

Response to Matthew Thomas Payne and Stephen Campbell's "Super Meat Boy"

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I was a little surprised when I first heard that I wasn't the only presenter who would be talking about *Super Meat Boy* at the eighth annual Games+Learning+Society conference (GLS 8.0). My first thought was that many excellent games came out between GLS 7.0 and GLS 8.0, and that there was already a huge array of other recent and classic games that could benefit from being well played with the aim of informing games and learning research. After thinking it over briefly, I realized that *SMB* receiving more academic attention than other games really wasn't very surprising at all. McMillen and Refenes's indie platformer has been something of a banner bearer for the contemporary indie games movement. As a result, multiple played perspectives on *SMB* are particularly useful in furthering the multidisciplinary project of video game studies. It also became immediately evident when I read Payne and Campbell's paper that the analysis of *SMB* they have conducted not only provides a thorough and enjoyable exploration of the game from a media studies lens, but also serves as an interesting complement to my approach. Their read focuses on the construction and significance of *SMB* as a media artifact within a long stream of played experiences. Mine examines personal played experiences of failure and learning. Between the two, an understanding of the Meat Boy experience takes shape that points towards certain consistent features of what it means to have played *Super Meat Boy* well.

Payne and Campbell do an excellent job of situating *Super Meat Boy* within the longer history of video games, and doing so serves to emphasize why it is that *SMB* can be a uniquely powerful played

experience for some contemporary games. While I was also conscious of McMillen and Refenes active reliance on the history of games (and particularly platformers) in the design of *SMB*, Payne and Campbell expertly pick up the various threads of gaming history that Team Meat tug on and deftly unravel them to reveal how *SMB* operates as an experience for members of a demographic of video game players that might be characterized as “aging core” (Payne and Campbell use the more politic term “veteran”). As the two point out, the central (or in some sense most optimized) audience for *SMB* is those players old enough to remember the bad old days of video games. In their words, “*SMB*’s visual design draws playfully upon a hodgepodge of intertextual gaming references. Level after level, gamers are offered visual treats that position them – Team Meat – and us – the gamers – as being hip to insider jokes meaningful to veteran gamers.” However, Payne and Campbell don’t limit their analysis of the *SMB* played experience to its ties to video gaming’s past.

Over the course of their work, they move on to examine the refinements Team Meat made to the platformer genre (and the experience of console gaming more generally) in the design and development of *SMB*. In their discussion they effectively capture how McMillen and Refenes pick up the existing language of video game play and use it to deliver a very specific kind of experience that could not exist without a deep enough tradition for them to draw on in creating intertextual game play that deliberately invokes both older and more contemporary video games. My work draws on learning theory to illuminate a personal experience with *SMB* and some possible implications for learning, particularly in informal environments. Payne and Campbell’s helps to position that singular played experience within a much broader range of play and research. Their deployment of video game history and game design theory (including the use of work by Jesper Juul and Sean Fenty), alongside their consideration of Team Meat’s own comments about the game creates a clear picture of how an entire

audience segment experiences certain aspects of *Meat Boy*.

Both Payne and Campbell's and my own work explore difficulty in *Super Meat Boy*. However both works also explore the unique roll of death in *SMB* and its impact on the player. Needless to say, the titular character's death and the difficulty of the game are intimately linked through the concept of generative failure Payne and Campbell suggest. Failure is of course productive in the form of player learning as Payne and Campbell emphasize when writing, "Of course, all of Meat Boy's moves must be combined to traverse his universe's innumerable hurdles, like deadly piles of salt, walls of saw blades, and other Meat Boy-killing nastiness." However, as the authors also note death, is literally productive as a played mechanic when the player has the opportunity to see their pattern of play reconstructed upon completion of each level. In considering this same mechanic that the authors point out, I see a very deliberate design move on Team Meat's part that directly upholds the claim Payne and Campbell make about the type of gaming experience *SMB* offers when they write that, "...failures do not inhibit success; rather, the opposite is true. Failures are necessary for success." Not only does this declaration ring true in a consideration of *Super Meat Boy*, but it also serves to reinforce the notion that failure and certain types of learning are deeply connected both in video games and in other arenas.

Ultimately the contrast between Payne and Campbell's mode of analysis and my own serves to highlight persistent aspects of *Super Meat Boy* that seem to emerge regardless of the particular played experience an author seeks to capture in providing a deep read of the game. *Super Meat Boy* is an undeniably difficult game. While I have emphasized this by relating specific passages of game play that have challenged me in a variety of ways, Payne and Campbell deftly illustrate the role of difficulty in the game in their discussion of how Refenes and McMullen lean strictly upon what Juul refers to as "energy punishment" in

creating a specific type of difficult gaming experience. While I may disagree with Payne and Campbell's claim that *SMB* is accessible to more casual players, their analysis of the construction of the difficult played experience in *Meat Boy* is superb. The notions they put forward of generative failure and a structure that invites returned play despite failure are incredibly useful for informing countless experiences of failure and learning that players have had with video games, as well as other experiences of productive failure that occur in both formal and informal learning environments. From a strictly personal perspective, when I reflect on the concept of generative failure, I gain a deeper understanding of the manner in which even now, over a year after I began playing *SMB*, I still find myself returning to it and making incremental progress. At the end of the day, it is of course also good to find that I have been suffering in good company.