Response to Moses Wolfenstein's "Well Suffered"

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Thank you to Drew Davidson and the *Well Played* journal for the chance to respond to Moses Wolfenstein's essay, "Well Suffered." We were anxious to discover another "Well Played" piece about *Super Meat Boy.* After all, how different could two analyses of one small indie game really be? As it turns out: plenty different. We were pleasantly surprised at just how differently Wolfenstein approached this grueling gem. Where we framed *SMB* as a veritable love letter from its "Team Meat" developers to gamers – one that traded in gaming nostalgia while improving upon platforming's key mechanics – Wolfenstein's personal tale of his gameplay successes and (many more) failures mirrored Team Meat's own challenges of bringing the game to market, while also prompting him to consider how failure figures into his self-assessment as a gamer and as an educator. We'd like to focus on these two points, as we found them to be among his essay's most intriguing insights.

I. *SMB* as empathetic connection between player and designer

One of the more outdated critiques of video games is that they are too mechanistic, procedural, or computational to engender "real" emotional experiences. That is, video games are too "cold" to adequately convey or create empathy. For those who've spent any time with games, we know this to be patently false. Indeed, this is neither the case today, nor has it ever been. And yet the contention nevertheless

holds mysterious sway for some pundits and critics.

Video game scholars, journalists, and everyday apologists have battled this misconception for years in books, editorials, blog posts, and in the pages of journals like Well Played. James Paul Gee (2006), one of the foremost voices in game studies, has observed that players merge their own identities with gaming's on-screen avatars to produce new, emergent identities with unique story-based trajectories. We all have played with the same *Super Meat Boy* characters across the same *Super Meat Boy* levels, but our individual experience of those gaming adventures reflect our personal choices. No two victories or, as is more likely the case in SMB, no two failures are exactly the same.

Wolfenstein's piece builds tacitly on Gee's argument, but arms video game scholars with another piece of evidence that there is not only an experiential and empathetic linkage between the player and the avatar, but that there are connections of shared humanity to be found between players and game designers. "Well Suffered" carefully chronicles the gradual changes in *SMB*'s tone as the player travels through the game's increasingly challenging worlds. At its outset, *Super Meat Boy* is cheerfully saccharine in its presentation; in fact, the game begins in a happy forest complete with doe-eyed woodland creatures. But the game's initial art design, musical score, and juvenile humor are replaced with stark elements of danger and foreboding; as when, for example, future terrors like Stage Six's saw blades are previewed in the background of Stage Two. Despite its initial façade, *SMB* is not a happy platformer of yesteryear. It would appear that nostalgia is not all that it's cracked up to be. And neither is the work of game design. It is here where Wolfenstein makes a provocative connection:

I see parallel here that probably applies to the development path trod by Team Meat, and that certainly applies to my own experiences in game development and other large-scale projects. In essence, the work

starts out as a joyful experience. You might encounter a few early difficulties, but the activity is fresh, exciting, and generally filled with promise. While you anticipate some trials ahead, you don't truly have any notion of the scope of those actual challenges. This is the point where your emotional investment in the process is relatively high and your material investment relatively low.

Thus, Wolfenstein's piece implicitly asks us to consider the following: if the emergent identity of playing *SMB* is "player + Meat Boy = player is Meat Boy", then can we imagine a connection with one more linkage? Namely: player --> Meat Boy --> Team Meat? Does the experience of playing *SMB* become inextricably tied to the developers and their creative challenges? Is this perhaps especially the case when a game's development history is so widely known (e.g., in industry "post mortems," gaming blogs, and in films like *Indie Game: The Movie*)? We believe so. "Well Suffered" opens the conceptual door to empathizing not only with other players, but also with designers, granting a tangible sense of authorship to games. (Of course, it's much harder to make the case for identifying with a massive design team where authorship has been dramatically blurred in AAA titles like *Madden* or *Halo*).

II. Dramatic failure as an opportunity for self-reflection

Both essays also necessarily focus on failure due to Meat Boy's sudden, dramatic, and repeated deaths. But beyond teaching us about the game's operating logic, physics, or level design – a point that our piece examines – Wolfenstein's essay reminds us that games like SMB prompt us into asking bigger questions about ourselves.

These are not the kinds of standard learning outcomes that educators typically look for. Rather, SMB's absurdly difficult levels force the player to consider how it is they deal with failure in a way that most games do not. As we say in our piece, we give the game the benefit

of the doubt and return to it willingly despite the challenges because we trust the efficacy of Team Meat's game design. The game has not failed; it is we who have failed. But our response to the game's difficulty escapes its mediated bounds. It's almost as if the game transforms into some meta-commentary or reflection on the nature of failure and the fear of future defeats.

Wolfenstein notes:

I have to count Lil Slugger as the first legitimately difficult challenge in Super Meat Boy. In fact, I actually paused for a second before starting the level on my most recent replay. For just a moment I was struck by a feeling akin to fear, the memory of my first attempt at Lil Slugger looming large in my imagination.

Here, Wolfenstein recognizes the need for steeling himself against the inevitable pain that attends to his future defeats. We believe that this affecting gameplay dynamic primes gamers to prepare themselves for defeat, so they will be more open to learning from their mistakes. And this is the core of SMB's brutally elegant design (or design of elegant brutality), which becomes the fountainhead of its gaming pleasure. Or, to blend our essays' interpretive frameworks, the Super Meat Boy functions as an authentic love letter because of the suffering – both the player's and Team Meat's suffering – that brought it to life.

References

Gee, James Paul. (2006). "Why Game Studies Now? Video Games: A New Art Form." Games and Culture, 1: 58-61.

Wolfenstein, Moses. (2012). "Well Suffered." Well Played.