetive tasks, and get paid in the evening before retiring to bed again. In Hateno Village, Link reported to the shopkeeper at 6.00am and then spent the day picking up large pots and vases, hefting them over his shoulder, and bringing them to an empty windmill to stack them up in the manner of wares in a storehouse. In Gerudo Town, Link would report to the bar owner and trek miles across the desert to procure ice for her drinks. Link would be rewarded not only with money but with 'apple juice' from behind the bar. The fiction was maintained by my daughter telling me to look away whenever Link engaged in conversation, and then reporting what the characters had talked about. Payment was managed by telling me to look away, opening the inventory and selling an item, and then showing me that Link's money had increased. My daughter would play 'Link has a job' for hours, evidently deriving great enjoyment from completing these self-imposed tasks and imagining a rich life for Link.

My problem was, being asked to sit and watch her gameplay, I would quickly become bored and frustrated. How could she play the same thing over and over? Didn't she want to play through a side quest of some kind, or open a shrine, or collect the many lizards, bugs and butterflies in the village to

enrich her inventory? I struggled to keep these thoughts to myself. After months of this I somehow came to accept that 'Link has a job,' too, was a valid mode of gameplay, just enjoying the affordances of the environment and trying out the many different roles that Link could inhabit in the world of Hyrule. This was bringing the game back to 'roleplay' at its most basic level. I learned a lot from 'Link has a job,' and came to accept it as a regular part of our daily life. One day I was surprised to hear that my daughter had completed the game story, after all, managing to balance progress/completion on the one hand and immersive make-believe on the other. After defeating Ganon, she happily went back to 'Link has a job' in the complete saved game, as well as starting a whole new game file to play again from the very beginning.

I don't know if it was the influence of my daughter's gameplay, but I also came to enjoy playing *Breath of the Wild* in a different way during lockdown, quarantine and the months at home. My ability to concentrate diminished as external events crowded in on my mind. I no longer felt the pressing need to complete the game, locate the shrines, or figure out the puzzles within. It all seemed like far too much work. There was a massive to-do list awaiting me with tasks related to online teaching, research, family, cleaning, preparing grocery lists, cooking larger batches of food to increase time between trips to the store. I could not fit in one more 'to-do' in my busy life, and certainly not a voluntary to-do like gameplay. I had finished writing my article on *Breath of the Wild*, so there was no longer any pressing need to play the game for work. It would be for the purposes of enjoyment. Having watched 'Link has a job' earlier in the day, I could also play to assuage my own frustration—finally it was my turn on the console, and I could make Link do what I wanted for a change. The problem was, I didn't really want to make Link do anything. I began to play as Link just to be Link, as an end in itself.

Having watched my daughter's town scenes earlier in the day, at night I would take Link to peaceful, slow environments like the forest. The only task to complete here would be to forage for food items or discover Korok spirits by happenstance. It was more relaxing than I could have imagined. Just being in the forest became the entire purpose of my gameplay. I found solace in the forest from the busyness of the day. I had no expectations on me and nothing to do. All I did was walk around, surrounded by greenery, listening to the birds and disturbing the odd lizard, which I let run away without being moved to chase it. My gameplay had changed completely. It was a 180 degree turnaround from my usual night-time sessions with missions and hours logged, progress and completion.

In one sense I was not 'achieving anything' in the forest. But on the other hand, I was achieving rest, relaxation, moments of respite, from the onslaught of anxiety in the news cycle, pressure from work and school, family issues far away in Australia and so much out of my control. For now, I did not want control over *anything*. What a relief not to be responsible, just for a short while. I could leave Zelda in the castle, leave the Zora missing his wife, not talking to anyone, not looking for anything. RPG actions were neither wanted or needed – take no action, press no buttons, just move the left joystick in a slow movement forward. If enemies appear, teleport to another forest. Why was it always a forest? It was just so soothing to be in an environment so green, so lush, with everything alive and living and breathing all around. Scholars like Gerald Farca, Alexander Lehner, and Victor Navarro-Remesal (2020), as well as Kaelan Doyle-Myerscough (2019) have talked about the emotional impact and affect

of *Breath of the Wild*, but I had to go through this experience myself to find the meaning of the game's title. The wind in the branches. The poc-poc of birds in the trees. Hoofbeats of deer and wild boar passing through. My own footsteps.

This mode of play was not only different to my usual mission-driven gamplay, but also different to my one prior experience of 'escapist play' in *Breath of the Wild*. Suffering a knee injury the year prior, I had found great delight in Link's ability to run. I would run everywhere in the game. It made me feel active! Unencumbered! Able to get places in time, not lagging or having to sit at every bench on the way to class. A longtime player of fighting games, I was well acquainted with the joys of inhabiting an onscreen body with capabilities far beyond my own. This use of Link's physical ability was familiar to me. Being silent and still in a forest was new.

On reflection, it is perhaps unsurprising that I found emotional solace and rejuvenation in the digital forests of Hyrule. Research on 'forest bathing' (*shinrin-yoku*) has shown that time spent walking or merely sitting in forests has beneficial effects on human physiology and mental health. Forest bathing is particularly effective in treating stress and fatigue, with a stronger effect noted in women (Li 2016, p.81). Digital and real forests differ in terms of their sensory input – scientist Qing Li notes that 'People can enjoy the forest via all five senses: the fragrance of the forest, the dominant green colour of the plants, the murmuring of streams and singing of birds, the eating of forest foods and the touching of trees' (2016, p.80). Videogames stimulate the visual and aural senses, but not touch, smell or taste. However, another research group examined the physiological impact of 'forest bathing' via the senses measured in both a real forest environment and in a laboratory, where subjects viewed pictures of flowering trees and nature videos, sat in a wood-panelled room, smelled essential oils of specific trees and listened to running water (taste was not examined in the study). A particularly marked response was noted in regards to visual stimulation (Tsunetsugu, Park and Miyazaki, 2010). Such research has led game scholar Alenda Chang to comment on 'the surprising health benefits of exposure to virtual environments' (2019, p.4), with a 'positive impact on stress levels, attention and task performance, and physical recovery' (2019, pp.64-65). Putting my own gameplay in the context of Chang's broader arguments on 'playing nature,' I see that I was forgoing the usual resource-extraction activities of forest hunting and gathering, just to be, and to absorb the sights and sounds of the green environment. Leaving the forest I would shed tears. Who knew when I could visit again?

Blue Skies in *Final Fantasy XII*

Somehow, during the summer, I felt rebalanced in my schedule. There would be no more online teaching until late August, no more department meetings or other faculty commitments. I focused on cooking, gardening, family outings. I began a new JRPG, *Final Fantasy* XII (Square Enix, 2006), as part of a larger goal to complete every title in the series. The last *Final Fantasy* game on the PlayStation 2 console, *FFXII* had a gorgeously rendered environment and 3D character models, just a little fuzzy on my HD television. I felt I was playing through a gauze overlay on the screen. Perhaps

primed by my experience in *Breath of the Wild*, I paid more attention to the environments than usual, but relished the chance to get back in the habit of mission completion, story progress, and leveling up the characters. The game proceeded apace, until I was suddenly blocked by the Demon Wall in the Tomb of Raithwall. The game ground to a halt. To level up my characters, I knew I was in for long grinding sessions – repetitive killing of creatures and opponents in the environment to acquire license points, treasures and other rewards. Over and over again. Every few days I would try the Demon Wall again, and fail. Trapped in the desert environment of the Nam-Yensa Sandsea, I attacked automatically, on autopilot, not paying attention, numbingly bored. I never grew to look forward to the boredom. However, reflecting on the experience now, I was wrong about something. I thought the ennui engendered by this level-up hell did not alleviate anxiety, but it did. It gave me something concrete and manageable to feel bored and annoyed about. Outside *FFXII* summer turned to fall. The election season ramped up, online teaching got harder, covid infections rose in our community. As the news cycle became more and more unmanageable, I looked forward to my nightly battle with the Demon Wall, the inevitable failure, the interminable levelling-up in the desert. But it was the opening cinematics of *FFXII* that really helped my mental state during this period.

Final Fantasy XII opens on a blue sky, filled with wispy clouds, through which the camera moves forward. Clouds fill the screen but part to make way for an airship, appearing in the center of the field of vision and soaring quickly up and to the left. This is followed by scenes of various towns, the camera panning up and over the architecture to continue the feeling of flight. Visions of doves and falling petals enhance this floating feeling, after which we see the desert, a crater, and the main character Vaan standing on a shore. The menacing armies and giant airships of the invading Empire appear, accompanied by the clashing symbols and stronger chords of ominous, military-sounding music. Next comes a fast-paced montage of characters in dialogue, followed by an even faster succession of Summons creatures, giving way at last to the loading screen. In the months I spent playing *Final Fantasy* XII, my mood dictated how much of this sequence I would watch. The player can at any time press the X button to load a game, as long as the Square Enix logo has already appeared on the screen. Crucially, however, this logo only appears after the initial blue-sky sequence of the clouds and the airship. Consequently, no matter when I loaded the game, I would always see this sequence.

Another factor ensuring my consistent experience with the clouds-and-air sequence is my strong desire to hear the PlayStation 2 console itself start up. Playing a game in my living room means turning the TV channel from Roku to AV2, and only then turning on the console, ensuring that the sound is also set at a volume of 10 or above. Failure to perform this process correctly means that I miss the opening screen of the PS2, with the black background, swirling sparks and contrails, and the loud chime that accompanies the words 'PlayStation 2' in the center of the screen. If I miss the auditory cue, I will turn off the console and restart. Whether or not this says anything about my mental state, it does ensure that I am seated at the console, controller in hand, when the black PlayStation background gives way to the airy clouds of the *FFXII* opening cinematics. When I think of this game I think of blue skies and escapism, truly transported to another place.

The visual sequence of the opening cinematic is very dynamic, with the fast-moving airship soaring into the sky away from the viewer. I felt I was on that airship, or wanted to be. Entering the blue skies of *FFXII* felt like being taken away from earthly worries, entering a realm that was far above it all. Interestingly, the plot of *FFXII* is intensely political, with factions warring and betraying each other, trouble in the Senate, unexpected assassinations and hidden identities. But the fantasy setting somehow offset the political parallels with reality. Moreover, it would take me such a long time to accomplish any progress in the game missions, I would be playing for hours just slaying enemies in the environment and not going anywhere new or seeing anything new in the story for weeks. The politics of the game story did not affect me. But the environment did.

Finally defeating the Tomb of Raithwall, after many weeks of play, I continued through the story, fighting my way across the Ozmone Plain to the village of Jahara, where we were told to proceed to a temple on Mt. Bur-Omisace. On the map, the way passed through a jungle. After so long in the desert and the plain, I was intrigued to see the entrance to the jungle, a paved pathway flanked by stone pillars, the whole seeming to float like a suspension bridge. Taking a deep breath, I entered the space, to be suddenly enveloped in a green, lush darkness. Giant trees surrounded the path. The path itself dipped and swerved, with unexpected turnings, switchbacks and wooden steps up and down. Monsters here were animals such as couerls—leopard-like creatures with large heads and powerful magic spells, as well as walking plants called Marlboros, whose poisonous breath afflicted my party with deadly status effects. The creatures and plants moving through the space intensified the feeling of 'jungle,' being in an environment rich in biodiversity and old-world first growth forest. Perhaps from the shock of greenery after the desert, perhaps from a sense of recognition after my many nights taking Link to the woods of *Breath of the Wild*, I was deeply moved.

However, the handpainted backgrounds of Golmore Jungle did not envelop me the same way the forests of *Breath of the Wild* did. The painterly art quality, the fuzziness of my HDTV, made it feel less like I was truly 'there' than experiencing a beautifully rendered stage set. It was a similar feeling to when Cloud Strife chased Aerith into the forest in *Final Fantasy* VII (1997), the 3D character models floating against the flat 2D artwork. Deep within the Golmore Jungle I found Eluyt village, home of the Viera people, who are clearly fantasy characters – long rabbit-like ears, furred faces, melodious voices and highly sexualized female bodies. There was definitely a mission to be completed here, with many beautiful cut-scenes. Unlike *Breath of the Wild*, Golmore Jungle was not a place to linger. Standing still on a pathway would get you killed! Even so, I found the green environment a great respite from real life in November, the height of the election tension. Completing the missions here, I put the game away for awhile to cope with the mental demands of teaching and following CNN at the same time.

Weeks later, I loaded the game again and left the forest environments for the icy mountains of the Paramina Rift, continuing on to the besieged temple of Mt. Bur-Omisace and the glorious crystal beaches of the Phon Coast. Moving north according to the storyline, I entered the capital city of Archades and then on to the port of Balfonheim. Here in these places I cried again, but why? Because

suddenly these were towns with shops and people. I could not and still cannot travel. I will not be travelling for months. My family is overseas, all my conferences cancelled or moved online. Archades and Balfonheim affected me in a visceral level. I wasn't expecting it.

Reflecting on this reaction, I believe it was the experience of being a tourist in these cities that affected me so greatly. Arriving in a new place, walking down a new street and looking up at the imposing buildings, appreciating the architectural style. Figuring out where the main places of interest are, and how to get from place to place. Catching a taxi. Visiting a vast array of new shops, and using currency to acquire local specialties. In the case of Archades, getting used to a new currency called 'chops,' rather than the 'Gil' that we are used to in the *Final Fantasy* universe. Talking to people on the street. Admiring the different styles of clothing—rich and adorned in the capital, pirate-style in the port. Exploring places with specific town-place names, like 'quay.' I miss being a tourist, and hope one day to have that experience of touring again. It's interesting that this strong emotional impact only happened in towns. Perhaps it's because I associated the outdoor environment with an escape from real life, and was not expecting this feeling of connection to realistic town scenarios.

Towards a Conclusion

Coming to the end of 2020 and moving into 2021, this chance to reflect on gameplay is meaningful and helpful, to my mental state as well as my research schedule. It was not so much the 'role' of these roleplaying games as the environment itself that really spoke to me in this year. Words like 'immersion,' 'presence' and 'engagement' have taken on a new meaning. I felt that these games supported my being, allowing me space to feel and grieve, providing a surrounding bubble of air in which I could breathe. Gerald Farca, Alexander Lehner, and Victor Navarro-Remesal (2020) examine the affect engendered by the game environment, arguing that regenerative play is best found in ecogames or green gaming. I understand now why *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is their main case study, as 'regenerative' is the perfect word to describe my experience. Paul Roquet's (2016) work on ambience, the importance of images, sounds and movements that surround us, also offers me a deeper level of understanding now.

I feel there is no 'conclusion' to my experiences of gameplay, as these will always be open to change. But one conclusion I have come to as a result of writing about my experience is that a person's gameplay style is not completely static, no matter how habitual, but something which will necessarily change over time, just as circumstances change in the world and as we change in ourselves. This should be self-evident. The game text is not a monolithic object but open to different readings, different meaning-making experiences. I just did not expect the ground to shift so suddenly and completely, and change my perspective on games I had been playing for years. Coming into 2021 I have abandoned the land of Hyrule and am slowly coming to the end of *Final Fantasy XII*. Scaling the Pharos Tower, I know my adventure is nearing a conclusion. Vaccines will no doubt offer a kind of

conclusion to this pandemic circumstance, but I am not certain that will come any time soon in my state. I know games will be in this new future that is coming, paradoxically offering constancy as well as the promise of change, and this in itself brings a new kind of hope.

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7. Playing as a Woman (of Color) as if a (White) Man

Reflections on Game Culture, Intersectionality, and Future Visions in the Era of Livestreaming and Esports

GABRIELA T. RICHARD

Introduction

It's been almost a decade since my initial musings on "playing as a woman as a woman as if a man" (Richard, 2012), an essay on the implicit ways that games, game culture and gaming spaces invite, construct and reify gendered participation through advertising, development and in-game worlds. The analysis reflected upon how video games' in-game and cultural entry points symbolized a space not inclusive of or supportive of my participation and experience as a woman player – even as a lifelong "gamer" and "tomboy" familiar with (and critical of yet tacitly supportive of) the contours of the space.

Looking back at the essay now (written as one of my earliest academic articles while still a graduate student), it provides a snapshot of a moment in time before major expansions in critical and intersectional scholarship, research and practice (as well as my own personal and professional development). It was also a time when I was engaging in early phases of my dissertation, which was a participant ethnography and mixed methods study investigating individual's intersectional experiences and perspectives – across gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality – in game culture at a time when seminal work in this area was emerging (e.g., Gray, 2012a; Gray, 2012b; Kelley, 2012; Nakamura, 2009; Richard, 2013; Richard & Gray, 2018; Shaw, 2012; Sundén, 2009; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012).

Using examples of popular role-playing games – and the *Fallout* series[1] in particular – as they evolved between 2008-2012, the essay explored how playing as a woman symbolized assumptions that I was playing as a man. Embedded within that, though indirectly (in part as a reflection of the lack of acknowledgement of my intersectional experiences as a woman of color in both game culture and game cultural studies), were the suppositions of not only playing as an assumed man in a male-oriented narrative space and overarching culture, but also as a White (mostly heterosexual and cisgendered) man.

While necessary critical, cultural and intersectional game-based research and social justice activism has increased over the past decade, historic tensions around equitable representation in both research and practice are still shaping inclusion and support in gaming and tech-related intellectual,

professional and leisurely spaces, albeit in more complex ways. This retrospective reflection provides an analysis of some of the influences that have shaped these tensions and popular opinions around game culture, as well as society and our wider culture. In the sections that follow, I provide thematic vignettes that help contextualize the themes discussed in Richard (2012) and illuminate the experiences, evolutions and tensions that have developed since.

Background

Games have been socially and culturally significant for centuries, even predating modern digital games (e.g., Richard, 2017a). In modern times, video games have taken on unique cultural significance, particularly with the rise of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) – including MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft*,[2] Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs), such as *League of Legends*,[3] Battle Royale-type games, like *Fortnite*[4] and *Apex Legends*,[5] first- and third-person multiplayer shooters, such as *Call of Duty*,[6] and even mixed genre competitive games like *Overwatch*.[7]

Both single player and multiplayer games have demonstrated benefits for learning, socialization and the development of expertise (e.g., Clark, Tanner-Smith & Killingsworth, 2016; Connolly, Boyle, MacArthur, Hainey & Boyle, 2012; Jenkins, Camper, Chisholm & Grigsby, 2009; Squire & Steinkuehler, 2014; Young, Slota, Cutter, Jalette, Mullin, Lai, Simeoni, Tran & Yukhymenko, 2012). Multiplayer games, which are often played with others online, have been positively associated with additional benefits including collaboration, negotiation and adaptive reasoning. Many also encourage the use of external resources, such as web forums and other fan spaces (Gee, 2003), as well as gaming communities (Richard & Gray, 2018) which have been shown to not only promote socialization and team building skills (Richard, 2014), but also, in some cases, organizational management (e.g., Carter, Bergstrom & Woodford, 2016). In most large communities, there is some form of a leadership hierarchy, and policies and regulations that manage appropriate behavior, community representation, competitions, and sponsorship. Games also have features that can be leveraged in ways that can be beneficial to society, such as by crowdsourcing to engage people in citizen science activities like curing diseases (e.g., Rallapalli, et al, 2015; Sullivan, et al, 2018).

More recently, livestreaming spaces (e.g., *Twitch*, *YouTube Live*, *Facebook Gaming* and, previously, *Mixer*), which have been bolstered by gaming content, have ushered in new professions and higher educational pathways (e.g., Richard, McKinley & Ashley, 2019). Some streamers and players have built emerging careers as sportscasters for gaming competitions, or created their own channels that feature their game play or other content, which can generate substantial monthly revenue (e.g., Clark, 2017). Video gaming as a spectator sport – also known as electronic sports ("esports") – has further raised the profile of gaming as a career path. Esports have also demonstrated promise for learning science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) content (e.g., Lee & Steinkuehler, 2019) and transferable knowledge across areas of expertise (e.g., Richard, McKinley & Ashley, 2018; 2019)

Many universities and colleges have instituted esports athletic leagues and some high schools have followed suit in order to support emerging pathways to college enabled through scholarships (e.g., Kane & Spradley, 2017; Kauweloa & Winter, 2019; Richard, Ashley & McKinley, 2017)

However, since the early emergence of video games and computers in the 1980s, researchers observed concerning inequities around gender (AAUW, 2000; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, Richard & Tynes, 2016; Kiesler, Sproull & Eccles, 1985; Provenzo, 1991). Early studies found that computing and gaming technologies were viewed as more appropriate for boys, who, compared to girls, were disproportionately supported by teachers, parents and peers. Research also found that these concerning trends became more notable when marketing for these products became almost exclusively male-oriented in the 1980s.

The tech and gaming industries have also been extensively critiqued for their overrepresentation of White and Asian men as developers and content creators (e.g., Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce, 2007). These industry trends are particularly important since studies have found that similar patterns of discrimination against women/girls and historically minoritized racial and ethnic groups (namely Black, Latinx and Indigenous) exist in both video game culture and the tech industry (e.g., Kafai, Richard & Tynes, 2016). Prior to this, early computer scientists, known as "computers" (as popularized on film in *Hidden Figures*) were predominantly women who calculated complex solutions for weaponry and space missions as well as programmed early computing machinery and software (e.g., Light, 1999). Women made up almost half of computer science degree seekers in the 1980s, though, by the time computer games became popular and marketed to boys, their degree seeking sharply declined (Hill, Corbett & St Rose, 2010).

The harassment of women and other minoritized groups in gaming became particularly visible during "GamerGate" in 2014 (Kafai, Richard & Tynes, 2016). However, before GamerGate, there was a notable increase in exclusionary practices, bias and discrimination directed at women and people of color (Donovan, 2019; Richard, 2016; Richard & Gray, 2018). Studies increasingly found that identification with gaming was implicitly associated with White-oriented and male-oriented themes (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Richard, 2016). In summary, the GamerGate controversy began in summer 2014 and was popularized through the #GamerGate Twitter hashtag, which primarily featured abuse, bias, harassment, as well as escalating acts such as doxing and death threats, targeting women, people of color and queer or trans people (e.g., Donovan, 2019; Heron, Belford & Goker, 2014). GamerGate was partially a response to increased scholarship that critiqued gendered and racialized inequities in gaming. Indeed, notable scholarship that moved beyond studying gender in a limited way, and instead illuminated the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality in gaming increased. Similarly, scholars noted that if previous social media discrimination and disinformation campaigns waged against women of color were taken more seriously and received more media coverage, GamerGate could have been more easily identified and deterred (Donovan, 2019; Richard & Gray, 2018).

Thematic Vignettes

Each of these vignettes represent thematic snapshots from some of the related work on game culture I have engaged in over the last ten years. The goal of each is to provide context for themes discussed in the first essay (Richard, 2012), as well as the changing landscape, emerging themes and evolving tensions as they play out in the current multimodal gaming ecosystem, which includes livestreaming and esports.

Vignette 1: Navigating an Implicit (White) Male Culture

During my ethnographic research, conducted between 2009-2013, I noted several themes around the experiences of players, and how women and players of color were more likely to experience exclusion and harassment, in intersecting and diverging ways (e.g., Richard, 2014; Richard & Gray, 2018). However, I also found that women and players of color – though minoritized – had deep and meaningful connections to gaming.

Implicit in the earlier essay were how women and male and female players of color, as players at the margins, experienced and navigated these complexities. Subsequent analysis revealed this as a theme related to traversing and finding acceptance in a space structured around rigid sociocultural expectations (e.g., Richard, 2017b) in regard to gendered expression, sexuality, race and culture. For women of color, playing as a (homogeneous and White-assumed) woman was more accepted than playing as a woman of color. For men, the casual acceptance of maleness made other areas of assumed difference stand out, whether they involved race or ethnicity, sexuality or presumed divergent expressions of masculinity.

Though most of the players I interviewed[8] between 2012-13 did not vocalize this directly, how they chose to identify, what they chose to disclose, which communities they gravitated to, and what topics were discussed were all indicators of these trends. For instance, I found that, when inequity was discussed, players of all genders in "Pandora's Mighty Soldiers" (PMS Clan), the largest international female-supportive gaming community (e.g., Richard, 2014a), were more likely to discuss unfairness in female representation, the lack of female playable characters or harassment and bias directed at women and girls in online gaming or at gaming competitions (Richard, 2014b). In these posts, women and girls (and some male allies) were vocal about their discontent with the lack of female playable characters or their hypersexualization and other limited tropes, as well as the unfair treatment female players received in gaming. It should be noted that, as one of the largest competitive gaming communities at the time, critical topics were less frequent, in general, and the vast majority of discussion posts centered around game play, fandom, competitions and community organization. Though players acknowledged that PMS was inclusive for players minoritized across gender, race/

ethnicity, sexuality and gender orientation (unlike the vast majority of gaming communities), and did not allow discrimination or harassment in any form, forum posts that addressed discrimination around race, ethnicity, sexuality or gender orientation were both uncommon and less active.

On the other hand, many minoritized players did express being drawn to or identifying with game culture and video games, specifically because they defied sociocultural stereotypes around interests. Some of the women and girls I played with and observed over the course of my ethnography were more explicit about being drawn to video games because of the male-oriented marketing. For example, in response to my interview question, "Do you feel that videogame companies design with your interests in mind?," Heather, a then-27-year-old white female player from the southeastern United States, responded:

> For the most part. I don't think I would have necessarily typical interests from if you were to pull some random girl of my age off the street. I like jumping into a game and shooting people and beating people down very badly. So, the games that I play allow me to do that.

She described being an avid player of first-person shooter games, like *Call of Duty*, as well as role playing games, like *Mass Effect*.[9]

> *Call of Duty* multiplayer, for example, I don't think you're really meant to identify with the characters. You're just a faceless soldier in whatever randomly assigned faction you are a part of for that match. Playing RPG type games like *Mass Effect*, for example, … I think they did a very good job in creating a strong balanced female character by giving me the option to play "FemShep."[10] I identified with "FemShep" a lot because her choices were my choices. So, it was like me playing the game – or being in the game, rather.

Heather describes having interests that deviate from an assumed "random girl" her age for which multiplayer, competitive, first-person shooters provide an outlet. While she does not explicitly say she identified with characters in these first-person (and "faceless") perspective games, she does express affinity for the kinds of actions and roles they allow her to play ("jumping in," "shooting," "beating people down"), which are counter-stereotypical to presumed feminine interests. She further depicts feeling like she can connect with characters in role-playing games, within which character interaction is especially fundamental. She explains how "FemShep" – the nickname for a White, fair skinned and red-haired main character option in the game series, *Mass Effect* – presented a "balanced female character" she could identify with. Unlike the *Fallout* series, as described in Richard (2012), *Mass Effect's* storyline originally involved playing as a (somewhat racially ambiguous) male character in its first two installments, which was updated to include a female playable option in *Mass Effect* 3, whose physical attributes were voted on by fans, resulting in the choice of a White-presenting (originally blonde and later revised to be red haired) female character (see fig. 1). It should be noted that Heather is a White woman with similar physical features, which could have also played a role in her sense of identification.

Figure 1. Covers of Mass Effect 3. Standard cover art featured the original, male Sheppard (left), and inserts, such as the one on the right, allowed a player to change the cover to the new female Sheppard, nicknamed "FemShep." Copyrights held by BioWare and Electronic Arts.

Most women players, however, described a tension between their interests and how game companies perceived of them. For instance, Tina, a then-26-year-old Latinx woman from a large city in the northeastern United States, flatly responded "no" when asked if she identified with any game characters she has played with, though she similarly expressed feeling that game companies designed with her interests in mind, as a "female gamer":

> …I mean, people want to play something that's interesting and challenging to some extent, and sometimes you just want to play a simple game. So, I think in that sense, they covered that. In terms of maybe thinking of a game that's geared toward women, you can't really have a game that does that, because I guess when most video game companies think of a woman, they probably think of *My Little Pony*, which is not necessarily true to an actual female gamer, because they are playing all the games that boys will play. So yes and no.

Like Tina and Heather, most avid female players described having counter-stereotypical interests to an assumed average woman or girl, which male-oriented marketing seemed to capture. However, on the other hand, their interests and presence were only partially considered or accounted for, as discussed by Tina and described in Richard (2012).

In fact, all of the women of color interviewed communicated limitations in being able to identify with characters. Instead, some, like Donna, a 25-year-old Black woman from the southeastern United States, described being particularly attracted to games developed by *Valve* because "they actually do take the time to both develop a game that's good and… kind of equal when it comes to female representation, but also that their female characters aren't donned in cheerleading outfits with short skirts and pompoms, and hairstyles that resemble a 10-year-old or something." However, she overall felt that, with the vast majority of video games, she was more compelled by the story than the characters themselves, who she mostly assumed were male: "If I start a game campaign off and I really understand why this character wants to do what he does, then I'll probably root for them a lot more than if it's – just you start the game and shoot these people…"

Similarly, Karen, a 21-year-old Black woman from the midwestern United States, felt she generally did not identify with game characters because "…a lot of times when there is a female character, she's usually really oversexed or just not too good of an example, and… guy characters are usually better looked upon." However, she did express one rare instance where she identified with a character in a popular game: "*Left for Dead*[11] was fun – being able to play as Rochelle because she was one of the only African American female characters that I've seen in a videogame, so, it's very cool being able to play her." Karen, in particular, when describing the game (which is developed by *Valve*), is explicit in describing how gender and race are intersectionally limited in game culture. Then, and even now, Rochelle stands out as one of the few Black female protagonists in a major game franchise.

Though gender and racial representation has improved somewhat in recent years, a recent industry survey of games produced from 2017-21 found that, when human or human-like main playable characters are featured, 79.2% of them are male (Lin, 2021). Out of all playable and non-playable characters featured in games, 66.5% are male, 27.7% are female, and 5.8% are non-binary; in fact, 31.7% of video games only contain male characters. The increase of female characters and the presence of non-binary ones represents an improvement in comparison to prior notable surveys in 2001 and 2009 (Glaubke, Miller, Parker & Espejo, 2001; Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory, 2009). Both found that less than 12% of playable characters were female, and none made mention of non-binary characters. More than 61% of characters are White, with the remaining 38.8% including all other assumed non-White groups as a result of encountering "difficulty in determining the true ethnicity of many multiracial characters… due to a lack of background information across the characters in many games" (Lin, 2021). The survey also determined that 9.5% of video games have no non-White main characters. In 2001, women of color were more likely to be featured as props, bystanders or victims of violence in video games, and, though female playable characters of color increased noticeably from less than 3% in 2001 (Glaubke, et. al, 2001) to 8.3% in 2021, most could be found in certain popular, first-person perspective multiplayer games with many characters (see fig. 2[12] Copyrights

held by Electronic Arts.), such as *Apex Legends* (Lin, 2021). *Apex Legends*, and similar games with ensemble casts of diverse characters with different skills and attributes, like *Overwatch*, are first-person perspective games, as is *Left 4 Dead*, which featured Rochelle in its second installment in 2009 (where she appeared as the lone female character in a group of four, replacing a White female in the prior game).

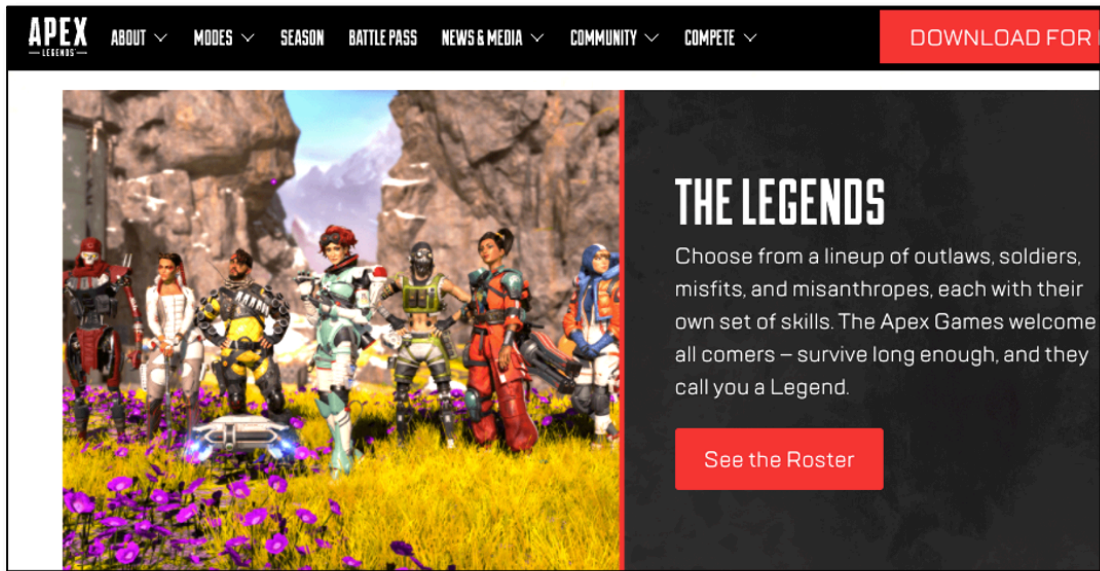

Figure 2. Apex Legends, a first-person perspective, battle royale-type game with a diverse set of characters with different abilities and skills. Advertising from the official EA website.

Figure 3. First-person perspective when playing Apex Legends (IGN, 2019). Copyrights held by Electronic Arts.

On the one hand, since battle royale-type and similar multiplayer games, like *Apex* and *Overwatch*, are amongst the most popular titles in recent years, having greater gender and cultural diversity

signals an emerging and a potentially significant shift in gaming representation. On the other hand, while there had been some improvements in the racial and gender character options available in and marketed around video games in the last 20 years, it is notable that the games that are most prominent in featuring characters of color and non-binary characters are those where the camera perspective renders the character "faceless," in the ways described by Heather (see fig. 3).

Analyses of video game characters over the years have noted that, after White male characters, the most prominent characters are Black (22%), Asian (9%) and Latino (2%) men (e.g., Glaubke, et. al, 2001), though, unlike White male characters, they are more likely to be limited to sports games or highly stereotyped roles and tropes (Glaubke, et. al, 2001; Williams, et. al 2009). The discernable presence of male characters of color could partially account for some men of color feeling a sense of identification. For instance, when interviewed in 2012, Keith, a then-21-year-old Black male player from the midwestern United States, felt that he could "sometimes" identify with game characters:

> … let's say for instance, *Grand Theft Auto* … even though it was about drugs, gangs, and shootouts, sex and money, it's almost like the neighborhood I live in now. And then on top of that, you can create a character to look just like you, so it's like you can create an African American character, put the clothes on him that you would usually dress in, and then you go out and do your missions… And even though he's going about it the wrong way – which you're not necessarily trying to go about it in that fashion – you feel for that character, because you want those things that that character has…

While Keith acknowledges the problematic tropes in *Grand Theft Auto*, he describes the importance of being able to play with characters that appear similar to him and may reflect some aspects of his experience. In a sense, he articulates a duality other scholars have noted with respect to hip hop music videos and marketing, which can contain not only problematic racialized and gendered stereotypes, but also enable Black and Brown youth and adults to redefine their identity and self-perceptions in the face of systematic oppression (e.g., Dimitriadis, 2001; Hill, 2009).

Playing as anyone other than a White, cisgender man has improved somewhat over the years and yet remained opaque. Playing as a woman, particularly in 2012, was more pronounced as an area of difference, and, simultaneously, of solidarity amongst the majority group marginalized (women and girls) for whom supportive structures and communities (such as PMS Clan) were designed. For instance, it was easier to find gender support than intersectional gendered and racialized support. It was more salient to describe playing as a woman than playing as a woman (of color) in a space gendered and racialized as belonging to mostly White, heterosexual and cisgender men and boys.

While men of color have been represented to a degree, and, increasingly, in more diverse ways, many of their options remain limited to certain kinds of characters and games. In 2001, for example, most characters of color were limited to fighting games, sports games, and namely highly stereotyped role-playing games (e.g., Glaubke, et. al, 2001), such as *Grand Theft Auto*, as discussed by Keith, which Everett and Watkins (2008) described as enacting "racialized pedagogical zones," or "racist discourses already circulating in … mainstream culture [that] intensify these messages and lessons of racial

difference through the power and allure of interactive gameplay" (p.142). In 2021, characters of color have increased to include more men and women, though their roles have also been limited, albeit in different ways. When taking the recent industry content analysis into account (Lin, 2021), it appears that video game companies have opted for more racial and gender diversity through ambiguity, such as in ensemble games with first-person and "faceless" interactions.

Thus, while diversity has statistically improved, the quality of that increase is debatable, which I argue is related to the continued assumptions of a White, cisgendered masculine leisure and intellectual space. A second contributor can best be summarized in the next vignette: the implicit assumptions of "value free" design.

Vignette 2: "Value Free" Design and the Case of Horizon Zero Dawn

Horizon Zero Dawn[13] (herein *Horizon*) represents both a case study in the next wave of female character representation in role playing games beyond the critique of such representations and their evolutions in the 2012 essay (which used *Fallout 3*, *Fallout New Vegas*, and *Skyrim* as cases), and a critique of and embodiment of content agnostic (or "value free" design).[14]

Horizon's counterstereotypical portrayal of a female character who is multifaceted, capable and bold, "unshackled… from the tired 'strong female character' cliché of a woman trying to make her way in a man's world, giving her free reign to be all these things and more" (Williams, 2017) is significant and notable in the history of top selling video games. Markedly, it became one of *Playstation 4*'s top selling games of all time, with over 10 million copies sold in its first year (Hulst, 2019), though, behind the scenes, *Sony* considered having a female lead character to be "risky" enough that then-president Shuhei Yoshida stated he was so "worried" he felt compelled to bring in marketing teams to confirm its viability and, even then, was "nervous" about how it would be received during a public unveiling (Crecente, 2015).

Figure 4. Aloy as a child (left); Animal-like Machines (right). Copyrights held by Guerrilla Games/Sony.

The protagonist, named Aloy, represents a headstrong, complex and capable heroine in a postapocalyptic yet lush world populated by humans and animal-like machines (fig. 4, right) which, once in balance with humans like the contemporary animals they share features with, now have become erratic and uncharacteristically hostile for mysterious reasons that initiate the narrative. Players are introduced to Aloy as a child (fig. 4, left) learning how to hunt with her dedicated, single father figure, named Rost (fig. 5, right). Rost is considered an "outcast" by the "Nora" tribe she is affiliated with. Aloy herself is considered an outcast since she is seemingly parentless (for reasons that are later revealed). Though an outcast, Rost is loyal to the values of the Nora tribe, which is led by three High Matriarchs (as well as dozens of other matriarchs), each of whom are older women and two of whom are discernably women of color (fig. 5, left).[15]

Figure 5. High Matriarchs (left); Aloy's father figure Rost (right). Copyrights held by Guerrilla Games/Sony.

At the very beginning of the game, young Aloy (who is presented as six or seven years old and very curious) accidently discovers and explores an ancient "Cauldron," which is soon revealed as a ruin of the now ancient 21st century world. She discovers the Cauldron after being rejected by other Nora children she wanted to pick berries with. Few have ventured into Cauldrons and the Nora matriarchs are described early on as forbidding exploration. When exploring as an unwitting child, she discovers a "Focus" (fig. 6), a piece of ancient augmented reality (AR) technology that allows her to view and access special features of the robotic beasts, as well as old tech, such as recorded messages left by the "Old Ones" (e.g., 21st century humans).

Figure 6. Child Aloy using the Focus to interact with old and new tech. Copyrights held by Guerrilla Games/Sony.

Through the "Focus," she learns about the past, which becomes a central part of her quest. Early on, while still a child, she uses the "Focus" to save a young Nora boy from machines[16] that surrounded him after falling into their midst. However, as an outcast, she is spurned by other Nora children despite her heroic rescue, prompting her to ask Rost why she was considered an exile. While he admits he does not know, he suggests she can learn about her past from the High Matriarchs, who she can gain access to after running in the "Proving," a coming-of-age ritual for all Nora, including former outcasts, where they compete to become "Braves," skilled hunters that defend the tribe.

Driven to understand her past, she spends the next twelve years preparing for the Proving, and primary gameplay begins when she has come of age (at around eighteen) to participate. Anyone who completes the perilous competition – which involves taking down machines and traversing dangerous terrain – can become a Brave (and, for Aloy, formal acceptance into the tribe), though those who finish first are given special recognition. Despite falling behind, in part due to an adversarial male competitor, she manages to navigate a more hazardous shortcut and finish first, much to the chagrin of her rival. However, her victory is short-lived when they are attacked by unknown human enemies (later revealed to be "cultists") who massacre several Nora, including two of her fellow competitors. While she is able to take down most of the remaining cultists, she is eventually captured by one who attempts to assassinate her. However, Rost appears and fends off the attacker, though he perishes when he shields her from a bomb and pushes her to safety. The Nora are both surprised

and distraught by the unexpected massacre, and, despite strong reservations from one of the High Matriarchs, Aloy is given a special mission to uncover the motive behind the attack after several Nora Braves are killed in pursuit of the attackers. She is assigned the rare, distinctive title of "Seeker," which is only granted in times of great need, and enables her to venture beyond their "sacred lands" and traditional practices.

Figure 7. Young adult Aloy in promotional material (left); third-person perspective gameplay (right). Copyrights held by Guerrilla Games/Sony.

Throughout the mostly open world, you explore as Aloy from a third-person perspective (fig. 7, right), taking down machines and scavenging them for parts, purchasing and upgrading weapons and armor (fashioned as Native American-inspired tribal wear (e.g., fig. 7, left) derived from machines and robotic creature parts), uncovering ancient recordings and technology, and attempting to uncover secrets from the past that are directly related to the challenges faced by humans endeavoring to survive in the postapocalyptic world set in the 31st century (Makuch, 2016).

As a game designed by John Gonzalez (Makuch, 2016), the writer for *Fallout New Vegas* (released in 2010) and reportedly initiated in 2011 (though not released until 2017), it presents an intriguing case for the next evolution of more expansive female character representation in RPGs (building upon *Fallout* NV, as described in Richard, 2012). However, *Horizon* is centered around Aloy as the primary playable character. As a result, interaction involves third-person perspective play where Aloy's agency is central (see fig. 7), unlike *Fallout* NV, where a customizable character is a major mechanic and first-person perspective orientation is the default option.[17]

Scholarly analyses suggest that *Horizon's* storyline and design choices offer unique and persuasive opportunities for critical play. For instance, Forni (2019) suggests that, in addition to Aloy, the game presents an array of counterstereotypical and complex characters that embody features and behavior that blend and defy traditionally masculine and feminine qualities. Though Aloy conforms to Western beauty standards, her attire is not objectifying, and, while some male and female characters comment

on their attraction to her, they are more likely to describe her strength, courageousness and cunning over her looks. Prominent nonplayable male characters enact non-traditional and multifaceted roles, such as Rost as both nurturing father and proficient hunter, and, Teb (the Nora boy Aloy saves at the beginning) as both shy and unathletic, as well as a gifted stitcher who provides Aloy with her classic armor (as featured in game marketing material and in figure 7). Moreover, while the game begins from the perspective of the matriarchal Nora tribe, Aloy encounters both matriarchal and patriarchal-oriented tribes, which allow players to "reflect on limits and potentialities of gendered power in real life as well" with the "message… that both matriarchy and patriarchy present various limitations" (Forni, 2019, p. 91).

Figure 8. Holograms of GAIA (left); Dr. Elisabet Sobeck (right). Copyrights held by Guerrilla Games/Sony.

However, the overarching narrative involves the strong female-oriented values of the Nora as Aloy's tribe, including their religious beliefs around a "Mother" goddess. Later on in the story, as the series of events that led to the postapocalyptic world and the current conflicts is revealed, players learn about the centrality of Dr. Elisabet Sobeck, a brilliant engineer and scientist from the 21st century, from which it is later revealed that Aloy's genetic code is cloned. Dr. Sobeck (fig. 8, right) is the creator of GAIA (fig. 8, left), a complex governing Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) with emotional capabilities, which controls Zero Dawn, a network of terraforming and cloning functions developed to restore the planet after autonomous, self-replicating military robots, developed by businessman Ted Faro (founder of the robotics corporation she worked for) ravaged the earth and consumed all life for fuel, resulting in mass extinction. HADES, a subfunction of GAIA designed to reverse terraforming efforts should they prove unsuccessful, is positioned as the necessary counterbalance of destruction to creation integral in complex ecosystems (Woolbright, 2018). However, now, an unknown force has caused it to become autonomous and run amok, enabled by one of the patriarchal tribes, later revealed as the "cultists" that assassinated the Nora and attempted to kill Aloy, thus setting the stage for ensuing confrontation to restore balance once again. In essence, matriarchal and patriarchal archetypes are in juxtaposition: GAIA as matriarchal creator along with Aloy/Elisabet as heroine(s) are set in opposition to HADES as patriarchal destroyer, the cultists and their leader Helis (fig. 9, left), a man bent on domination, as

primary antagonists, and Sylens (fig. 9, right), a shadowy figure and potential future adversary who personifies individualism in that he wants to assist Aloy in stopping HADES so he can amass more knowledge and time for himself (Woolbright, 2018).

Figure 9. Helis, leader of the cultists (left); Silas, a wanderer out for his own aims (right). Copyrights held by Guerrilla Games/Sony.

A core emphasis of the game centers on the climate crisis and sustainability (Woolbright, 2018; Condis, 2020). Condis (2020) suggests that games are particularly powerful for fostering ecocritical reflection as complex systems, and the story presented in *Horizon* is "both a celebration of and a cautionary tale about ecomodernism." Ecomodernism emphasizes the importance of technical innovation in solving ecological problems yet ignores the implicit values placed in consumerism, capitalism and individualism that have directly contributed to current environmental problems. Nevertheless, by playing through the dilemma of Elisabet's "techno-fix" it is possible that players might ponder the limitations of ecomodernism, which is revealed through the core storyline as her innovations are coopted and corrupted for militarism and destruction by Ted Faro in his quest for greater profits. However, Condis (2020) suggests that, while the story itself opens up these possibilities, the core gameplay mechanics, which center around fast-paced and combat-oriented interactions, renders significant aspects of the story (which sometimes require listening to or viewing sequences around potential combat zones) and related reflection opportunities to the periphery. Moreover, Woolbright (2018) suggests that the medium itself may present some limitations for deep reflection, particularly as one built around individual choices and experiences with the story.

Woolbright (2018) further suggests that core narrative and design elements personify ecofeminist theoretical ideas; these theories assert "that social transformation is necessary for ecological survival, that intellectual transformation of dominant modes of thought must accompany social transformation, that nature teaches nondualistic and nonhierarchical systems of relation that are models for social transformation of values, and that human and cultural diversity are values in social transformation" (Howell, 1997, p. 231). Woolbright (2018) offers that Aloy is an "intersectional heroine"

whose "whole identity… drives" the game, and Forni (2019) proposes that non-playable characters allow intersectional engagement for "female players… [who have] the chance to identify with many different female characters… [with] a wide spectrum of personalities" (p. 98).

Yet, the diverse and mostly counterstereotypical in-game sociocultural representations, while heralded by critics as unexpected and unprecedentedly divergent (e.g., Polo, 2017; William, 2017), were not without limitations for intersectional engagement. Indigenous writer Dia Lacina (2017) conspicuously underscores the oblivious and widespread acceptance of Indigenous cultural appropriation by the overwhelmingly "non-Native games journalists," excited by the "'unique' and 'refreshing' take on gender, social politics, matriarchies." Her deep analysis further sheds light on *Horizon*'s prolific use of problematic terms (such as "braves" and "savages") and tropes ascribed to Native Americans, who were not consulted as part of the design process. Moreover, building the story upon a White-presenting, fair-skinned woman relegates other characters as drivers of and background dressing to her experience. Woolbright (2018) provides a critique of GAIA's "racialized depiction" as a "toga-clad [B]lack woman… [which] unfortunately classes her with the all-too-familiar trope of the Magical Negro, the token [B]lack character of page and screen who possesses mystical insight and selflessly aids in advancing the white protagonist's plot." Though most characters do not present such glaringly problematic racialized examples, incorporating people of color as support characters, particularly for White women, has been critiqued for its prolific use in media generally; instead, "to incorporate the experiences and insights of women of color meaningfully… creators would have to… decenter whiteness both narratively and figuratively" (Benson-Allott, 2017, p. 66).

Similar to Condis' suggestion that *Horizon* both celebrates and critiques ecomodernism, I propose it both provides an example of and critiques content agnostic (or "value free") assumptions embedded in the design of technologies (Lachney, Babbitt & Eglash, 2016; Richard, 2018; Richard & Kafai, 2016). Analyses of the sociocultural effects of influential software and hardware technologies, such as search engines and facial recognition surveillance tools, suggest that designers embed their values, experiences and worldviews in ways that can significantly impact society (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Noble, 2018). Often times, the ones most affected are already marginalized, such as women of color, who, studies show, are the most likely to be associated with discriminatory search terms and misclassified by facial recognition technologies.

At the heart of *Horizon*'s storyline is one that, I argue, implicitly critiques a content agnostic design process led by a Ted Faro – capitalist-driven entrepreneur – whose privileged and consumerist values around innovation reinforce myopic and destructive outcomes. Humanistic design practices are considered counter to "value free" design assumptions, similar to ecofeminism, whose first assertion is that "social transformation is necessary… [and] imagines and requires that power-based, hierarchical relationships must be replaced with reciprocity and mutuality" (Howell, 1997, p. 233). Dr. Elisabet Sobeck exemplifies this through the design of GAIA, a matriarchial ecosystem devised for such balance. As if symbolically, *Horizon* is critiquing the prior state of game design and development: Ted serves as a stand-in for past content agnostic design philosophies which led to exclusionary and harmful outcomes, such as those critiqued in games historically. However, at the same time, *Horizon*

invites its own critique, by (1) reinforcing hierarchical design practices that exclude and exploit minorized groups, (2) using an archetypical White, red-headed woman as a marker of "diversity" in gaming – akin to FemShep, discussed above, and GamerGate's mascot Vivian James (see fig. 10) – and (3) rendering people of color as peripheral plot devices.

Figure 10. Aloy (left), FemShep (middle) and Vivian James, the "GamerGate" mascot (right). Copyrights held by respective creators.

Vignette 3: Livestreaming and Amplified Exclusion in Competitive Gaming

The final vignette highlights how game culture, livestreaming and spectatorship have converged and reshaped the gaming space to into one where games and cultural practices can be consumed, shared, negotiated and reflected upon in multimodal ways that are both active and passive. In other words, when livestreaming was in its infancy in 2012, games and game culture were primarily experienced directly through play. Streaming has transformed gaming consumption into a multifaceted experience for different audiences. While that opens up game culture in new ways, it also broadcasts problematic cultural behaviors along with everything else, which runs the risk of further normalizing them as a feature of the culture.

The last decade has ushered in significant changes in the game cultural landscape, most notably with the emergence of livestreaming and the evolving landscape of competitive gaming, now formally termed electronic sports or esports (Richard, McKinley & Ashley, 2019): "there are generally two kinds of professional video-game players — competitive pros and 'lifestyle' gamers" (Capps, 2020) who are primarily *Twitch* influencers. *Twitch*, in particular, is notable for spearheading interest in livestreaming since its launch in 2011 and has the largest proportion of streamers, viewers, and livestreaming content created and consumed (e.g., Pannekeet, 2019).

In 2017, demographic statistics (Yosilewitz, 2018) indicated that *Twitch* creators and viewers were overwhelming male (81.8%) and white (71.5%). A breakdown of demographics indicated that women (15.6%) and trans or genderqueer (2.5%) users were in the vast minority, as were Hispanics/Latinxs

(10.2%), Blacks (3.9%) and Native Americans (0.7%) compared to their North American population statistics.[18] More recent *Twitch* viewership statistics show more gender parity, with women now making up 35% of viewers, and diversified content, including Creative streams, has been credited for the shift (Stream Scheme, 2021).

Women and female-presenting players and streamers face substantial adversity. They are more likely to be sexually objectified, and have more chat comments directed at their bodies and looks, whereas male streamers are more likely to have viewers support them or chat about their content (D'Anastasio, 2016). Similarly, many female streamers describe being held to double standards unlike their male peers, who are primarily evaluated on how entertaining or adept they are. Women have also described instances of organized harassment, stalking, threats, and safety concerns (D'Anastasio, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2019; Teng, 2018; Young, 2019a; Young, 2019b). Women livestreamers have also felt delegitimized by male streamers who could have a positive impact on their viewership and earnings potential but generally do not support them in the same way as other men (e.g., Farokhmanesh, 2018; Teng, 2018).[19]

Instances of vitriolic abuse directed at female players (once invisible to those who didn't play online games prior to the popularity of livestreaming) are still prolific and, in many cases, also hypervisible online. In 2017, a popular 16-minute video clip circulated online featured male Overwatch players berating the sole female player on their team, at one point saying, "we basically just raped her" (Mulkerin, 2017). Similarly, in summer 2019, Chassidy "Cupcake" Kaye, a top-ranking *Overwatch* player documented an abusive incident, which occurred while she streamed competitive matches on *Twitch* (Katzowitz, 2019; Strapagiel, 2019). After asking for assistance from her male teammates, she received a barrage of verbal attacks that included, "Shut your fucking mouth," "Shut the fuck up and go make us sandwiches," "Hey, go mop our floors," and "Women have lower IQ" followed by maniacal laughter.

Black esports players and livestreamers have also been at the receiving end of prominent, hateful attacks on stream. One of the first notable instances during an official livestream for an esports tournament involved "TerrenceM" Miller, a then 21-year-old college student majoring in accounting, and the only Black professional player of *Hearthstone*,[20] a competitive, strategy-oriented collectable card game. In May 2016, he made it to the finals at Dreamhack – one of the oldest, largest and most prestigious gaming and esports festivals globally, boasting over 350,000 annual attendees – and, in what was characterized as a "breakout" performance with "brilliant" plays (Fenlon, 2016), finished in second place, winning a respectable share of the prize pool. Yet, while he was being interviewed after some of the qualifying rounds on the event's official livestream, to an audience of 60,000 average *Twitch* viewers, viewers in chat began to spam racist slurs and innuendos (fig. 11). Some things written were obviously racist: "monkey in the studio," "he like fried chicken n grape kool aid boys," variations of the N-word, and insinuations of criminality.

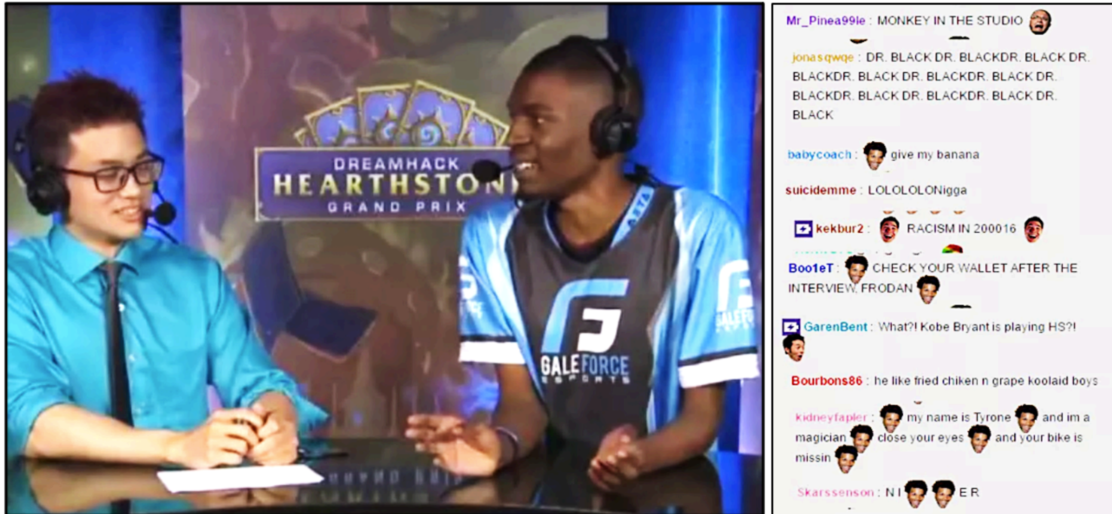

Figure 11. "TerrenceM" on the official Hearthstone tournament livestream (left); snippets of the racist and offensive chat (right). Images courtesy of PC Gamer (Fenlon, 2016).

In addition, something less well understood at the time was distinctive for its prolific use: the "TriHard" emote, which features TriHex, a Black man who is a popular streamer and speedrunner.[21] The interweaving of the TriHard emote within the racist chat messages soon identified its use as intentionally derogatory and racist (Starkey, 2019). TerrenceM described how he was later informed about the incident by teammates who viewed the stream while he was busy being interviewed, and was particularly distressed knowing that his family members were watching. The ordeal also impacted him psychologically right before his final matches the following day.

Figure 12. First incident where MsAshRocks (2019a) is targeted for racist and sexist attacks in GTA Roleplay.

In 2019, a conspicuously hateful incident happened to "MsAshRocks," a well-known Black female streamer, while playing *Grand Theft Auto Roleplay*, a popular role-playing mod for *Grand Theft Auto*

V.[22] She recorded two incidents that occurred in quick succession where she was targeted for racist and sexist abuse online, both of which she posted on Twitter (Glaze, 2019; MsAshRocks, 2019a; 2019b). In the first (fig. 12), while roleplaying as a Black female paramedic, she meets up with a group of friends and starts chatting when, all of a sudden, she and one other friend are run over to which she screams in surprise and fright. Within seconds, the driver – role playing as a White man with a shaved bald head – starts screaming, "Get out of the fucking way you fucking nigga!" He gets out of the car while continuing to scream the N-word, running up to her camera view, punching violently in the air and running over their bodies until other players surround and attack him.

Figure 13. Second incident where MsAshRocks (2019b) is targeted for racist and sexist attacks in GTA Roleplay.

Shortly thereafter (fig. 13), when she and a friend are running up a sidewalk, a large dump trunk targets her, running her over, and a different man (appearing eerily similar to the first one) starts screaming a barrage of abuses at her in a British accent: "You dumb fat bitch! You skanking, freaking whore! You fucking dumb nigger!" He violently and mockingly keeps yelling the N-word, and backs the truck over her dead body, taunting her ferociously, "You want that too, you fucking nigger, nigger, nigger—." Finally, his voice cuts out and a message indicates he has been banned from the server.

Conclusion

Over the course of the past decade, gaming and game culture have morphed into more complex, immersive and multimodal spaces in the era of streaming and spectatorship. There have also been inroads in gendered and racialized representations in and around games, which build upon areas explored in Richard (2012). The purpose of this essay was to illuminate if and how the ecosystem has evolved.

The three vignettes help to underscore how there have been some areas of progress, particularly around female representation, especially if that character is an assumed White woman. For instance, Aloy is represented is emblematic of this trend: while she represents progress as a complex, realistic

and capable main character in a high-profile game (in spite of significant hesitancy on the part of the publisher), she also serves as a stand-in for other minoritized groups, namely Native American groups whose cultural symbols are embedded in her in-game world. She also functions as a proxy for men and women of color, who, while written as more nuanced, capable and complex, remain on the periphery of a narrative centered around Aloy. In video games, in general, women of color have increased in representative quantity, but they also remain siloed within certain ensemble game-types where player perspective takes on a different – and perhaps less connected – link to the character.

The last vignette underscores how the hypervisible and multimodal space has provided more ways to experience and share gaming, though the contours of that experience are quite reminiscent of the insular experiences I and other women and players of color experienced years ago within immersive yet less externally visible spaces. Yet, at the same time, multimodality – or the multiple forms of interaction and engagement enabled by social media and modern technologies – helped empower MsAshRocks when she shared her experiences with the world, both in terms of garnering immediate support as well as also greater acknowledgement of the issues she and others similarly minoritized disproportionately face.

What remains clear are the ways that game design and play cultures have a lot of road left to travel and interrogate as play spaces continue to morph and offer different ways to engage with them. As we enter the next era of digital games and immersive experiential spaces, as well as critical scholarship, my hope is that players, creators and scholars continue to push beyond the antiquated boundaries presented, to all of the untapped possibilities around playing with and embracing our identities and differences. The next steps for gaming would be for all of us – especially those of us historically at the margins as non-White, cisgender men – to be able to play as the complex, diverse and holistic people we are, instead of the limited tropes we have been imagined to be. That would truly embody innovation.

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Notes

1. Bethesda Softworks, https://bethesda.net/d
2. Blizzard Entertainment, https://www.blizzard.com/
3. Riot Games, https://www.riotgames.com/
4. Epic Games, https://www.epicgames.com/
5. Electronic Arts, https://www.ea.com/
6. Activision, https://www.activision.com/
7. Blizzard Entertainment, https://www.blizzard.com/
8. Between 2012-13, I interviewed 28 individuals who identified as avid video game players (Male, N=13; Female, N= 15; Black, N=5; Latinx = 6; White = 14; Middle Eastern = 1; Native American = 1), in addition to the hundreds of others observed as part of the ethnography. All interview participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity.
9. Bioware, https://www.bioware.com/
10. A White, red-haired female version of the main male character Sheppard.
11. Valve Corporation, https://www.valvesoftware.com/
12. Screenshot of *Apex Legends* characters (termed "Legends") retrieved July 10, 2021 from https://www.ea.com/games/apex-legends/about/
13. Guerrilla Games, https://www.guerrilla-games.com/
14. Note that the proceeding sections will contain major spoilers as part of the analysis.
15. Nora women who have living children and grandchildren are given the role of matriarch, whereas great-grandmothers with three generations of living decedents are designated the role of high matriarch and shared leadership of the tribe.
16. Amongst whom are "Watchers" (specialized recognissance machines) and "Striders" (machines that resemble horses and can be ridden)
17. Players can choose an optional third-person perspective play experience.
18. Asian/Pacific Islanders at 7.8%) are slightly overrepresented compares to their population statistics at the time.
19. A famous example involved popular streamer Tyler "Ninja" Blevins, who stated in an interview in 2018 that he did not play with female streamers to minimize harassment, toxicity and rumors that could affect his relationship with his wife (though she stated she was not against him doing so; see Teng, 2018). He was criticized for not using his influence to change the culture and instead remaining comfortable in his privilege as a White man who would otherwise not face this kind of bias frequently directed at women, including his wife.
20. Blizzard Entertainment, https://www.blizzard.com/
21. Speedrunners are players known for mastering game shortcuts and exploits and compete to be the fastest at completing games.
22. Rockstar Games, https://www.rockstargames.com/

8.

A Retrospective

ARTHUR PROTASIO

Well Played is amazing! Though this might seem like a biased comment coming from a member of the advisory board, the truth is I only joined it because of my admiration for what the publication represents. I believe it plays a very important role in our society when it comes to discussing media consumption and critical analysis of content. Especially when we take into account we live in a world where mass audiences are typically encouraged to "go with the flow", acquiring, and paying for what are considered to be the most popular experiences.

Yes, there is value in understanding what makes a specific piece of content popular. However, in this social-media-driven age, it is easier to find crowds who blindly the promotional opinions of charismatic figures without questioning why something is as people perceive it to be. This points out the importance of developing inquisitive personalities as early as possible. The earlier we learn not to take things at face value, the earlier we are able to form our own opinions grounded in proper fundamentals.

That's why talking about Well Played inevitably leads to a retrospective of the journal's impact on my life. Both are deeply connected and it is no wonder this (autobiographical) story began over ten years ago – when I already had a passion for critical readings but was still in search of ways to enhance it.

I met Drew Davidson in 2010 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. However, this would never have happened if, when I was a kid, I didn't develop the habit of consuming media and then creating my own stories inspired by the games, movies, and books I had just experienced. That was what I did. I absorbed as much as I could while playing, watching, reading, and crafted short stories, poems, or comics with my version of adapted or original tales.

Curiously, although I had always been a storyteller at heart, circumstances of my life eventually led me to pursue Law School – where I got the chance to exercise my creativity in very intriguing ways. The culmination of it was an in-depth study of the consequences of video game prohibitions and the importance of free speech. It was all about Constitutional Law, Free Speech, and if video games are entitled to any. Spoiler alert: of course they are! Game developers and players should always have the right to express themselves, but I had to prove that through a combination of constitutional clauses and cultural evidence.

This was an investigation that turned out to be my creative solution in combining media entertainment and law studies, granted me my Law diploma. It ultimately led me to join the Well Played Advisory Board and publish Player of a Thousand Stages, a book inspired by the Well Played series.

This brings us back to 2010. I had just graduated from Law school and, given my "Games & Free Speech" and experience as an intern at the Center for Technology and Society (CTS), I was put in charge of running CTS Game Studies. This was an academic game research and development project. It was part of the Center for Technology and Society (CTS) which, in turn, was part of the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) Law School. The center's mission was, among many things, to study the social connections and implications of technology's advances throughout time. The project's goal, as a branch of the center, was to analyze the video game medium as a communicative, artistic, and cultural manifestation and study its connections with the realms of sociology, law.

As the newly appointed leader of the video game division of CTS, I knew where to start. I would further develop the debate of my final essay at the PUC-Rio Law School. A couple of judicial decisions from previous years had banned games such as Counter-Strike, EverQuest, and Bully in Brazil and the "Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association" case in the United States had just escalated to the Supreme Court.

Therefore, it was in my interest to join the fight and spread proper awareness regarding video games as a medium for artistic and cultural expression. All of this might seem obvious or second nature in the 2020 decade, but although video games have been around since the 1970s, social perception of them has changed dramatically throughout the years. And I knew video games did not exist in a bubble. All human expression derives from the information and content we process as individuals. Nothing comes from nothing. We always adapt, transform, create through inspiration.

That's why, among the many activities I planned for CTS Game Studies, I wanted to include the debate of cross-media. It was important for the audience unfamiliar with video games to understand the concept of storytelling spread across platforms – and its connection with games.

Thus, I hosted the event "Transmedia Experiences" and had the pleasure of presenting talks with Drew Davidson, director of the Entertainment Technology Center (ETC) at the Carnegie Mellon University, and Charles Palmer, director of the Center for Advanced Entertainment and Learning Technologies (CAELT) at the Harrisburg University. I remember meeting Drew and receiving several books that would serve as valuable references to my research in the coming months. Among them, Cross-Media Communications, Stories in Between, and Well Played 1.0.

After Drew's visit, this whole debate about the multiplatform approach to content sparked an idea in my mind. If video games were like any other medium, not mere entertainment or toys, then it would only make sense to treat them as such. What if I adapted my writings from academic papers? What if I took the debate of video games as free speech to another platform? This was late 2010 and vlogs were slowly taking over Youtube. There, I saw an opportunity to use that genre in my favor.

I'm no comedian, but I certainly think good humor plays an important role in communication. In previous years, I had directed a political-parody stageplay to criticize the game bannings. The script I wrote was a mix of quotes from actual judicial documents and original lines delivered by a cast of cosplayers. Among many highlights, I remember the audience laughing along with Liu Kang they realized the original Mortal Kombat had been stealthily banned in Brazil back in 1999.

The play had already been a success, so it was certainly worth giving a try to something in video format. Thus was born LudoBardo, a channel focused on the critical analysis of games and their narratives. Most of the videos and content were produced in Portuguese because I'm Brazilian and wanted to converse directly with people from my country. This explains the strange title. "LudoBardo" is the combination of two words: Ludo and Bardo. The former means "to play" in Latin and the latter is the Portuguese word for "Bard". Hence, the storyteller of games.

LudoBardo came to life when I published its first video published on January 13, 2011. In it, I presented and discussed the concepts of Embedded and Emergent Narrative based mainly on Salen and Zimmerman's Rules of Play and Bissel's Extra Lives. It was a tongue-in-cheek video essay full of quips, jokes, and funny gameplay footage that made niche academic concepts accessible to the general public. Despite not having much experience editing and acting at the time, the video would eventually pave the way for my influence as both a developer and scholar in the video game scene – both in Brazil and internationally.

The element I'm most proud of is how the channel started a mainstream conversation in the community and local developers began generating an awareness of themes and principles that went beyond the typical call of duty of game design. It was about understanding the meaning of video games and how to exercise that through their unique language.

Thanks to that approach, I tackled debates such as "What's the role of violence and combat in games?" and, of course, "What's the cultural relevance of video games and why should they be acknowledged as a mainstream medium of expression?". It was the evolution of my Law monograph pushed forward by a comparative study between the history of video games, film, and comics. The result was the video Games: Media and Free Speech, a passionate, yet legal and logical, defense of the video game medium. No wonder the video remained as the channel's most popular upload for quite a long time – and one of which I'm the proudest.

It's fantastic to realize that all of this was taking place as a consequence of the seed Well Played 1.0 had planted back in 2010. One notable example was "The Battle For Brazil's Game Future", a feature article I wrote for Gamasutra precisely discussing the comparative perception of media back then in South America and the challenges that kept it from being recognized as a vital medium in the developing economy. Namely, Well Played's essays opened my eyes and encouraged me to publicly debate games beyond the "video game" spectrum, but striving to comprehend their role in our society among others forms of entertainment and communication. Articles discussing the depth of the emotional

experience in games – all the way from the elaborate survival horror Silent Hill 2 to the indie, artistic, pixelated Passage – were what validated my career path of not only thriving as a researcher but as a critical storyteller.

No wonder, although I always had the motivation the create content, this process of getting involved was crucial in defining the next steps. Reading essays from academics and developers I admired discussing games I loved to put a new spin on what I believed to be my relationship with video games – and media in general.

Not by chance, I further developed a keen eye for analyzing and criticizing games. Eventually, my sights landed on a peculiar and rough, yet *well played*, gem that would become the object of study for my essay in Well Played 3.0: the Way of the Samurai 3.

This was an action RPG set in feudal Japan with a unique twist. The story always began the same but ended radically different according to the decisions made by the player. A branching narrative experience comprised of several short tales that resembled an anthology, rather than a long novel – as is typically the case with AAA branching narrative games. The more I reflected, the more I concluded it was something worth examining.

Not only did the game present an elaborate narrative structure, but it also delivered its narrative drenched in cultural influence, ranging from cinema, history, and religion. It was a work of expression capable of conveying powerful and meaningful messages, especially ones referring to the freedom of living many different stories. Choice and consequence were the bedrock of the narrative structure and ethical testing grounds. In essence, it was an experience that allowed me, as a player, to examine my values through the concept of narrative reincarnation.

Writing this essay led to my first official participation in the Well Played and eventually, an evolution of it got selected and awarded Gold Prize at the GDC's 2013 GDC Game Narrative Review competition. However, more importantly, it paved the way for my Master's degree in Design with a focus on Interactive Storytelling. By combining all of these elements and further expanding my investigations into the intricacies of narrative, I acquired valuable academic knowledge while in tandem advanced my career as a narrative designer.

I wanted to express my gratitude for this amazing journey and did not hesitate when the opportunity arose to join the Editorial Advisory Board and help with the journal's releases. It was great to collaborate with Well Played and help spread the critical eye for the meaning in video games, but I also wanted to give back to the Brazilian community what Well Played had gifted me.

That's why in 2014 we published the anthology "A Player of a Thousand Stages". It was a book I put together with fellow scholar and game designer, Guilherme Xavier, comprised of twelve essays written by twelve different developers analyzing twelve games. Each represented a step in the Hero's Journey and, of course, referred to Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces – hence, the title.

The publication posed the question "How have games affected your life? Name one and describe a life-changing experience connected to it." This prompted authors to elaborate personal reviews of their relationship with video games and represented a significant contribution to the debate of the perception of video games in our mainstream society – especially in Brazil. It was an important discussion which bridged the gap between developers and the audience – and I'm very glad to have done it as a tribute to Well Played with Drew Davidson's blessing.

The following year, in 2015 I founded my own storytelling business, Fableware Narrative Design. Since then I've written, directed, and produced content for film, TV, VR, comics, and, of course, video games. Years went by and it's both impressive and gratifying to see how my work methodology is deeply inspired by Well Played. All of it was and is made possible by the values, meaning, and reflections developed throughout this journey.

Even now, six years later, after having moved from the Atlantic Southeast (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) to the Pacific Northwest (Vancouver, Canada), my mission remains the same. I'm very proud to have been able to create critical spectacles and always strived to plant the seeds of reflection in every piece of content I've worked on – no matter if for entertainment. Though I always had the conviction inside me, I had to go on this adventure to be able to properly articulate why games are like any other form of expression. They might be a tool, yes, but only with experience and practice can we harness their potential. Crafting meaning is not easy and I too had to understand the most efficient ways to forge my path ahead.

It is no wonder Well Played promotes in-depth readings of games to analyze and identify their value and meaning. Albeit indirectly, Well Played also led me to develop this analysis of this last decade in my life and confirm the core values that I've always held true. This long-lasting inspiration helped share a sense of the value of games in several ways. From numerous themes from escape rooms to diversity in games, intergenerational play, and much more. If I may, I'm proud to be part of this legacy and will continue to do good by it.

It seems planting seeds does take time, but when they sprout, the consequences can be everlasting. I see what you did there. Well played, Well Played.

9. (Videos) Trust, Simulation, Loops, and Horizons

Lessons from Well Played

MOSES WOLFENSTEIN, MARK CHEN, & DAVID SIMKINS

As we started our first recording, Mark uttered the phrase "Yeah, I'm lost. I don't remember where it was." and in a sense, this arguably sums up both our somewhat odd entry into the *Well Played* retrospective, and, from our perspective, the strange loop that games studies seems to have engaged in since we entered the discourse. Fourteen minutes later, as Mark and Moses were finally getting into the heart of the discussion, Mark reflected that, "Maybe what matters more is the person playing than the thing that they're playing," and this absolutely sums up one of the deepest understandings that we've arrived at through our participation in both the *Well Played Journal* and the broader community of games studies that intersects with it over the last 14 years.

You'll have the opportunity to come to that moment and other similar ones in the videos that accompany this introductory piece, but first we want to provide a little more information about the format as well as some background on how we arrived at it. The videos that are the bulk of this contribution vary in length from roughly 45 minutes to nearly 2 hours. The format becomes progressively more refined, but even in the third and fourth videos the conversations sometimes ramble and take tangents. The organic nature of our conversations is not accidental, but you're most likely to actually enjoy watching (or listening to) the videos if you're a fan of things like fireside chat style conference sessions and podcasts.

As for how we arrived at the submission format, when faced with the call for a retrospective on the *Well Played Journal*'s first ten years, Mark and Moses began by considering our own involvement in *Well Played*. We rapidly arrived at the conclusion that a less conventional contribution to this issue was a good fit for us. On the one hand, Moses curated the Let's Play video issue (Davidson & Wolfenstein, 2016) which Mark contributed to (Chen, 2016), and, on the other hand, we felt that something a little less formal (and more conversational) than your typical academic paper suited the occasion. After recording the first video, we reached out to David, who has also contributed to the journal (Simkins, Dikkers, & Owen, 2012) and serves on its advisory board, in order to attempt a well played *Pandemic* (Leacock, 2008) in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. This solidified the nature of our entry as a conversation between games scholars, each of whom has contributed to (and engaged with) the *Well Played Journal* in different ways.

The overall result is this four video series in which we reflect on the *Well Played Journal*, how it has intersected with our personal engagement with games and play research, and how it reflects the

larger trajectory of the games research community as we've observed it over the last ten years. Each video is juxtaposed against the play of a different game, and each video takes on specific themes that we feel to be especially salient in the context of ten plus years of *Well Played*.

In our first video (45:41 duration), Mark plays *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (Ubisoft, 2020), a game that is arguably in the direct lineage of the first game to receive a well played treatment. The game itself is extensive, and, as such, we use the gameplay less as an opportunity to illustrate what a well played game can look like as we offer only a small slice of the gameplay experience. Instead, the game itself serves as a way of setting the table for a discussion about *Well Played* and playing well. As it's the first video in the series, the conversation is a little less focused in the beginning, and gradually develops a sharper focus on what makes a well played game, and how our perspectives on the topic have been shaped in no small part through the games scholarship that the *Well Played Journal* has helped to define.

As Mark plays, we consider our own history with the *Well Played Journal*, and more importantly what we think a meaningful way is to approach the concept of well played ten years on. We begin with our first experience of the Well Played format when Drew Davidson offered a well played *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft, 2003) at the Games+Learning+Society 3.0 conference (Davidson, 2007), but quickly move on to how video games both have and haven't changed over time and what we can take away from that in terms of well played experiences. Ultimately, we arrive at the conclusion that no matter how far games have progressed in the last 10 years, they still are obviously simulacra and can break the trust of the player almost immediately at any given time when the simulation breaks such as when a character glitches out or some ridiculous unplanned behavior occurs while talking to an NPC, a topic Mark also covered in his Fallout 4 Well Played Let's Play (Chen, 2016). At the same time, the trust between player and game that is foundational for a well played experience also relies deeply on each player's prior experience, not just with the individual game, but with the genre conventions that structure different kinds of games and playful experiences.

In our second video (1:57:37 duration), we are joined by fellow games scholar David Simkins. The three of us sat down to play the board game *Pandemic* over Zoom with Mark providing a view of the board from a second camera, updating the game state as we made our moves. To facilitate play, David kept track of the turns we took on a spreadsheet. This isn't a standard practice for playing *Pandemic*, but it greatly aided our ability to play the game remotely, and it proved essential for recreating the game state which we had to do subsequently due to a technical issue. Unlike in the first installment, we did in fact attempt to provide a well played engagement with *Pandemic*. Over the course of play and in an after game wrap-up discussion, we examine both the game itself and the larger concepts we picked up in the first video.

We explore how a well played game as the enactment of an artistic medium allows us to reframe the current state of the real-world pandemic and vaccination efforts at the end of 2020. We compare the real world progression of COVID, and the relatively uncoordinated global response at the time, to the systems in the game, and we wonder how the game could be changed to reflect the (mis)handling of the pandemic response from various nations. We also discuss whether *Pandemic* is a roguelike, which

leads to having to talk about roguelikes and their rise in popularity over the last decade or so. As the conversation progresses David suggests that some games are more roguelike than *Rogue* (Wichman & Arnold, 1980), deepening the conversation's engagement with how genre informs game design and shapes the potential for well played experiences. Meanwhile, we also wonder if this video really ought to be a submission for the COVID-19 issue of the *Well Played Journal*! Ultimately, while we do discuss the pandemic in detail, we decided that the discussion on roguelikes offered a springboard into a third video that could use different roguelike games to advance key themes from our conversation.

In the third video (1:02:36 duration), the three of us planned on anchoring our concluding discussion to two games, *FTL* (Subset Games, 2012) and *Loop Hero* (Four Quarters, 2021). These two samples from the sprawling genre/s of roguelike and roguelite games offer us a platform to both approach different views of a well played experience and to provide a platform for a final discussion on the various themes we have circled around previously in our discussions. However, as we began delving into *FTL* with David piloting the game, we realized in short order that we would actually need two separate videos if we wanted to also use *Loop Hero* as a platform for furthering our discussion. We knew that the *Pandemic* recording had run long, and we wanted to avoid adding an even longer recording to the series. As a result, we ultimately recorded a separate fourth video (1:23:44 duration) where Moses plays through the beginning of *Loop Hero*, providing us with an opportunity to dig even deeper on the inherited qualities of game genres that contemporary designers work with and how that forms our personal capacities for well played experiences with contemporary games.

We view the third and fourth videos as a conclusion to our conversation carried out in two parts, and in each case we reached a refined approach to engaging with a format that resembles a hybrid of a let's play with a podcast. We start each video with gameplay and a focus on the well played experience of each game. We then set the game aside and discuss how the recorded played experience, as well as our deeper personal experiences with it, serve as a tool to reflect on well played experiences, game design, and especially the games research community. The conversation proceeds with a focus on both how games research has changed and how it has stayed the same over time, and it also engages with how games researchers at different stages of their careers enact common approaches to the medium. All of this is set against the background of how the *Well Played Journal* has served an essential stage for advancing these conversations over the time that we've been engaged in this research community.

There are two key themes that we address in the third and fourth videos. We use the games as an opportunity to talk about the phenomenon of looping, not so much in terms of game design loops, but iterative passes through familiar themes within games studies that we've seen re-emerge in the last 10 years. We pay particular attention to the loop-like patterns that early stage scholars enact as they seek to classify and taxonomize games, before generally abandoning what is an essentially impossible project that nonetheless helps to ferment more productive and unique lines of inquiry.

Finally, we also discuss the concept of "seeing the horizon", the place where our engagement runs its course. In the context of a specific game, this can be the place the player reaches where a well played experience is no longer personally accessible because the game's possibility space is exhausted for

that player emotionally, the game reaches a "solved" state, and a flow state is no longer accessible. This serves as an opportunity to reflect on horizons in games studies and even horizons for research publications. We ultimately conclude that the *Well Played Journal* provides an enduring value to the games research community specifically because it provides games scholars with the opportunity to share their individual, and often highly granular, engagement with specific games and how they help us better understand discrete phenomena that games surface as designed experiences.

Video

You can watch all the retrospective videos at the ETC Press book page: https://press.etc.cmu.edu/index.php/product/well-played-retrospective/

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10. (Pandemic) Playing for fun, playing for meaning

A personal essay on how digital games evoke hedonic and eudaimonic experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic

ROWAN DANEELS

Introduction

The year 2020 – and probably a decent amount of 2021 as well – has been dominated by the emergence and global spread of COVID-19, a respiratory infection illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 type of coronavirus (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). To combat this pandemic, governments around the world implemented several measures to maintain physical and social distancing between people, including organizing sports and cultural events without an audience or even cancelling them, and limited or no access to restaurants, (movie) theatres, shopping, and other social venues. As such, people are spending more time at home, searching for alternative activities to engage in. One of those activities is playing digital games, which has seen an increased popularity during the pandemic. For example, Steam, the world's biggest gaming platform, reported breaking their record of concurrent in-game (7.25 million) and concurrent active users (23.5 million) multiple times throughout March 2020 (Batchelor, 2020), the start of the global Covid-19 pandemic. These numbers are also not dropping anytime soon, as McGlynn (2021) reported that the all-time peak of concurrent active users on Steam was set on 25.3 million users on January 2, 2021.Next to their increased popularity, digital games have also been found in previous research to help people cope with issues that are very present during the Covid-19 pandemic, including stress, loneliness, and negative emotions (Eden, Johnson, Reinecke, & Grady, 2020). Reinecke (2009), for example, found that digital games can be used to recover from stressful situations. Furthermore, escaping through digital games, while often seen as an avoidant coping strategy linked to compulsive gaming behavior (Guglielmucci et al., 2019), can also lead to stress relief in terms of 'active escapism' (Kuo, Lutz, & Hiler, 2016). This form of escapism empowers players by letting them escape into a fantasy world where they often have control over their own (customized) character and which immerses them into wonderful virtual environments. Active escapism also allows players to experience positive emotions (Hemenover & Bowman, 2018). Next to this, Iacovides and Mekler (2019) showed that people might (temporarily) turn to playing digital games during difficult life situations, such as the Covid-19 global pandemic, because they offer (1) a much-needed respite, (2) support for dealing with their emotions, (3) meaningful social connections and support – an important asset of digital games in times of social

distancing, and (4) personal growth. Finally, Marston & Kowert (2020) suggested a similar notion that digital games can be used as tools to improve social connections with friends or family and combat negative emotions such as loneliness during social isolation.

Digital games offer players an extensive range of experiences that can help players cope with stress, loneliness, and negative emotions caused by the current pandemic. Recently, an important distinction made in entertainment research is that of *hedonic* (e.g., pleasure, fun; see Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004) and *eudaimonic* experiences (e.g., meaning, emotionally moving, self-reflective; see Daneels, Bowman, Possler, & Mekler, 2021a). An abundance of studies have looked at how digital games can evoke hedonic experiences like enjoyment – as the main driver of entertainment (Vorderer et al., 2004) – to distract players so they can avoid having to deal with (pandemic-related) issues. For instance, Mekler, Bopp, Tuch, and Opwis (2014) showed in their systematic review that game enjoyment is mostly related to (only) positive affective and cognitive aspects of the game experience. Furthermore, studies have identified various factors that leads to more game enjoyment, including competition against human players (Caroux, Isbister, Le Bigot, & Vibert, 2015), control and character customization (Kim et al., 2015), monadic character identification (i.e., when player and avatar merge together as one entity; see Hefner, Klimmt, & Vorderer, 2007), and perceived game realism (Daneels, Malliet, Koeman, & Ribbens, 2018). However, scholars have recently turned their attention towards digital games' potential to evoke more complex, deep or eudaimonic experiences (Klimmt & Possler, 2019) that might help players actively confront and cope with their negative (pandemic-related) problems. For instance, Oliver et al. (2016) found that over 70% of participants in their survey were able to recall game experiences that were personally meaningful for them. In contrast to hedonic game experiences, there is no real consensus on which complex, deep gaming experiences can be defined as eudaimonic. A recent scoping review (Daneels et al., 2021a) therefore identified several eudaimonic game experiences: *appreciation* (i.e., an overarching eudaimonic audience response similar to enjoyment as an hedonic response; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010), *meaningful* experiences (i.e., players making connections between in-game elements and out-of-game elements from their personal lives; e.g., Daneels, Vandebosch, & Walrave, 2020), *emotionally moving/challenging* experiences (i.e., players laboring with complex emotional in-game situations; e.g., Bopp, Mekler, & Opwis, 2016), *self-reflective* experiences (i.e., players contemplating and trying to understand themselves; e.g., Mekler, Iacovides, & Bopp, 2018), *socially connecting* experiences (i.e., players connecting and bonding with either other players and/or in-game characters; e.g., Daneels et al., 2020; Iacovides & Mekler, 2019), *nostalgia* (i.e., players having fond and bittersweet recollections of close others and/or real-life events; e.g., Wulf, Bowman, Rieger, Velez, & Breuer, 2018), and *elevation* (i.e., players experiencing heartwarming and uplifting feelings as a response to acts of kindness, altruism, and so forth; e.g., Daneels et al., 2020). Finally, Daneels et al. (2021b) found that eudaimonic experiences in single-player games are mainly elicited by a strong engagement with difficult narrative themes (also see Bopp et al., 2016) and narrative-impacting choices, augmented by elements like realistic graphics, a tone-appropriate soundtrack, close camera perspectives, and game-specific mechanics.

In this essay, I will reflect on how playing digital games during the COVID-19 pandemic elicited both hedonic and eudaimonic experiences that helped me as a player cope with the pandemic.

Reflection on personal gaming experiences during the pandemic

During the pandemic, my digital game platforms were limited to the PlayStation 4 and Nintendo Switch consoles. Overall, I played a range of games: single-player games such as DOOM *Eternal* (id Software, 2020), *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017); and online multiplayer games such as *Call of Duty: Warzone* (Infinity Ward & Raven Software, 2020) and *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* (Mediatonic, 2020). For a full overview of games played by me during the pandemic, see Table 1 in Appendix A. In the next sections, I will focus more deeply on several games (both single- and multiplayer games) as case examples to reflect on how and why specific gameplay moments led to both hedonic and eudaimonic experiences.

Single-player games

In the overall game list, the number of games with single-player modes I played (N= 16) seriously outweighs the amount of games with a multiplayer component (N= 6). There were some games in the past year that were very entertaining to play and led to some joyful hedonic moments. One of those games was DOOM *Eternal* (id Software, 2020), sequel to the original reboot version of DOOM from 2016. Known for its fast-paced action and gory 18+ violence, this first person shooter game provided me with numerous hours of “don’t think, just shoot” moments – along with the amazing heavy metal soundtrack in the background – that were very welcome when I played it at the start of the pandemic. The playable character, also known as ‘The Doom Slayer’, is the last person that can save Earth from the invading forces of Hell demons. As the Slayer, I felt very empowered in a time where the fear of losing loved ones, less social time with family and friends, and canceled work opportunities and travel plans due to the pandemic left me feeling powerless. Other elements that, for me personally, led to hedonic experiences were the range of cool weaponry (including the Super Shotgun, BFG-9000 energy cannon, and the Crucible energy blade; see Image 1 for an example) to unleash hell on the hordes of enemies, the different strategic approaches to different types of enemies (e.g., more close or more ranged combat), and the stunning game environments that take on a more apocalyptic, hellish, and sometimes also a medieval appearance. During the pandemic, the game was perfect in providing fun experiences where I could take out my frustrations on the waves of demons.

Image 1: The Crucible blade, a legendary sword that instantly kills almost all types of demons, with the city of Sentinel Prime in the background (taken from in-game screenshot). Source: id Software (2020).

Next to this, as a pretty big fan of the Marvel comic and cinematic universe, games like *Marvel's Avengers* (Crystal Dynamics, 2020) and *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales* (Insomniac Games, 2020) provided me with some very pleasurable moments. For instance, doing acrobatic somersaults and throwing your shield towards enemies as Captain America – a personal favorite – made me feel like I was the character (cf. monadic identification; see Hefner et al., 2007), which was very enjoyable. Another aspect of both games that evoked hedonic experiences is their ability for character customization (Kim et al., 2015): they offer players different outfits, emotes, and so forth to personalize the playable character as well as the gameplay moment itself. Furthermore, players can choose their own playstyle in these games by making decisions in which gear or skills to use and upgrade (see Image 2 for an example). For instance, in the Avengers game, you can focus earned skill points to adopt a more ranged playstyle by strengthening the iconic shield throw moves of Captain America, or you can choose to focus more on the defensive characteristics of the heroes. Freedom in customizing these aspects led to much enjoyment while playing these games. Regarding the narrative, both Marvel games tell a compelling story about young heroes: respectively, Kamala Khan (i.e., a Pakistani American teenage girl with shapeshifting abilities who brings the Avengers back together after a tragedy) and Miles Morales (i.e., the new Spider-Man who has to deal with supervillains and evil corporations on his own). Although these games gave me moments of inspiration and elevation as the heroes evolved and matured throughout the game, mainly in side missions such as Miles Morales' Spider-Man helping out locals in his neighborhood of Harlem (e.g., helping to find the cat of the local

bodega owner), these experiences were short-lived and secondary to the fun experiences for me personally. However, as these stories revolve around adolescents seeking their place in society while juggling their new identity with family and peers – something that is very prevalent in the lives of real-life adolescents (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2013), I suspect that especially younger players could have more deeper, eudaimonic experiences from playing these games (cf. Cingel, Sumter, & Jansen, 2020; Daneels et al., 2020).

Image 2: The 'Gear' sub menu of the Captain America character in Marvel's Avengers. In here, you can choose different types of shields, armor, and helmets as well as upgrade these. This is just one of many customization options in the game (taken from in-game screenshot). Source: Crystal Dynamics (2020).

The previous two games bring us to a set of games that provided me with a range of deeper, eudaimonic game experiences during the pandemic. In particular, there are two games that – although not new games – led to more intense eudaimonic experiences as I started playing them during the pandemic: *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017). In the first game, you play as the young huntress Aloy who lives in the 31st century in a post-apocalyptic, tribal-like environment. During the game, the player has to unravel why humanity almost went extinct in the past, how the large robotic creatures that now run the lands are connected to this, and what role Aloy herself – as a foundling without knowledge of her parents – plays in this. In the second game, the player controls the warrior Link, who awakens after 100 years to save the fantasy kingdom of Hyrule and the princess Zelda from the evil calamity Ganon. To do this, he needs the help of four gigantic ancient machines called the Divine Beasts, which are scattered throughout the vast world of Hyrule. Both games offer players an immense and beautiful open

world to explore, with realistic environmental graphics (see Image 3 for an example), 'back to nature' soundtrack themes that create an authentic feel for different areas in both game worlds, and an eye for detail (e.g., weather conditions affecting Link's climbing ability) that evoked strong pleasurable or hedonic experiences while playing, but also let me actively escape in these awe-inspiring virtual worlds to cope with lockdown situations that forced me to stay at home (Kuo et al., 2016). Next to this, the narrative – and especially engagement with difficult themes such as losing loved ones and death (Bopp et al., 2016) – led to eudaimonic experiences, specifically emotionally moving and elevating moments. For *Horizon*, these moving moments were specifically linked to Aloy being left in the dark and slowly learning about her origins. While these were just touching experiences throughout the game for myself, for others, these moments were personally meaningful and instigated players who are adopted to seek out their birth parents (e.g., Loveridge, 2017). For *Breath of the Wild*, moving moments mostly related to Link's tragic memories of losing Zelda and their friends to Ganon a century ago, but also occurred when hearing Zelda's somber voice in your head. These emotional narrative moments in both games are also enhanced by more somber soundtrack themes, which were also found to be an important elicitor of eudaimonic game experiences among other games like *God of War* (SIE Santa Monica Studios, 2018) and *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018) by Daneels et al. (2021b). However, *Breath of the Wild* also elicited some uplifting and elevating experiences through Link and Zelda showing heavy resilience, despite having to fight back the end of their world as well as having doubts and insecurities about possibly failing these rescue attempts (also see Hazel, 2017). It is in their final success to free Hyrule that the game ends on a heartwarming note: 'perseverance will lead to better moments in life', a thought we might also want to adopt during the current pandemic.

Image 3: The small fort of the Nora tribe called "Mother's Crown" at night time, just one of the graphically realistic settings in Horizon: Zero Dawn (taken from in-game screenshot). Source: Guerrilla Games (2017).

Multiplayer games

Digital games are known to provide players with social experiences, mainly through interactions with other human players (Kowert & Kaye, 2018), which can be both hedonic and eudaimonic for players. Some studies showed that social aspects of playing games is key to the enjoyment of these games (e.g., Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006), while others found that social moments in games can create a sense of connection with and belonging to other players that can be seen as eudaimonic (e.g., Daneels et al., 2020; Oliver et al., 2016), especially in difficult life situations such as the Covid-19 global pandemic where online social gaming experiences occur in a safe virtual environment (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019; Marston & Kowert, 2020).

Focusing specifically on online multiplayer games, only three PlayStation 4 games are included in this category – *Call of Duty: Warzone* (Infinity Ward & Raven Software, 2020), *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (Treyarch & Raven Software, 2020), and *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* (Mediatonic, 2020). However, the amount of time spent on these games exceeds the time spent on single-player games significantly. This is something that has also been found in a recent large-scale study: using Steam data from the 500 most popular games on the platform, researchers found that the increase in digital game play during the pandemic was more prominent for multiplayer games compared to single-player games (Vuorre, Zendle, Petrovskaya, Ballou, & Przybylski, 2021).

For me personally, I played *Warzone* (released in March 2020) for approximately 241 hours, while *Cold War* (released in November 2020) was played for around 147 hours. *Fall Guys*, for instance, instigated purely fun experiences with friends, as players compete against other players in an attempt to survive several levels inspired by the Wipeout TV game show. Especially the lighthearted soundtrack elicits a lot of fun while trying to survive the many obstacles alongside your friends. Similarly, both *Call of Duty* games mentioned above mainly evoked fun or hedonic experiences due to their social characteristics. *Warzone*, the free-to-play battle royale game where you play with up to four players in an attempt to survive against other players in an ever-shrinking map, provided me with hours and hours of entertaining social experiences with friends I would normally see in real life. Hedonic experiences when playing *Warzone* mainly occurred through the different types of competition (Caroux et al., 2015) the game offers you: on one hand, you have to compete with other online players as you attempt to survive the lobby, but on the other hand, there is also an internal competition within your own team, as you try to get more kills than your friends to earn bragging rights of being the better *Warzone* player. Along with the graphically realistic environment that lets you experience the thrill to survive (see Image 4 for an example), this competition aspect of the game has led to hedonic gameplay moments for me personally. However, because playing *Warzone* replaced most of the social contacts I would normally have with friends from sports activities and other hobbies (which were suspended during the pandemic), I also experienced some socially connecting moments with friends that I had not seen in person for quite some time that can be experienced as eudaimonic. These connecting moments often consisted of playing the game and talking about other aspects of life outside of the

game, effectively compensating for the lost face-to-face contact to some degree. These experiences are also in line with previous research on social gaming during challenging times like the Covid-19 pandemic (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019; Marston & Kowert, 2020).

Image 4: The graphically realistic environment of Verdansk, along with an accurate representation of an AK-47 assault rifle, in Call of Duty: Warzone (taken from in-game screenshot). Source: Infinity Ward & Raven Software (2020).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic affected (and still affects) people on a global scale due to the fear of losing loved ones as well as the existing physical and social distance with friends and family, among other things. This, in turn, has led to stress, loneliness, and overall negative emotions among many people. Besides more time being spent at home playing digital games, the medium also has the potential to help people cope with these negative issues that are prevalent during this pandemic.

For me personally, the ongoing pandemic has meant more game time in general compared to pre-pandemic times. The most likely explanation for this is that my game time replaced face-to-face social moments such as sports activities and other hobbies that were canceled due to the pandemic. Furthermore, my personal game time during the pandemic consists of an increased amount of online multiplayer games with offline, real-world friends to replace the lost face-to-face contact to some

extent. However, the amount of single-player game time was similar compared to pre-pandemic times. This distinction between single- and multiplayer games seems to align with recent findings from a large-scale survey on game play during the pandemic (Vuorre et al., 2021).

More interesting perhaps is that playing digital games has also allowed me to cope with the insecurities and social isolation that accompanies the current pandemic, having a positive impact on my overall well-being. Single-player games provided me with moments where I could actively escape into a virtual world to experience both fun hedonic moments killing demon hordes in *DOOM Eternal* (id Software, 2020) or playing the hero in *Marvel's Avengers* (Crystal Dynamics, 2020) as well as deeper eudaimonic moments that led to emotionally moving and elevating feelings while playing *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017). Furthermore, playing online multiplayer games such as *Call of Duty: Warzone* (Infinity Ward & Raven Software, 2020), *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (Treyarch & Raven Software, 2020), and *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* (Mediatonic, 2020) fulfilled most of my social needs to interact with other people during the pandemic. Playing games online led to fun moments, but also to socially connecting and bonding moments that can be described as eudaimonic.

Reflecting more on my personal game experiences post-pandemic, I assume that overall game time would go back down to pre-pandemic levels, as more in-person social activities start back up and replace gaming moments. Similarly, the need for safe virtual game environments seems less imperative in a post-pandemic situation where face-to-face contacts are hopefully normalized again. This, in turn, would translate to less online gaming and socially connecting experiences for me personally: after a screen-filled period during the pandemic (cf. 'Zoom fatigue'; see Bailenson, 2021), online screen time will probably be cut down severely, while spending time with family and friends will more than likely be preferred in offline contexts instead of online game surroundings. Finally, except for the decline in socially connecting eudaimonic game experiences, hedonic and eudaimonic game moments will stay the same post-pandemic: these specific experiences are not unique to the pandemic situation. However, hedonic and eudaimonic game experiences, as discussed within this essay, can be used to uniquely deal with the pandemic. Hedonic experiences can distract players from their worries or provide players with positive emotions by letting them escape into a virtual world and avoid pandemic-related issues (Hemenover & Bowman, 2018; Kuo et al., 2016), while eudaimonic experiences can confront players with pandemic-related issues and accompanying emotions, but can also serve as useful tools to improve social connections with friends and family in times of social distancing (Iacovides & Mekler, 2019; Marston & Kowert, 2020).

Lots of research has dealt with the 'dark side' of playing digital games (e.g., violence, aggression, addiction). However, this personal essay as well as plenty of other research shows that games also have the potential to provide positive experiences that are found to be almost necessary to cope with the negative issues the current COVID-19 pandemic brings along, allowing players to improve their well-being in a time of crisis through both hedonic and eudaimonic game experiences.

Ludography

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Appendix A

Table 1: Author's game list during the pandemic (2020/2021)

Title & Publisher	Release year	Platform	Type game & Genre
Assassin's Creed Valhalla (Ubisoft Montreal)	2020	PS4	Single player / RPG
Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War (Activision)	2020	PS4	Single player & Online multiplayer / FPS
Call of Duty: Warzone (Activision)	2020	PS4	Online multiplayer / FPS & Battle Royal
Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time (Activision)	2020	PS4	Single player / Platform
Darksiders - Warmastered Edition (THQ Nordic)	2016	PS4	Single player / RPG
DOOM Eternal (Bethesda Softworks)	2020	PS4	Single player / FPS
Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout (Devolver Digital)	2020	PS4	Online multiplayer / Battle Royal
Horizon: Zero Dawn (Sony Interactive Entertainment)	2017	PS4	Single player / RPG
Mario Kart 8 Deluxe (Nintendo)	2017	Switch	Single player & Local multiplayer / Racing
Marvel's Avengers (Square Enix)	2020	PS4	Single player / Action-Adventure
New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe (Nintendo)	2019	Switch	Single player & Local multiplayer / Platform
Spider-Man: Miles Morales (Sony Interactive Entertainment)	2020	PS4	Single player / Action-Adventure
SpongeBob Squarepants: Battle for Bikini Bottom Rehydrated (THQ Nordic)	2020	Switch	Single player / Platform
Super Mario 3D All-Stars; Super Mario Sunshine & Galaxy (Nintendo)	2020	Switch	Single player / Platform
Super Mario Party (Nintendo)	2018	Switch	Single player & Local multiplayer / Party
The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo)	2017	Switch	Single player / RPG
Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection	2015	PS4	Single player / Action-Adventure
Uncharted 4 (Sony Computer Entertainment)	2016	PS4	Single player / Action-Adventure

Table 1: Author's game list of 2020/2021

11. Well Played as a Research Method

KURT DEAN SQUIRE

Well Played in Context

"Well Played," as a format, arose around 2010, a time when games were climbing a steep growth curve. Economically, culturally, and as a subject of academic study, games transformed from a medium consumed by youth and a subculture confined to the Internet to an established part of the cultural landscape. Between 2000 and 2010, US game sales nearly tripled, from $5.5b US to over $17b, suggesting a hockey-stick style growth curve. At the close of the decade, seemingly everyone had a *World of Warcraft* account, which reached its peak number of concurrent subscribers in 2010 (12 million). Between 2008-2009 global game sales were dominated by Nintendo Wii titles, which suggested a mainstreaming of gaming. Physically and socially interacting with games was becoming the new norm.

A maturing market, robust ecology for online distribution, and disgruntled generation of experienced developers birthed a genuine indie game scene, as exemplified by Braid (2008) and World of Goo (2008) (See Davidson, 2009; Zimmerman, 2002). Game markets for mobile platforms such as the iPhone (itself released in 2007), Android (2008), and iPad (2010) matured, and titles such as Angry Birds (2009) and Fruit Ninja (2010) became cultural touchstones. 2009 also saw the release of *Minecraft*, the game of a generation. *Minecraft* embodied the visions for games for learning by building game play around (1) emergent narrative, (2) digital construction within simulated worlds, and (3) collaborative game play that were articulated at the beginning of the decade (Squire, 2001).

Games as an academic field were coming into place. Established game development programs like ETC at Carnegie Mellon and RIT's game program were sending students into industry. A generation of games scholars earned tenure at research universities. The Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) was nearly a decade old, and games courses, PhD theses, and academic job descriptions for games scholars in the Humanities, Informatics and Education were common. New waves of scholars showed up at a growing number of events. Not even the dead-enders hung on to the narratology vs. ludology debate that drove so much early discussion in the field (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2004). New colleges, universities, and departments once wary of games were eager to start game programs to bolster enrolments.

This period of the cultural acceptance of digital games culminated, perhaps inevitably, in its commodification. Gamification, in its general sense, is the application of game design patterns to non-gaming contexts (Walz & Deterding, 2014). In a sense, gamification as a term formalized a long-standing tradition of mining games for theoretical or design inspiration (see Gee, 2003; Laurel, 1986; Malone, 1981). On the other hand, gamification as a *concept* was a way for consultants to ignore the

complexity, nuance, and perhaps even magic of games, strip it from its social and cultural contexts, and package it as a solution to achieve capitalist ends (Bogost, 2011). Much like the narratology vs. ludology debate, gamification as a debatable idea also grew stale, and its core ideas, such as mapping points, leaderboards and badges to non-game context to improve engagement, is now commonplace (Rodrigues, Oliveira, & Rodrigues, 2019).

It is in this context that *Well Played* formed. Simultaneous to this impulse toward "stripping games down for parts," was an impulse to also deal with games on their own terms and understand the player experience, irrespective of inherent utility. *Well Played* offered scholars – defined here broadly to include designers, players, and professional academicians – a venue for exploring the aesthetics of games. Consistent with the principles of participatory culture more broadly, well played has had, since its inception, a profoundly democratic streak, whereby it seems most anyone with sufficient motivation and a reasonably enough articulate streak could write a *Well Played* and submit it to Journal within ETC Press (or eventually the Games + Learning + Society Conference. In the early days of *Well Played*, it was not entirely clear how, if at all, *Well Played* contributions would count toward promotion or merit. A *Well Played* was something one did because, well, one just felt it ought to be done.

I want to argue here that *Well Played* should be understood as a reaction against this instrumentalist approach to games scholarship. *Well Played* represents a bulwark against reductionist approaches to game studies that seek to commodify games scholarship and threaten to strip games from the playful contexts in which they occur. Further, spending time on a *Well Played* runs counter to, if not in resistance toward the hypercompetitive, neoliberal academic structures, which value federal grant dollars, funded graduate students, and citation rates in high prestige journals (Macfarlane, 2021). How many of us wrote a *Well Played* to force ourselves to make time to play and reflect on game play? Even if Well Played became a respected and established form through ETC Press, writing a *Well Played* article is, in short, how we preserve our souls.

In addition to arguing that Well Played serves to (perhaps) preserve our souls in a hyper capitalist work environment, *Well Played* is a core research method in game studies broadly, because it is a method for interrogating aesthetic experience. *Well Played* enables scholars to 1) Reflect on and theorize play experiences, 2) Address game play in broad cultural contexts, particularly the communities in which meanings are negotiated, and 3) engage the broader game playing public. As a research tradition, *Well Played* owes much to phenomenological scholarship generally, and more specifically auto-ethnography as a researcher method. A *Well Played* is fundamentally, playing a game, reflecting on experience, and examining these experiences with respect to existing knowledge. As a community of scholars, we could perhaps learn more from the debates around auto-ethnography, particularly in healthcare (see Atkinson, 1997). At the very least, we should recognize and celebrate Well Played as a, if not the, core mode of participation in the field of game studies.

Well Played as a Phenomenological Research Method

Well Played articles continue a phenomenological analytic tradition of reflecting on experience to theorize game structures, play, and the human condition. Phenomenological inquiry is a tradition of systematically reflecting on consciousness, rooted in existentialist philosophy (see Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009; Smith & Thomasson, 2005). Phenomenological approaches vary, and it is beyond the purposes of this article to detail them in full, but generally, is inquiry into the nature of experience (Sokolowski, 2000, Woodruff, 2018). Typical phenomenological concerns include intentionality, consciousness, and first-person experience, which then also include perception, thought, memory, imagination, and embodied action (Woodruff, 2018). Phenomenology is generally practiced by philosophers engaging in reflection and writing.

Bernie De Koven's (1978) aptly titled *The Well Played Game* is perhaps the spiritual god parent to this entire enterprise. *The Well Played Game* is a meditation on all things play, from entering the imaginary world with a neighbor child down the street to simply creating fun in everyday life. Although it mostly deals with non-digital fun, it describes a mindset and spirit similar to *Well Played*. Insofar as *Well Played* are how game scholars preserve their souls, it may be continuing in a spirit articulated by Bernie.

Modern *Well Played* essays most often focus on deep analyses (or close readings) of experiences with specific game titles (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011), which continue in a tradition of David Sudnow's (1983) *Pilgrim in the Microworld*. Sudnow, a sociologist, reflects on the nature of learning, perception, knowing, practice, expertise, social context, and again, life itself while documenting his trajectory from a video game neophyte to a master of *Breakout* on the Atari 2600. Sudnow (somewhat famously) also documented his process of learning the piano and became a piano teaching guru of sorts, suggesting the power of the phenomenological method for theorizing instructional methods in play (Sudnow, 1978).

As a research method within the modern social sciences, *Well Played* owes a great deal to autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Auto ethnography combines features of autobiography and ethnography and is essentially the reconstruction of experience into narratives. Anderson (2010) identifies five key features of autoethnography: (1) Member researcher status (someone becoming a complete member of a group or community, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative description of the researcher, (4) *dialogue with information beyond the self* (emphasis added), and (5) commitment to an analytic agenda. Autoethnography also comes in many varieties, and a full accounting of autoethnography is also beyond the scope of this article, but a few ideas from autoethnography are worth considering.

First, autoethnography extends phenomenological approaches by emphasizing member-author participation. For me, this distinction suggests that it is not only important to, for example, describe one playing a game like Netrunner (see Duncan, 2019), but an author ought to also participate in common participant structures, such as matches, tournaments or other competitive events, with an

understanding of to what extent such participation is typical of which communities. A *Well Played* article does not necessarily require one to become a ranked player, but it does point the author toward accounting for what kinds of participation one engages in within what community, and then how that community compares to others. In my own work on the *Civilization* series, for example, we've tried to account for how the community of *Civilization* players that we cultivated is like or unlike other affinity groups, such as Apolyton University (Squire & Giovanetto 2005).

Second, this framing *Well Played* as autoethnography encourages researchers to engage in dialogue with information beyond the self. Such engagement with outside information should not necessarily be required, but rather, autoethnography might be enhanced by such reflection. For example, in *A Cure for Toxic Masculinity: Male Bonding and Friendship* in *Final Fantasy* XV, Green (2019) describes how the experience of playing *Final Fantasy* XV gives players a remediated experience of male friendships based on emotional vulnerability. Green experiences *Final Fantasy* XV in response to other media, tropes from Western media, and critically others' experiences. Green asks men, which includes her husband and male students, for their experiences with the game, which is an analytic move consistent with autoethnographic research. How do her interpretations relate to others'? What evidence would confirm or disconfirm her hypotheses? These instincts – to treat her experiences of the game as one story to be read in relationship to others'- is partly what situates many *Well Played* pieces as a part of the autoethnographic tradition, as opposed to the purely phenomenological.

Finally, Well Played analyses often have an eye toward generating a theoretical framework. Davidson's *Prince of Persia* analysis that yielded the interactivities model is one such example (see figure 1). One senses in this framework, which attempts to explain (among other things) how and why he continues to play *Prince of Persia* long after it was enjoyable, a commitment to both an analytic framework and a desire to build robust theoretical models of experience to be extended beyond game play. Indeed, this model was first described in Davidson's (2003) analysis of *Ico*, expanded upon with *Prince of Persia*, and returned to later with respect to narrative theory in *Physics is Still Your Friend* (Davidson, 2018). We see across *Well Played* essays an interest in building and extending formal representations such as Davidson's Interactivities model. This impulse to systematize requires an engagement with outside ideas and reflects a commitment to an analytic agenda common to autoethnography, which, as a form of social science research, holds a possibility for some degree of stable knowledge.

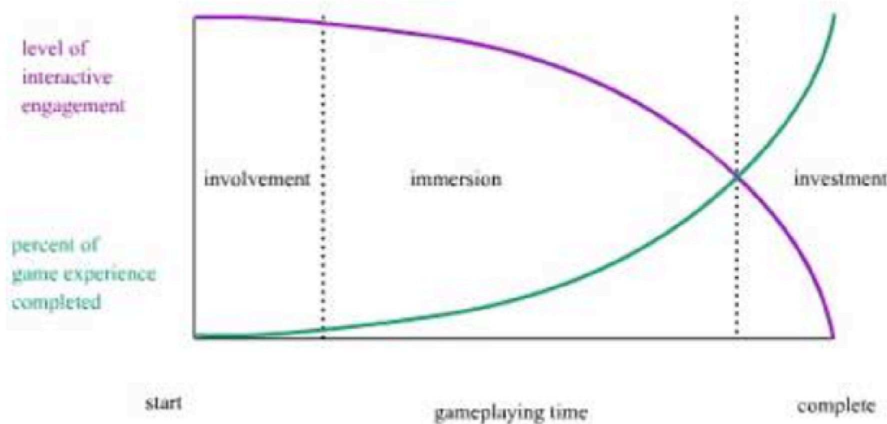

Figure 1: Davidson's Interactivities Model

Figure 1: Davidson's Interactivities Model

Considering *Well Played* essays as a form of autoethnographic research also suggests its limitations, or at least connects it to broader methodological conversations. In "Narrative Turn or Blind Alley" Atkinson (1997) critiques autoethnography for essentially reducing all phenomena to narrative. This debate, which has raged somewhat hotly within medical anthropology, is to some extent an argument between modernist and post-modernist qualitative researchers (see, Bocher & Ellis, 1992; Thomas, 2010; Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2014). For the purposes of *Well Played*, most researchers can probably steer clear of such minefields. However, Atkinsons' primary critique, which is that autoethnography re-inserts the researcher as an autonomous subject (e.g. the researcher is more or less just writing about their experience and inscribing their own subjectivities and experiences) remains salient. With some game-related analyses, such issues may be irrelevant (whether or not Drew's *Prince of Persia* experience generalizes might safely be left to readers – to what extent it is taken up by others will determine its validity, see Stake, 1996). But on the other hand, Green's (2019) discussion of toxic masculinity suggests how quickly an analysis can contain politicized dimensions. Reading game experiences with one another and compared to other narratives are ways to prevent researchers from reifying pre-existing beliefs.

Well Played in Communities

Recent Well Played analyses have specifically focused on game play within particular communities. In *Civilization* 4, Squire, Durga and DeVane (2009) analyzed a multiplayer Civ4 game experience, played

along with youth from an after-school program and examined how particular cultural practices (such as trash talking) emerged and evolved. We argue that a multiplayer game is a constructed magic circle, resembling a shared hallucination, in which participants join in creating and maintaining a social fiction. Implicit to this analysis is that not all *Civ4* games are alike, and variables ranging from changing settings to individual play styles change the experience.

The importance of social contexts in inscribing the game experience is more obvious in competitive games. What does it mean to be a good player? What forms of play are valued? What constitutes cheating? Consalvo's (2007) analysis of cheating in games is (while not a Well Played), a fantastic example of such a meditation, particularly how such meanings are constructed. Consalvo's analysis of failure among streamers, particularly how failure is performed among particular players with respect to particular audiences is a particularly salient example of how a game may be played well differently among different communities. The recent emergence of the term tryhard (something admittedly my children turned me on to) further suggests how communities make sense of game performances.

Further clarifying this distinction between meaning as a property of a game vs. a player vs. a player in community can be found in John Sharp's edited volume (2019) on "The Sporting Mindset." Sharp argues for the sporting mindset as a conception of game as follows.

The popular conception of the sporting mindset puts certain values ahead of others, and positioning games as a means to an end rather than an experience unto itself. Sometimes, the sporting mindset brings out the best in us; sometimes, the worst. Sports as community institutions play a complex role in our culture. Sports produce values, behaviors, and cultural conventions that simultaneously include and exclude; that encourage and nurture some while rejecting others; and that celebrate aesthetic performance and violent behavior all at once. These cultural and play values manifest in all manner of games: crossword puzzles, videogames, collectible card games, athletics, cooking competitions, and reality TV shows, to name a few.

Here, Sharp captures all of the beauty and horror of competitive cultures, and in doing so, sets the stage for ethnographic (or quasi-ethnographic) approaches to Well Played.

In an analysis of *Netrunner*, Sean Duncan (2019) describes two events within the Netrunner community that revealed tension between players who viewed the game competitively vs. those who viewed the game as a hobbyist board game community. Duncan observes that the act of organizing into a competitive sport mobilized and changed players in ways that perhaps ran counter to the objectives of the game's stakeholders. Duncan's analysis reminds us that for multiplayer games in particular, occasions where the meanings of games are contested are particularly insightful locations for studying games *Well Played*.

Long Live Well Played

Perhaps the most startling development after 10 years of *Well Played*, is the extent to which this practice has been taken up outside of the academic community. True, few gamers perform *Well Played* analyses that invoke Lawrence Lessig, as Gruning's analyses of valuing digital objects in *Farmville2* does, but between Twitch streamers, YouPlay videos on YouTube and other emerging forms of play, homegrown game analysis of games by gamers thrives (Consalvo, 2019). Indeed, the differences between Let's Play and Well Played explored in Let's Play 6(1) (Davidson & Wolfenstein, 2016) is insightful, and at around 21:00, Wolfenstein reflects on the similarities and differences between the forms. In Prepare to Suffer (for example) Wolfenstein and Berberich were advised to rewrite and resubmit their analysis of *Dark Souls* with a strengthened case for why Dark Souls warrants close analysis. Connecting back to the autoethnography debates, we are reminded that autoethnographic work is subject to peer review which can serve as a check on excessive subject narration.

The explosion of homegrown, fan analyses similar to *Well Played* reminds is a pattern typical of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins reminds us that while some academics may dismiss such work (or deride critical forms that resemble fan-driven practices), there is something endearing and perhaps inherently valuable to analyses driven by passion or interest, rather than professional obligation. Of course, given the monetization of streaming, You Played streamers have also professionalized reflective game play as a practice, and may in fact gather more financial resources and carry more social capital than academics practicing our more esoteric forms of *Well Played*. Recent reporting in the *Atlantic* (Zoia, 2014) ties streaming (in which video game players stream their game play, often with running commentary or analysis) to the emergence of YouTube's partner program, which made it potentially profitable for gamers to stream their play. Millions of players actively stream on Twitch, and even more youth around the world have YouTube channels where they share their play. *Minecraft*, *Fortnite*, and more recently *Among Us* all have robust communities. Perhaps we all got into the wrong gig.

Regardless, as an academic community, we are wise to account for (and perhaps study) We Play and You Play videos as a genre as fan-generated video examples of *Well Played* essays. For example, 10 years ago, researching *Civilization*, I turned to online communities such as Apolyton.net to compare interpretations of *Civilization* (particularly to understand community perceptions of how it mediated history). Today, one might also search for We Play or You Play videos on YouTube to find similar analyses, particularly to check one's interpretations with others, and to situate them within the community, which is critical when we consider autoethnography as researcher-*membership*. Wolfenstein and Berberich's (2019) meditation on *Drunk Souls* and consideration of alcohol in the *Dark Souls* community is one such (amusing) example. Examining just a few You Play essays does remind us that they are of varying quality (however one wants to define that), not peer reviewed, and less frequently connect game experiences to extant literature or generalizable frameworks.

You Play videos provide researchers an intriguing data source to compare interpretations, and perhaps as a data source themselves. Minimally, if a limit of *Well Played* are its introspectionist roots, *You Play* videos provide an intriguing way to read one's interpretations off of others. In the future, we might also imagine methods for automating such analysis, using *You Play* videos as data sources.

Closer to *Well Played*, is the *Boss Fight Books* series, a series of 58 (and counting) analyses of classic video games. These books are, in short, fan-generated *Well Played*, motivated by an author's curiosity. Each book is a critical and historical examination of a game, and in fact, Sudnow's analysis of *Breakout* was recently republished as a *Boss Fight* book. The authors of *Boss Fight* books include game journalists, game designers, critics and artists, and suggest a bright future for the form. Long Live *Well Played*.

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12. Games for Change

SUSANNA POLLACK

We have had the privilege of hosting Well-Played sessions at the annual Games for Change festival for the past 7 years. We started in 2014 with Nick Fortugno and Tracy Fullerton presenting *Paper, Please* and *Gone Home* respectively. Over the years, Well-Played has become a highly anticipated feature of our event and we are thrilled that through our platform, thousands of people have been able to experience games through the perspective of leading game designers and creators. In 2020, we hosted a special Well-Played session with Sabrina Culyba and her then 6 year old daughter as they played Sims 4 together. The session was one of our most popular offerings ever! It might have kickstarted a new tradition of looking at games from a young person's perspective. Next up is Well-Played: MInecraft with Sabrina and 3 young people who played Minecraft as a way to connect with friends through the pandemic. I am truly thankful to CMU to coming up with this innovative format as it allows examination and discussion about what makes games impactful from a designers point of view yet in a very accessible way. You can see a full list of Well-Played sessions with links to the video from the G4C Festival.

2020:

- Well-Played: Sims 4 Co-play with a Kindergartner
- Well-Played: Animal Crossing or How We Have Faith in Systems

2019:

- Well Played: Ndemic Creations

2018:

- Brain Age: A Well Played Retrospective
- September 12th – A Well Played Retrospective

2017:

- Well Played: BLINDFOLD, by iNK Stories.
- Well Played – Walden, a Game

2016:

- Well Played: Project Syria
- Well Played: That Dragon Cancer

2015:

- G4C15: Manuel Marcano and Brian Upton / Well Played Series: Never Alone
- G4C15: Doris Rusch / Well Played Series: Zoo U

2014:

- G4C14: Nick Fortugno / Well Played Series (Papers, Please)
- G4C14: Tracy Fullerton / Well Played Series (Gone Home)

13. (Pandemic) I'd Rather Just Watch from the Battle Bus

DICKIE COX

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first time games have mattered to me as they provide a coping mechanism for my emotional health. During 2020's extended state of sheltering in place and social distancing, I turned to video games as both an attempt to find reprieve from the chaos of unknowns brought on by the pandemic, and to connect with my extended family safely from a distance. With these two aims in mind, I began to explore the player-vs-player, battle royale *Fortnite* (2017) through both solo and intergenerational play (Klopfer, 2019). In this essay, and as a participant-observer, I recall and begin to analyze my pandemic gameplay, which brought me to experience and then consider, various critical notions, including those of fatherhood, third places, partisanship, and masculinity.

I Usually Roll 20s

During my teenage years Dungeons & Dragons was my lifeline while I waited for life to get better. As a nerdy lover of fantasy and science-fiction, living in a small, southern town in Virginia in the 1980s did not have the charm that it might seem to have now. In fact, my passions felt like a liability. When I would talk to peers at my school, my wide-eyed interests were frequently met with bullying and harassment. But in 1988, a new friend moved to my town from Indiana and brought source books for the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons system with him. Every day before classes and after school, a group of five or six friends piled around a table at our library to create new worlds, characters, and conflicts. From this, I discovered my love of writing scenarios, planning games, and learning game systems, gravitating toward the role of game master early in my play. The act of creating worlds, and having a modicum of influence over those worlds, provided me with the outlet to survive treacherous teenage years. Further, gaming impacted my adult life by instilling creativity and making as normalized aspects of being, play as a mode of understanding others, and a critical eye for seeing systems.

From my teenage years to now, my gaming oscillates between play in real life and virtual realms. I have certainly experienced my share of obsessive video game binges. Day-long streaks spent playing *Final Fantasy* (1987), *Fallout* 3 (2007), and *The Elder Scrolls* V: *Skryim* (2011) perhaps show a pattern of losing myself in the RPG genre. With little interest in multi-player online games or the competitive aspect of games, I instead prefer observing and contemplating play styles and making choices in the context of rules and systems. I relish in the interactivity and immersion of analog games like RPG

tabletop, boardgames, and tabletop skirmish games. Spending time with friends at a gaming table sustains and invigorates my outlook, and is a way to get to know those people intimately. Now as an academic nomad for nearly two decades, analog games provided a key way of cultivating long-lasting adult relationships as I moved from place to place. In some ways, these friends are the family that I got to choose. I can now count dozens of people across multiple states that I can visit in-person, roll up a new game in minutes, and play for days-long visits. The great irony, then, is that I have not made gaming friends in the place that I have now lived the longest in my adult life and where I currently hold a tenure-track job.

As the pandemic unfolded in its early days of March 2020, I was on child-rearing leave from my university. My son had just turned one. My wife, who is also an academic, son, and I were living in a small, two-bedroom apartment at the Jersey Shore. The second bedroom had been a shared office for years, but the arrival of our son necessitated we share a desk and the rest of our once-office space became baby storage and diaper changing station. In March, the pandemic thrust my wife and I both into full-time online work from home. We had begun house-hunting in a very challenging housing market. We scheduled a tour of the house that we purchased just a few days after Governor Phil Murphy declared a state of emergency in New Jersey. In all likelihood, if not for taking that risk during the early onslaught of the crisis, I am not sure that our offer would have been accepted.

In early June 2020 we moved into our first house. Suddenly we were able to spread out across new spaces for the first time in years: a backyard, separate bedrooms, separate offices, a den, and a workshop. As I daydreamed about where I would place a gaming table, the long-haul of the pandemic started to come into focus. Over the summer, my university union won faculty choice about teaching modalities. In-person meetings were put on hold, and we would be Zooming into our university lives for the next year, at least.

I sat at my computer with Zoom windows opened into colleagues' and students' homes. Suddenly we were all peering into one another's private spaces out of necessity to safeguard public health. Our second places of our workplaces collapsed into our first places, or homes (Oldenburg, 1989). I was seeing people virtually and routinely, yet I experienced the constant sense that my body was tethered to the desk that holds my computing workspace. Even when students and colleagues appeared on my screen, I could not shake the feeling that I was speaking into an empty room and staring at the wall just behind my computer. The surface of the computer monitor lacked a sense of depth, despite displaying so many new spaces.

My family had the privilege of rarely leaving the house for anything other than physical exercise and provisions. Our choice of staying in was our way to contribute to ending the pandemic as quickly as possible. The internet connection became our lifeline to every facet of our lives: groceries, household supplies, medicine, work, socializing, and entertainment. I was not just beginning to worry about how the pandemic might impact my toddler's cognitive and social development, but my own as well. By mid-summer, this new way of being in the world, compounded with on-going political and social strife in the United States, brought me to a moment of existential crisis.

At the core of that crisis was an overwhelming sense of loneliness. That loneliness had been in the making for years, but the pandemic gave it such immediate clarity. I missed having relationships that were strengthened by gaming with friends. Mulling over a manageable scope of tactics within a miniaturized world would be a welcomed distraction from a world out-of-control. In July I responded to my existential crisis by beginning to play *Fortnite* with my 11-year-old nephew.

Jumping on the Battle Bus in *Fortnite*

I have always had a video game console in my possession since I was 13, but as an adult I usually purchase used consoles years after the hype of a console's release and its associated titles has died down. And so it was with my purchase of my PlayStation 4 and a copy of *Fallout* 4 (2015) in July 2020. Excited for an escape into a favorite RPG franchise, I began to play *Fallout* 4 as soon as the system was plugged in and the updates had run. However, I did not get very far in the game. The narrative hook of the "Sole Survivor" of Vault 111 witnessing the murder of their spouse and the kidnapping of their son was too triggering for my emotional state as I most often played in the basement when my own spouse and son slept upstairs. If I could not play with my friends, then I wanted to be immersed in an RPG game that I could play alone. But our isolation as a family in the pandemic and worries about the unknowns were already intensely palpable. I did not want to assume the role of a character experiencing desperate loss as an impetus to gameplay.

I had remembered watching both of my nephews from Virginia playing *Fortnite* in 2018. They explained it was free-to-play and really fun. I reached out to them to see if they still played, thinking this might be an opportunity to connect with them in an online activity. While both said they still played, it was my youngest nephew who played more routinely and expressed excitement to meet up in-game. He sent me his network ID. We were friends within minutes. Being new to the PS4, I knew it would take some time to configure the hardware and network features. My 11-year-old nephew was so eager to play that he offered to help lead me though those setups, serving as both my guide to the PS4 system and teacher in *Fortnite*. Very quickly we were audio chatting through our headsets, even though I very rarely speak with him live from a distance, such as on a phone or video chat.

When I first jumped from the Battle Bus in July 2020, the Battle Royale Island had just been flooded weeks before with the start of Chapter 2, Season 3. The summery themes of times spent by large bodies of water juxtaposed with their game's flood map made me smile. One of the first tricks that my nephew taught me was to use a fishing rod to ride a shark in Sweaty Sands. I laughed and laughed at the whimsy of this game affordance. While the game's visual appearance felt designed for a younger audience, it appealed to my love of narrative, and the antics of the game helped me to not be off-put by the competitive nature of the Battle Royale. For several nights in a row, we played duos as he explained the intricacies of the game: where to land, how the game objects worked, and how to use

gathered materials to build. It was that latter mechanic that I had the most difficulty understanding. Why would I want to build in this game? It would take a couple of weeks to understand the value of building in *Fortnite* and months before I was even quick enough to drop some “boxes” in a fight.

After our first few gaming sessions, my nephew started to invite a couple of his friends to join us in squad games. Early on, they were kind to me as a “noob” in the game. They offered items and materials to help when we landed in locations that I did not know well, and they would often face risky scenarios with other squads to resurrect my card at the Reboot Van. I was always the first squad member down in our games. After another few squad sessions, it became clear to me that my nephew and his friends were very competitive during Battle Royale. I was a liability to their style of gameplaying. In previous PVP games I played, I was most interested in, and capable of, playing stealth or support modes; my coordination was too slow for tanking or DPS (damage per second), and my decision processing and executive response are more acclimated to slow strategy and turn-based tactics. I was a “bot” in a squad of “sweats.”

I heard a lot of game slang in the first few games that I played, so I asked my nephew to translate. A “sweat,” or a “sweaty” player, was a try-hard player who used showy techniques to win battles in-game, as if the player literally sweats at their controller post-win. With the actual addition of AI “bots” to help fill matches, players also used the term “bots” to refer to new players, like me, who were not very good at the game yet. In turn, my squad explained “rotating,” “90s,” “turtling,” “peeking,” “beamed,” “knocked,” and “cracked,” all important concepts to both the way they played and the way they communicated during play.

We would occasionally play in *Fortnite* creative modes. The inventiveness and imagination of the player-designed levels and mini-games amazed me. Many of the creative experiences had zany qualities to them, like the one that used the Baller vehicle as a stand-in baseball on a traditional baseball diamond. During these free-play sessions, my nephew would invite in more of his friends and the party chat would feel more casual than in Battle Royale, as well as a little more crowded. Everyone in the room except for me lived in the same area of rural Virginia where I grew up. Everyone in the room was approximately 35-years my junior. This was when I felt most out of place in the intergenerational play dynamic and often chose to just listen. But I enjoyed hearing their exchanges and about how they thought of their everyday activities in the context of where they lived. The comradery in their audio chats made the world feel a little more like pre-pandemic times.

My nephew took a great pride in being my guide in the game. He seemed to really appreciate being an expert for an adult in our intergenerational play, especially because his parents do not play and his older brother rarely plays with him. He was excited to share his knowledge and to feel like an equal to an adult. From him I saw rules and systems in videogames equalize a range of lived experiences. He was busy being an expert at the game, and I was busy learning from him. We were both using the game to forget about the stress of the pandemic. At times we talked about what was happening at our respective households. Sometimes I would hear my brother and sister-in-law in the background, or my nephew would act as a surrogate for sending messages. We shared recent family news and gave each other updates, like I would on the phone with other family members. This was the first time

that I found myself tending to a relationship with someone I knew within the context of playing a videogame. But, as with in-person and other mediated communication systems, misunderstandings and rifts can occur.

When a squad member dies in *Fortnite*, they begin passively watching another squad member's gameplay stream. When I was downed in the game and could not be rebooted, I absolutely loved to watch my nephew play. He told me his skill level was owed to the number of hours that we had spent for years practicing the game. He is a good shot and a great editor in build fights. Watching him build and edit is like watching someone perform magical feats; it is mesmerizing. I began to realize my impact on their squad play and became self-coconscious. When I would be downed, I insisted that they not risk a reboot and opted, instead, to watch my nephew play. I got to see the game and his speedy decision-making. I felt his joys and fears as he called out plays and reacted to others. But my choice to observe at those moments confused my team. I wondered if they would not rather have another friend take my place to help the squad win. I started to feel my novice abilities hold them back. And I was using my limited available gaming time to play with the squad, because my nephew preferred to play in this mode. I had mostly wanted the time and opportunity to connect with my nephew, but this was not a game I would play typically.

During a session in late November, post-election, one of my squad mates flared his temper at some of my game choices. He started hurling random insults at me. One of those would-be insults was to say that I "probably voted for Biden," to which I said that I had indeed voted that way. I should have just ignored the taunts. Instead, I attempted to have a rational conversation only to find my statements and views mocked and trolled by my team. After a few minutes, I called it a night and logged off. The argument with my squad lingered with me for a couple of days. Politics had never come up in-game before, but now that they had, I was disappointed and frustrated to hear baseless Alt-Right talking points from these pre-teens, recalling the mocking I experienced as a teenager myself. It was at this time that I decided I would explore *Fortnite* solo for a little while, both to cool off and improve my ability. I set my status to offline.

No longer beholden to the squad, I began to explore the game alone and observe my experiences more critically during game play. I played a lot of solo Battle Royale—getting my first win in early December—and explored many of the Creative and Limited-Time Modes (LTM) in the game. When eliminated during solo games, I would often watch another player as they continued on. I learned new techniques as I saw how others navigated the map and the storms. I also repeatedly experienced that players use dozens of the emotes as a way to mock and shame me as a player that they eliminated.

One of the strangest LTM moments was the *Fortnite Fashion Show* where players go head-to-head showing off their skins and emotes. Skins, dances, and emotes are aspects of the free-to-play game that cost money. Many of the skins are kooky and depict strange mashed-up details of the game world narrative. Some demonstrate the unique contractual partnerships that Epic Games has entered with other companies' intellectual properties. Some are extremely objectified and sexualized. I remembered back to a comment that my nephew said to me when I complimented one of his avatar skins in our earlier days of playing: "I don't know why I spend my money on Battle Passes or skins in

the game. Someday I know this game won't always be around. I feel like I am just wasting my money. I don't even need them to play." At the time, I elected not to engage in a conversation with my nephew about dark patterns design (Brignull, n.d.), but now, during my solo exploration, I routinely witnessed experiences and interface designed to help sell V-Bucks, *Fortnite's* in-game currency. Even with an understanding of those design patterns, I found myself routinely buying V-Bucks and Battle Passes. The purchases often served as a cathartic emotional release in a given gaming session or connected to my love of previous fandoms, like the Marvel skins in Chapter 2, Season 4.

Even as a well-informed, critical player, I could feel gameplay becoming a little obsessive for me as my game sessions lengthened. I pursued daily and weekly XP tasks, and reviewed leaderboards for varying tasks. Chapter 2, Season 4 really captivated my attention in its partnership with Disney to bring Marvel intellectual properties into the *Fortnite* storyline. I was one of 15.3 million concurrent players during *The Galactus Event* on December 1, 2020. With subsequent seasons, it is clear that Epic Games values and promotes extended gameplay, in part, by bringing additional IPs into the game as playable characters (Flanangan and Nissenbaum, 2014, pp.33-72). This encourages veteran players to try something new and entices fans of other franchises to join in the game.

The most surprising element of the game that lingered with me was the streaming audio from others' headsets in the game channels. I only ever wore a headset with a mic to communicate with my nephew. As a solo player when I would go into LTM games that required filled squads or chose random players for teams, I chose not to have a two-way communication system. I was sensitive of my age in a game that I perceived to be primarily targeted to kids. But many other players, all strangers to me, talked throughout their game experiences to anyone who was listening. Sometimes two friends would have a pseudo-private conversation as the game unfolded, the whole of their conversation broadcast from my television. I heard dozens of languages with excited or anxious inflictions. I heard parents scolding their kids. I heard kids hating on their coaches after basketball practice. Once, I heard a family making dinner together in what sounded like a tiny apartment. I started to listen to the sound cues in the audio beyond the speakers' words, as, strangely, the audio created more dimensional entries into people's private spaces for me than my flat Zoom interactions ever did. Zoom cameras frame the person and selectively frame space, while the audio in-game picks up all surrounding sounds via omni-directional headset microphones in a less curated way. I could hear the sounds of life happening in households all over the world during a global pandemic.

Games like *Fortnite* matter, in part, because they are "third places" (Steinhuehler & Williams, 2006). They act as community meeting sites for friends and strangers. They are filled with opportunities for agency, fun, and escape. At the same time, they are rife with aggressive and partisan enactments. Like all public spaces, they provide moments for personal connection and reflection as well as conflict. As I reflect on my time playing *Fortnite*, I keep wondering about the play spaces that my son will engage with over his lifetime. I see how all of learning for him right now is play and how he mirrors and emulates the actions that he sees. What will he see and hear in games? And how will he choose to bring his in-game experiences out into his "in real life(irl)" relationships?

Conclusion

For my nephew, *Fortnite* matters as a space for him to enact and develop his agency as he matures toward adulthood. It is also a space where he and his friends parroted toxic partisanship and masculinity they have learned both in-game and elsewhere (Kimmel, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, I turned to video games for a safe, socially-distanced connection with my family afar as well as for a momentary escape. What I found and experienced was a complicated social space as any other. This may seem like an obvious conclusion to my play experience as game scholars have studied the good, bad, and in-between of the productive potential of gameplay. Having played many games before, and being versed in scholarship around games and play, I was hoping for an idyllic immersion free from divisive rhetoric and mortal panic, if just for a moment.

Even with its sometimes irritating experiences, I have come to enjoy the pace, immersion, and escape that the game affords. However, I do take longer pauses between my sessions. These days I spend more of my downtime meditatively painting my miniature terrain alone in my workshop waiting for the opportunity to play with them again. I do find myself watching a growing number of Fortnite Pro Streamers, like SyperPK, and Fortnite content creators, like Adamuru, in the background while I work in my workshop. I have become interested in how the paratextual culture of *Fortnite* is communicated and performed beyond the in-game experience through streaming and video platforms. Those YouTubers and streamers are actively contributing to the creation of the *Fortnite* mythos, which have impacts both on the in-game narrative and items, but also hints at the economic aspects of transmedia participatory storytelling. I would have not have engaged with the game long enough to see these emergent research aspects, if not for the initial help and in-game relationships of my nephew and his squad.

My nephew recently shared that he is also spending less time in *Fortnite* because he has become more interested in *Call of Duty*. He invited me to come play, and I think I will join him to play some on occasion. In spite of our previous in-game argument, we are closer than we have ever been. On the whole, I feel more open to new experiences in video games that I would not usually choose for myself. I am sure that I will return to more frequent gaming with friends and family once it's safe to do so or when my existential dread arises again.

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14. It's the Small Moments that Count

Being Well Played by a Game

JAMES PAUL GEE

I was 52 when I played my first video game. Now I am 73 and I have played hundreds of them. Most were single-player, a few multiplayer. Some were AAA games, some were not.

I have ridden on hotel busses to GDC and E3 and been told by "real gamers" that I wasn't a "real gamer". My own twin brother has told me the same thing, because he is a "real gamer".

I'm not a "real gamer" because I am not competitive with games. I don't join guilds and elaborately plan raids. I don't "study" games on theory-crafting sites or other websites. I don't go after achievements. And I cannot stand watching other people play video games on Twitch or anywhere else.

I studied and wrote about games as an academic. I didn't play games as an academic. I have read lots of books. I have played lots of video games. But I have never seen the two people—reader, player; scholar, gamer—as the same person.

I never liked people talking or writing about games when they didn't play them. I never liked people treating games as content media, rather than performance media I never liked people critiquing a game's "content" outside of its embodied design as ensembles of choice, affect, and action.

I once gave a talk on games and learning to a thousand people while simultaneously playing, on a big screen, the first *Ninja Gaiden*, a hard game I loved. Some years after that talk I was eating in a fast food restaurant. A youngish elegant African-American man came up to me. He was an officer in the Navy. He told me he had seen me do the *Ninja Gaiden* thing. He had gone back and told his Navy colleagues: "You can't believe a guy who looks like that can do that". I thanked him and took it, sort of, as a compliment.

Of course, I started playing games at 53 when I was already an old bald white guy. Now I am an even older, balder, white guy. One thing I have liked about video games is that, though I have been many different things in games, I have never been an old, bald, white guy.

I am not an academic anymore. I'm retired. Now I am a farmer, a small one, raising animals to love and not eat. I was no good at *Harvest Moon*, but I'm ok as a small farmer, though nowhere as endearing as the avatar in *Harvest Moon*.

I still play video games hours a day. Of all the books I have read, I cannot remember most of them in any deep way. I can remember what they said, but not how I felt—how they affected me—when I read them. The same is true of games.

I have come to see, in old age, that what is important about books, people, and video games is how they made you feel, how they affected you, how they changed you for the better, if even just a little. Otherwise, they were passing fancies, distractions from the inevitability of death—or just the hassles of life—but they do not now live in you.

Warning: Academic Aside: Newish research shows that any piece of knowledge you have tried to put in your head—or that someone else tried to put in your head—was dead on arrival if it did not move you, make you feel something, feel that something was at stake for you in coming to know it. Feeling and emotion can exist without knowledge, but knowledge cannot exist with feeling and emotion. However, if you are a good teacher, you already knew this.

So, what does this have to do with "well played"? It is easy to think of playing well as the achievement of the player. But, at some deep level, well played means, too, how well the game played *you*. How well it carved itself into your soul.

A perfect example is *Brothers*: A *Tale of Two Sons*. In this game two brothers go on a journey to get magical water to save their dying father. The younger brother is moved by the right thumb stick and his actions are triggered by the right trigger button. The older brother is moved by the left thumb stick and his actions are triggered by the left trigger button.

The player must manage both sets of controls simultaneously to get the brothers through a great many challenges and dangers on their journey. The effort of coordination it takes to do this creates a physical stand in for the effort of the brothers in the game world.

[**WARNING**: Spoilers below, do not read on if you do not want to see them].

Towards the end of the game, the older brother is killed. You can move his control stick and tap his action button, but nothing happens. They are dead like he is. After having bonded so closely to each brother—and seen the close bond between the two of them—this is shocking. You feel the older brother's death in the death of the controls. You feel for the little brother who has always been helped and encouraged by his big brother.

The younger brother must go on, miserable and frightened as he is, to bring the water to his father. It feels very odd controlling him all alone, after having spent so long a time controlling the brothers as a team, a team that gets ever better in the game world as you, the player, get better at the controls.

The younger brother comes to a stream and must swim across. But he can't. You very well know, from earlier in the game, that he is afraid to swim and cannot swim. His brother has always carried him across.

The younger brother hesitates at the stream. Since he can't swim, his stick and action button do nothing. So, you, as he does, hesitate and wonder what to do. His controls are dead and so are the older brother's. You feel the plight of the little brother; you feel your plight as a player.

And, then, eventually, you try the big brother's dead controls and they suddenly come alive again and work, so the younger brother can swim across. His brother is there still, but has transferred his powers and courage to his little brother, who goes on to save his father.

Just as you physically felt the death of the older brother in the dead controls, you feel his resurrection as part of his brother's soul in the dead controls coming back alive, now to power the little brother.

The effect at the stream seems small. Just one very small moment in a long game. Yet, it is a powerful moment that you never forget.

One of my lovers once said to me: "It is the small moments that matter most". This moment in *Brothers* seems but a small part of the game. However, it was earned by all the design and play that came before it. It was earned by an inventive control scheme and the effort you, as a player, put in to master it. At the moment of affect (feeling, emotion) all this work may be forgotten in the small momentous moment of illumination.

Another example: In the first *Call of Duty*, you play, in turn, a soldier in the American army, the British Army, and the Russian army. When you finally, at the end, get to the Russians—especially if you do not know the history of WWII well—you are in for a shock.

You make a landing from a boat and are told by your commanding officer to disembark and stand in line to get your weapon. When I got in line, I quickly saw that each solider got either a gun or ammunition, not both. The Russians did not have enough for everyone. They didn't have enough food either.

As you got your gun or ammunition, you were told to move forward to the German lines. Anyone who stalled or turned around would be shot. Off you went, soon under heavy gunfire. The idea was you would pick up either a gun or ammunition, whichever you needed, from the soldiers who died in front of you.

The slog to Berlin is a steep climb of seemingly insurmountable challenges. It feels nothing like the American or British army.

At one point as I was moving forward, head down and slowly, I came on a fellow Russian soldier hiding behind a big boulder. He told me he was trying to shoot a sniper, so he could move forward. He suggested I move out into the open so the sniper would shoot at me. He would see where the sniper was, and then kill him. He said I was fit for the task because my head was big. Having only an empty rifle at this point, I thought, well, what other contribution can I make and, in any case, they will shoot me if I turn back. I darted out and back and made it out alive.

After many struggles and lots of death, I get to Berlin with the tattered remains of the hungry and wretched Russian army. We survivors all run at full speed, firing and being fired upon, streaking across the open space in front of large government buildings filled with Germans. We enter the buildings under heavy fire, fight our way to the top, and hoist up the Russian flag. The Germans are defeated.

I was never so proud to be a Russian, even though, in "real life", I am an American, people who have long taken credit for what the Russians accomplished at far greater cost. I was proud of them. I was proud of me.

My two most emotional moments came when I realized I had only a handful of ammunition and when I helped hoist the flag. Again, small moments well earned by a big game.

WARNING: If you are one of those fanboys who checks for accuracy, don't tell me I didn't help hoist the flag. That's how I remember it. And I am sticking to it.

Another example: Well, we all know about Ico sitting on a bench, holding Yorda's hand, to save the game and the girl. No need to belabor the point. It doesn't get smaller; it doesn't get bigger

Another example: When the wonder of turning the earth green again in *Flower* turned into that eerie dark electric dangerous level with the metal towers, I wondered all of sudden: "What the hell is happening here?", "Can I die in this level?", "How are the skills I developed as windblown flower petal going work here up against electricity?". "Geez, I was feeling happy, exhilarated, making progress—even having a bit of a Zen moment—now I am getting depressed".

But I made it through, I not only flew free again renewing nature, but turned the old electric metal beams into tall buildings and painted them with bright colors. I went for a wild ride round and round a city that I was making every more vibrant. As I flew, I felt redemption.

Some other examples: We all know how our first ride on a dragon felt when *World of Warcraft* came out.

We all know bad we felt when we climbed on and killed the big creatures in the *Shadow of the Colossus*.

WARNING: Yes, I know that you discover you are actually the bad guy at the end of the game because you have freed the evil spirit that had fragmented itself in the 16 Colossuses which are, thus, really not "alive". I felt terrible while killing them; I felt terrible when I found out I had been duped. And I always felt (remember, feeling precedes and forms thinking) they were lovely, mysterious, wonderful, and alive. That's my memory. And I'm sticking to it. If having an evil spirt in you means you are not alive, then most humans aren't.

WARNING: Academic Aside: Modern biologists cannot agree on or find a common definition for what is alive.

And don't get me started about when the little kid gets off the train and arrives in the town in *Animal Crossing*. What child has not dreamed of being free, but feeling safe and cared for, on a self-directed adventurous journey to become, not just be. What adult, who has not given up, hasn't?

15. What Well Played meant to me, 10 years later

FRANCISCO SOUKI

What is your absolute favorite game? The one game you look back to most fondly?

If I had a magic wand, I'd wish for every budding game designer to get the opportunity to publish an essay about their coming-of-age game. That game we all played when we were 9 or 12. The one that opened our eyes to the potential of game design. The one that causes others to say "oh yeah, I played that game" and us to think in response "oh yeah, I AM that game".

Ten years ago, thanks to Well Played, I was able to do just that.

If you've never done it, I highly recommend the exercise of deconstructing why your favorite game isn't everyone else's favorite game. I got partly there with my *Chrono Trigger* Well Played piece, back when my game design career had barely started. In outlining what makes that game great, I delved into the objective and the subjective. And in observing that subjectivity I began to recognize what I value in game design. Now I know that the version of *Chrono Trigger* that I play is mine and only mine: it is my perfect game.

Something I discovered in writing that piece, and have adopted as a design value for my own games ever since, is the importance of cohesion to a game's design. *Chrono Trigger*, while being constructed of several story segments taking place across wildly different time eras, ties the experience together tightly through its art and design. A lot of attention was paid to the experience as a whole beyond its moment-to-moment components. The player is able to poke at the game in some serious ways: skipping back and forth across eras, engaging (or not) with the side quests, triggering the game's ending early in as many as a dozen different ways. Yet the experience remains fully aware of itself and how the player's actions dictate the ways in which it should behave – the game pokes back, and as a result the player feels seen. I have grown to see myself as the "keeper of the experience" for the games I design, and I strive to make games that feel just as alive. The roots of that role lie in my appreciation of *Chrono Trigger*

What was it like to write a public lover letter to the game-love of my life? It was easy! It was hard! I am quite fluent in spewing platitudes about *Chrono Trigger*, and yet… how to truly capture in words what a game makes you feel? *Chrono Trigger* makes my eyes water with admiration: it gets my brain and heart in perfect sync. I did what I could to capture that, and now that essay is woven into my relationship with the game – how great is that?

The truth of it is that being given the opportunity to write that piece showed me that my experiences and my voice have value (foreign accent and all). That my upbringing, so different from that of most of

my peers, is an asset and not a disadvantage. As a non-American game designer trying to find my way into the American games industry, it helped me recognize what is unique about the way I think about, play and process games. And it clued me into the fact that all of the above can combine to give shape to my design style.

Today, that experience serves as a reminder of the value of diversity and as a strong driver to give designers of all backgrounds a platform to show their work. When given an opportunity to showcase or promote a designer, I try to choose someone who is less likely to think their ideas have worth – or someone who is not used to being asked to share their thoughts. The same goes for game development meetings and brainstorms: team members shouldn't need to adapt to the fast-paced communication style of outgoing native speakers to earn the right to voice their ideas – so it has become my goal to create opportunities for them to voice their opinions and ideas in ways that they are comfortable with. My games are much better for it.

That's a lot for one piece of published material! If you want to read a clumsy love letter to the love of someone else's life (you don't), it is there for all to see in Well Played 3.0.

And since I have you all here… one more thing about *Chrono Trigger*. It continues to be a game I replay, end to end, every four or five years, and I expect that to continue into the future. It dawned on me recently how extremely fitting it is that a game about time travel allows me to go back in time and embody my past selves as they were when they played through *Chrono Trigger*. As the courtroom scene music begins and the camera rolls down, my body simultaneously becomes host to my amazed 12-year old self, to my fresh into grad school self, to my trying to explain this scene to my partner self, to my "how can I recreate this moment in my own games?" self. The game also holds, secretly in its time travel code, the emotions of the future selves who will one day smile when the courtroom scene begins and we are reminded of the day we wrote this piece.

Well Played gave me (and has given me again, all these years later) a chance to yell at the top of my lungs all the reasons why, when it comes to *that one game*, my glasses are the rosiest-colored. If you hold the power to give others a similar vehicle to voice their ideas, I beseech you to offer it to the unlikeliest voice you can find.

16. (Pandemic) From Animal Crossing to Plague, Inc

From Animal Crossing to Plague, Inc: Contra Gaming in Covid Times

VANESSA HADDAD

When my college first transitioned to remote learning in the spring 2020 semester, I was hopeful that by the fall 2020 semester, life would be back to normal. With social distancing measures, multiple lockdowns enacted, and restrictions put in place, it seemed reasonable to think that we might be able to eliminate Covid-19, or at the very least, protect ourselves while we find ways to treat, and eliminate it.

With the hope of the pandemic being short lived, I took the restructuring of day to day life in a positive way. Without a commute, or in person class and meetings, I felt a sense of relief that I could recover from the heavy work-related stress that I had been carrying. I tried new workouts, new recipes, eliminated (some) piles of clutter around my office, and played new video games.

The trajectory of Covid-19 not just in the United States, but around the world, quickly changed my general outlook from relieved to having less work stress, to feeling generally disheartened. Nearly every activity outside of my home became a calculated risk. Going to the grocery store, dealing with the logistics of the death of a loved one, being invited to maskless group activities and parties in spite of what was happening. Explaining to others that there were some activities I wasn't comfortable with socially, suddenly made me the odd person out in my world. Asking close friends to take walks wearing masks resulted in tension and disagreement. Every time I was expected to forego wearing a mask, or ignore social distancing, or attend a large gathering, I became progressively disillusioned with the state of our culture. Video games increasingly became a refuge in which I could interact with friends and strangers alike, while avoiding difficult conversations about personal safety that often resulted in negative outcomes. This paper looks closely at the two video games that I played the most during the Covid-19 pandemic: Animal Crossing: New Horizons (2020), and Plague Inc. (2012).

Animal Crossing: New Horizons

Animal Crossing is a series of games released by Nintendo beginning in 2001, and the most recent game in the series, Animal Crossing: New Horizons was released in March 2020 for the Nintendo Switch console. Nintendo (2021) describes Animal Crossing: New Horizons on their website in the following way:

> Escape to a deserted island and create your own paradise as you explore, create, and customize in the Animal Crossing: New Horizons game. Your island getaway has a wealth of natural resources that can be used to craft everything from tools to creature comforts. You can hunt down insects at the crack of dawn, decorate your paradise throughout the day, or enjoy sunset on the beach while fishing in the ocean. The time of day and season match real life, so each day on your island is a chance to check in and find new surprises all year round.

New Horizons provides players an opportunity to create a calm, peaceful life that they are in control of on a private deserted island. Up to ten animal non-playable characters, called villagers, can also be added to the island as residents, or which there are nearly 400 available in the game. There are several major goals in the game: to earn bells, or in game currency, to spend bells on items, purchasing and expanding your home, and island construction; craft items; fill your island museum with fish, insects, fossils, and art; and earning a five-star island rating. The rating is earned through decorating, creating aesthetic spaces, removing weeds, and planting a variety of trees and flowers, and other plants.

When a player begins Animal Crossing: New Horizons, they are greeted by two raccoon characters, Tommy and Timmy Nook, at the check-in counter. The player is asked for their name, and creates a customizable character. Then, they choose a Deserted Island Getaway Package, which determines the amount of freshwater, and landscaping, of the island. Next, the player is flown to their island, and arrives at the centrally located plaza. The player is greeted by raccoon character Tom Nook, who is the uncle of Tommy and Timmy. Tom owns and operates Nook Inc., which is a development company encompassing retail operations, residential services, infrastructure services, and banking services. After Tom welcomes the player, the next step is to select a spot to pitch a tent. Then, the player can meet other island residents, and help them select where to pitch their tents. After this step, the player is sent on a number of collection tasks for Tom, including collecting tree branches, weeds, and fruit. Once these tasks are completed, the player names their island, and tells Tom that they are going to bed.

When the player wakes up, Tom delivers to them an in game cell phone, called a NookPhone. The NookPhone offers the ability to shop, communicate with friends in game, a camera, a map, recipes for crafting, a listing of collected insects, fish, and sea creatures, and several other in game functions. Tom gives the player the task of paying off their loan of 50,000 bells. Tom allows the player to pay off their loan in 5,000 Nook Miles, which are award through completing given tasks around the island.

The next task is to learn how to use Tom's DIY workshop, collect five tree branches, and craft a flimsy fishing rod. Tom gives additional recipes for crafting a campfire, and a flimsy bug net. Naturally, the fishing rod and the bug net aid in collecting fish and which helps the player reach the 5,000 Nook Miles goal. Once the goal is reached, the debt is paid off, and Tom asks the player if they would like to upgrade their tent to a house. If they select yes, the player is given a new loan of 98,000 bells. Once the loan is paid off, the player can pay to add additional rooms to their home – three more rooms on the main floor, a large room upstairs, and a basement. While there are not many large goals in the

game, the player often owes Tom Nook thousands of bells at any given time, whether it's for house upgrades, or for infrastructure projects, like building bridges and ramps to make island navigation over rivers, or up cliff sides, easier.

Island and home decorating are a major part of the game. Items can either be purchased from Nook Inc., crafted through DIY recipes, or received as gifts from villagers, or from friends who also play the game. Some items are customizable in color or pattern using the DIY workbench, and player created custom clothing and item designs can be downloaded from other players through the NookPhone (only with a paid Switch Online subscription, though!). This allows for endless possibilities with self-expression and creativity in the game. The game can become slightly competitive in this way, as island comparison, whether through YouTube tours, online communities, or among in game friends, becomes an extrinsically motivating factor for island improvement. This game can certainly be played as a virtual Keeping up with the Joneses if a player works to change their island's appearance after visiting another island.

While there are some goals in the game, there are no consequences to not meeting them. If a player decides they'd rather fish then collect Nook Miles, there's nothing lost by doing so. The game provides the player freedom in how they spend their time in game. The laid back nature of the game is like taking a virtual vacation – watch the sky, take a swim, go fishing, sleep to dream, eat a fruit you picked, talk to a villager, or don't do these things, either. There is no rush to pay Toom Nook back, and there is only peace on the island. The most consequential things that can happen on the island is accidentally hitting your villager with your net, or getting bit by a tarantula. Otherwise, the game is simulation of a simple, primitive life that many of us wish we could experience from time to time.

I, as well as all of my friends who played video games and owned a Nintendo Switch, purchased Animal Crossing: New Horizons the day that it was released in March 2020. We exchanged friend codes, and soon enough, we were visiting each other's islands, sending gifts through the in-game mail system, and comparing our villagers. I was new to the series, and it was an otherworldly experience to visit people in this way. As dramatic as it sounds, two weeks into lockdown, visiting a friend's museum on their island made me emotional. Having a way to spend time with someone in a world that they created while I couldn't see them physically, felt truly special. "I can't wait until this is all over, and we can do this for real! Maybe we can see each other in a few months!" I said over Discord. I had no idea that one year ago, I would have been so wrong.

There are a few reasons why New Horizons is appealing to a broad audience. First, the game is easy to learn how to play, and is simple in its instructions and controls. Second, it is easy to create a community and to bond with others through, and within, the game. There are numerous online spaces for players to connect, such as through Discord, Twitch, YouTube, and reddit. Players look to each other for custom items, take virtual island tours, either by visiting other's islands directly, or through viewing videos or livestreams. Players also share their character interactions with friends (especially the dialogue that can occur – the game is known for having pun humor in the character dialogue), or with the broader Animal Crossing community.

New Horizons became a haven from the stresses of the outside world. Performing the immaterial labor of the game, while also creating gifts for friends in it, reduced my anxiety significantly on particularly difficult days. It gave structure and socialization in a new life that had decreasing amounts of both. The simple tasks in the game kept me present and mindful. According to Cruea (2020), video games are useful for inducing a flow state, which can lead to mindfulness through relaxation, enhanced concentration, improved mood, reduced stress, and greater empathy. New Horizons helped me with managing the difficult emotions that followed as a result of current events, and staying connected with others through physical isolation. I lost interest in social media, and engaged in gaming more instead. Reading Facebook arguments about Black Lives Matter, Covid-19 being a hoax, and an intense election cycle, was mentally too much for me. Disconnecting from the toxic spheres of Facebook and Twitter, and replacing it instead with activities that resulted in positive feelings, especially video game playing, became essential in preserving my well-being during the pandemic.

Plague, Inc.

While I was having positive experiences with Animal Crossing, I also found it to be intellectually not all that stimulating or challenging. After all, the game is essentially a simulated, slow paced vacation with few goals. It fulfills a need for relaxation and positive feelings, but on its own, it felt repetitive sometimes. I needed to pick up a game that would be more intense, more engaging, and something that I could learn from, to balance out the laid-back nature of Animal Crossing.

In an attempt to learn more about how pandemics occur, I purchased Plague Inc (2012) at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic on Steam (it is also available as a mobile game, but does not include multiplayer versus or co-op). I was in good company, as Plague Inc. has seen an increase in downloads of 123%, and a 201% increase in revenue since the beginning of the pandemic (Gaugh, 2020). While the goal of the game, to eradicate the entire human population, is rather macabre, it taught me a great deal about what happens when a contagious illness runs rampant, and how that happens. Ndemic Creations (2021) states that:

> Plague Inc. is a unique mix of high strategy and terrifyingly realistic simulation with over 700 million games played! Your pathogen has just infected 'Patient Zero'. Now you must bring about the end of human history by evolving a deadly, global Plague whilst adapting against everything humanity can do to defend itself.

The player takes on the role of a bacteria, virus, fungus, parasite, or other type of pathogen with the goal of mutating, infecting the population, and killing every single person in the world. If even one person survives, the game is lost.

The main game begins by selecting a pathogen to play. At the beginning, only bacteria is available to play. Virus can be unlocked once the player wins the game with bacteria, and other pathogen

types can only be unlocked once the player wins with the preceding pathogen. The player can select one of three levels of difficulty: casual, normal, or brutal. Once the level of difficulty is selected, the player can name their plague, and modify its genetic code by inserting genes that have been unlocked through gameplay. Once this step is complete, the gameplay begins. The player must select a country to start their plague in. During gameplay, the player earns DNA points through popping bubbles on the map, which tend to spring up as more people are infected and die. DNA points are used to evolve the plague through transmission, symptoms, and abilities. Transmission vectors include birds, rodents, insects, livestock, blood, air, and water. Some symptoms include sneezing, coughing, inflammation, insomnia, insanity, paranoia, coma, rash, vomiting, paralysis, nausea, and rash. Some abilities include cold resistance, heat resistance, drug resistance, and genetic hardening.

While the player earns points, they can observe a world map that has ships and airplanes traveling throughout the globe. A news ticker runs with humorous headlines, including: Compromise voted most insulting word ever, Memes found to extend life expectancy by 25 years, Jogger smiles at camera, becomes popular, CDC: nine out of ten U.S. Adults get too much sodium every day.

The effectiveness of the plague is measured by three traits: infectivity, severity, and lethality. One of the trickiest aspects of the strategy of the game is learning how to balance infectivity and lethality together, while going undetected (which is what severity measures). If the plague is highly infectious, but it has low lethality, and evolves to be lethal too late, and is detected, then the game is lost. If the disease is too lethal with a low infectivity rate, then the game is also lost. The strategy for this balance can change depending on the player's chosen pathogen. Generally, the key to winning a game, which typically takes less than an hour, is to go unnoticed for as long as possible, while being highly infectious and lethal at the right time.

In January 2021, Plague Inc. added in an anti-pandemic mode, called Plague Inc.: The Cure. The creation of this new mode was in direct response to the covid-19 pandemic. Instead of playing the role of a pathogen, the player instead takes on the role of a global health expert. In this reversal of the game, the player needs to manage world affairs, while trying to eradicate the disease. The player must invest resources into things like disease research, field workers, contact tracing, public awareness, vaccine research, and supporting treatment and healthcare infrastructure. The player must also balance efforts to reduce infections, such as lockdowns, closures of ports, restricting air travel, closing land borders, and targeted lockdowns, which lead to societal unrest. While these measures restrict the number of cases in the game, they also reduce authority. Once a player loses their authority in the game, the game is lost and is over. While Plague Inc. can give a player an understanding to a degree of how pandemics happen and spread, Plague Inc.: The Cure can give a player an understanding of the challenges of how covid-19 are managed. This game may also provide catharsis for those who are distressed at the covid-19 pandemic. In March 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a public awareness campaign using Plague Inc: The Cure. The WHO (2021) describes it as "a new public awareness campaign bringing together gamers and WHO experts to promote actions everyone can take to stay healthy and learn to detect and act upon misinformation."

Plague, Inc. also has scenarios that can be played as well, such as: fake news, in which the player can create their own fake news story to manipulate the population; science denial, a scenario in which people no longer believe in science, and try to use alternative cures to overcome the pathogen; black death, a scenario in which patient zero is infected with a dormant strain of Yersinia pestis; who cares, a scenario in which people in rich countries are distracted by reality television shows, which stops them from caring about what happens in poorer countries, reducing funding to identify and assist poor countries with outbreaks xenophobia, a scenario in which people are angry over immigration and globalization, and triggers hostility towards foreigners worldwide, resulting in fortified borders; and necroa virus, a scenario in which zombies and zombie hordes infect the world.

What is unique about Plague, Inc. is that it provides a player with a number of options to explore. The player can become an epidemic, a scientist focused on curing an epidemic, or even a vampire spreading an epidemic. The popularity of the game has increased since the covid-19 pandemic began, and this is likely due to providing a space for people to explore their fears, feel a sense of control, and process their emotions around a situation in which they feel helpless. Games like Plague, Inc. provide a safe simulation of a worst case scenario for a reality that the world is still undergoing. Plague Inc. allowed for me to explore the darkest aspects of what was happening, while providing a deeper scientific understanding of how pandemics occur.

Gaming with Opposites – Contra Gaming

After reflecting upon my experiences of gaming during the pandemic, I could not help but notice that the two games that I played the most are polar opposites of each other. New Horizons focuses on the experience of a slow, relaxed, and problem free life. Contrarily, Plague Inc. focuses on how to spread death to the world. While the focus of these games is entirely different, there are some commonalities in terms of what they provided me with. Both games played a significant role in relieving and processing my anxiety about the state of the world. Not only was this achieved from experiencing flow (Czikszentmihalyi 1990), but it was also achieved through experiencing two opposite worlds that yet somehow still both resembled aspects of reality.

The reality of New Horizons is through a simple stress free life devoid of a modern economy, and simple tasks, such as gardening, fishing, and collecting fruit, which are aspects of the human experience that many of us are generally cut off from in one way or another. The reality of Plague Inc. is the winning outcome being the absolute worst case for humanity. This kind of gaming experience is what I refer to as 'contra gaming', which I define as engaging in opposing video game narratives and experiences simultaneously in a meaningful way that fulfills fundamental needs and desires that could not be otherwise experienced.

In terms of defining what human needs are in this context, I look to the Freudian theoretical concepts of Eros, or life drive, and Thanatos, or death drive (Freud, 1923). The aim of Eros is to ensure that

life continues, and that people are united and bound together. The aim of Thanatos is to bring living matter to an inorganic state. When life emerges, the death drive attempts to counter it by causing a continual stride towards death. All things that live eventually reach a state of no longer living. How we manage this desire for destruction can manifest in a multitude of ways, such as self-destructive behavior, aggression, and depression. This drive can also be channeled through play, and can be expressed and can be expressed without causing destruction internally, or externally. The consideration of these ideas is really an examination of human nature, and how it is expressed in society. While they may not be entirely literal, this lens of humans being driven towards aspects of both life and death simultaneously throughout the lifespan may be accurate when considering human attraction to dark and macabre themes, and survival in relation to them. Since many people are limited in their expression of these drives, one way to manage them is through play, and sublimation (Haddad, 2019). Therefore, I think of Animal Crossing: New Horizons, as a virtual expression of Eros, and Plague Inc. as a virtual expression of Thanatos, and they are joined together in a meaningful way through the concept of contra gaming.

The gaming experiences that I had this past year were not necessarily unique for me. In the past, I have balanced extremes in gameplay through stressful periods – Resident Evil counterbalanced with The Sims, Civilization counterbalanced with Candy Crush. What was unique in this particular occurrence was the social nature of Animal Crossing out of necessity due to a global event, engaging with Plague, Inc in reaction to attempting to understand a global event, and having the time to pause and reflect on why I had engaged with video games in a particular way during a stressful time. In the future, I will pay closer attention not only to this pattern of gaming and its meaning, but also seek to understand its potential benefits of expression of Eros and Thanatos in gameplay in this way. What can this style of gaming be used for on a broad scale? What is its potential for managing difficult events, and the anxiety around those events? How can it help others connect? I hope to answer these questions moving forward.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a multitude of change in the lives of everyone throughout the world. Through the challenges that this pandemic has presented to us all, adaptability, flexibility, and creativity have been essential to survival, and self-preservation. Video games have provided a major way of not only connecting to each other, but also provide a way to experience fundamental aspects of life, while simultaneously learning, and developing further understanding of the world around us.

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17. A Well Played Retrospective

SAM ROBERTS

I first became aware of the Well Played Series in the late 2000's. I had been working in games for a few years, attracted to the space after falling into a vibrant scene of artists and thinkers exploring what media could be in the new century. Drawn back to games by a growing awareness of people exploring how to tell serious stories, convey meaning, and share life experience using interactivity and play, I had meet a series of game academics through my involvement with two independent games festivals, the Slamdance Guerilla Gamemaker Competition and Indiecade.

Well Played was targeted towards and served a space I found immediately engaging – critical and thoughtful examinations of games in modes other than the commercial review and the academic dissection, attacking certain properties of a game or several games, or reflecting on the experience of play, not the value of product. Despite being an academic publication and being about games specifically, it fostered an outlook and writing style that helped bring energy to emergent discussions that the space needed – each of the early volumes feeling like a games conference bound in paper, where new outlooks and ideas could be discovered.

Some of the early papers, such as Katherine Isbister's analysis of the experience and brilliant interaction design of Parappa the Rappa or Patrick Curry's design analysis of the learning presented by Super Mario Bros heuristics are fundamental breaks and advancements in how we could mine this medium and the experiences it provides for insight on design, human psychology, and art. These papers were inspirational to myself and a generation of game players and designers who grew up with the medium and intuitively knew it could tell great stories, provide true insight, and express deep meaning but struggled with words and ideas to discuss that and implement it into our own creative practices.

This made it an immediate and compelling fit for IndieCade and the IndieCade conference, a space that sought exactly to create these sorts of conversations and create the kind of community that was emerging around the Well Played Series. We partnered with Well Played to do a series of conference sessions where interesting game designers, academics, writers and even experts from further fields would play games from the festival and then sit down and talk about them (and often play them with) the game designer in front of a live audience.

These sessions emerged as some of my favorite sessions at the festival, providing a deep dive into a designer's process and bringing interesting voices into deep analysis of a game, not as part of a larger academic paper making a point, nor as a commercial or artistic review, but a dialogic engagement with the material that enlightened the audience as to how the game truly came to be, and what was interesting about the way it provoked playfulness and experience.

In particular, I remember sessions analyzing IndieCade nominees in the early 2010's where respected designers such as Nick Fortugo and Tracy Fullerton played beautiful innovative games that experimented with the format, that introduced wild new ideas, that expressed through the design of interaction wholly new ideas or experiences, such as Gorogoa or J.S. Joust. These beautiful talks from insightful design thinkers expressing their own experience of

play, and then drawing insight from it in conversation from the designer of that insight, inspired everyone who saw them to experiment with their own game creation if they were not already.

I was deeply drawn to these talks and to the collection of essays, so much so that I contributed by own article to Well Played 2.0, an article about the actual experience of play of a classic game, deconstructing its design in terms of platform, historical moment, and moment in my own and other's lives. For the article, I replayed in classic platform the old D&D adaptation Pool of Radiance, with a dear friend who also had 20-year-old fond memories of the game. I wrote an article about the experience of play as it was reflected both in the memories of myself and others, and also in our lived experience of trying to recapture that moment and that energy – of the strengths and weaknesses of the game's design and how they had changed over the years, withstanding changes that could not have been predicted but also falling prey to vicissitudes of the format of video games that could not be predicted. I wrote an article that was not academic enough for DiGRA, not current enough for GDC, and not content-focused enough for PCGamer. An article that had insights into how our designs are impacted by platform and context but had no home before there was a Well Played. This article began my own process of organizing my thoughts about emergence, experience, and narrative that form the crux of my teaching and design practice today.

This is the legacy I have seen Well Played define – a testbed for the ways we discuss and talk about games. An early touchpoint for discussions that would continue in and around the space for years to come. A channel and outlet for thought and conversations that had no home or audience except other people talking and thinking about the same things. The sessions at IndieCade became a core part of IndieCade's very community and mission, helping define an approach to discussing and celebrating games that started with the designers and sharing their wisdom. The approach to games discourse that was experientially focused, playful, energized by the ideas and channeled through the lived experience of design and play. A conversation by and among designers all seeking to understand their craft better, and writers and thinkers inspired by design and their personal experience with an emerging media form.

18. Well Played, Well Human

CARO WILLIAMS-PIERCE

Just as Well Played has dual meanings – well played as in well read (but for games), and well played as in "Well done, Caro, you finally pulled off that horrifically complicated button combination!"—so does Well Human. Playing is a human activity—we need to play to be *well*—and we are, *well*, only human – and consequently prone to needing to spend hours practicing the button combination because our stupid fingers aren't as agile as we'd like. Well Played celebrates the playing, the struggles, the victories, the failures, the friendships – all the experiences that make us human. In doing so, Well Played celebrates us.

In writing this retrospective, I started thinking back to over a decade ago, where I first met Drew and was introduced to the Well Played world—and realized just how many *firsts* in my scholarly journey are directly related to Well Played. This journey began in 2007, when I had just tentatively (awkwardly, nervously) joined the Games+Learning+Society (GLS) group at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and was volunteering at their annual conference. Well Played had the most bizarrely comfortable space—like a large living room got moved by a careful hurricane into the middle of a stodgy generic conference—and the sound of the Drew's carefully curated fun leaked out and disrupted the seriousness of more explicitly academic presentations. I remember thinking, "This is what all conferences should be like – the experiences under discussion side by side with the experiences themselves." The long-lasting lesson that I learned that day was that noise and laughter does not imply that nothing of value is taking place—that celebrating our well-human-ness is just as important as everything else we do, and think, and strive for.

At my first GLS conference presentation, I learned that well human means not just playing to be well, but taking into account human error – that forgiveness is just as important as celebrating. As I am, well, only human, I suffer from intensely debilitating presentation anxiety at conferences – somehow, my nervous system has decided that the only way to deal with that is to crack jokes nonstop throughout the talk. In 2014, I tried to run a Well Played session at GLS, and the technology broke. But the majority of the audience still stuck around, waiting, as Sean Michael Dargan and his lovely bowtie hustled to find tech support, and Drew smiled patiently at me from the front row, and even my nervous joke cracking failed me as I was pinned by embarrassment to the stage. But when the technology finally worked, and I started navigated Sackgirl through *LittleBigPlanet 2*, the audience forgave me the time they had wasted waiting in uncomfortable conference chairs, and began laughing and paying attention and asking good questions.

As I was writing my first solo-authored journal article for Well Played, Drew and I actually spoke on the phone about how to describe the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing as I was switching between playing *LittleBigPlanet* and *Metal Gear Solid 4*—I felt torn between two worlds. They were the same—experienced the same way, in my body, through my eyes, with the same television and the same

controller—but worlds apart. Goofy playful. Dark and dangerous. How can I, the human in each of them, also be a single human outside of them? Drew helped me write that story, and at the same time helped me towards my broader life goals—understanding myself, designing worlds, and expressing the thoughts trapped within my skull.

And when I decided I wanted to write an edited book that would be a useful guiding text for teachers, I knew where I needed to go—Drew and Well Played understand that humans sometimes struggle in unique ways around games, and that teachers need a google result that is free, quick to access, written by other teachers, and immediately useful—and not from a conglomerate for-profit with opaque motivations. So Drew and brilliant patient Brad guided me through the process of sending out CFPs, reviewing, reminding, editing, formatting, reviewing cover art, and reading reading reading! Whew. And when I took at least a year longer than they expected, they gently reminded and encouraged, even as I began giving up hope on myself. The book's out, and last I checked, it had hundreds of downloads. I learned—they taught me—that a little support can go a long way.

Today, I have my own version of Well Played that involves facilitating a mathematical play working group at the top mathematics education research conference in North America. In 2018, when I was conducting it for the first time, two separate conference attendees came up to me and asked if we were "just playing" in the working group – implying that to play, to be well human, is of less importance than studying how middle school students grumpily learn linear functions, or memorize how to divide fractions, or fail math tests. In other words, these colleagues were telling me that learning and playing are separate activities that ne'er shall meet – and as I paused to carefully (gently, politically) respond, I heard echoes of that Well Played laughter from my first GLS conference in 2007. And what I didn't say, but what I can say here in the safety of the celebrating, forgiving, supporting Well Played is: we will never fix how we teach mathematics without understanding how to help learners play and be well, and expecting them and ourselves to be, well, human.

Well Played, thank you for the last decades—may there be many more, accompanied by raucous laughter and deep thoughts.

19. (Video) M+M Play Gloomhaven!

MARK CHEN & MELISSA PETERSON

This video submission for the Well Played Journal's Games During Covid Times special issue features the authors, Mark Chen and Melissa Peterson, asking each other a set of questions about what it was like to play the popular board game, *Gloomhaven*, during the pandemic and how it came about. While they discuss how important the gaming sessions were to them and why they decided to record each play session to share on YouTube, sped-up versions of videos from four of the gaming sessions give viewers a preview of the YouTube playlist.

Starting in February of 2020, we (Mark Chen and Melissa Peterson) have been playing *Gloomhaven*, a fantasy board game, over Zoom, the video conferencing app, while recording our sessions and uploading them as a Let's Play series to YouTube (Chen & Peterson, 2021 and ongoing, https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqMt8w5YgAQpN34ffTlaD70fCdvstrkgV). We had decided to play *Gloomhaven* together before the pandemic happened since both of us had been wanting to play the game but were unable to with local groups due to scheduling (for Mark) and being in a remote location (Melissa). Mark had played a couple of board games and also *Dungeons & Dragons* over Zoom before and knew others who had successfully done the same as well (Wolfenstein, personal communication, 2018), as a way to stay in touch with family and friends, so we knew it was doable. Melissa would need to purchase her own copy of the game, which would allow us to each have our own table set up to just keep in synch while we played.

We tested various video camera setups during the first few sessions. Initially, we tried it with Mark using an inset video feed put together with Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) or ManyCam. We felt that this provided an unsatisfying viewer experience, though, since the view of the table was too small to make out details. Eventually, we settled on and are pretty pleased with having Mark connect to the Zoom room with three devices: 1) a webcam pointing at the table, 2) a virtual camera showing a specific window on a laptop that was mirroring a connected phone screen, using ApowerMirror and OBS, and 3) a tablet pointing at Mark so he could communicate with Melissa.

While we had not planned on playing because of the pandemic, the fact that we started right as the pandemic was starting was good timing, and playing the game has been a welcome respite from all of the various stressors in the world. Even before the pandemic, part of the reason for wanting to play was to find a creative outlet and to stay social while facing existential dread due to climate change and dealing with the absurdist condition of living through the Trump administration.

The video series has now been going on for over a year with over 30 episodes at the time of this writing. We believe we are about 2/3rd of the way through the game's campaign so our estimate is that we'll be done sometime in 2021. Afterward, we hope to continue the Let's Play series with *Frosthaven*, *Gloomhaven*'s upcoming sequel. The playlist is not popular with only a handful of views

per video, but some of the motivation for posting them is for ourselves to have an archive and diary of our activity. We've been told (by someone named Matt) that it makes for good background video while multitasking, though, so we happily invite readers to go like and smash that subscribe button!

Video

You can watch all the retrospective videos at the ETC Press book page: https://press.etc.cmu.edu/index.php/product/well-played-retrospective/

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Open Broadcaster Software (OBS)

20. The “Well Played” Con

JOSÉ P. ZAGAL

As a middle-aged scholar, I’ve nurtured a fair share of pet peeves about games research and the scholarly output of the academic community I’ve been fortunate to be a part of for many years. One of my pet peeves is that much of the academic work on specific game titles ignores or under-specifies the game’s design elements and how they function and operate. I wish there were more papers and articles that dove deep into the features and design of a game and explained how they work with subtlety and nuance. A “golden unicorn” paper in this context would additionally connect design features with those from other games and articulate the kinds of player experiences that they afford.

I’m being selfish, I know. These are some the papers I enjoy reading and want more of. These are the sources I want to cite in my work, and often can’t. I end up referring to strategy guides, trade publications, and fan-created analyses instead. I sometimes think that these papers are rare because game scholars do not have the interest. The truth is that these papers are incredibly hard to write well. To be fair, my personal biases and interests are not shared by everyone in the games research community. These papers might be hard to justify in the context of “getting promoted” or “getting funded” or “establishing a scholarly career”. What’s the contribution? Why would anyone care?

Well, I care. I cannot explain why. I’m just interested. It’s the reason I started working in games research. Perhaps it’s my engineering background coming through – I just like to know (or think I know) how things work. In this case: games.

This is why Drew Davidson’s *Well-Played; Interpreting Prince of Persia the Sands of Time* (Davidson 2008) was such a breath of fresh air when I first read it over a decade ago[1]. This was the kind of paper I yearned to read, enjoy, and ultimately (selfishly) use and refer to in my own work! Thankfully, it did not end there. Drew’s paper turned into a manifesto (Davidson 2009), then into special sessions or tracks at a variety of academic conferences that, in turn, often fed into a triad of published volumes. It has now been many years since that original article and its impact has turned into a journal with multiple volumes and issues with more to come.

I’ve been lucky that Drew’s paper did not end there. He followed it with an invitation to others to participate. This call for playing and running with the initial concept behind “well played” has led to a corpus that has served me well. It’s my go-to reference for scholarly sources to support statements like “games with features such as…”, “other implementations of this idea can be seen in…”, or “this game does this in this way…”. It’s where I go when I want to read something academic that dives into the design details.

But.

It has also been more than that.

You see, the meaning of "well played" snuck up on me in a way I didn't expect. It's my own fault for not noticing. I think it was always there. So, it's a little embarrassing to talk about.

I was fortunate to land a faculty position at DePaul University as the ink of my PhD diploma was drying. Prior to starting at DePaul in 2008, I was asked – would I rather teach intro game design or a class on ethics and videogames? I responded that the ethics class sounded more interesting. I reasoned that I'd already taught game design and while I thought I knew a fair amount about games and game design, I didn't know anything at all about ethics. I was intrigued and challenged. I've been teaching ethics and videogames ever since and it is in this context that "well played" has taken on its additional meaning.

Originally, "[a] game can be well played in two senses: first, 'well played' as in 'well done,' so a game can be looked at in terms of how well it is created, and second, 'well played' as in 'well read,' so through the experience of playing games you can develop a literacy of games." (Davidson 2008) This reflects what I tell my students when it comes to them playing games for class assignments. Go deep into these games, play these games such that you can learn the most from that experience, play them with an interest and desire to learn. Appreciate these games such that you learn from them.

However, over the years of teaching about ethics and videogames I noticed that the question of what does it mean to "play well", or for a game to have been "well played" comes up often and frequently in class discussion around a variety of topics in a slightly different context. For example, are successful cheaters to be celebrated because they have subverted a game so skillfully that their opponents never became aware of the deception? Is this well played? Is it to play well to strive to win at all costs in the context of competitive games? In the context of sports, we often speak of sportsmanship – the consideration for one's opponents and respect for the rules of a game. How do ideas of sportsmanship relate to "playing well"? How do these notions also apply to esports and competitive videogame play? And then, how do we consider those games that are not competitive or framed in the language of domination or completion. Can you play well casually?

And, what does this all say about the player. You see, "playing well" comes up again as students reflect on their own values and who they are or aspire to be as people. How do, and should, these values reflect in the kinds of games they choose to play and how they go about playing them? Is it to play well when ones' personal values are aligned with those that may be encoded in, or expressed by a game? Do the games I choose to "play well" reflect on my individual character and personal integrity in any meaningful way? Am I a bad person for playing ultra-violent videogames well? Should I be celebrated for my skills and abilities to lie and deceive my opponents in a game of Poker despite the fact that we find lying reprehensible outside of a game? Is it virtuous to play well in these contexts? Do we demonstrate virtue by always striving to play well?

So, what does "well played" mean to me? I don't know anymore. It got complicated and messy. And this is good. I continue to teach ethics and videogames and these questions and issues continue to

bubble up in student's questions and discussions. Perhaps that's what it means – it's Drew Davidson's long con – a Trojan horse in two words that paired together unfolded into all kinds of interesting and unexpected places. I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Well played Drew, well played indeed.

Davidson, Drew. 2008. "Well Played: Interpreting Prince of Persia – The Sands of Time." *Games and Culture* 3 (3–4): 356–86.

———. 2009. "Introduction." In *Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value, and Meaning*, edited by Drew Davidson, 1. Pittsburgh: ETC Press. http://press.etc.cmu.edu/content/introduction-0.

Notes

1. To be fair, I'm pretty sure I heard many of these ideas at the 2007 edition of the GLS conference.

21. A Sandbox Runs Through It

A (very) Subjective History of Well Played

STEPHEN JACOBS

The Pre-History of Well-Played

The year 2005 was a busy year for Dr. Drew and the ETC. Two efforts to add to venues for game scholarship, especially video game scholarship, were under way. First, it was the year the ETC Press debuted. The second was the Sandbox Symposium, an effort to get video games their own place in the annual conference of the Association of Computing Machinery's Special Interest Group in Graphics, SIGGRAPH.

SIGGRAPH had begun as a small to medium-sized conference of enthusiasts and academics coming up with new teapot rendering algorithms and obscure digital interactive arts pieces in the mid 70's. Thirty years later, in addition to being the premier academic computer graphics conference it had become a commercial behemoth of an enterprise and the cattle call recruitment event for the computer animation industry.

Sandbox was an effort born of discussions between Drew and the managing committee of SIGGRAPH to get video games their own place within the annual conference. At the time (and perhaps still) this was the main way SIGGRAPH enhanced the main conference; by having an external team run a co-located effort first. If that effort had impact and staying power over several years, it could then be added to the main conference. An ACM presence for video games, and regular proceedings from one, would be a great way to showcase and add academic cred to video game scholarship as a field and a pursuit.

And so a handful of game profs and fellow travelers organized and delivered "Sandbox: An ACM Video Game Symposium" co-located with SIGGRAPH from 2006-2008. The organizing committee included a great mix of established and emerging game academics, grad students, studio heads, library games programs leaders and others. Over the three years the content and event types ranged widely and included keynotes from industry leaders and studio heads, designers and critics. Papers on technical development, Ui and UX , games and education, panels on "games as art" and Open Source pipelines in industry practice and transmedia story telling. Workshops on ethics and news business models in gaming. The first year there were even game tournaments.

Some of game academia's leading lights got their first exposure and/or conference organization experiences at Sandbox. The website for the co-located conference is still live on-line and can be found http://sandbox.siggraph.org/ Take a look if you get a chance, there's some great events and

fantastic people listed there. The proceedings are all in the ACM library; just search on Sandbox. Some of the particularly memorable moments for me included getting conference streaming to work (still a challenge in 2007) and Warren Spector's Keynote on "emergence" turning in to a transmedia/film buff discussion in Q and A.

Sandbox's success also led to its eventual demise. After three co-located conferences the symposium was indeed brought in as part of the main conference. But the size and scope of the inclusion was greatly reduced to a small papers track alone, instead of the larger adoption of video games within the conference the original team had hoped for. After three years as a papers track, Sandbox within SIGGRAPH was suspended. SIGGRAPH still promotes video games as an audience interest area for the conference, but video games remain diffused into the overall programming and have a minor impact across the conference.

And yet, in some ways the bones of Sandbox can be found in *Well Played* the books and the journal.

The Books

It seems to me that I first heard Dr. Drew kicking around the idea for *Well Played* "the books" during Sandbox 2008 and trying the idea on for size. The thought was that there was a place in video game studies for a collection of "close readings" of videogames. In literary studies, a close reading is an in-depth analysis of a literary work, and often a small section of the work. The author of a close reading may choose to examine all the elements of that text; vocabulary, voice, metaphors, rhetoric, cultural and/or historical references. Or they may choose to focus on just a few of those. Close readings often bring in the personal observations and/or experiences of the author.

The close reading approach of analysis grew to encompass film and media studies as those academic fields emerged in the last century; with film studies starting as a discipline in the 20s and 30s and media studies emerging in the 60s and 70s. For these motion media, close readings often go into depth on the formal elements of the medium, shot construction, editing, pacing, etc. as well as to the narrative content and structure of the film.

Many of us in the first wave of game academia got their academic training based in film and/or media studies, including those who had been active in Sandbox as organizers or presenters. So the idea of close readings of video games resonated well and so the project moved ahead.

Like Sandbox, the contributors to the work collected in *Well Played* 1.0, 2.0 (2010) and 3.0 (2011) come from a wide range of backgrounds; journalists, game writers, producers and designers, librarians, and even a high school student can be found alongside game profs. The style of the written work varies from "academia light" to confessional. Dr. Mary Flanagan took the greatest artistic liberty in book 1.0, writing in a Lovecraftian voice (as the author himself) about an encounter with a strange "box" and a "Tempest" it contained. While no one else (unfortunately) took as much liberty with their

pieces as Flanagan did, the collected works in *Well Played* the books still provide an approachable and entertaining look into why people who have video games as a livelihood or a passion think that the games that hold a special place in their own personal cannon think a particular game is an exemplar of the form.

Not surprisingly, pieces on genre establishing or otherwise exemplar games like Bioshock, Guitar Hero, ilovebees, The Secret of Monkey Island and Super Mario Brothers can be found in the pages of the three books. But there are ones on lesser known games as well, such as The Mines of Minos, a deceptively complex Atari 2600 maze game, American McGee's Alice, a dark Wonderland adventure game and Indigo Prophecy/Fahrenheit a supernatural possession murder mystery. The work in *Well Played* was (to my mind) often most effective when making the case for these lesser known and/or less commercially successful games. Perhaps there's a place, someday, for a fourth volume called "*Well Played; The Guilty Pleasures Edition.*"

Well Played, The Journal

While the book series kept the spirit of Sandbox alive (for a while, anyway) as far as publishing a wide range of perspectives on video games went, Well-Played the Journal served that spirit by addressing the need for more peer-reviewed publication venues for video games academics. While the journal doesn't exclude non-academics from submitting, the focus and flavor of the content is absolutely more academia forward. In doing so it serves a key need for video games scholarship.

The more technical a medium, the more it's technology becomes the message. This is especially true the more commercial the medium is as well. The challenge with the discussions around a technological medium is to keep the technological aspects from overwhelming the others. One of the reasons that the Sandbox Symposium didn't survive long as an aspect of the SIGGRAPH conference is that SIGGRAPH is an industry and a technical conference. Despite the fact that the conference supports the exhibition of interactive art and the celebration of digital animation, the bulk of the focus across the conference is on the technical aspects of the work. By and large It's not a place for close readings.

Well Played remains the vanguard of the video game "close reading" both in the sense of looking at the whole of the game or in specific elements of a portion of the game or a series or genre. It has brought the idea of close readings to conferences as well; publishing the papers from those sessions as part of, or the whole of, an entire issue. The journal has occasionally published special issues of close readings in a specific genre or field as well; learning and games, the intersection of sports and games, intergenerational play, analog games and others.

For those of us invested in the design, story-telling, and impact of the medium, those who want to tell the story of why a given game or approach works within a larger context than an industry or consumer focused review, Well Played provides a key opportunity to write on, and discuss, the premier medium of our times.

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22. (Pandemic) Helping Grandma Home

Spiritfarer's Progressive Treatment of Older Adults During COVID-19

JOCELYN WAGNER, ANDREW MOGER, MIA CONSALVO, & ANDREW PHELPS

1. Abstract

The portrayal of older adults in U.S. and Canadian media typically reflect societal perceptions and negative stereotypes of aged members of society. This is no less true in video games, a medium in which older adults are rarely, if at all portrayed. When older adults are present in video games, they often fall into pre-existing tropes and stereotypes seen throughout American media and culture. While the U.S. and Canada have a long and storied history with ageism both in media and in policy, the COVID-19 pandemic brought these issues to the forefront as the virus is especially dangerous for older adults. This led to a global grieving over the deaths of older community members, juxtaposed with national rhetoric regarding older adults and their place in society. This moment in time, while unexpected, created an interesting environment for the release of media that focused on death, dying, age, and illness. Thunder Lotus' *Spiritfarer* is one example of a game released during this period that centers these themes.

Spiritfarer portrays older adults in an interesting light; the game tackles death, dying, aging, and illness by acknowledging societal fears about these topics, each through the lens of an in-game character, and walks players through these fears in order to analyze death and grieving in a frank and empathetic fashion. Three characters in particular, Summer, Alice, and Astrid, illustrate the game's philosophy regarding older adults, and another, Gustav, seeks to link to our fears of medical decline through the aging process. Each of these characters embodies and addresses several societal fears regarding aging in a way that neither stereotypes nor minimizes the complex facets of old age. These stories are especially poignant against the backdrop of the pandemic and the loss of many lives, especially those of older adults. This paper analyzes the context of ageism in the U.S. and Canada, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the release of the game *Spiritfarer* during the pandemic, and analyzes the aforementioned characters through the lens of societal fears regarding aging, dying, illness, and death.

2. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged many of our global and national norms, putting jobs, plans, and lives in disarray. It has also been quite effective at shining a light on the unjust systems and

beliefs present in the United States and other countries, including the mistreatment of older adults. The pandemic has disproportionately affected the older population of the U.S.—eight out of ten deaths in the U.S. have been in adults 65 years or older and as of November 25, 2020, 40% of coronavirus deaths nationally occurred in long-term care facilities (CDC, 2021; Chidambaram et al., 2020). Even more damning is a U.S. Government Accountability Office report from May, 2020 which concluded that most long-term care facilities had "persistent" infection control deficiencies before the pandemic began (Paulin, 2020). This theme can be seen in Canada as well with around 80% of their COVID-19-related deaths occurring in long-term care homes as of June, 2020, with that trend continuing through to 2021 (Webster, 2021). These ageist values extend beyond just long-term care; they have ingrained themselves into our culture and manifest themselves in everything from simple conversations to policy decisions, from employment practices to portrayals of older persons in nearly every form of media, including video games.

One recent video game that has stood out in relation to this topic is the indie title *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020a). Released in August of 2020, *Spiritfarer* is a game that explores death and dying through the lens of a caretaker. Unlike many other games, it treats death with care and respect and provides a thoughtful reflection on how we perceive the end of one's life. Due to its primary topic, *Spiritfarer* engages with many subtopics linked with death, including aging. The game also treats this subject with nuance and respect while maintaining a level of authenticity that has made the game stand out to players in a relatively unique way. *Spiritfarer*'s release during a pandemic has made its topical engagement with aging and older adults incredibly poignant. Its story contrasts sharply with prevailing narratives on older persons, and it thus serves as an informative text on how attitudes within the United States and Canada can and should be different. Before talking about the game and its innovative portrayals, a deeper dive into the specifics of ageism within a modern context is required.

3. Treatment of Older Adults in the U.S. and Canada—Pre- and Post-COVID-19

Before discussing the treatment of older adults in the United States and Canada, it is important to note the preferred terminology. According to the Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy, the use of the term elderly "is ageist…a form of prejudice or prejudgement that shapes perceptions" (Lundebjerg, et al., 2017). The journal recommends the use "older persons" in its stead—a term designated by the United Nations Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights of Older Persons in 1995. Additionally, there are many articles and think pieces that condemn the word "elderly" when discussing older adults, with many older adults citing it as patronizing and even pejorative (Graham, 2012; Jefferson, 2017; Pinsker, 2020). As such, the authors of this paper have elected to use the term "older adult" when referring to adults over the age of sixty-five in order to better represent and appropriately address this community.

The societal treatment of older adults globally is both varied and nuanced, but it is generally acknowledged that some cultures (including Mainland China, Russia, and New Zealand) statistically respect and have positive perceptions of aging while others (including the U.S. and Canada), take a less positive and even detrimental view towards growing older (Löckenhoff et al., 2009; Palmore, 2004). The comparison of the treatment of older adults in the U.S. and Canada versus that of other countries is not new: the relegation of older adults to nursing homes, the proliferation of elder abuse, and the general ageism that permeates the discourse around older adults in these countries stands in contrast to countries and cultures where older adults are perceived positively by society (Lachs & Pillemer, 2015; National Center on Elder Abuse, n.d.; Palmore, 2004; Löckenhoff et al., 2009). This general disregard for older adults in U.S. culture came to a head during the COVID-19 pandemic, from increased elder abuse during the pandemic to the current and on-going debates about vaccine distribution tiers and even the falsification of nursing home deaths during the pandemic for better optics (Aronson, 2020; Malik, et al., 2020; Goodnough & Hoffman, 2020; Banco & Roubein, 2021).

Within this context, it's unsurprising that the COVID-19 pandemic, with a virus that is particularly deadly for older adults, brought ageism to the forefront of popular discourse, media attention, and federal policy during the pandemic. Adults over the age of 65 are at least two times more likely to contract COVID-19, are 35-80% more likely to require hospitalization (with the percentage increasing with age), and are 1,110-7,900 times more likely to die from the virus (CDC, 2021). COVID-19 placed a magnifying glass onto the U.S.'s treatment of older adults to reveal a disturbing truth: older adults are often treated as expendable in the United States. The lack of care for older adults, both in public rhetoric and public policy in the U.S.; in addition to the rampant ageism in the discourse surrounding the virus (from risky behaviors from young adults due to perceived lack of risk to questions of vaccine distribution and value to society (Maragakis, n.d.; CBS News, 2020; Goodnough & Hoffman, 2020)), there have been initiatives in the medical field to focus on care for younger patients with the virus despite the increased risk for older adults, likely due to ageism (Aronson, 2020; Kohn, 2020). While such rhetoric and policy are not new, the COVID-19 pandemic has focused media attention on these issues due to the exceptionally deadly nature of the virus and the fact the virus is considerably more deadly to older patients as compared to younger adults, teens, and children. These negative and even harmful attitudes and behaviors have been reflected in U.S. and Canadian media long before the COVID-19 pandemic, and may illuminate some of the current public narrative regarding older adults in the U.S. and Canada.

4. Treatment of Older Adults in Video Games and Other Types of Media

American attitudes toward older adults are reflected in their depictions, or lack thereof, in video games. As of 2009, older characters are mostly absent from games, comprising only 1.34% of primary and secondary characters despite making up 12.43% of the United States' population (Williams et al., 2009). Additionally, when older adults are depicted in games they are not always represented correctly or respectfully. Oftentimes, the ageist narrative in video games reflects its predecessors in

film and television, often resulting in tired tropes such as a wise old sage doling out quest clues or else a beggar or urchin that can inform players of the good old days before whatever current crisis is at the core of the game arc. Rughiniș et al. (2015) note that in the case of art games, when older adults are present, they are often used to convey darker themes stereotypically associated with aging such as disability, decay, "loss, loneliness, or de-personalization." As these authors conclude, "[t]here is little mention of possible gains of aging" (Rughiniș et al., 2015, p. 10). When older adults are depicted in games they are often defined by stereotypes associated with aging.

Examples of these stereotypes are easy to come by and are usually already known by most players. American audiences are probably familiar with older characters being used for comedic purposes or played for sympathy, both usually related to some sort of mental or physical disability (Toma, 2015). If older characters are not disabled in some aspect, then they are often "simply dying" and defined purely by their association with death (Rughiniș et al., 2015, pg. 10). In their research on aging stereotypes, Ory et al. and James Thornton describe some "myths" surrounding older adults within the American cultural landscape that the authors of this paper argue can also be found in other media. In addition to those previously discussed, new stereotypes they present include perceptions that older persons are dead-set in their ways and unable to learn new behaviors or change their beliefs, that aging reduces sexual interest and engagement, and that older adults do not "pull their own weight" and are unproductive (Ory et al., 2003, p. 165; Thornton, 2002, p. 303). The first 'myth' has a few notable examples in big budget games like *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) and *Fallout* 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015). The antagonists of both of these games are older, bearded men who are deeply entrenched in their beliefs to the detriment of those around them and eventually themselves. While it is not directly stated that their age is the reason for their inflexibility, the games seem to suggest that their stubbornness and father-knows-best mentality is due to their older age. Even more interesting is that the antagonist from *BioShock Infinite*, Zachary Comstock, is not actually an older adult—his appearance as one is a result of recurrent evil behavior, suggesting that aging is associated with entrenching oneself deeper into problematic mindsets (*Zachary Hale Comstock*, n.d.). This Dorian Gray-esque narrative serves to illuminate a mindset that goes back to Oscar Wilde: aging is not only equated with ugliness, but with moral corruption (Wilde, 1994).

There are a few examples of more positive depictions of older adults in video games. One of these characters is Flemeth from the *Dragon Age* series (Toma, 2015). As Toma explains, Flemeth defies many tropes by being "portrayed as a strong, agentic character, in marked contrast with other representations of old women in games, which are either ironic or focused on the perspective of death" (2015, pg. 63). Toma (2015) further explains that Flemeth is additionally subversive by displaying traits traditionally associated with younger female characters, like being powerful, and older male characters, such as wisdom. While any stereotype, including "positive" ones like associating wisdom with aging, can be harmful, it is important to differentiate between characters solely functioning as stereotypes and characters functioning as fully developed individuals with traits that on their own would be a stereotype. Using Toma's example of Flemeth, she is more than just a wise older person. She has wisdom and strength while also having specific wants, desires, frustrations, etc. This differentiation will be important when discussing the cast of *Spiritfarer*.

5. *Spiritfarer*: A Game About Death

Described as "a cozy management game about dying," *Spiritfarer* places the player in control of the new "ferrymaster to the deceased" or Spiritfarer, Stella (Thunder Lotus Games, n.d.). Stella and her cat, Daffodil, sail a customizable boat around a mystical sea, stopping at islands to meet and bring aboard various spirits. Her task as the Spiritfarer is to "befriend and care for [these] spirits before finally releasing them into the afterlife" (Thunder Lotus Games, n.d.), a retelling of the classical Greek myth of Charon (Carpenter, 2020). The player, as Stella, can take their time getting to know the spirits by caring for them on the boat and completing their unique quests. The game is intentional in its pacing, as it gives players as much time as they want to complete their tasks and offers multiple relaxing activities like fishing off of the back of their boat, reorganizing and building new sections of the boat, and playing music to help their gardens grow faster (see Image 1).

The player's main task is taking care of the spirits invited onto Stella's boat. Keeping them well-fed and giving them hugs (when they want them) is only part of keeping the spirits happy—each of them have a series of quests for Stella to complete, most of which are uniquely suited to each spirit. There are two exceptions to this: players must build each spirit their own home on the boat, and with a few anomalies, the player must ferry each spirit to the Everdoor. These homes serve dual purposes; not only do spirits spend time in and personalize them, but each home remains on board after the spirit has passed on. This is another intentional facet of design—whilst players can salvage various fixtures on their boat if they so choose, the spirits' homes cannot be salvaged, as they're needed to interact with ongoing in-game events. Their homes never go away and serve as bittersweet reminders to Stella as she builds new structures around them.

Eventually, spirits will give Stella their last quest: the journey to the Everdoor. Their reactions at this moment and during the journey to the Everdoor vary from serenity to fear and confusion. The Everdoor (a portal to the "great beyond" (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020b)), is an archway nestled among white trees, all of which rise out of red water. This somber section of the world is beautiful and calm. As Stella slowly paddles a rowboat through the rustling white trees, the spirits impart their last thoughts onto her. These remarks vary greatly but always reinforce *Spiritfarer*'s frank attitude toward death and dying. Players note that these last few moments with the spirits are emotionally challenging but truly encapsulate the beauty of this game (Flynn, 2020; Carpenter, 2020; Simpkins, 2019). Players especially related to these themes during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that the topicality of the game's themes made it especially poignant to play (Harrison, 2020; Carpenter, 2020; Favis, 2020).

Image 1: Fishing off of the back of Stella's boat. Image from Hamilton (2020).

6. *Spiritfarer*'s Treatment of Older Adults

While *Spiritfarer* and the accompanying artbook (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020b) usually do not detail spirits' exact ages, it can be inferred that at least eight of the eleven spirits are over the age of forty, and at least six of those spirits are likely past the expected age of retirement in the United States and Canada due to their in-game narratives and attributes (such as Alice's dementia or Astrid's involvement in World War II). It is important to note that, without the additional context from the art book, players only have context clues to determine the characters' ages; because the spirits are anthropomorphic animals, stereotypical visual markers (such as wrinkles and stooped posture) are absent. Perhaps this is intentional; by stripping the spirits of initial age markers, the players get to know them as humans first, rather than reducing them to ageist tropes and stereotypes. By the time the player begins to infer a spirit's age, they have already come to know them rather intimately. That the characters tend to skew older makes sense given the game's underlying story—the game depicts a fictional world in which Stella ferries spirits to the Everdoor; itself a fictionalization that occurs as the real-life Stella, an end of care nurse, is living through her final moments (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020b). As such, each spirit in *Spiritfarer* is based on a patient and/or acquaintance of Stella.

Players have noted that the game is empathetic when depicting death (Carpenter, 2020; Flynn, 2020)—showing characters who must confront their fears about their inevitable demise as well as the deaths of everyone they love. *Spiritfarer* excels at depicting fears about aging, terminal illness,

abandonment—in short, fears surrounding death and dying, and the grief and sense of unfairness that can embody those experiences. The characters each experience fear intimately, and the game walks them (and Stella/the player) carefully through the experience, even (mostly) giving the player closure as they take each spirit to their final resting place: the Everdoor. It is important to note that *Spiritfarer* does not stereotypically link becoming older with dying. Instead, the game acknowledges that death is part of getting older without defining the entirety of aging by its perceived proximity to death—death is an eventual part of aging but it is not the only aspect of getting older. Each older character has their own interests and hobbies that they are able to pursue in part because they are older, and none of them express a desire to be young again. In separating the notion of age from death by exploring spirits of multiple age ranges and varying causes of death, the game instead looks at the roots of our anxieties: losing agency, being alone, grappling with illness. It is through these spirits that we approach and confront these fears, and while the game does not offer a trite, happy ending, it does give a sense of peace. Death may be inevitable, but it is also a part of life. This is true for the older adults in the game as well, in particular Summer, Alice, Astrid, and Gustav, whose stories confront fears about aging as it relates to death.

6.1 Summer

Summer, an anthropomorphic snake in a large, tasseled cloak, is amongst the earliest spirits introduced to the player. Throughout the course of the game, the player learns that Summer married Stella's aunt, Rose, later in life after a long and successful career that she for the most part now regrets. The artbook goes into more detail: Summer ended up developing breast cancer due to her exposure to the heavy chemicals she encountered during her career. This diagnosis prompted her to leave the past behind, to embrace her spiritual side, and to be kind to the earth (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020b). In the game, her primary antagonist is the dragon, which can be understood as a "deep metaphor" (Rusch, 2017). The dragons in *Spiritfarer* symbolize cancer, not unlike the game *That Dragon, Cancer*, which also visualizes the disease as a dragon (Numinous Games, 2016). Each dragon in *Spiritfarer* is covered in large, tumor-like clusters which the player must use a pickaxe to remove—this practice relieves some of the dragon's pain, and after the process it sinks below the surface of the water until the growths return. This act also yields resources (ore) that the player can then use in other parts of the game. The parallel to cancer treatment is apparent: tumors grow, and patients must receive treatment and undergo surgery to remove them in the hopes that they can eradicate them entirely (see Image 2). This metaphor even plays into Stella's role as an end-of-care nurse in the real world. While Stella may not have been the surgical hand that removed the tumors during Summer's real life, her work with Summer would obviously include pain management, an aspect which is emphasized each time the player encounters the dragon.

Image 2: Stella chipping mineral growths off the dragon, from Hetfeld (2020).

The fear that Summer grapples with is two-fold: one is the fear of a life of regrets, and the other is a fear of inevitable terminal illness. Summer's move to spirituality later in life is spurred both by her cancer diagnosis and her guilt and regret for exploiting the earth. In her old age she atones for this, and finds a loving wife in the process, before eventually succumbing to her breast cancer. While Summer's story embodies fears about aging and death, her characterization is not defined by this story; in fact, the game barely touches on it, with light references and hints to this backstory. Instead, the game focuses on Summer's beliefs, her love for Stella and for Rose, her regrets, her desire to pass on what she's learned, and her love for the earth. For example, on quests together, Summer teaches Stella to meditate (seen in Image 3), wishing to impart the life lessons she wished she had learned earlier. Summer's fears, while acknowledged, take a backseat to who Summer is as a person. By doing so, *Spiritfarer* avoids falling into the trope of reducing her character to the "sick old person" stereotype. Summer has agency to the very end, a luxury that not all the spirits have.

Image 3: Summer teaches Stella to meditate. (Screenshot by authors.)

6.2 Alice

Alice, an anthropomorphic and grandmotherly hedgehog, can join the player in the middle of the game. At first Alice seems like a typical grandmother, and spends her time on the boat cooking for the other passengers and reminiscing about her daughter and late husband. Perhaps because of this largely maternal role, each of the authors developed protective feelings for the spirit, which the game's story and quests further magnified. Players are confronted with Alice's age for the first time after an excursion to the icy north: Alice has trouble climbing the ladders, and afterward the player is either tasked with moving her house to the deck level of the boat or, if they have already done so, given a dialogue line from another spirit about Alice's inability to climb. In our play-throughs, none of us had thought to initially position her house at deck level, and we each felt guilt over our lack of accommodation. After this, players are tasked with walking Alice across the boat in the morning and evening since she can no longer do it on her own. If a player does not complete this task Alice is left out overnight and sleeps on the deck of the boat, which induced further feelings of guilt in those of us who 'forgot' to check on Alice. The interactions between Stella and Alice during this time hinge on Alice's age: she becomes dependent on Stella for care, and the player thus becomes responsible for Alice's well-being in an intimate and unique manner. It is deeply centered on caretaking, which is rare in digital games, especially in contexts that successfully engage the player at a deep emotional level (Schrier, 2020).

After losing some of her mobility, it is revealed that Alice is also losing her memory. The first symptoms seem relatively small, with Alice asking Stella to retrieve something from her late husband. As the game, and her dementia, progresses, interactions with Alice become more fraught: her demeanor changes to the point where she is often confused and temperamental. In the end, Alice does not recognize Stella at all, and the player must dress as Alice's daughter in order to guide her to the Everdoor. Since Alice will no longer follow Stella off the prow of the boat after this point, players must either leave Alice cold and alone each night or help her pass on—an intentional bit of design that is meant to move players to make a tough decision. Alice's decline resonated with players as a brutal yet truthful examination of dementia, with many players relating it to personal experiences with family members (Miranda, 2020; sigitang-arthi, 2020).

The fear that Alice asks players to confront is a loss of agency, which only increases throughout her time in the game. Alice's declining agency also defies most videogame norms, which only posit increased agency for the player. In the end, Stella is the one who decides that Alice needs to pass on—this is the only time in the game where a character does not make the decision themselves. Much like with Summer, *Spiritfarer* avoids oversimplifying Alice's character by defining her aging experience solely as one of physical and mental decay. Instead, her time as an older adult is much more complex as she is also able to finally explore and embrace her interests and enjoy the smaller moments of life like enjoying the breeze at the prow of the ship and conversing with Stella before and during the earlier stages of her dementia.

6.3 Astrid

Astrid, an anthropomorphic lynx, advocate for workers rights, and prolific gossiper, is a spirit encountered by the player near the mid-game. Astrid has spent much of her earthly life in service of others, from hiding Jewish children during World War II to her later work with labor unions (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020b). Her story is deeply entwined with that of her husband, Giovanni, and ultimately his penchant for extramarital affairs leaves her alone in her final moments. Like many of the other characters, it is difficult to read Astrid's age at first—initially, the only indicator is Atrid's proclivity to gossip, which is stereotypically attributed to older women. The first quest the player receives after Astrid makes a home on the boat is entitled "Feed Your Elders"—this is the first in-game evidence that Astrid is one of the older spirits. Another clue to Astrid's age is her friendship with three in-game turtles. Unlike other characters in the game, these turtles show their age: wrinkled skin, half-closed eyelids, and chipped shells all suggest that these turtles are in their twilight years. Additionally, the in-game line about hiding children, as well as Giovanni's continued war stories suggests that both were young adults during World War II. When the player takes Astrid to the Everdoor, the game is explicit about her old age: "I don't think it's wise to live that long, Munchkin. Good thing I've never been that wise. But, boy, am I old. And being this old is disappointing" (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020a). While

Astrid does talk about the struggles of being an older adult (remorse, aging body, lethargy, etc.), she also notes that it is the world, not necessarily her age, that has been unkind, and just before she leaves she implores Stella to remember her.

According to the art book (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020a) Astrid is the only character to die of old age. Despite this, she does not present a cheery representation of death—her perception of her old age is more nuanced. Astrid's struggle in the game does not stem from her age, rather it illuminates the societal fear of loneliness and abandonment. Throughout her entire life, Astrid kept living through the same cycle of love to betrayal and abandonment with Giovanni, until the very end where he left her one last time. In the game, her arc does not culminate with faithfulness from her partner; instead, a final indignity is that she must confront his unfaithfulness one last time even on the boat—the player is asked to investigate Giovanni and then faces a moral quandary we all wrestled with: either lie to Astrid about his infidelity or tell her the truth, leaving her alone at the very end. Astrid (and the player) must contend with the realities of life and death: sometimes loneliness and abandonment are unavoidable. Despite the struggles that Astrid both faced and witnessed during her life she notes that she does not regret anything. It is a two-fold realization: life can be hard, brutal even, but it can still be meaningful. To die alone, of old age, is not the scariest thing—it is only a fact of life.

6.4 Gustav

Gustav is an anthropomorphic, academic bird and former art collector that travelled the world for his work. His primary struggle in the game is somewhat difficult to read, and this is likely regarding the backlash his character received after the initial release of the game. Gustav, we learn in the artbook, developed a degenerative disease as a young man that took an increasing toll on his body as he aged, eventually causing paralysis. In the game's initial release, his character had a line of dialogue which indicated that death is better than being disabled (Kent, 2020). Many players, especially those with disabilities, found this statement to be off-putting and ableist, and within several days, Thunder Lotus Games issued an apology and removed the offending line. While this was undoubtedly the responsible call regarding the design, the removal of the line took out the context of Gustav's degenerative disease; the only reference left in the game is a brief and almost vague bit of dialogue during his ride to the Everdoor: "We create machines that are useful…Machines like the dreaded chair. The one that subsumed me, made of me an object. But maybe, also, made me truly realize what impermanence means…My chair, when it finally became unneeded, became once again a heap of metal." (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020). While players might be able to discern the meaning behind these words, it is not evident enough at face-value to make the parallel clear.

While the initial depiction of Gustav was certainly an ableist depiction, the remnants of his story take on a different color when read as a facet of aging. If we look at the tropes and stereotypes surrounding old age in North American media and rhetoric, many of our fears have to do with agency, as noted previously with Alice. We fear becoming frail, having to depend on others, losing our ability to walk or

stand, our memory, our ability to travel, our self-reliance. When Gustav's ambulatory degeneration is read as a metaphor for ageism, it becomes a mirror to our own anxieties about age. Much of his final speech focuses on usefulness as the basis for meaning and purpose in life (see Image 4), and in largely capitalist societies, older adults, especially those who are past the age of retirement, are framed as not contributing to society, or as a burden to their families. Gustav's acceptance, then, can be read as the freeing of meaning and purpose from usefulness—one can live meaningfully and with purpose if they are old, or in a wheelchair, or in any other circumstance. Hauntingly, Gustav performs one of the most incredibly beautiful musical performances in the game on his violin, reminding us of the beauty of life in the midst of these painful subjects. Much of our anxieties about aging intersect with societal preconceptions about disability. Gustav was also a favorite to two of the authors due to his interests in art, philosophizing, and regular musical performances. This led to some strong reluctance in bringing him to the Everdoor, even after he declared he was ready to depart. The game never forces the player to do so until they are willing, letting the player/Stella come to the same realization that each spirit must make. The game does nudge one along, however, with a lack of new quests and limits to new dialogue options with Gustav (as with any spirit) indicating that perhaps his time has come, and his story is ending.

Image 4. Gustav and Stella on the way to the Everdoor. (Screenshot by authors.)

7. Death, Fear, and Authenticity

Summer, Alice, Astrid, and Gustav serve as excellent examples of the game's treatment of older adults. Rather than falling into certain two-dimensional stereotypes and tropes, each of these characters is fully fleshed out within the scope of the game, and each represents different facets and concerns regarding life and death. The intent of the game is not to make these situations more palatable, or even more hopeful—the game fundamentally denies each character the chance to conquer their individual struggles but instead provides closure through acceptance: Alice will not remember, Summer will never defeat the dragon, Gustav's disease is in fact incurable, and Stella must, at the end of everything, die. The game confronts players with aging and death through the lens of societal fears and fully explores the sense of helplessness that spirits can feel when fighting death. But the game is insistent on the beauty of life and, in particular, the beauty of age. Although these characters have regrets, none of them expresses a desire to be young again or to find eternal life or youth, and while they (with the exception perhaps of Alice) acknowledge the realities of their aging bodies, they do not begrudge the process of aging. Similarly, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes about disability, which can be extended to aging as well, this is "a significant universal human experience that occurs in every society, every family, and most every life" and further in recognizing that reality, we might expand our thinking "toward intrinsic rather than instrumental valuing of human beings" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, pp. 603-604). The spirits in the game exemplify this intrinsic value—while each of them contributes to the ship in some manner, their acts do not constitute their in-game worth.

Each of the spirits' stories acknowledge a different societal fear about aging and death, addresses it truthfully, and leaves the player with knowledge that these fears are merely facets of life, whether or not that life is long, full, well-lived, or free from regrets. It is by walking the player through each fear in a humanizing, realistic way, that the player comes away from the game with a cathartic experience. It is this experience that has helped so many players through the harsh realities of COVID-19, and the loss of their friends and loved ones, as detailed in section 5. The experience of loss and grief, according to *Spiritfarer*, is as universal as it is personal.

8. Our Reactions and Play Experiences: Commonalities and Differences

While being universally applicable, playing Spiritfarer is still very much a personal experience as exemplified by the four authors' own playthroughs. Each one of us connected with characters for varying reasons. They reminded us partly of ourselves or loved ones and explored topics that we each found compelling. Two of these characters—Summer and Gustav—were, unsurprisingly, subjects previously analyzed in this paper. Wagner read Summer in a manner where she represents a culmination of the game as a critique of capitalism: she does 'everything right' with respect to living and thriving in a capitalist society and is still brought low by sickness and poor health as a direct result of her employment. Upon reflection she becomes a socialist and embraces her sexuality as a

lesbian, not as a revolt but through acceptance of self rather than conforming to capitalist norms. For Consalvo and Phelps, they identified with Gustav as all three are academics, and also shared in Gustav's lamenting his inability to travel and his love of art and its importance in society as noted above. In addition, these authors were deeply moved by his musical performance in the game as a particular highlight.

A third spirit, Stella's upbeat uncle Atul in the form of an anthropomorphized frog, has a unique and upsetting character progression. (Moger identified strongly with Atul as he reminded them directly of the experience of visiting and hanging out with their real-life uncle, and the sort of familial irreverence of the 'fun uncle.') Atul vanishes after the player throws a dinner party for him, disrupting the pattern of delivering spirits to the Everdoor. Spiritfarer breaking its own ritual was jarring and unexpected for all of us. This was an event where the authors' experiences and feelings aligned: we felt cheated in not getting to properly say goodbye to a loved character and wondered at how the game deviated from its own process.

There were a few other moments where we all had shared reactions. Since players typically recruit Alice later in the game, when the lower levels of the player's boat are already occupied, it is unsurprising that each of the authors placed Alice on a higher deck, prompting a conversation that necessitated the movement of her house to the bottom deck. This elicited guilt in all of us; it did not occur to any of the authors that the aging anthropomorphic characters might have mobility issues, and each of us felt a sense of shame in our lack of consideration. Additionally, there comes a point in the game where players are forced to leave Alice on the prow of the boat overnight (due to her limited mobility, she can't return to her house on her own). This only compounded the guilt the authors felt in their inadequate care of Alice. While the passing of each character was a somber experience, each of us felt particularly heartbroken upon dressing as Alice's daughter and delivering her to the Everdoor.

The authors also had a few shared points of frustration based primarily around changing gameplay mechanics and experiences. Some of us were bothered by Spiritfarer's shift toward a more platforming-centric playstyle at certain points of the narrative when the difficulty of such detracted from the story experience. For example, after the player has delivered a certain number of spirits to the Everedoor, they are visited by Death as they jump their way past various pieces of Stella's memories. This happens a few times and the resulting challenge from the new emphasis on platforming skill made some of the authors feel that it contrasted with the game's already established tone and focus on story. Several of us were frustrated with the difficulty and how it clashed with the expectations the game had already set. Others disliked the timed components of some of the latter challenges. Despite our varying gripes with some of the platforming elements, we were all unified in the feeling that these parts conflicted with Spiritfarer's pre-established tone and focus.

Finally, each of the authors enjoyed the interactions with each of the spirits and getting to know them as individuals. By performing various story quests, building and furnishing character houses, and finally delivering the spirits to the Everdoor for a closing monologue and emotional hug, the authors felt increasingly immersed in the world of the game and connected with each of the spirits to varying degrees. We all found the game to be emotional and rewarding; each of us cried at various points

in the game (typically when parting ways with beloved characters at the Everdoor) and enjoyed the scenic and picturesque vistas within the game. Fishing off the back of the boat, listening to the various spirits play their instruments on board, and performing daily tasks provided a sense of calm. Much like the platforming mentioned above, some authors felt that these moments were somewhat cheapened when gamified—by achievement hunting for all the fish or trying to discover all the recipes, the relaxing nature of fishing and cooking became stressful, something that felt at odds with the game's overall themes. Some of the minigames on board were more well received than others, with various authors preferring some of the tasks while loathing and even neglecting others due to some personal distaste for the mechanics.

9. Conclusion

Attitudes about older adults in U.S. and Canadian culture and media have largely been negative, often linking age to death and dying, illness, loneliness, limited mobility, and lack of agency. This has been both perpetuated and reinforced by media representations of older adults, including but not limited to the portrayal (or lack thereof) of older adults in video games. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these societal notions both in public rhetoric, policy, and healthcare during a time when older adults were both more likely to contract, be hospitalized for, and die from COVID-19. The proliferation of loss during this pandemic, especially of older community members, is only compounded by historically negative views of older adults in these countries. This provided an interesting moment for the release of games, especially those that discussed death, dying, age, and illness.

Spiritfarer tackles death and its accompanying themes in an honest, refreshing, and unique manner. The release during the COVID-19 pandemic created additional meaning to the subject matter of the game, especially as it related to illness and the passing of older adults. The game proved a useful and empathetic tool to many players while dealing with their grief during the pandemic. While none of the spirits in the game died from COVID-19, the parallels are there: many of them died from illness or complications from illness, and many of them are older adults. In a time where so many are losing older relatives, friends, and community members, *Spiritfarer* seems especially resonant—losing a loved one is difficult. The game sits with the player in their grief, walks with them during their journey, and lets them (for the most part) say goodbye to each spirit on their own terms. And yet even here the game seems deeply intertwined with the pandemic: we felt cheated in Atul's disappearance after arranging his final dinner party as the game abbreviates its own process for grief and saying goodbye, much as the pandemic has preempted final moments and even funeral services. As noted by Fernandez-Vara (2021), "I found the game I needed at the right moment. I cared about the story of the characters, but it may be a different game for others, who may find it meaningful in their own way. And that's the beauty of it." It provides closure, not in a clean way, but in the messy way life is lived: stories don't end neatly wrapped in a bow, but with spirits, Stella, and the player realizing that life can be difficult. Yet, while death is inevitable, it can be worked through, dealt with, and eventually, accepted. *Spiritfarer* can show you how.

In the longer term, no doubt this pandemic will eventually end in some manner, already as of this writing vaccines are rolling out (at least in more wealthy nations) and daily life activities are slowly returning to some version of 'normal.' *Spiritfarer*, released both in time and in context with the pandemic, will most assuredly live on afterward, as will the scars and memories we have collectively endured during this period. On the one hand, the game was a timely intervention and, somehow, was exactly what we needed right in this moment of collective anxiety, grief, frustration, and loss, as Fernandez-Vara notes above. Yet on the other, it speaks to death, to dying, to grieving, and to peace and acceptance in those processes. These are timeless elements of what it means to be human. This piece of interactive media re-centers depictions of aging not on loss, but on embracing change and inevitable transcendence, and in this it raises the bar for other games of the future, challenging the field to deeper, richer, more nuanced representations throughout. *Spiritfarer* is not a game that is played and forgotten, it is art that becomes a part of you.

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23. The Player and the Game

MATTHEW SAKEY

Lord Bafford's estate is a monument to conspicuous consumption, all amber brick and stained glass surrounded by stone walls ornate enough to qualify as decorative but sufficiently high to broadcast a stern keep-out imposingness. The house is lit up like an incandescent peacock even though nobody's home (except some guards, who do not count), trumpeting One-Percenter opulence as only real estate truly can.

Inside, Garrett is already at work. The charming, cynical anti-hero of *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass Studios, 1998) slithers unnoticed from shadow to shadow, vacuuming up Lord Bafford's pocketable wealth. He slips through the door at the end of a passage and finds himself in a wood-lined study. Hand-carved bookcases dominate three walls, packed floor to ceiling with volumes bound in silk and leather, practically oozing first-edition pricelessness.

"*I wonder if he reads them*," Garrett murmurs, "*or if it's just for show*."

It's rhetorical, obviously; a fact emphasized by actor Stephen Russell's drippingly sardonic delivery. *Of course* he doesn't read them.

Lord Bafford is not well-read.

* * *

Well Played 1.0 was published in 2009 with the stated aim of "help[ing] create a forum for discussion that further develops and defines a literacy of games as well as a sense of their value as an experience." This it has certainly accomplished, creating its transmedia forum across books, journals, and presentations, for more than a decade.

Since video games had been already around for a little over 40 years by the time Well Played arrived on the scene, it was able to jump straight into the important stuff—analyzing video games, value, and meaning—armed with built-in legitimacy as a product of Carnegie-Mellon and ETC Press. By this time, there was already a rapidly expanding scholarship developing around interactive games. The phrase "art form" was maybe still under debate, but the various perspectives had, by 2009, pretty much agreed to disagree and leave it at that. The academic language of game criticism was still young and few if any hard and fast rules had yet been established to govern it. All these factors combined to enable Well Played to be what it wanted to be, and approach the content from its own angle.

The preface of every single *Well Played* issue, book, and journal makes a point to explain its own title, which has a rich menu of nuanced interpretations. "Well-played" as in "well-read," meaning consumed thoroughly and eagerly; also "well-played" as in "well done," meaning performed skillfully; an intimate

comprehension borne of meticulous effort and experience. The expectation also is that the games discussed are well-played in the sense that the people doing the discussing are knowledgeable and curious.

In other words, reading between the lines: Well Played makes it about the *player*, not the *game*.

That's a rather bold and unique perspective, not only in game circles but throughout literary analysis. It places no strong constraints on what is "worthy" of examination. Any game can qualify, because any game can be well-played. The burden is on the contributor to demonstrate how and why their chosen subject has value and meaning—even if that value and meaning exists only for them. It's a markedly more egalitarian philosophy than the norm for other media studies, with their insular communities, rigid criteria for what is deemed worthwhile, and older, more calcified grammar.

Film theory, for example, is a fundamentally declarative pursuit. Cinema scholars *tell you* what a movie, or director, or genre, or whatever is trying to achieve; they *tell you* what it means. They *tell you*, in essence, how it makes you feel. Which is fine, maybe, for cinema. But it would be an incomplete framework for discussing games, because games (get ready to have your mind blown) are *not* cinema. For a long time, lots of people—including me—misguidedly advocated adopting the language of cinema when discussing and analyzing games: retracing the footsteps of another medium despite knowing perfectly well that it was an imperfect match at best.

I can't speak for anyone else, but my excuse is this: first, I studied film theory at university. It was hard. It was also very confusing at first, but over the years I managed to absorb at least some of its byzantine rules and traditions and discover what I could and couldn't get away with (protip: you cannot get away with using Paul W.S. Anderson's *Mortal Kombat* as evidence of German expressionist influence on early Generation X filmmakers. Do not try it. You will not get a good grade. The professor will scrawl *this was a clever but disrespectful stunt* in red Sharpie on your paper). If it was part of your education, erring in the direction of a known quantity like film theory makes a certain sort of sense.

Still, I'd always been troubled by how impersonal film theory can be. When it considers the audience at all, it usually does so in terms of a cog in the machine; a whole, rather than a selection of unique personalities. The idea that the same film might affect people differently is generally relegated to less "serious" criticism. Maybe that's why so many disaffected film academics prefer to do reviews: because they get to enjoy (or not) the movies they see, then explain why, from the vantage of their hard-earned expertise.

In other words, reading between the lines: film theory makes it about the *film*, not the *viewer*.

And again, maybe that's the right approach for film. But Well Played and similar efforts have shown that it's not right for games. Or at least, it would be very incomplete, because it doesn't account for interactivity. You can't develop a framework for understanding the literacy of games and their value as an experience if your equation doesn't include the thing that's doing the experiencing.

By extension, that means the game under scrutiny is… I don't want to say "less important" than the player. But it's certainly less of a determining factor in assessing the value of a contribution. Well Played isn't interested in litigating which games are or are not literature. By refusing to participate in a pointless, subjective circular argument, it enables a larger melting pot of worthy content that welcomes new and unusual perspectives. Readers can find everything from complex academic theories to aesthetic deconstructions to intimate ruminations that zero in on particular games or experiences, often in highly personal terms. Rather than weakening the credibility of games as literature, this approach has strengthened it, helping a unique analytical language custom-tailored for games to germinate into a broader canon of criticism.

It also means *Well Played* is a lot more engaging and fun to read than many other journals of its stripe… another crucial factor contributing to the influence it has had over the years.

Which brings us back to *Thief*, and its protagonist's assessment of Lord Bafford's collection of fancy, unread tomes.

Since Garrett dislikes all people more or less equally, it's doubtful he'd have been any more kindly disposed toward the nobleman even if every book in the library were dog-eared to oblivion. His running commentary about burglary targets is mainly to amuse himself; he doesn't really care one way or the other. Bafford, meanwhile, might point out that there's no law saying you have to read the books you buy. Maybe he collects them, or maybe—for all we know—maybe he *does* read them, just very carefully, so as not to damage the spines. But somehow that seems unlikely.

Players get a look at where Garrett himself lives in *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, the third and final installment of the franchise (the less said about the ill-conceived 2014 reboot, the better). A modest, disinterestedly furnished apartment in an unremarkable building, as befits a character whose career and life alike depend on going unnoticed. Among the odds and ends are a handful of books, maybe six or seven at most, leaning floppily against each other like weary paperback dominoes. The books aren't really an important part of the environment, but it's clear Garrett doesn't have many possessions, so I always found their presence meaningful.

Media studies tend to shed their humanity (and their approachability) as their language is formalized. Well Played does the opposite. Its editors have worked to extend its reach, from the very first physical volume to the digital journals and presentations of today. In my view, at least, its core strength is that implied commitment to the player: not the faceless consumer or bulk "audience" but *the person who is playing*. Like Garrett's modest collection, Well Played isn't meant for show. It wants to be read—and read well, as the best games are those well-played.

24. Well, Play

SEAN DUNCAN

I'm not certain what year it was that I first came across "well-played," but it was certainly after the first edited volume was printed but before the second, and it was certainly at a Games+Learning+Society conference in Madison, Wisconsin. Back in those days, both Drew Davidson and I were regular attendees of this conference, him as an experienced presenter and guest, me as a new assistant professor, fresh-faced and just starting my first tenure-track job.

I recall watching Drew's masterful live analysis of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* at that GLS. He adeptly bounced between multiple save files, hopping through the game on multiple levels (pun intended), and provided an exciting and revealing model for how one could discuss the design and player experience of a game in real time. He didn't reduce the game to a cold discussion of its mechanics and systems, didn't overly privilege a designerly perspective nor a distanced, textual analytic perspective. Drew's approach also eschewed discussions of application, which felt especially daring in the GLS space which at the time included a great many participants primarily interested in using games to teach. In this talk, games weren't only interesting because they were useful; this early well-played session was a welcome (and I'd argue necessary) reminder to that community that well-designed games were worthy of exploration regardless of what other agendas we had.

That this was a presentation — a real, live playing-through of a game, with a real, live audience there to contribute — was key. I was immediately smitten with the idea that games research could be baldly and unapologetically *participatory*, and that our in-the-moment reads of these media as players didn't always have to take a back seat to academic contextualizing within existing research traditions and methods. At the time, and in the context of a conference built around the idea that games were primarily interesting because of how they could change educational systems (spoiler: they didn't and probably can't), the idea of a "well-played" approach seemed like a shot across the bow of how games research had been conducted to that point. And, as the approach of "well-played" and the *Well-Played* books and journal grew, these small initial forays into "playing and talking about a game" started to coalesce into a community.

I wasn't one of the earliest *Well-Played* contributors, but I'd like to think that I became one of its more enthusiastic supporters back then. I presented in multiple well-played sessions at multiple conferences, coordinated a "well-played summit" at the Digital Games Research Association, and published in the *Well-Played* journal either solo or with student collaborators — too many times, according to a former department chair. I crafted class exercises and assignments around the idea of figuring out how to "do well-played" with both undergraduates and graduate students, which I still continue in a somewhat different form today. I bought wholesale into the admittedly amorphous idea of the "well-played" approach as not only allowing us new ways to closely read games, but, frankly, as a vehicle to keep me interested in the medium as the field shifted from starry-eyed

optimism over games' potential toward the dark realities that the Gamergate moment revealed. Game studies, if it is a field, is one replete with contradictions in method and multiplicity of perspective, focusing on this fuzzy category of ill-defined things called "games"; the approach of "well-played" that I witnessed seemed to lean *into* these ambiguities, focusing on individual experiences as a way to ground discussions of how personal experience served as a lens for multiple views of a game.

While the books and journal of *Well-Played* have paired close reads of games with an increased focus on scholarly context, I'd like to continue to advocate for in-the-moment personal play as a key part of the approach, especially as it may have lost some prominence. For most of these early presentations, *Well-Played* was genuinely playful! It often seemed more pressing to highlight the experience of play over modeling/adapting an existing interpretive approach — and always most important was the attempt to think about play *concurrently*, provoking an audience to consider how the play of a game worked in real-time. That was something that was personally quite motivating for me to see, and I attempted in my own presentations, including a memorable one in which we recruited audience members to play the tabletop role-playing game *Fiasco*.

That *Fiasco* session was notable for a few reasons, beyond that it was the most fun I've ever had with a conference presentation. I recall trying to balance three different sets of perspectives in the presentation: (1) my read of the game's mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (riffing off of Hunicke, Leblanc, and Zubek, 2004); (2) the design goals of the game's designer, Jason Mornigstar, who I Skyped in to the live presentation; and (3) the perspectives of players, audience members who were tasked with playing a round of the game in front of the audience. Afforded a long session time within which to do this, I tried to take seriously the idea that there would be really nothing interesting in presenting solely *my* read on the game, especially in a game that involves a high degree of negotiation between players on how to play it. By bringing in Morningstar, I sought to openly and plainly challenge my own take on the game by complementing it with an authorial voice. I sought out potential *contradictions* to my perspective; rather than seeking confirmation from Morningstar, I hoped he'd challenge the (distanced, analytic) perspective I tried to provide with a view from the "inside" of the game's design.

And, of course, I can't forget about the volunteers who played the game live, helping us blur the line between audience and presenter, player and critic. *Fiasco* is, as a story-based role-playing game, something that necessarily involves the creative contributions of players, and so any discussion of its play requires more than just a simple demonstration of its play. The in-the-moment play of the game was fun — and, honestly, very *funny* — but was intended to go past "showing how the game works" into, again, challenging my stated interpretation of the game. My intention was to give a voice to the *player's* experiences of play, as well as an avenue for the audience to get some kind of entrance into the messy meaning-making that took place between the multiple perspectives in the talk. In the context of incorporating online discussions of games, my Duncan (2013) "theory of well-played" piece argued that "accounts of 'well-played' games should not attempt to wish away the positionality of who is assessing a game, but understand it in relation to other interpretations" and that we should "pay close attention not to just each individual voice attempting to understand games, but to the interactions, arguments, and discussions between them" (pg. 55). Through live performance of these

multiple perspectives, I hoped that my personal perspectives on play with *Fiasco* could be brought into conversation with an interpretation of the game and gaming community under analysis in ways that could be generative of discussion.

But even that fun and somewhat chaotic *Fiasco* presentation was ultimately destined to become a cold, dry, and academic paper (Duncan, 2014). Out of five papers I have authored or co-authored in the *Well-Played* journal, it is my personal favorite, but still pales in comparison to the thrill of the in-the-moment presentation. It goes without saying that presentations and active discussions are necessarily difficult to summarize in written form. And even though some of the initial inspiration for the very idea of "well-played" came from Squire's (2005) written analysis of *Viewtiful Joe*, I see the value of the presentation as providing a kind of multimodal, multi-voiced game analysis. These early presentations served as a model for a different way to open up live discussion about games, but as time passed, and the presentation of "well-played" has become less prominent, I fear that it is one that may have been lost a bit to the necessities of academic publishing. And while the book series and journal have done an exemplary job of attempting to better connect the idea of "well-played" to interpretive approaches from games and media studies — the special issue of *Well-Played* on "theories of well-played" edited by John Sharp being a notable early example of this — there's frankly only so much one can do in the written form to convey a dynamic experience of play. The interaction of a game, the player/presenter, and the audience in the "well-played" presentation is, to my knowledge, a truly unique analytic system that, sadly, is difficult to make work outside of very limited conference settings, especially during a global pandemic.

Unsurprisingly, while presentations allow for these kinds of interactions, it's tough to translate these faithfully to forms that are validated by the academy: that bread and butter of scholarly discourse, the book and the journal publication. While books chapters and journal articles have clear instructional utility, there's typically a notable lack of productive messiness in them and it is difficult to replicate the surprise of in-the-moment play. Matt Payne and Nina Huntemann's (2020) excellent edited volume *How to Play Videogames* is a volume that, playing off of the approach initiated in Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell's (2020) *How to Watch Television*, attempted to provide something similar in spirit to *Well-Played*. In it, each chapter's author highlighted a different game and theme pairing (from Miguel Sicart on ethics in *Papers, Please* to Adrienne Shaw on LGBTQ representation in *Leisure Suit Larry* to Dan Golding on music in *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time*). I have taught with this book many times, and it's been an invaluable resource for new game studies students in understanding the breadth of approaches in game studies. But it also needs something to give it *life* — in my experience, even the best analyses of games need avenues or provocations to connect these scholarly perspectives with a personal experience of play. With multiple assignments, I compel my students to do just this, picking up *Papers, Please*, for instance, and then considering how their first-hand experience helps to amplify or contrast with Sicart's argument.

With a focus on discussing play in-the-moment, we open the door to failure, contradiction, embarrassment, and just plain ol' *messiness*. There is precedent for the detailed recounting of play presented in detail, warts and all and perhaps we should be revisiting these literatures more often.

As I step back and reflect on the past decade of *Well-Played*, I find myself increasingly thinking about David Sudnow's classic book *Pilgrim in the Microworld*, which can provide a new/old model of ways of thinking about multiple valences on the experience of play. In it, Sudnow dug deep into his own experiences playing *Breakout* on the Atari VCS, ranging from the most detailed first-person account I've ever read of how one's eye movements relate to gaining expertise in a game, but more importantly, all the way to self-reflection on a budding obsession (or was it something we'd now classify as an addiction?) to the game. In my mind at least, Sudnow captured the potential of "well-played" a few decades before the book series and journal and his work still provokes us today. In particular, we could benefit from looking more deeply at how he doesn't shy away from sometimes-excruciating detail on his own play, often in uncomfortable and self-critical ways.

While work in game studies has shifted our focus away from the games to the social and cultural practices that arise from the platforms of games (e.g., Boluk & Lemieux, 2017), I worry that the pendulum has now swung too far away from the in-the-moment experience with these media themselves. Sudnow provides us with a persistently interesting model (not unlike Drew's early presentations) which keep a distinct focus on the microstructure of play. Like my *Fiasco* presentation, like some of Drew's presentations (e.g., his *World of Goo* and *Gorogoa* presentations) Sudnow also sought out the *designers* of the game. "Close reads" of games as players can and should be complemented with these designerly perspectives, whenever possible. That is, what we're perhaps missing and what I'd hope *Well-Played* still allows us to do is not just focus on games, but to deepen a focus on how *individual experience* with games varies from multiple directions, whether or not it fits the conversations currently in vogue about representation in games or media platforms.

This may sound painfully naïve, reactionary, or both, but after a decade of "well-played," I yearn for a return to approaches that compel us to look carefully at games, without an existing agenda or a larger argument about something else (which are very often more easily validated in academic contexts). When done well, the "well-played" presentation tells me as much about the presenter and how they experience media as it does the game under study, something of a rarity in today's game studies world. As I argued in Duncan (2013), the "well-played" approach isn't really about performing some kind of textual analysis, but is, at its best, about creating an "understanding of games not as simple media artifacts, but as media that are contested, negotiated, and often in continuing debate regarding their meaning(s)" (pg. 38). I still believe this, and encourage us as a community to "keep *Well-Played* weird," for a lack of a better term — the "continuing debate" is, to me, more compelling than definitively-stated interpretations of games.

There's obviously more at stake for me here than just how one interprets games. Perhaps my concerns are as much about my disquiet at trends in current, commercial game design as they are about the written publication pressures of academic research. Ask any undergraduate about their experiences with games these days and it'll be only a question or two before we get to micro-transactions, loot boxes, and complaints about the value (or lack thereof) of downloadable content. The first-hand experience of games for the key demographics that still have the time and disposable income to devote to them reflects the increasingly connected, monetized, and contentious nature of gaming

culture. Additionally, in post-*Gamergate* gaming culture, games have increasingly become a site for us as scholars to of course interrogate systems of power and address inequities within them but, in doing so, we often just skim the surface of play, often ignoring the moment-to-moment interactions with the medium in service of getting down to the more important business at hand.

So, while I lament what I see as the loss of deep investigations of play — at least the kinds that I felt might become a key part of game studies a decade ago — I also see opportunity for *Well-Played* as a journal to chart a new path forward. When done well, contributions to *Well-Played* feel less like a process of communicating an argument and much more like a dynamic process of discovery and I suspect there's so much potential for more. As it moves into another decade and with a year or more's worth of Zoom meetings and Slack/Discord teaching under many of our collective belts, I hope that we can see more experimentation in capturing those messy moments of play, as well as talking about them in ways that better leverage the communicative tools we have to do this. I hope for something beyond, say, "academic Let's Plays" or "scholarly Twitch streams:"; instead, I wish to see *Well-Played* increasingly reach for events and formats that can capture what I attempted at that *Fiasco* presentation. We can provide novel examples of multiple voices sharing different perspectives on a game's design and impact, presented dynamically and expanding what I believe Sudnow helped initiate: Opportunities to erode the critical distance between ourselves and the media we study, and new ways of understanding how experiences with games (good, bad, and in-between) arise from our interpretive contestations.

The approach of the "well-played" presentation ignited my interest in the medium a decade ago, and I hope that *Well-Played* — as a journal, a community, or just as a provocation for more presentations — can still be useful in serving a similar role for new game studies scholars today. At the end of the day, I think back fondly to that *Sands of Time* presentation as well as the ways that my *Fiasco* presentation caused me to reflect on the productive tensions between different perspectives on these media. As one who has often been more enamored with the "trees" of games than its "forests," I hope *Well-Played* can keep us grounded in the practices and personal engagements that we have with them, and that we will find new ways to foreground and even eventually *privilege* the in-the-moment working-through of games' meanings in public and dynamic ways.

I hope that, in the future, we can still, well, *play*.

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