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a journal on video games, value and meaning

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Introduction

John Sharp

Let's face it, *Well Played* is a journal of aesthetics.

More specifically, a journal of micro-aesthetics [most of the essays in the first four books (I count *Tabletop: Analog Game Design as a Well Played*)]—a single view on a game or two, written from a place of love and nostalgia and deep connection. In a Kantian sense, perhaps they aren't aesthetics at all, considering Kant sought a generalizable framework that operated outside the viewer's own desires and expectations. Still, the point remains; in a contemporary sense, *Well Played* is aesthetics. But we seldom taken the time to look closely at what this means and the lenses through which we approach play-centered game writing. A consideration of the relationship between play, reflection and writing is something it is well worth the time to pause and reflect upon.

And so we come to this issue, *Theories of Well Played*. Instead of the “close-playings” found in the previous issues, we shift here to analysis and musings on what it means to play well inside a game and through the culture around the game, what the considerations of game criticism might be, and what it means to do a close playing in the first place.

There is a long history of reflection on the experience one has with a cultural artifact. We can go back at least to the Greek tradition of ekphrasis—the impassioned description of a work of art. Even this early, the act of responding to a work of art takes on a double function. It is certainly a form of reporting on the experience one had with the work, but it also a performance of one's understanding of the work, and then within the medium through which the ekphratic turn is delivered, be it written or oral. And so to write a *Well Played* essay is to step into this tradition of turning one's aesthetic experience into a performance and a new work.

And like any experience, it is personal. But with games, this takes on even more weight. Each play session of a game is going to differ based on the decisions made, the play style brought to the experience, and innumerable other factors. As Frank Lantz has said, writing about games has more in common with travel writing than it does writing about literature or film. When you reflect on a trip to, say, Pittsburgh, PA, you are at best touching on the places and people and events that unfolded around you. To report on the full experience is to make the equivalent of a four-dimensional map of a place, representing all things and all moments in full detail. So when we write on a game, particularly in the close-playing style found in *Well Played*, there is an implicit “your mileage may vary” asterisks.

As has been decried repeatedly over the last few years, we are in need of a criticism of games. This position is anti-review and anti-rating aggregation. But it is also apologist, suggesting that somehow games cannot advance without a more rigorous criticism. While teeth have gnashed over the state of games criticism, things have quietly proceeded. Game studies continues to grow and mature as a multi-headed super-discipline, outlets like *Critical Distance*, *Kill Screen* and *Well Played* continue to publish, and new voices from a wide range of perspectives and communities join the conversation on an almost daily basis.

For me, *Well Played* essays occupy a space outside criticism and game reviews. While there is a criticality to some of the essays for sure, most are more fan-boy/girl-flavored than critical. This point became crystal-clear during Nick Fortugno’s February 2013 IndieCade East *Well Played* presentation on Richard Hofmeier’s *Cart Life* (2012). While Nick’s take on the game was indeed constructively critical at times, it had an overall positive take on the game. Yet Nick received a good deal of pushback about the talk. There is a need for criticality within *Well Played*, yet four issues in, this is largely uncharted territory.

The conversations that grew out of Raph Koster's blog on *dys4ia* (2012) point out the potential contention that stems from discrete communities of practice operating with different value systems that clash in sometimes uncomfortable ways. A formalist take—the game design-centered view that a game's heart is its design, in the spirit of formalist art criticism that focused on the formal properties of line, color, shape, etc.—on a game like *dy24ia*, particularly when it leads to the questioning of whether or not the work is in fact a game at all, should lead us to question the value of gatekeeping definitions in a the face of the messy world around us.

Yet *Well Played* tends to live in a world of formalist values, though they are not always spoken to as such. Game design is king in these parts, and with that come values that are in some contexts appropriate, and others perhaps not so. Game design has its place, but should it be the dominant criteria of game analysis? At the same time, should we always take into account the political contestation of our sub-communities and differing value systems? Should one write about games from outside their community of practice or their play community? Indeed, it is worth pausing and reflecting on what value system we bring to our close-playings, and what the ramifications of these will be in our performed post-ekphratic ludic travelogues.

As a discipline, art history is almost pathologically obsessed with its methodologies. Volumes and volumes of historiographic writing on the history of art history as a field and its theoretical frameworks can be found in most any art library. But if you look for the equivalent for games, you will not find so much, outside inter-disciplinary strikes and counter-strikes buried in peer-reviewed papers. Perhaps this is because we are a relatively young discipline, perhaps it's because we do not care yet to reflect on the means by which we analyze our work.

I pitched this issue of *Well Played* to Drew Davidson almost two years

ago as a modest step toward a methodological analysis of what we do here in the Well Played series (I say we, as along with editor Drew Davidson, Jane Pinkard and I are associate editors of the series, while Ira Fay and Clara Fernandez are assistant editors, all supported by an advisory and review board). We received a number of submissions when we put out the call. Five in particular struck me as worthwhile contributions to this reflection process.

Casey O'Donnell's "Inhabiting Games Well (If not Uncomfortably...)" is a great place to start, with its Science Technology Studies-meets anthropology deconstruction of what it means to take on a Well Played essay. In the process, Casey looks at the discomfort of negativity, considers whether we should remain polite and reverential, and ultimately seeks out line between value-policing and formalist reporting.

Yotam Haimberg's "Critical Literacy: Game Criticism for Game Developers" comes from the perspective of a young gamemaker and writer who wants more from game reviews and criticism. Yotam calls for a new lens for close-playings in the service of guiding both gamemakers and gameplayers alike. Whether or not criticism is indeed at the service of game developers is an open question, but this essay passionately seeks a more responsible and sophisticated games criticism.

From there, we have two different looks at the meta-game of player forums. Sean Duncan's "Well-played and well-debated: Understanding perspective in contested affinity spaces" looks at player interaction on discussion forums as a place of contested affinity spaces. In the process, Sean gives us a sense that close-playings only capture part of the picture of a typical player's experience.

Thibault Philippette and Baptiste Champion's "On justification: WoW, EQ2 and Aion forums" as well looks at player forums, but to a very different end. Instead, they are using forums as a subject for Boltanski and

Thévenot's Common Worlds schema—a tool for analyzing six community value systems to player expectations for play experiences. Through Thibault and Baptiste's analysis, we see players can approach the same game with radically different expectations within the same game.

We then close things out with Alan Meade's "Why we Glitch: process, meaning and pleasure in the discovery, documentation, sharing and use of videogame exploits." While most players are focused on the designed game, glitchers are looking for the holes, bugs and glitches with which they can play. And so we see a whole other value system for what it means to play well, and are reminded that there are many, many ways players approach, value and share a well-played experience.

Certainly, these five essays do not cover the breadth of the theories of Well Played—they barely scratch the surface. But it is a great start to bringing a larger sense of reflection to our ever-growing field of criticism and, yes, an aesthetics of Well Played.

Inhabiting Games Well (If not Uncomfortably...)

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An Introduction

It is significant to see the field of Game Studies asking the questions associated with this special issue on “Theories of Well Played.” As a scholar of Science and Technology Studies (STS) I have had the privilege of growing up in a field that has long struggled with how to position itself with regard to its subject of interest (Latour, 2004; Collins, 2002; Jasanoff, 2003). STS, as a field, remains largely interested in exploring the structure and work of scientific and technological practice. I have maintained that thinking of scientific and technology production as a game makes sense. As an Anthropologist, I am also fortunate; the field continues to ask very similar questions about researcher and researched (Marcus & Fischer, 1999). Thus, it was with much delight that I observed this special call for Well Played, which provided the opportunity to return to some of the reflexive questions that framed much of my early graduate career and continue to haunt my work today.

Theory/Method

I was once instructed to, “divorce ruminations on method from those of theory.” That demand set my work back by nearly six months. For some, theory represents a stand-in for “jargon,” clouding what should otherwise be a straight-forward set of research activities. Yet, it is the theoretical frame that helps the researcher make sense of the materials they have gathered as well as their approach to the collection itself. In my case, such a disconnection was the re-moval of my project’s life support.

Thus, acknowledging the interconnection between theory and method is important early on in an essay on what it means to Play Well. Theory and method have always been closely tied, though their discussion is often divorced in the interest of “clarity” or some other logic that may very well prevent analytic lucidness. Game Studies has done an exceptional job of continuing to think well about methods (Boellstorff, 2006; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Elverdam & Aarseth, 2007; Hunnicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004; Malaby & Burke, 2009; Malliet, 2007), yet discussions of theory, explicitly in the context of Playing Well, have been less central to the field. That in and of itself is interesting to note, given that in most cases, each of those methods was informed in greater or lesser degree to some set of theoretical frames.

In this essay, I do not attempt a “unified” theory of Playing Well. Rather, I explore how I Play Well. Clearly, I have not Played Well, in that I do not include here an empirical example of what I consider playing. Rather, I explore Playing Well from the analytic stance that I have long since committed myself to with regard to studying game developers and game development practice. Not quite the same thing as Playing Well, I’ll admit. Instead, I connect these ideas with previous Well Players in the hope to demonstrate the value of this theory of Well Played.

To contextualize, I approach this essay from the very explicit perspective of a scholar of STS. As a field, STS has long struggled with how to (ethically) make sense of complex systems of scientists, engineers, technologies, users and broader political-economic systems. Not unlike those exploring the Well Played game is attempting to explore deeply a game’s assumptions and context, researchers in STS take a similar tact to the study of scientific and technological production. My frame is further complicated by a methodological perspective rooted in Anthropology. The quandary posed by post-structural theory sent Anthropology scrambling to make sense of itself in a context where a

multiplicity of readings rendered ethnographic writing problematic. Yet, the product, a text produced through the activity of Playing Well is not unlike the kind of descriptive project that characterizes the products of anthropological work.

It is this literature that I return to, nearly a decade later[1], to suggest that those reflections of a young graduate student offer much to the reflexivity that Game Studies now asks of its own subjects. It is with this standpoint, that I attempt to frame my theory of playing well.

Inhabiting Games

Clearly, when a Well Played project is undertaken, there is the intent of the author to perform an “in-depth” reading of the game in order to make sense of the (multiple) meanings and experiences that can be taken from the combination of the underlying game system, presented aesthetics and stories as well as the context the player often embodies through their play of the game[2]. While games may offer up to the viewer a variety of visual experiences when a game goes unplayed, these cannot be said to characterize what a game “is.” Game systems are dependent upon the (various) inputs of their players. They demand input in a way that makes them particularly interesting texts for analysis.

Simultaneously, the various layers of a game lend themselves to a multiplicity of messages. The very possibility of “ludonarrative dissonance,” (Hocking, 2007) demonstrates the diverse attentions that can be paid to a Well Played game. Even when one examines the various methods associated with studying a game’s “message” (as if such a thing were singular) there is a tendency for the multiple. What are its visuals? What are the rules? What kinds of interactions does it involve? What various outcomes or experiences can be had?

There is something inherently deconstructionist (Derrida, 1976) in this activity. Deconstruction seeks to explore the assumptions built

into constructed narratives (or systems/structures). It is not destructive. It is more akin to the dis-assembly of a system in order to explore its built-in assumptions. Such an approach seems ready-made for the analysis of games, though in other contexts, such as the deconstruction of scientific practice, such activities are viewed with suspicion. Thus, one frequently finds particular breeds of criticism leveled at deconstructionist projects (Derri-da, 2005), and regardless of how fatally flawed those arguments are, they persist (Derrida, 1988). Yet, for some reason, the deconstruction of a game does not seem to attract the same ire that it has in other contexts.

Despite the lack of overall controversy (or at least external controversy) to be found in the Well Playing of games, there is a great deal that can be said for turning to deconstructionist projects to explore how they have framed them-selves in ways that position themselves and their object of research in ways that lend themselves to more productive (ethical?) arrangements. It is from this perspective that I launch into a theory of Playing Well that demands inhabitation and allows for the various multiplicities that ultimately emerge from games.

Not unlike the deconstructionist projects explored below, it is impossible to Play Well, if one does not take the project seriously. The object of deconstruction is not to be taken lightly. It is a serious project, though all that serious-ness ought not prevent a kind of fun and play, but I am getting ahead of myself. Part of what makes the deconstructionist bent so reasonable in the context of games is that each player is assumed to have at least a marginally “unique” or personal experience of the game. Yet, as Derrida noted in his explicit and precise deconstruction (and in this case, destruction may actually be a fitting sub-term) of Searle, “there is a ‘right track’ [une ‘bonne voie’], a better way, ... this [Searle’s] definition of the deconstructionist is false (that’s right: false, not true) and feeble; it suppose a bad (that’s right: bad, not good) and feeble reading of numerous texts” (Derrida, 1988, p. 146). Thus, the same ought to be true of a deconstructionist approach to Playing Well.

Perhaps more than other cultural forms, games have lent themselves willingly to a deconstructionist perspective al-most willingly. Film, literature, philosophy and numerous other projects have found the deconstructionist lens so uncomfortable to bear, primarily because of a kind of imaginary of authorial intent. Games (and their design-ers/develop-ers), on the other hand, have never enjoyed such an imagination. The role of the player, the interrelation of rules, game systems, and aesthetics have always proven difficult to manage and police. Games always lend them-selves towards excess[3]. Game designers frequently dissect (vivi-sect) games in order to break them down into their component parts. The variety and variability in understanding them seems obvious.

Inhabiting Games Well

What does it mean to Play Well? How does one, or how ought one Play Well? Perhaps what makes a deconstruc-tionist bent for Playing Well feel uncomfortable is the kind of baggage that academics fear will come along with it:

There are many vicissitudes of these antideconstruction misreadings: deconstruction simply re-verses binaries, privileging the secondary term; deconstruction reinstalls the binaries it criticizes; deconstruction destroys binary structures; deconstruction makes knowledge impossi-ble; decon-struction is rhetorical free play; deconstruction marks the end of politics. These concerns - often owing more to a popularized understanding of deconstruction than to a close reading of any par-tic-ular deconstructive texts - have become the commonsense political responses to the complexi-ties of deconstructive procedure. (Wilson, 1998, p. 21)

And yet, if the corpus of Well Played represents a set of deeply de-structionist texts, which I think it does, then why have similar concerns not been voiced? I think the answer, in part, lies in the kind of care that seems to be taken in approaching each game. This may

also prove a limitation for Well Played projects. Too often accounts are almost too respectful; too reverent. It is not uncommon to encounter apologies for one's care of a game in the Well Played text. For, "[h]ow can I begin to talk about one of my favorite games," (Falstein, 2009, p. 37), which represents a kind of analytic bent not always found in previous deconstructionist projects.

For this reason, I turn to Wilson's work, which at first glance might make Game Studies scholars ponder, what is the connection between *Playing Well* and feminist/psychological/neuroscience work? The answer lies in the relationship or "location" from which she approaches her work. Drawing heavily on deconstructionism, she cuts to the heart of what makes deconstruction a particularly difficult task, which would indicate why one might ponder the possibility of *Playing Well* one's favorite game:

Deconstruction has effect by inhabiting the structures it contests. This means, of course, that de-construction and its practitioners are always internal to and complicit with the structures they ex-amine. ... For Derrida, the question of criticism can never be a question of whether or not one in-habits the domain that one criticizes, whether or not one is contaminated by the logic and violenc-es one wishes to contest. One always inhabits, excludes, violates; contamination is the condition of criticism in general. (Wilson, 1998, pp. 29-36)

It is precisely this complicity that makes *Playing Well* so seemingly uncomfortable, and yet, when undertaking a Well Played project, the researcher clearly is making an effort to understand the game critically[4]. In some ways, it is the dissection (vivisection) of one's most prized play experiences. *Playing Well* is about examining all aspects of a game. It is a commitment to a good (that's right: good, not bad) reading of the game. To inhabit a game well, to Play Well, but to examine both the game and the player simultaneously. Why is the game being read in this way and how might it be read multiply?

Wilson demonstrates a mode of deconstruction different from what might be referenced solely as a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” (Žižek, 2004, p. 42) and rather approaches the subject matter more playfully. The suspicious mode is not an interrogation, but a kind of conversation or dialectic with and through the material. It matches more the affect of Deleuze’s “excessive benevolence” but does so through a kind of game. Ultimately hoping to present a kind of match that as readers we might remark on as, “well played” (De Koven, 1978). Playing well feels different. It isn’t a de-tached, or disconnected, “objective” analysis, but a situated “fully engaged” and “totally present” (De Koven, 1978, p. 5) kind of playing. When observed, it can feel uncomfortable, because it is such a “radical departure from what we do, as adults, when we play” (De Koven, 1978, p. 10).

The relationship that the Well Player has with a game when Playing Well seems to speak to the kinds of positions that some researchers in STS have attempted to foster. Though often conceptualized not explicitly as deconstruction-ist, the interest that STS has shown in the opening of black boxes (Latour, 1999), too seems intimately linked to the deconstructionist project.

I have written elsewhere about the particular mode of play that many designers and developers employ as they explore games, for it differs from “typical” play of a game (O’Donnell, 2009). This kind of “instrumental play”[5] is critical for understanding, or at least making sense of, the systems that Well Players find themselves engaging with in their analysis. Others have written about these various analytic bents in a variety of ways, though the “labyrinth” (Rheinberger, 1997) and “dance of agency,”[6] (Pickering, 1995) are two particular favorites of mine. Yet, the single metaphor that has long since spoken most clearly to me is that of the Cat’s cradle:

Cat’s cradle is a game for nominalists like me who cannot not desire what we cannot possibly have. As soon as possession enters the

game, the string figures freeze into a lying pattern. Cat's cradle is about patterns and knots; the game takes great skill and can result in some serious sur-prises. One person can build up a large repertoire of string figures on a single pair of hands, but the cat's cradle figures can be passed back and forth on the hands of several players who add new moves in the building of complex patterns. Cat's cradle invites a sense of collective work, of one person not being able to make all the patterns alone. Once does not win at cat's cradle; the goal is more interesting and more open-ended than that. It is not always possible to repeat interesting pat-terns, and figuring out what happened to result in intriguing patterns is an embodied analytical skill. (Haraway, 1997, p. 268)

Perhaps, again, it's too simplistic. Of course Cat's cradle as a way of thinking about Playing Well jives with how we should think about a theory of Well Played, Haraway is thinking closely and critically about a game. While that might be the case, I think it also encourages our thinking about Well Played to also not close off the idea of Playing Well more than once. That Playing Well may often mean returning, over time, to those games examined and re-explore them in light of the work done by others. Playing Well ought to mean beginning to engage in a broader con-versation with a community Playing Well.

At the same time, this isn't really a call for some sort of deconstructionist kum ba yah. Inherent in both Haraway and Wilson's accounts of deconstructionist approaches to Well Played, there is important element of critical engagement. It is simply that that engagement must "inhabit" or engage with the activity not as something to be done without serious commitment. Further, there is an important element to consider, in each of these passages, explicit in Hara-way's and more nascent in Wilson's, that of surprise.

Discomfort in Playing Games

Discomfort might be too strong a word. Surprise might be better. A theory of Well Played ought to encourage read-ers of a Well Played text to themselves return to a game to be surprised again at the kinds of multiplicities that can emerge from a Well Played game. Foucault, discussing the work of Jean Daniel, encourages us to, when returning to texts, like many of those writing Well Played text do, to “not reconstruct those moments” from our past experiences. Rather, that the reader (player) of these texts, “is on a quest for those subtler, more secret, and more decisive moments when things begin to lose their self-evidence” (Foucault, 1980, p. 447). These moments when Playing Well when:

[Y]ou see again something you had never completely lost sight of; it gives the strange impression that you had always sort of thought what you had never completely said, and already said in a thousand ways what you had never before thought out. (Foucault, 1980, pp. 447-448)

Deeply caught up in this search for good (not bad) sessions of Playing Well is a sense that the temporality of what is under inquiry can actually take a great deal of time and care. Those moments when you wake up thinking about a game, for one reason or another, though you might not be able to put your finger on it. This is the kind of uncomfortable, “ethic of sleepless evidence,” that all of our explorations of Well Played games, no matter how small or limited provide insight into a rigorous reading of a Well Played game. It is precisely those games that make you uncomfortable, or when playing a game again that it provides pause, speaks to what makes a Well Played game so important.

Time and again, you get a sense, when exploring the annals of Well Played, that when game analysts returned to games that were spurred, cherished or well-remembered, that their subsequent experiences were

different from those of their first encounter. Time and again in the corpus of *Well Played*, one can find comments such as, “My nervous-ness, as I began playing [again?], was unusual,” (Zagal, 2011, p. 56). In some cases, there is an acknowledgement of the ephemerality of the events a Well Player has even encountered, “I was not even pursuing it. It just happened, like a shooting star that I happened to glance up and see – completely out of my control, yet a reward all my own” (Sharp, 2010, p. 57).

At the same time, these same analysis often rediscover uncomfortable readings, “an ominous warning can be seen in the Schwastika-like flag in the nerd observatory,” (Battle, 2009, p. 74) that may very well turn a Well Player’s analysis toward a more critical bent. Good readings are not necessarily nice readings. The point of the analysis, is to open up new discussions about those moments that might have gone under-examined previously, but strike us differently as they are re-played again.

Inherent in these analysis is an acknowledgement of the seriousness of what Playing Well means, and yet a penchant for finding new surprises, perhaps even some unpleasant ones. The Well Player in these cases is responsible for playing (perhaps numerous times) a game quite carefully, in order to make sense of the variety of systems, aesthetics and multiplicity of meaning that at game might present as a seemingly unified whole (“title”). The negative perspective offers as much possibility as the positive. Both can, and perhaps ought to, exist simultaneously. They form a core of Playing Well that can support a much richer perspective on each analyzed game.

Game Over

If a theory of *Well Played*, rooted in well inhabited notions of deconstruction are not quite your cup of tea, perhaps, “It’s too hoity-toity,” or, “You’re over thinking it.” Maybe it’s the discomfort (in search of new surprises) that has you feeling a bit estranged. In this case, I’ll

turn to science studies scholars and physicists for assistance in the formation of a theory of Well Played:

The sciences, then, are something of a game, albeit a very serious one. But if we are in a time in which responsibility has become a key word for the sciences, that doesn't mean that having fun at this game will or should go away. We need a new aesthetic for performing sciences that includes both the pursuit of responsibility and the preservation of the joy, exuberance, and creative affirmation that the sciences have always provided for their practitioners - and sometimes for the rest of us. (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 145)

All this deconstruction and discomfort ought not negate the joy and exuberance we find through the act of Playing Well. My suggestion at a deconstructive bent for Playing Well shouldn't be thought of in such a way. Even with a critical predisposition, I doubt that Playing Well could ignore the rather "creative, joyous, wonderfully imaginative and productive, positively charged side of the sciences as well" (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 143). If anything, perhaps this should be the lesson that STS offers Game Studies:

'Fun' used to be a basic principle in the defense of pure science in the modern era, particularly among physicists. (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 112)

What it does mean, however, is that if Playing Well can be compared to the care and craft (or game) of science, then Playing Well is "a dense, intricate, and volatile assemblage of practices, metaphors, articulations, and other kludged-together elements of nature, culture, and power," that must ultimately be "muddled through" (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 147).

As Well Players of games, our critiques might be better served as, "a game of judging, which is different from a game of policing" (For-

tun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 146). Put another way, the act of Playing Well (and thus its theoretical foundation, for method and theory intertwine) finds Well Players attempting to balance “heavy-handed proposals for sociocultural value-policing of” games and “laissez-faire purity for total, autonomous fun,” and “require[s] something more akin to the reciprocal and even contradictory alternations” (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 147) between those perspectives. To judge a game well is to explore all of its facets, in the hope of exploring the range of readings, including those that are pleasant and those that haunt the Well Player. This isn’t a fan-boy/girl’s account of their favorite game, though that might be a start. It is a deeply interested exploration of a designed system, done in the hopes of demonstrating the depth of this medium. Such readings will always invariably find disconnects or faults, every work exhibits imperfections. It is what makes the game and the deeply engaged readings so important.

Playing Well with a deconstructionist tact, thus requires a kind of care(ful) reading of the game, where a marriage of methods comes together to make sense of the multiplicities each game offers. For, each of those systems was craft-ed, quite carefully with particular emergent experiences in mind, but it remains a text that can and ought to be read with an eye (and ear and ...) for surprising conclusions, not precisely what one experienced on first play. These readings ought to challenge our assumptions of what the game is, was or could be.

NOTES

[1] In 2004 an essay was published in the Newsletter of the Society for Social Studies of Science (O’Donnell, 2004) that explored the metaphors and theories that frame inquiry in STS and how young scholars’ positionalities were quite different from those that had been deployed previously.

[2] I have often had the question posed by students if someone “must”

play a game to offer commentary on it. Must they? No. Do I put much stock in such an interpretation, based on my experiences as a researcher of game designers and as a game designer? No. It is certainly possible if one observes players for a long enough period, but I remain skeptical based on experience.

[3] Hence all of the controversy, productivity and ambivalence around the concept of the Magic Circle (Zimmerman, 2012). As noted in Zimmerman's essay, the concept was used to productively think about the process of game design. Like most concepts, however, they move and swerve when put into practice. Game designers seem more capable of picking up and setting down conceptual frameworks as they fit a given situation, and thus what was envisioned as a tool for designerly thought became something much larger.

[4] I mean "critically" in the post-Marxist "critical theory," sense.

[5] I elaborate extensively on "instrumental play" in my forthcoming book (O'Donnell, 2014), differentiating it from what might mistakenly be identified as a kind of instrumental rationality. The "play" aspect of the endeavor is the lynchpin that sets it apart from the traps of the Frankfurt School's conception of the phrase.

[6] Both of these terms appeal to the role that materiality and agency play in the construction of scientific "fact." The materiality of an object of inquiry is not immobile in the play of scientific (playful) inquiry. The scientist (player) is not the sole owner of agency. Such a perspective ignores the more complex relationship between the system being explored and the explorer.

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Critical Literacy: Game Criticism for Game Developers

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Introduction

As video games grow beyond the purview of a devout subculture, they are attracting scrutiny from audiences more numerous and diverse than ever before. The expanding public wants to know: What is a “good” videogame? What makes it “good”? The definition of “good” has connotations stretching from commerce to entertainment to art to explorations of a social issue. The body of work related to game criticism is already growing; authors are writing about their interpretation and perception of games and, through the simple act of writing about games, the structure of game criticism is already beginning to formalize.

As game developers, critics, and ultimately game players, we ought to cultivate a culture of criticism, a critical literacy, within the community to take advantage of the ongoing, critical discussions to better discuss, evaluate, and learn from games.

Games exist as today’s predominant cultural artifact and their power as a cultural form is interaction; the power for players to directly choose actions within a situation and see the emergent ramifications from a perspective different from their own. A critic’s job is to call attention to the forces that create this interactive power and to tease out that power from other developers. While developers tend to approach games from the rule set or from dynamics that support desired play, a critic’s chief concern should be aesthetics.

Although aesthetics is understood to deal with the creation and appreciation of beauty, this paper will refer to the operational definition posited by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek (2004): “Aesthetics describes the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with game systems.” Aesthetics are ultimately what the game offers because through interaction a player will experience a set of behavior that emerged from their play; they effectively become the authority on their own experience with that game. An astute critic can unpack this experience and examine it through that lens of interactivity; ultimately comparing their experience against the creator’s intent if they so choose.

By contrast, Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) posited one form of criticism that views works as wholly independent from their creators since the meaning should be objectively and directly inferred from the work itself. They argue that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.” This view is extreme. Works being created, especially within our community of games, exist within a context of which critics should be aware. Their writing is a form of feedback for developers, a vehicle advancing this creative form. A deep reading into the game developers is unnecessary but an understanding of the intention of the game allows a critic to subjectively discuss if a work was successful for what it was trying to do. This is one aspect of criticism, and individual critics can choose to instead focus on a game’s technique in execution or their emotional response to it.

To be clear and avoid confusion, criticism is distinct from review. Game review focuses on commerce-driven evaluation and often provides an overview of the game experience with advice to potential customers. Game criticism is a mixture of thoughtful and shrewd examination to unpack a game’s aesthetics, the desired emotional response, within the largest context of the medium. Criticism is

uniquely positioned to celebrate what is special about this medium in a historical and cultural context that is not concerned with sales. Although developers and critics do not directly work together, their combined attention toward fostering a community of critical literacy will propel creative growth.

Fundamental Feedback

The varying kinds of game criticism express their differences from one another through their target audience. Some forms of criticism reflect back to the creator of the work, reflect to their peers, or reflect to their readership as an audience-at-large. Moreover the content of the critique can span a wide variety of topics such as beauty, narrative, mechanics, technology, or social issues related to games. Game development has become increasingly accessible with the explosion of tools for game creation, and this paper specifically focuses on the feedback loop between critics and developers, including potential critics and potential developers.

As game critic and essayist Lana Polansky (2012) points out, deep readings of games can “help articulate an inchoate idea that you couldn’t otherwise discuss.” Critics can penetrate the workings of a game experience and ascribe vocabulary to those elements, providing readers with a conceptual toolkit for talking about games. Taken a step further, game criticism can call attention to easily overlooked games, analyze why successful games might still be bad games, and provide reflection for developers as they explore new games; this is a fundamental feedback cycle.

Furthermore, game criticism can explore in-depth what it means for something to be “well played,” a concept that this journal pursues exclusively. By unpacking an experience and parsing out the meaning, critical analysis can define the criteria for what makes a game engaging

and well executed. The onus for engaging with this critical discussion is on the community of developers, critics, and players because the advancement of games as a cultural form directly benefits the experiences they have through these games.

State of the Practice

Currently, there are a few scattered sources for game criticism and they all take different approaches. The way in which they conceptualize games and the manner in which they discuss it draws in diverse audiences from people looking to be entertained, to be informed, or to examine games under a new perspective. These different approaches are crucial; they allow audiences to explore the critical landscape, seeking viewpoints that align with or challenge their own. Moreover, the following critics are writing to evaluate their experiences with games and not to inform audiences of a commercial product since they assume the audience has either knowledge of the game or has played it themselves. The list below is not comprehensive but establishes a sample of what exists today.

Perhaps the most visible critic is Ben “Yahtzee” Croshaw of the video series *Zero Punctuation*, a production of *The Escapist Magazine*. Although Yahtzee’s criticism of games is primarily geared for entertainment and is perhaps the most review-like in its quick delivery format, he is vocal and critical of how the games he plays are designed. He celebrates, laments, and lampoons concepts and tropes, and draws attention to things that might otherwise be overlooked. He is a positive force for game developers because he shows that the audience cares and has a capacity to appreciate a well-crafted experience. By brazenly pointing out all of the repetition, overused tropes, and dull characters Yahtzee tries to shame developers despite the commercial success of this repetition. While large-scale development is not able to respond to this critique, small-scale development is poised to tread new ground because of it.

Extra Credits, another video series, is dedicated to examining games through a more academic perspective. Each episode is tied around the central tenets of how games are made, how we can make them better, and how we can be better for it. Moreover, some episodes feature a segment about games that might have been overlooked and why people should play them – a prime example of elevating culturally significant work. Extra Credits is devoted to promoting the status of games by figuring out what it is about them that appeals to us and how we can foster that connection so it is strong and enduring. It challenges its audience to examine the games they play and why they play them, ultimately raising the collective literacy of their audience.

Founded by a former Wall Street Journal culture reporter, the publication Kill Screen reads more like a journal than a magazine. From their website (Warren, n.d.), the publication is interested in the “intersection between games, play, and other seats of culture from art to music to design.” The difference here, as the magazine points out, is that the quality of the writing fosters a thoughtful discourse about games and since the articles do not synchronize with game releases the discussions tend to be richer. There seems to be a demand, or at least perceived demand, for quality writing and well-researched journalists contributing to a single publication among the din of blogs and free, online magazines like Kotaku and Polygon.

The Well Played journal takes a close, penetrative reading approach to examining games. This forum is chiefly concerned with the meaning found in the experience of playing games and is driven by deep and often personal close readings. Some explorations bear a resemblance to travel journalism in which the player ventures into a new world, records his or her thoughts, and returns to share the fruits of the journey. By taking the time to reflect upon a game’s experience, authors can suggest new words and concepts for developers and audiences alike so that they can better describe the medium. For example, Caro-

line Williams (2011) delved in the “deceptively simple choice of what game to play” by examining the avatar as an enactment of identity and a function of “who to be for the next few hours;” and Charles Ecenbarger II (2012) analyzed group dynamics in *World of Warcraft*, outlining the stages a randomly generated group will experience such as emergent leadership and breakpoints.

Each of these sources of criticism has its own style and methodology as well as its own audience; games attract a wide demographic and criticism ought to reflect that spectrum. It is worth keeping in mind that these sources are all discussing, advancing, and deeply caring about the same thing: games. Interested readers are also encouraged to consider the works of individuals such as Michael Abbott, Jesse Schell, Ian Bogost, Anita Sarkeesian, Mattie Brice, Clint Hocking, and Leigh Alexander.

Elevating Significance through Feedback

A critic can guide readers to what games, or aspects of games, are worthy of our attention. Critics set their criteria and put forth the beneficial aspects to which we should and should not pay attention as well as the pernicious aspects to which we should and should not pay attention. In the developer-critic feedback loop, this can manifest for developers as an insight to the perception of their games. Criticism can be a window into how others perceive the work, enabling developers to compare that perception to their own intention and see where it does and does not match.

For criticism to flourish, the critic should be mindful of which qualities are important in a game and recognize that a whole could be more than the sum of its parts. A score is not the only valid metric for games especially since they are consumed in a different manner from other forms of media. By elucidating their appreciation through written and spoken word, critics can encourage game developers to strive with each

new game and to push past commercially-driven development and into innovative development.

Anita Sarkeesian is an example of one such critic who has been directing the attention of her audience to harmful stereotypes and tropes within the context of gender roles in video games. She has been an outspoken critic of the depictions of women in games, particularly commercially successful ones, and her criticisms have starkly highlighted the misogyny in video game culture. Sarkeesian (2011) has produced six videos to examine tropes that involve women such as the “Evil Demon Seductress” and “The Straw Feminist.” More recently, she has devoted her attention to the most widely used gender cliché: The Damsel in Distress. Her analysis (2013) shows how a constant reinforcement of women as the naturally weaker gender can have a detrimental effect on society as a whole, particularly in a wide-reaching medium like video games. She devoted a substantial amount of time unpacking this one particular trope and her work is a prime example of establishing what is significant within games as a cultural form. These tropes as plot devices are reasonable in moderation, although the overuse of these lackluster writing techniques is indisputable, even if viewers disagree with her argument. Her criticism also doubles as a form of feedback, providing insight for developers who might not have otherwise understood what those aspects mean or recognized the effect those aspects have.

Through leading discussions about the aesthetics, the core emotional response evoked in the player, and how they tie into a game’s mechanics, sensory aspects, technology, and narrative, critics are positioned to consider their perception of a game in relation to the developer’s intention. However, just as it is the critic’s responsibility to elevate significant works despite poor reviews or poor commercial success, it is also their responsibility to be critical of highly successful works since these commercial achievements do not always translate to good games.

Limitations of Rubric-based Review

It is wise for critics to examine the limitations of the current, score-oriented review culture to refine the culture of criticism. Scored reviews are not necessarily unhealthy for the medium but they are shaping how the audience thinks and talks about games, and this has ramifications in market research for new games. Games require a substantial time commitment by players and the review culture has taught players that a low score is not worth their time since players can glean a proxy experience from both a review and a single number. Games are subjective experiences and a critical, close reading of the subject matter might reveal more of the inner workings to the audience.

Game journalist Peter Nowak (2011) points out the discrepancy between the review standard of games and of movies, particularly how poor writing seems to have a disproportionately minor effect on game reviews. *Gear of War 3* earned an aggregate review score of 91 out of 100 and one reviewer, who awarded the game a 9 out of 10 on IGN, highlighted the action while glossing over the poor writing (Lynch, 2011). Nowak emphasizes that “great action movies rarely score in the top percentile without great writing.” If writing, or any aspect of a game for that matter, is truly not a concern for a game, then their reviews should reflect that position with an appropriate score. However, since reviews help propel sales, the spectrum of acceptable review scores is crunched to the upper end of the scale rather than being truly representative of the game experience within its context.

Jamie Madigan, a psychologist who writes about the cross-section of games and psychology, wrote about the effect of rubric-based scoring for subjective experiences. He found research by Timothy Wilson and Jonathan Schooler (1991) that indicates how rubric-based judgments of subjective things might lead to poorer evaluations. Their research involved asking college students to taste different brands of strawberry

jam and rate them. Students who were asked to simply rate the jam had ratings that corresponded well to those of experts. On the other hand, students who were asked to analyze why they felt the way they did had ratings that agreed less with those experts.

Wilson and Schooler (1991) go on to conclude that by analyzing the reasons for their choices, the students' were shifting their attention to criteria that might not matter and then basing their choices and ratings on those criteria. Madigan (2010) highlights this study because when reviewers evaluate a game based on a rubric with elements such as graphics or sound it can "exacerbate this limitation and lead [them] to consider what should be irrelevant information when making [their] ratings." It is for this reason Madigan also seeks out more organic reviews or close readings of games that give him more information about the actual experience.

Awards represent another limitation of rubric-based reviews since games are typically selected as being the strongest in their category with no reasoning or transparency. This value judgment offers little to no justification for why that game is receiving that specific award which in turn provides no feedback for developers. This is a flawed form of feedback because the message this sends is to emulate the apparent success and not the direction of decisions that led to that end result. It is easy to show when something is lacking, but it is equally if not more important to explore why something is done right.

It can become awkward to provide a single number to represent a game's score and thinking along a rigid rubric might even limit the reviewer's ability to assess the game as a comprehensive experience. The lesson for critics here is to find ways to describe parts of a game with words that accurately and succinctly portray the critic's experience, both good and bad. Critics are not writing to inform customers and thus can value different elements within games. Instead of an

abstracted, numerical score, critics can provide the developers with an articulated expression of their perception which reinforces the critic-developer loop and encourages the community to engage culturally with criticism.

Critical Vocabulary

Current game discussions often use a shorthand vocabulary, wherein concepts are referred to through a significant game and discussions refer to intangible but well-known elements within those games. To an outsider it might appear incomprehensible, but within the community describing a new shooter as, “similar to Halo but with some Uncharted cinematic flair,” would make complete sense. This is especially true of games that popularized a particular mechanic or genre such as *Myst*, *DotA* or *Farmville*. This referential shorthand is insufficient for the community because it takes the power of description away from the critics and developers, and allows other groups to define what this shorthand means. Ian Bogost (2006) raised this issue in his critique of the widely infamous *Bully* by Rockstar Games. He pointed out that the media was taking the game very seriously but the videogame community was not; this allowed “legislators and attorneys and media watchdogs [to] define the terms of the debate.” In many ways, the subculture-specific, shorthand vocabulary is to blame. While a more sophisticated language might not benefit this specific situation, a more game-literate culture would.

Just as writers of criticism find new ways to describe aspects of games, so do developers as they work on the games. During production developers have to find terms to describe the elements that they are working with; programmers need names for their variables! If you have played a social game then you are probably familiar with “doobers” (Reynolds, 2010) or small objects that can be clicked on to reward some resources. If you click a person and coins rain onto the ground, those

coins are all doobers. If you have played a first- or third-person action game, then chances are you have “frobbed” (Raymond, 1996) a switch or button. It is an old, hacker term that essentially means “to use” and has been accepted by programmers as any usable object in the game. These are only two examples of many terms that developers use during their project cycles. It is entirely possible, and probably better, that these words never see the light of day but the mere fact they exist show that the language of games is evolving and, more importantly, growing as a result of development.

Game designers also step into the role of a developer-oriented critic to evaluate the works of their peers. Coined in 2002 by Nick Pelling (Marczewski, 2012), “gamification” is the use of game-thinking in a non-game context and has exploded in usage to describe loyalty programs or achievement badges. “Ludonarrative dissonance,” coined by Clint Hocking in 2007 (Hocking, 2007), refers to the conflict between a game’s narrative and its game play. These are both useful terms within their context, but the danger here is recognizing that a term is only as good as its widely known or accepted definition. By contrast, examples of words that are more widely understood include mechanic, goal, win state, and feedback loop.

Film makers and critics had to come up with terms to describe the concepts within film. Film has a plethora of shot angles, editing techniques, storytelling techniques, and the list goes on. Consequently, each of these elements is named so professionals, critics, and audiences can discuss the film with a shared language. While it is important for games to differentiate themselves from previous media it would be foolish to disregard film criticism because it raises so many questions. Would the same criteria for films apply to games? Why or why not? What would game criticism ignore from film criticism, and what kinds of tools would need to be created to address those areas? There are a multitude of different sources for new game vocabulary,

but these sources are diverse and each concerned with their own work and words. Game critics are in the best position to collect and curate the formal vocabulary of games because vocabulary outlines how people think about and discuss games. This curatorial role would transfer and popularize vocabulary being developed in various sub-communities that may not always communicate with each other such as game design and game studies. Armed with useful vocabulary, critics can lead the community through a deeper understanding of what games are saying so that the game community can properly discuss it amongst themselves as well as with the public-at-large.

Moving Forward

Erik Kain (2012) recommended that games should be consumed and discussed with an approach that is more similar to a book club than a movie review. This is a strong format, ideally if done in person with one member championing a game for each meeting, because it allows people to share and cultivate their views on a game with a community already familiar with the experience. This exists to some degree through venues such as IndieCade which hosts the Well Played sessions. The particularly exciting aspect of these sessions is that a person will explore one game in-depth with the game creator(s) present to challenge the speaker or answer questions.

As an alternative to in-person meetings, these “book club”-type meetings are also happening online with leaders taking the form of blog posts or videos to crystallize their thoughts and start a discussion on forums or in the comments. This format allows for ideas to bubble to the surface based on popularity or accessibility which allows for anyone to contribute to the discussion. People have also taken a curatorial role for organizing and presenting these articles and organic discussions, such as “This Week in Videogame Blogging” on Critical Distance.

Critical discussions are happening all the time; developers and critics can openly challenge ideas and conversations spin off as a result, both online and in-person. All parties ought to engage with this discussion to promote a community that is critically literate because criticism is an essential vehicle for driving the growth of our cultural artifacts. If we make games, talk about those games on a penetrating level, share how we respond to those games, and in turn continue to make games based on that feedback then we only stand to benefit.

In Conclusion

The critic is positioned to lead discussions, and through their reflections developers can recognize their triumphs and missteps. Critics have a responsibility to elevate culturally significant works, drawing our attention to both beneficial and pernicious aspects of games. They should consider how a rubric can deeply influence one's reflection of a game and hamper the descriptive power of that reflection. Finally critics should consider how vocabulary itself shapes how we talk about something and what we can learn from current game vocabulary as well as vocabulary that exist within other media.

Each medium has something that it can do powerfully, a certain power that that medium alone can truly capture beyond any other medium. For books, it is the power of description and dialogue for the reader can ponder over each phrase and re-read if he or she chooses. For film, it is the power of editing for a succession of images can convey a complex idea in mere seconds and provoke a powerful emotion with a corresponding and well-timed score. For games, it is the power of interaction; the power for players, who are no longer observers or spectators, to choose within a situation and perform a course of action to see the consequence from a new perspective. This is fundamentally different from reading about or watching the same sequence of events. Games present deep systems for players to explore and master, as well

as new techniques of storytelling unprecedented by other media. Perhaps Extra Credits said it best in their episode “Art is Not the Opposite of Fun” (Portnow, Floyd, & Kretzschmar, 2011) by observing that “studying games, thinking more intently about games, giving them the same amount of attention and respect we give any other medium is not going to make them worse.” We need to nurture a community that is critically literate; one that can discuss our perceptions of game experiences, properly evaluate those experiences, and create new games that advance the medium further.

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Well-played and well-debated: Understanding perspective in contested affinity spaces

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Introduction

The theme of this special issue, “Theories of Well-Played,” reflects a new and exciting point for both the journal and the field of game studies. While the journal and the three previous Well-Played volumes (Davidson, 2009; Davidson, 2010; Davidson, 2011) have contributed to the body of principled analyses of how gaming experiences are shaped by the designed elements of games, there is still much work to do regarding its theoretical underpinnings. What does “well-played” mean? And who is “well-played” for? Game studies’ unique mixture of approaches — designer discourses, rhetorical analysis, textual analysis, cultural studies, and applications — makes it appealing to step back and understand the ways that we, as academics and designers, can attempt to understand how a game can craft unique experiences for its players.

However, there is a missing piece that needs to be considered in the development of theories of how games are “well-played,” and one that may interestingly connect the goals of game studies even more deeply with approaches to understanding online culture. I argue that to understand “well play,” we may benefit from focusing not only on the ways that academics and designers analyze and understand the systems of a game, but also by looking into the manners by which players engage with one another and with game designers in the interpretation

of a game's mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek, 2004). The potential to connect "well-played" analyses to players' lived experiences outside the game is underexplored, and serves as the focus for this paper. I suggest that attention to the ways that game players conceive of their own activities with a game and the forms of identity play that these players engage with can contribute to a better understanding of their involvement in the ongoing assessment of what makes a particular game "well-played."

Toward this end, I address the forms of meaning-making that occur within a game's online community, connect those practices back to designed elements of the game under discussion, and then speculate on potential ways that the analysis and interpretation of a game can drive considerations of player's identity play in relation to the collective and competitive activity of evaluating a game. I attempt to bring into conversation two approaches to game studies that have not yet been fully integrated. Both share the common metaphor of space — a discussion of gaming affinity spaces (Gee, 2005; Gee, 2004; Hayes & Duncan, 2012) or the productive and contentious online discussions that occur around games, and a discussion of contested spaces (Squire & Jenkins, 2002) or a formal analysis of games in which contestation over virtual spaces is seen as central. Through the connection of these two notions of "space," I suggest that a productive synthesis emerges in which the consequential out-of-game activities of some games can be connected to designed elements of the games under discussion.

The synthesis of affinity spaces and contested spaces can help further our understanding of games not as simple media artifacts, but as media that are contested, negotiated, and often in continuing debate regarding their meaning(s). Discussions about games that focus on disagreements can be revealing, and help those of us interested in what makes a game "well-played" consider the contingent nature of interpretation and analysis. Ultimately, this paper will argue that the position-

ality of who is assessing a game matters, and is best understood when in conjunction with other positional interpretations of a game. What even counts as “the game” can change with contexts of interpretation, can change over time, and can change with considerations of the activities that take place in the contested spaces and affinity spaces of games.

Affinity Spaces

First, it is worth elaborating how and why the concept of the affinity space has become of interest to games scholarship in recent years. Gee (2005) coined the term as a way of leading educational considerations of gaming away from solely educationally-designed applications of games (e.g., the design of educational games such as Oregon Trail or the efficacious use of Math Blasters in a classroom), and toward a perspective that valued the “emergent culture” (Steinkuehler, 2006) of gaming. For nearly a decade, Gee’s perspective has been one in which gaming affinity spaces — gaming discussion forums and resources for games ranging from Age of Mythology to Rise of Nations (Gee, 2004) to The Sims 3 (Gee & Hayes, 2010) — have been cataloged and described in qualitative terms.

In Gee’s view, the classification of a “gaming community” has always been rather difficult, and perhaps fruitless. A boundary problem has been a great part of this; does one study the “communities” that manifest around only individual games, such as The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword? Or, is the relevant “community” the fans of Eiji Aonuma’s 3D Zelda games? Or all Zelda games? Or just “Nintendo fans” in general? Issues of membership are tough to assess in many on-line spaces around games (see DeVane, 2012), and the shifting, ad hoc nature of online gaming spaces makes it difficult to understand the utility of the term “community” for any of these media. Switching the metaphor to “space” rather than the problematic “community,” Gee sought to dodge this problem and re-frame research on gamer activi-

ties as being about the elements of a particular environment that can give rise to interesting, productive practices within them. Gee (2005, pg. 225-228) preferred to list the potential features of affinity spaces rather than a set of definitional criteria, which included:

1. Common endeavour, not race, class, gender or disability, is primary
2. Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space
3. Some portals are strong generators
4. Internal grammar is transformed by external grammar
5. Encourages intensive and extensive knowledge
6. Encourages individual and distributed knowledge
7. Encourages dispersed knowledge
8. Uses and honors tacit knowledge

And so on, including affinity spaces' multiple routes to participation, status, and leadership. Gee's list emphasized the positive elements of engagement with online gaming discussions — again, certainly an emphasis that reflected his games-skeptical audiences of educational researchers and educational practitioners. And, with this, some branches of games and learning scholarship began to take much more seriously the productive nature of the online contexts around games, and the potential of games to include broader discussions of participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2006), as well as leading to empirical studies of what exactly goes on within them (e.g., Steinkuehler & Duncan's, 2008, study of informal scientific thinking practices in World of Warcraft affinity spaces).

However, in recent years, there has been concern over what the focus on the affinity space concept has told us both about learning within the online discussion spaces around games, as well as interactions between gaming fans. Is the concept only useful in broad descriptive terms? Does this focus give us a sense of how gamers craft understandings of the meaning of a particular game? New efforts have been taken

to both better identify the features of affinity spaces as well as testing the concept's utility in understanding other forms of media engagement. Recent affinity space studies have moved from documentation of gaming spaces to other media such as anime fan fiction (see Black, 2008), while a variety of methodological concerns (Duncan, 2010a; Lammers, Curwood, Magnifico, 2012) have been raised about how to best characterize the overall practices within these contexts in conjunction with accounts of individual moments of meaning-making. For gaming affinity spaces, the expansion and further application of the concept has been shifted to game design (Duncan, 2012), game modding (Durga, 2012), and how game playing spaces can foster designer identities (DeVane, 2012).

And so how we “expand the affinity space” has been a recent concern, and one relevant for this paper's discussion of developing theories of well-played — making the key assumption that one way to view a game's “well-played” nature is through how people discuss it. As the initial emphasis on play and resources found within affinity spaces has given way to a variety of concerns over what exactly players do in affinity spaces, we are left wondering whether or not Gee's initial picture of the affinity space is an unnecessarily rosy one. In our recent edited volume *Learning in Video Game Affinity Spaces*, Duncan & Hayes (2012) claimed that the pervasiveness of online spaces causes us to re-evaluate research on gaming's “elitist affinity spaces” that are “sites of very high knowledge production, ... [and] tend to value a narrow range of skills and backgrounds, have clear hierarchies of status and power, and disparage newcomers who do not conform to fairly rigid norms for behavior.” (pg. 11).

Focusing on gaming affinity spaces and online discussions, many of us understand that gaming discussions online can be contentious and often exclusionary (see Alexander, 2011, for a prominent games journalist's evaluation of “gamer” discourse vis-a-vis gender). Gee's frame-

work gives us a basic structure with which to understand the ways that affinity spaces provide opportunities for players to make sense of their gaming experiences, but is agnostic on the consequences of the forms of discourse present within them. In Steinkuehler & Duncan (2008), we found that some gaming affinity spaces presented a wealth of social construction of knowledge: Participants within the massively-multiplayer game World of Warcraft's Priest class forum worked through complex analyses of the Priest class's systems in a largely evaluative and collaborative manner. The World of Warcraft online forums represent only one affinity space, and one that we will return to in the course of this paper, but this study points out that affinity spaces are not just sites of productive activity, but sites of potential discussion. Understanding and evaluating more than any one individual's take on elements of the game's "well play" is a necessary task to both participating within and considering the implications of a gaming affinity space.

Steinkuehler and Duncan argued that the complexity of World of Warcraft's interaction of game mechanics was a key driver for the development of discussions in affinity spaces such as the Priest class forum, and this leads us to a consideration of the designed elements of the games that may give rise to such discussions. At the time, we did not include much discussion of many players' moment-to-moment in-game activities. World of Warcraft is not solely about theorizing about game systems, creating "builds" or "specs," but features actions in which players struggle against one another and the game's systems, including continual PvP battles between two player factions, organized conflict against game-generated enemies, and competition between individuals or guilds for in-game rewards. In order to more sufficiently address the ways that affinity spaces serve as contexts for meaningful discussions about a game's meaning, perhaps we should get a handle on the often contentious, conflict-oriented nature of many games, and what this emphasis might mean for the better understanding of "well play."

Contested Spaces

Continuing the metaphor of “space,” I have recently found myself drawn to an older, short piece by Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins entitled “The Art of Contested Spaces” (Squire & Jenkins, 2002). Though other parts of Squire’s and Jenkins’ individual work have addressed the participatory culture of gaming (see Squire, 2006 or Jenkins, 2006b), their contested spaces piece was focused in particular on a new read of digital games as featuring struggles over spaces within a number of game environments.

Squire and Jenkins’ argument provided a litany of digital games that featured spaces under struggle in one fashion or another, from *Myst* to *Shenmue* to *Black and White*. Their account addressed “space” in a variety of guises, including *Wolfenstein 3D*’s virtual three-dimensional space full of enemies, and later elaborations of the first-person shooter in *Doom* and *Quake*; spatial exploration games in which the player progresses through a virtual space laid out by a designer, from *Super Mario Bros.* to *Grim Fandango*; and games in which a social space is negotiated, such as massively-multiplayer games like *Star Wars: Galaxies* and *Asheron’s Call*. A major contribution of this piece was to frame the primary activity of the player in these varied spaces of games as working through environments that are contested in some fashion, be it space that a player is fighting over versus another player in a synchronous fashion (say, a *Call of Duty* multiplayer game), or a space that a player is working through versus a designer’s plans (say, the narrative and space of an *Uncharted* game).

This work cut across a wide range of digital games, and cast the primary activity of gamers as gaining knowledge of game design as they play, incorporating insights from design into their play practices. Squire and Jenkins stated:

“As players engage more directly in the design process, the line be-

tween gamers and designers begins to dissolve. To fully participate, players will need to learn more about the art of game design. Effective game design can yield spaces that encourage our exploration, provide resources for our struggles for dominance, evoke powerful emotions, and encourage playfulness and sociability. This art owes much to previous traditions, including those of painting, architecture, and urban design, but it also takes advantages of the unique properties of emerging digital media. Games have always been an art of contested spaces; computer and digital games have pushed that art to a new level of aesthetic accomplishment.”

And so, this navigation through a game-based metaphor of space is again argued as beneficial and positive, as was also seen in Gee’s work on affinity spaces. We should acknowledge that Squire and Jenkins’ argument is perhaps a bit overstated — many successful games do not literally include a virtual representation of contested space (e.g., *Draw Something*, *Dominion*), though clearly contestation is still at the core of such games. Additionally, we should consider that the selection of games chosen by Squire and Jenkins reflects the state of digital gaming in 2002 and may not fully capture subsequent, novel game mechanics, from music rhythm games (*Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band*, *Dance Dance Revolution*) to social networking games (*Mafia Wars*, *FarmVille*). Yet, there is an appealing connection to be made between a designed element of games (contestation over some form of space) and the practices that are negotiated and discussed in online affinity spaces. Are affinity spaces in some ways extensions of the contested spaces of games? Squire and Jenkins’ assertion that the navigation of contested spaces yields an understanding of game design and “dissolves” the line between gamers and designers (ideas also explored by Duncan, 2011a), then it perhaps leads us back to considering the forms of contestation that arise in affinity spaces. If the line between gamers and designers is dissolving through play in contested spaces, how might the contestation itself play out within online discussions? And might

a consideration of “contested affinity spaces” help us to understand the ways that both game designers and game players co-construct the meaning of a game?

A Contested Affinity Space

Considering the intersection of contested spaces and affinity spaces, I present data here from a case study of contestation in one game’s discussion forums: Debates between a game designer and game players in the official forums of the massively-multiplayer game World of Warcraft. This analysis is of course not meant to be representative of all games, and I do not mean to overstate my case through the presentation of just a small amount of data from one exemplary game (as some who have studied this much written-about game have done in the past). Rather, I see the discussions presented here as illustrative of the ways that contestation within the game might be reflected in the interactions between the game’s designers and the game’s players.

In 2009, as part of a larger study of design thinking in online affinity spaces (see Duncan, 2010b; Duncan, 2011), I collected data from the World of Warcraft official online forums (currently located at <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/>). Focusing on the “Damage Dealing” forum — a forum for multiple classes of characters whose primary role in the game was in dealing damage to enemies, rather than healing or “tanking” — I investigated the ways that players interacted with the game’s Lead Systems Designer, former marine biology professor Greg Street, known on the World of Warcraft forums by his screen name “Ghostcrawler.”

For a franchise of this size (well over ten million players at the time), Ghostcrawler was an unusually omnipresent figure in the online forums, engaging with players on the game’s continual design and iterative redesign, as well as policing conduct within the affinity space.

Ghostcrawler's deep engagement with players within the online forums presents an opportunity to see the ways that a game's lead designer and the players of the game co-constructed an interpretation of the gaming experience, as well as the role that the interpretation of this experience served in the broader mission of Activision Blizzard (World of Warcraft's developer and publisher). It should be noted, however, that I did not have access to Ghostcrawler or Activision/Blizzard's internal policies nor do I have evidence of Ghostcrawler's intentions outside of what was displayed online. The approach presented here and the strength of claims presented are somewhat limited in that this discourse interpretive method focuses on displayed online talk and activity (for both Ghostcrawler and World of Warcraft players in the official forums) and is not as yet supplemented with interviews with the participants.

Through a random sampling of threads in which Ghostcrawler appeared, I was able to cull a varied set of interactions between Ghostcrawler and a number of participants. Of particular note was one exchange between Ghostcrawler and a poster I'll refer to here as "Nawaf." Nawaf was a proponent of and user of a World of Warcraft add-on called Simulation Craft (or "SimCraft" for short). SimCraft was an open source data collection tool (currently found at <http://code.google.com/p/simulationcraft/>), which allowed player performance data to be collected across a number of individual players, and then collected into a central database for further statistical analysis. As a tool to support the understanding the game's systems, as well as a way to improve player performance, SimCraft was one of the predominant methods at the time for players. Rather than just intuit through individual play what the most efficacious approaches were for a damage-dealing player, SimCraft afforded players a collective effort to apply statistical and scientific methods toward reverse-engineering the game's systems.

In a thread entitled “Conflag changes on top of immolate?,” a number of players and Ghostcrawler debated changes to a popular spell (“Conflagrate”) for Warlocks (a damage-dealing class in the game) that had recently been “hotfixed,” or changed abruptly, by Activision Blizzard. Players advocated particular approaches for the company to take in how to conduct these changes to the game’s mechanics, and argued for the use of data and conclusions drawn from the player data gathered via SimCraft. In the thread, Ghostcrawler expressed controversial statements on the use of SimCraft to make arguments within the affinity space, as well as statements indicating the “proper” place of tools such as this. A lengthy excerpt of his post follows (emphases mine):

I’ve commented on Simcraft (and any similar tool before) but I’ll repeat myself.

- 1) It’s awesome to see players dedicating that much effort to WoW. It really is. They show a passion for the game and dedication to improving both the player’s effectiveness and the game in general. It is humbling in a way.
- 2) Those tools are very difficult to make. I’ll give a shout out to Toskk’s Feral spreadsheet, which represents an enormous effort and is still being refined constantly. Getting that kind of accuracy and precision for every spec in the game is going to be challenging.
- 3) As the community continues to offer feedback, refine and grow to accept Simcraft (or any tool), so will we. We aren’t going to spend a great deal of our effort to troubleshoot or verify their assumptions. They are third party tools.
- 4) At the end of the day, the Blizzard designers are going to balance the game. Not the community. Not Simcraft. Not any external tool. If you want to use those numbers as part of your argument, that’s awe-

some. But just posting those numbers and saying “Fix it,” isn’t going to work. I’ve said this a lot lately, but you should stop approaching every potential change as “What do we have to do to get you to make this change?” The answer is there is nothing you can do. You can give us information and we will use that information to make informed decisions. But we, not the community and not external tools, are going to make those decisions.

The highlighted parts of the post make clear that Ghostcrawler saw some utility in the use of SimCraft, but not for what many of the players were advocating. Many players discussed SimCraft as a tool to help them understand the game, but Ghostcrawler’s reaction was one in which the tools were cast as useful only to provide “information” that could benefit the game’s true developers, Activision Blizzard’s World of Warcraft development team. The “community” was lauded for what it’s done (“Toskk’s Feral spreadsheet,” a model for Druid play), but also it was made clear that there were limits to the activity in the affinity space vis-a-vis achieving goals that players might want.

As might be expected, Ghostcrawler’s statements didn’t sit well with many of the participants, who, to varying degrees, saw themselves as either contributors to the ongoing design of World of Warcraft or, at least, users of SimCraft who saw value in attempting to uncover the game’s complex interaction of mechanics. For many SimCraft users, the tool allowed them to not just provide data for the designer, but to actively and collaboratively interpret the game. In one of many followup posts, Nawaf took Ghostcrawler to task for not sufficiently addressing the results that the population of SimCraft users had determined through the use of the tool, and the kinds of engagement with data that it represented. The following is a selection of Nawaf’s post (emphases mine):

People perceive simcraft data as validation, much the same as people

my field (Quantum Optics) feel molecular dynamics validate their data. I'm not sure what kind of exposure you had to modeling in your marine biology PhD, but simulation data is often used and accepted in the academic community as tool for understanding the underlying effects of individual variables. Yes we're talking about toy models. But the same can be said for a great many "real" experiments in science. Model systems are also toys. The benefit of studying toy models through simulation, as opposed to studying them in experiment is that you so much more control over every possible variable. There's so much more data output that can be generated from simulations. The World of Warcraft really isn't that much different from the "World of Science". WWS and raid parses are similar to experiments performed on model systems. Simcraft data is analogous to molecular dynamics.

Nawaf's response is one that overtly discusses the activity of using SimCraft as science — quantum optics, "toy models," and molecular dynamics are all part of his argument. Contrast this with Ghostcrawler's framing ("third party tools," "external tools"), and we can see a member of the player community attempting to validate his argument through an appeal to another, privileged kind of activity which has at its central goal understanding of systems rather than the design of new ones. We see a clash between approaches here that may be illuminating for how we think of the forms of contestation within these affinity spaces: Is World of Warcraft "well-played" in different ways to the different participants in the space? Are we left with deciding whose perspective on the game is more worthwhile?

Contestation seems productive for not just revealing the players' theories of why World of Warcraft is "well-played" or, perhaps, in need of refinements to be "more well-played" in the SimCraft example. Focusing on moments of contestation allows us to see a distinct difference in the framings of the activities of the affinity space presented by both Nawaf and by Ghostcrawler: Nawaf argued for the affinity space dis-

cussions to serve as a form of “science” that meaningfully uncovers the systems of the game, responding to Ghostcrawler’s argument for an “engineering” model in which players provide feedback to the game’s designers to potentially improve the game. The contestation at the core of this particular affinity space interaction illustrates an interesting tension between the played experience (and analysis) of the game, apart from the designer’s intentions.

And, of course, this discussion also reveals the different power relationships between player and designer, which are rarely acknowledged so clearly — Ghostcrawler, as an employee of Activision Blizzard, sought to stifle certain forms of discourse (criticizing the “science” framing) and yet reify what he saw as the commercial and true purpose of the affinity space (to provide feedback to designers and social support for players). Though this is only a short part of a much longer conversation on the validity of SimCraft’s results, we can see a glimpse of how contested affinity spaces can provide an interesting context for which to study “ownership” of a game’s broader experience. To develop accounts of how a game is “well-played,” this indicates that we need to do more work to develop approaches that acknowledge how one’s perspective on a game is shaped by one’s position to the development of the game. Positions in a gaming affinity space do not exist in a vacuum; gamers and designers interact and forward their own approaches to understanding a particular game.

Finally, these sites of contestation between game designers and game players can reveal much in what one participant in the argument is stating, and what one is not. For Ghostcrawler, to understand how the game is “well-played” is a process that involves players as feedback resources, but relies primarily upon his (and his team’s) choices and decisions. He does not refer to methodologies for analyzing the data, nor does he even refer to SimCraft results as data (preferring the term “information”). The game is understood as an Activision Blizzard

product first and foremost, and the engaged player's perspective is one that is "awesome," but ultimately unnecessary for the development of the game ("if you want to use those numbers as part of your argument, that's awesome"). An approach to understanding the "well-played" nature of World of Warcraft that defaults on the designer's understanding of the game may capture elements of its design process, but misses out on the persistent work and intellectual contributions that a player community may bring to understanding the game's systems.

For Nawaf, the game's "well-played" nature seems to have encompassed its flexibility to empower players to gather terabytes of data on the game's systems and give them a (potentially) consequential space to analyze and discuss it with the designer. And this is, of course, just the player's perspective on the game, and only a partial one. A theory of "well-played" that only takes into account the played perspective of a Nawaf is one that focuses on the player community's meaning-making as consequential and significant places for the players to adopt scientific practices (see Duncan, 2011a). But this would be one that is ignorant of the internal Activision Blizzard processes that give rise to these systems, and again missing a large part of the picture of how this game's experience is shaped. Considering World of Warcraft as a commercial gaming product, the game's design is not and never has been "owned" by its players, regardless of how much data and the sophistication of analyses players put towards it.

For both of these singled-out perspectives, the contested nature of the argument plays out within the social space of the game's affinity space, and an interpretation of "well-played" for World of Warcraft (at least the 2009 version of the game) is that the ongoing tension between designer and player reveals more than either individual perspective alone. The affinity space provides a public venue for practices to be advocated for by Nawaf and other SimCraft users, as well as a place for Ghostcrawler to attempt to communicate the means by which the game is

developed. It's a place in which a designer's view of the game (and the role of its affinity space) most clearly comes into public contact with perspectives of the game's players.

The push-and-pull of this interaction reveals more than just insights about the structure of an affinity space, I argue, it reflects something fundamental about this particular game. Developing a "well-played" for World of Warcraft cannot ignore that it is simultaneously a game that is continually iterated by its developers, and also a game that fosters intensely complex practices among its players. But, it is this interaction of the two — what drives the contested nature of this particular affinity space — that gives rise to an understanding of the way both perspectives shape our understanding of the game. The online fight is a contestation over space — in this case, the meaning and purpose of particular affinity space for World of Warcraft (and tools such as SimCraft) is openly contested, not by players versus players or players versus environments, but by players versus designers, customers versus employees of Activision Blizzard, and "scientists" versus "engineers."

Well-Played For Whom?

As one of the central concerns of the journal is furthering the understanding what makes games "well-played," we need to return to what a consideration of contested affinity spaces might allow us to understand about games that has implications beyond the individual case of World of Warcraft presented here. Contested affinity spaces are interesting and revealing regarding the approaches that players and designers take to discussing games, but do not appear for every game, nor am I arguing that a "theory of well-played" needs to necessarily investigate contested affinity spaces. Rather, I see several lessons that arise from the consideration of contested affinity spaces that help us to think more seriously about who determines how a game is "well-played."

First, one lesson is that a “well-played” account that does not address the experiences of multiple agents involved in the design and play of a game is clearly missing key parts of the picture. In an earlier “well-played” (Duncan, 2011b) paper on the game Minecraft, I attempted to incorporate the designer’s perspective as seen through interviews, insights on the game’s mechanics drawn from journalistic writing, the interpretation of the game by my students, by independent game designers, and, ultimately, myself. The differences in interpretation and meaning that each of these individuals brought to the interpretation of Minecraft was, at the time, merely implicit in the paper. In retrospect, there were tensions being explored between each of these interpretations of the game that I may not have been aware of at the time — Minecraft as open world sandbox for a new player; Minecraft as a prototyping tool for my students; Minecraft as a platform with which to develop new gaming experiences (e.g., Jason Rohrer’s *Chain World*). I implicitly described multiple voices, but did not address how these perspectives interacted, nor how their differences were managed.

Through a look at contestation in affinity spaces, we can directly and easily witness these differences in perspective, and do something that I was unable to accomplish in my “well-played” of Minecraft: See what each constituency thinks of each other’s interpretation. To date, implicit theories of “well-played” often rely on one individual’s interpretation, and treat “well-played” as a textual analysis task first and foremost. It is my belief that this is generally a mistake — disagreements over the meaning of a game are not just different perspectives, but can illuminate the ways that games serve different roles for different people at different times and in different places. Disagreements, conflicts, and contestations are loci for us to employ in understanding how games are used in a variety of contexts, and the multiple forms of identity (e.g., gamers, designers, journalists, scientists, engineers) that are employed by those who engage with games. If Bogost (2011) is correct, and games are media whose interpretations should be owned

by “people, ordinary people of all sorts,” then the future theorizing of how games are “well-played” necessitates an understanding of how individuals embodying many different kinds of “ordinary” interact with one another in the course of considering any particular game.

In sum, it is my hope through this brief paper that we can continue to think deeply about the ways that gaps between multiple discourses may be implicated in the forms of games we play, as well as how the activities of games may foster specific forms of meaning-making around them. Though the World of Warcraft case is but one small example of a contested affinity space, it yielded not just two perspectives, but an illuminating interaction of them that may foster an understanding of the developing tensions between multiple voices. While Squire and Jenkins discussed a “dissolving” of the line between player and designer, I argue that the key is understanding the process of “dissolving” — we need more nuanced ways of talking about participation in games than just unitary “player” and “designer” labels, and serious thought on conflicts between perspectives must be incorporated into future “well-played” accounts.

While the case presented in this paper is heavily oriented toward a specific moment in the history of World of Warcraft, there is nothing in this approach that is or should be unique to the understanding this game, or even to MMORPGs. I suggest that it could be productive to further investigate cases of designer/player contestation in commercial game contexts (e.g., the problematic 2013 release of EA’s SimCity), in the open development of independent games (e.g., Double Fine’s Kickstarted Broken Age), and to non-digital game contexts (e.g., the discussion of and iteration of homemade board game variants on boardgamegeek.com). And this approach could be levied to understand game-related discussions online in other contexts, perhaps extending the understanding of “designer/player” discussions to other contexts such as “media critic”/“audience” contestation (e.g.,

the vitriolic reactions to Anita Sarkeesian's recent "Tropes vs. Women" video series). To fully dig into the complex task of Squire and Jenkins' "dissolving" between production and play requires understanding engagement across multiple games, multiple game genres, and multiple communities. It is my hope that this paper serves as an early attempt to do so, but also that it will not be the last.

I conclude with the hope that as we further develop approaches to understanding gaming experience and the meaning that players make of games, we can both critique and further the work on contested affinity spaces begun here. Understanding how a game is "well-played" cannot and never has been the sole purview of the designer, the critic, or the academic, or whatever label one chooses. We wear different hats at different times and in different contexts, and 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. As we develop more nuanced understandings of how gamer discourse in affinity spaces serves to shape understandings of the medium, we need to pay close attention not to just each individual voice attempting to understand games, but to the interactions, arguments, and discussions between them.

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On justification: WoW, EQ2 and Aion forums

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Introduction

What is “good play”? What does it mean to “play well”? How do users have to play? Are all playing styles and practices acceptable? How do players build a common activity and common cultural references when playing? Players discuss all these issues: “good play” is not only a matter of skill or technique, but also a social issue. The “good play” is not fully given by the game: it may differ for each player, and each player can look in the game for different achievements. When the game is online, a “good play” implies to agree with other players on what is needed for experiencing this good play, according to all parties. So, if players develop their experience and sociability in their playing activity, they also do around the game (e.g. in forums devoted to the game).

These forums’ interactions contribute to the structuring of the gaming experience by providing criteria and references for assessing the gaming experience. They are a way for some players to take “ownership” of their game. Some standards of gaming activity are negotiated in the players’ community. It is difficult to understand gaming practices if we do not know how these practices are discussed between players outside the game’s “magic circle” itself. So the gaming experience is partially based on value systems built or shared by players. Therefore understanding these value systems and the way they are discussed by players

helps to understand how the good game and the well played are defined by players. This essay focuses on a comprehensive approach of the well played through the subjacent values players invoke.

For this purpose, we studied the exchanges on the Internet forums of three Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG). This contribution presents the results of this exploratory research assessing how players negotiate the standards of their gaming activities in an interactive and dynamic process. Analysis is exclusively based on exchanges in forums (we do not directly observe any gaming activity), and focuses on the ways players argue and justify their position in the debate. These exchanges are categorized thanks to the common worlds theory (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), in order to uncover the value systems mobilized by forumers.

This research has three objectives. Firstly, we tried to understand how players argue about their gaming activities, and especially the kind of arguments they convene when they agree or disagree. Secondly, on this bases, we highlighted some patterns (or “ideal type”) of the way these players consider their gaming activity, and especially how they consider well played. Thirdly, we had a methodological objective: assessing the contribution of the theoretical framework we used to classify players interventions and uncover underlying dimensions of the gaming experience. It’s why we consider that this research is of an exploratory nature, even though we have worked on a corpus of several hundreds of messages.

To meet these objectives, this essay has three main parts. First, we will present the theoretical framework and the methodology used for our analysis. Second, we will draw the main characteristics of the forum interactions we analyzed. In a third step, we will show how these characteristics reveal players subjacent conceptions of the game and well played. Conclusions will discuss contributions and limitations of this approach.

Theoretical framework: Boltanski and Thévenot's Common Worlds

When we began to look at players' forums and observed exchanges, we were impressed by the diversity of arguments they mobilize to justify actions clearly taken in the game or more generally to express their views on what should or should not be done in the game. This state of affairs requires a specific theoretical approach to frame and categorize the diversity of the arguments in a comprehensive manner. So, this reminded us of the theory of Boltanski and Thévenot on justification.

Boltanski & Thévenot (1991, 2006) constructed a grammar of political bound—called polities—based on canonical philosophies (Bossuet, Rousseau, Hobbes, Smith, etc.). These canonical philosophies are used to define different polities each characterized by a specific way to consider what the state of worth is. Boltanski and Thévenot were especially interested in situations where parties cannot ignore each other but nevertheless seek a common good (without using extreme means, like violence for example) because these situations highlight the worth involved. In a specific polity, specific worth guarantees this common good state. For example, in the civic polity (that refers to Rousseau) the state of worth is that collective interest will prevail on private interest; in the domestic polity (La Bruyère, Tocqueville and Bossuet), the state of worth is based on respect due to family and tradition; etc.

Boltanski and Thévenot extended this theoretical polities model to study (real) situations of disagreement and critical operations to resolve conflicts (for example, in their book: conflicts in organizational and corporate literature). Each situation (or expressed position) may therefore refer to one or more of the six Common Worlds defined by Boltanski and Thévenot. Each Common World operationalizes a specific polity model.

- The Inspired World rests on the spontaneous expression of emotions, creativity and singularity.
- The Domestic World is based on traditional ties, kindness and good manners.
- The World of Fame enhances the reputation and public events.
- The Civic World wants to uphold the collective interests against individualism.
- The Market World advocates open competition and negotiation.
- Finally, the Industrial World considers the measurement of performance and efficiency.

For Boltanski and Thévenot, those states of worth are not attached to a specific person and are thus a favorable condition for what they call contention, which is a disagreement over the worth of persons, and thus questions the equitability in the way the worth was distributed in the situation (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p.133). The contention and the litigious process thus lead to a test that is expected to bring the disagreement to a close by establishing a new fair distribution of the people and objects to which worth has been ascribed (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006, p. 136).

Our study considers games and games forums as a place where players negotiate videogame practices but also put representations of the game itself into words. In this context, Boltanski and Thévenot's model seems quite relevant to understand the disputes observed and the way players overcome them. We will show later in this essay that the understanding of these forums' interactions can uncover some underlying dimensions that shape the game experience, and the representations of well play(ed) that players build on it.

Main hypotheses

We made several types of assumptions about the worth mobilized in players interventions. It is reasonable to assume that the dynamics of

interactions on a forum cannot be explained by a single cause. Also, even though these assumptions guided the data processing, one of our challenges is to assess the part of each category of factors in the dynamics we observed.

Firstly, we focused on players' characteristics. Does the involvement of the player in the game influence the positions he defends in the forum, or the way he defends them? The player's "involvement" refers to his identity, his seniority and his skills in the game or in the community. This involvement is indicated by a series of game characteristics that also constitute the player's avatar in the forum (e.g. race, class). These characteristics potentially distinguish experienced players from newbies. Secondly, we focused on the dynamics of the interactions, considering correlations between Common Worlds mobilized by the players and the (un)ability to reach a compromise situation. The idea is to highlight if some Common Worlds are more often used together (or one against the other), and to examine whether recurrent forms of compromise correspond to these cases. This question was investigated using a categorical analysis of a corpus of messages in game forums.

Thirdly, we assumed that a specific argumentation type indicates a specific way player consider their gaming experience. Common Worlds may reveal the position of the player with respect to its play activity, which underlies players well played conceptions.

Corpus, Methodology and Data Processing

This research was conducted on a corpus of discussion threads extracted from European French-speaking official forums (general discussion section) of three popular MMORPGs: World of Warcraft (Blizzard Activision), Everquest 2 (Sony Online Entertainment) and Aion (NCSoft). We chose these games because they share common characteristics: they are all online role-playing games based on the progressive development of a character in a medieval-fantasy world.

For each of these three forums we recorded the last 10 threads in the year 2010 that included keywords indicating justification processes (i.e. 'because'). Thus we analyzed 30 threads containing a total of 786 messages. For each message, we recorded the identity of its author as it appeared in the forum (which is in fact the identity of the character played in the game): nickname, race, class or specialty, level in the game and guild or legion (see Figure 1A below).

We considered individual messages as our unit of analysis. This means that each post was considered as the level that helped us to understand the player's position in the thread. The thread is not meaningful in itself: it is meaningful as a dynamics of significant messages. So, data processing was quali-quantitative and centered on individual messages. The qualitative part consisted of coding each message with respect to the Common World it convened, the Common World with which it conflicted and the presence or absence of compromise (Figure 1B). If different Common Worlds were apparent in a single message, the message was cut into several parts and each part coded separately, so as to preserve the richness of the argument.

Players' name	Nb of posts In the forum	Character race	Character class	Character level	Guild Name
Kathieuchka	9	wow-morts-vivants(-)	mage	82	Noobs Spotted
Myrgo	3	wow-nains(+)	chasseur	85	The Shadows
Necka	25	wow-taurens(-)	paladin	85	Im just being Miley
Poupsette	34	wow-gnomes(+)	mage	85	eXistenZ
Tmlie	15	wow-draenai(+)	chaman	85	eXistenZ
Menghounette	124	wow-gobelins(-)	pretre (priest)	85	Raid in Peace

Figure 1A. Coding Characters

General overview of players' interactions

Common Worlds frequency and differences between games

Our study highlights the fact that players primarily convene the Industry (EQ2: 43.5%, WoW: 38%, Aion: 32.5%) and Domestic worlds (Aion: 27.5%, EQ2: 27.5%, WoW: 25%) in their arguments (see Figure 2). However, in the WoW's forum, the references to the Market World reached 23% while this figure caps at 10% in other forums. In other words, players mainly justify their position in the following ways: firstly, for efficiency; secondly by respect of convenience. Then, thirdly, when players of WoW search for a "good deal" with other players on issues they discuss, EQ2 players highlight the inspired dimension of the game (fantasy, pleasure, etc.) and Aion players argue in terms of collective action and organization. In contrast, the World of Fame remains anecdotic in all three games. The focus on Industrial World through players' discourses is reminiscent of theorycrafting phenomenon. According to Paul (2011), players who pursue PVE content or raiding develop and share strategies for optimizing play. This concept of theorycraft —inspired by statistics used in the sports competitions— shows the desire of players to maximize their odds of success by an increased understanding about the how to play but beyond that, it shows their need to influence the overall quality of play and the "fun" they have. This idea is also confirmed by the categories of forum subjects we made (see below).

It appears that the Industrial World is mobilized mainly in the case of litigation (Industrial vs. Industrial), which means that the order of subjects and objects is challenged inside a Common World. In contrast, the Domestic World arguments mostly face Market (EQ2 and WoW) or Industrial positions (Aion).

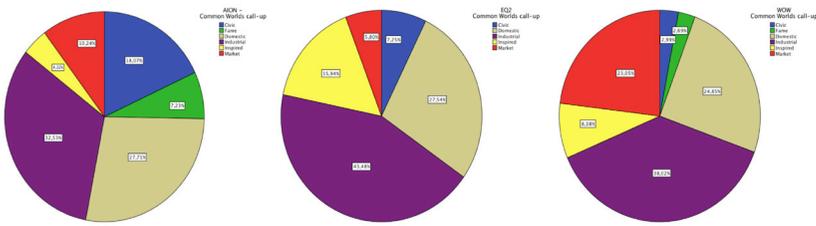


Figure 2. Common Worlds call-up

We interpret these differences in terms of the games' specificities. Aion and EQ2 have a game mostly based upon PVE (Player versus Environment) whereas WoW blends PVE and PVP (Player versus Player). The competitive aspect is essential to PVP games. Also, it presents the need for in-game interaction with other players. Therefore it is not surprising to read subjects like: "Priests too nerf" (2) or "Feral are not cheated!" mobilizing the arguments of the Market World. Are each player's chances really equal? And if players think they are not, they argue for more fair rules in the game.

Players characteristics and Common Worlds they convene

Regarding the characters' specifications, all metrics indicate that overall, neither the race nor the class nor the level seem to influence the Common World that is mobilized or the ability to significantly alleviate conflict. Nevertheless, this can be offset by particularities noticed in some cases and could be related to the corresponding game. For example, in Aion's forum debates, we found a tendency (p -value = .009) to do compromises breeds by "positive race" (Elyos) against "negative race" (Asmodians), which was not raised in other forums. But does this mean the "roleplay" has an influence in Aion's case? Our results do not confirm this idea. On the contrary, global results seem to show that identity "in game" does not influence position taken by the player in the argumentative

process in the forums. In other words, players value arguments from their point of view rather than from a hypothetical “troll” or “elf” Common Good’s point of view.

Regarding the threads’ specifications, being a prolific poster does not seem to influence the Common World used. However, the number of messages in a thread for the three forums appears to play a role, but in different ways depending on the forum. For Aion, short threads are more Domestic-related while long threads are Industrial. For Everquest 2, the Domestic and Industrial arguments increase with the threads’ length, unlike other Common Worlds. Finally for World of Warcraft, this is more erratic except for the Market World’s arguments, which increase very significantly with long threads. Then, interpreting these results globally seems to be a risky business. It does not confirm a presumed difference between experienced players (or rather “forumers”) and “naive” newbies’ interventions.

Justification and things players speak about

We also performed a categorization of topics discussed in the thread we analyzed. The idea was to check if specific topics are associated with specific justification forms. This categorization identifies four kinds of discussion threads:

- Discussion about the game universe itself. For example, the races or the classes of characters, or the in-game economic system.
- Discussion considering the game as an object: its specificities, its evolution, its place regarding other games, etc.
- How to play? These threads focus on the rules, the tactics, and the procedural aspects of the play.
- Who to play with? This category refers to the social play, it concerns the community structuring or relationship with other players.

We noticed that the subjects discussed in Aion and WoW’s forums are more often related to the “game universe” (green - see Figure 3) and to

“how to play?” (beige), whereas EQ2 subjects mainly deal with the “game as an object” (blue). This can be explained by different reasons. Firstly, Everquest is a older MMORPG with a community of faithful players, so this community is relatively old compared to the others. To face competition, especially World of Warcraft, the publisher, SOE (Sony Online Entertainment), seeks to reach new players while maintaining their aficionados. This results in the migration from least active servers to North American servers, launching F2P (Free-to-play) servers, etc. It is therefore not surprising to find players’ discussing the fundamentals of the game, the future evolutions they desire, etc. The second reason, corollary, is the presence of recurrent interventions from the moderator, influencing the subjects and therefore the players’ position in the debates.

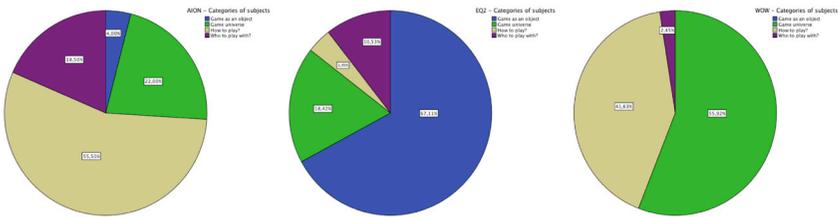


Figure 3. Subjects discussed in the three forums

Defending the playing experience

Studying qualitatively the content of forum discussions, it is possible to uncover some representation of the gameplay often associated with precise Common Worlds. On these bases, we can draw different representations of what a “good play” and a “good player” are for players/forumers. When the Industrial world is convened, it is usually in the context of a strategic conception of the game, where control and efficiency are valued. For these players, the “good player” is the one who understands the complexity of the game and is able to use several parameters with

efficiency. The “good game” is running on good servers (no lag), which offers complex activities requiring a sufficient technical expertise. In this perspective, the quality of a game is mainly viewed in terms of playing experience: performance of the technical infrastructure, and performance of players that cope with this technical infrastructure. Here are some examples (3):

- A more efficient game: “For PvP: change the AP system as suggested in many forums, including topics well studied by Zophia ; do not allow to obtain armor with PVP bonus in PVE (...)” (Extract from the Aion forum; all quotations are our translation)
- An efficient management of the team: “(...) Now, I delete all “alts” (note: alternative characters) and demote missing players to a rank with no right. Then they remain in the guild and if their account is reactivated, they are seen in the roster.” (Extract from the EQ2 forum)
- An efficient way of playing: “(...) the major concern come actually from controls. In heroic, you must force DPS to control enough mobs (note: enemies controlled by the game) to avoid having more than 2 mobs on you (1 is the ideal).” (Extract from the WoW forum)

The Market World depicts a conception of the game where competition and equality in the competition is valued. The “good player” is the one who deserves his position through collaborations with others. He is also able to bend the rules in favor of new negotiated rules considered as “more equitable”. The “good game” is open to a renewal of agreements and thus, open to a tactical conception.

- A good marketplace: “There are already price ceilings for certain essential commodities (...). But it would be ridiculous to put a cap on everything. Finally, it is doubly ridiculous bitching about the price, because inflation, as you enjoy it as well, comes to what you sell, loot or reap.” (Extract from the Aion forum)
- A well-balanced environment: “(...) what are the options for the French players? Put all of them on F2P (note: Free-to-Play) Storms (note: name

of a French server) and it ends in lynching because so is not legendary stuff and then won't join a group? Or we put players on two separate servers and then, instead of having a 'little world' on Storms, we will have no world at all." (Extract from the EQ2 forum)

- A negotiated way of playing: "Hello to you all dear, Arak Arahm players, I would start a topic of discussion about Tol Barad. As having observed that those who attacked earned 1800 honor points, would it not be wiser to let those who attack win? It could turn Tol Barad control between two factions instead of always seeing the same having it, and this would benefit everyone in honor points because it is more sympathetic to win 1800+75+1800 than 200+200+200." (Extract from the WoW forum)

The difference between a strategic and a tactical conception could be related to *The Practice of Everyday Life* from de Certeau (1990, 2011). The author distinguishes strategies, which are the calculus of force-relationships which become possible when a subject of will and power can be isolated from an 'environment', from tactics, a calculus which cannot count on 'a proper' —on other words means an insinuation into the other's place (de Certeau, 2011, p. xix). An Industrial thought is more strategic because it looks for a stabilization (an efficient stabilization) of practices. Indeed, their messages are addressed to the game designers or to specific players who ask for advices or seem not playing properly. The Market thought is more tactical, which means that players seem sensitive to the constant (fair) evolution and adaptation from the game to the playing situation: how to deal with the system.

The last most used Common World is the Domestic World. Related to this world, the "good player" is the one who respects the activity and the expression of other players. The "good game" rewards properly the player regarding their experience and investment in the game.

- An attention set to the players: "I still remember the beginning of the game when we said RvR was unplayable :D The only answers we had (from players) were the same of ncsoft :D Mask your character details,

spell effects and you can play in RvR quietly :D Benefits without making costs on servers by the end of the subscription? :)” (Extract from the Aion forum)

- A rewarding environment: “It’s unfortunate that loyal players who would like a nice box of SF are forced to pay double the price. SOE has a funny way of rewarding its most loyal customers... Already we pay a high price for each extension in addition to the subscription! Packs all-in-one are certainly great for new players or those who return after having missed a few episodes, but the others?” (Extract from the EQ2 forum)

- A respectful way of playing: “(...) who do you think you are insulting people like that. You just put your two cents in because you want easily earn honor (I like your design of PVP, guy!). And you treat me and those who are against this type of arrangement of assholes (...)” (Extract from the WoW forum)

In our analysis, we pointed out that Domestic arguments mostly face Industrial or Market positions. Like Industrial position, Domestic arguments look more strategic, but from a Domestic point of view, Industrial arguments are based on performance with sometimes a lack of common sense. Example: “You’ve packed on the horde side and now you’re crying that you have to queue. Lol anyway.” (Extract from the WoW forum). Facing Market arguments, the difference of conception is more relevant. As Mora (2005) observed a schism between FPS first generation players and new entrants in e-sports competitions, we consider there is a radical opposition between Domestic and Market arguments in the playing conception. From a Domestic point of view, advantages received from arrangements must be subordinated to merit. From a Market point of view, arrangements between players are valued provided that each party makes a profit. We particularly observed the violence of the “clash” with the topic “a little arrangement” in the forum of World of Warcraft. But unlike Mora who shows that older players are more turned toward the community (a typical Domestic conception) while new players would have a more utilitarian view (Market conception), we cannot correlate

the use of these arguments at the age of the players. The main reason is that the characteristics of the avatar do not appear sufficient to discriminate real ancient and new players (4).

Conclusions

Justification principles and gaming experience

These results highlight certain aspects of the standards negotiation in game forums. Firstly, we did not observe monolithic arguments: different aspects are simultaneously present in the interactions, although some Common Worlds appear to dominate. Similarly, several types of justification are used on each topic disputed in the forums. So, to play well is not only a matter of efficiency, of pleasure or fairness: it is a complex phenomenon that can be discussed on several appreciation scales, and that forumers consider together in quite a complex way. Complexity arises from discussion: players are not content to express their opinion; they also come mostly to enter in a discussion (they compare their opinion with those of other).

Secondly, these results do not establish a correlation between the player's position in the game and his arguments. On its own, the player's position in the community does not seem to explain which Common World he tends to refer to. Instead, different factors, which can vary significantly from one forum to another, seem to influence the justification. We cannot consider that there are specific Common Worlds or justification processes among Orcs or Archers, or among older players, for example. It seems to be a disjunction between the player and the forumer, even if player's character is also his avatar on the forum.

It is interesting to notice that these findings do not seem to be shared by players: if our metrics show no correlation between the avatars' characteristics and his arguments, we noticed that some players think their avatar itself is an argument. For example, in a discussion thread about possible

inequity of the Paladin class in WoW, a player said to another (who used different avatars): “You would have been a little more credible if you had posted with your paladin”. In this case, being a Paladin seems justify the criticisms that another class should avoid.

Thirdly, recurrent use of some Common Worlds indicates the existence of a clear opposition in the players’ conception of gameplay. On one hand we note a more global conception of the gameplay where the good play is appreciated in relation to the system/the community. On the other hand, some arguments refer to a more tactical conception of the activity, where the good play is appreciated from individual success.

Methodological learning

The method we developed also presented some limitations. If the Boltanski and Thévenot model provides a useful tool for quali-quantitative categorization of arguments (subject to validation steps), this application to game forums has several limitations.

A first limitation is that although the corpus is important, several messages had to be removed during the coding process because they were completely out of the debate or because they referred to in-game activities without unequivocal meaning. Thus, we faced a loss of our initial corpus between 14% (Aion) and 30% (WoW), which fortunately was not really an issue in the last case given the number of messages (see Figure 4). This corpus “cleaning” requires important interpretation work, so it is quite long and difficult to automate.

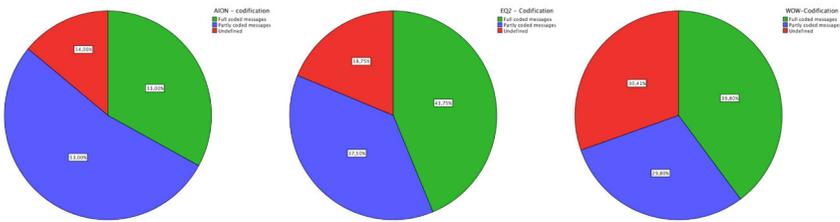


Figure 4. Loss in the coding process (in red)

A second limitation is that the MMORPG identity systems are very complex. For example, Everquest 2 has 20 races and 25 different classes of characters, inducing issues with theoretical statistics when crossing some data. This constraint required us to combine initial data into categories. Another aspect discussed before is that some players seem to use different avatars (and so different identities) in the same discussion thread, this makes it is very difficult to map contributions to individuals unambiguously.

A last limitation is related to the nature of the corpus studied. Unlike the well-structured corporate literature examined by Boltanski and Thévenot, forum interactions appear to be quite chaotic and unstructured. There are various levels of discussion (some players speak to everyone, others answer to only one) and interventions are sometimes chaotic due to rapid writing (as highlighted in Marcoccia 2003). Sometimes long threads seem to dissolve into a series of jokes performing a phatic function in the discussion, without any content suitable for analysis. In this case, there is no more argumentation and no interpretation context is available. So if the Common Worlds appear to be an interesting theoretical reference for identifying the way players consider their own gaming activities, implementation remains a problem.

Further perspectives on gaming experience and players' well played conceptions

The games, especially online, are the theater of permanent compromises. But we must not forget that these compromises are necessarily concluded in a structure that is imposed to the player: the game system (Juul, 2005). Players may more or less discuss, but in the margin of the general frame given by the structure of the game. Thus, it is always interesting to evaluate various videogames' structures effects on what well played is. Nevertheless, Boltanski and Thevenot's Common Worlds theory shows that people defend different appreciations of an experience even when they deal with the same constraints' system. The differences thus come from the way people value things and persons. Different motivational factors may explain the involvement of the player in a game. And this is especially true for MMORPG where players can spend several years in, so the motivations may change. The Common Worlds model could serve as a tool for analyzing pattern changes between players. It could also be a tool for describing the different types of player trajectories within the games. Indeed, we can assume that there are "standard trajectories" in the players' career or guilds' evolutions. A possible extension of this work would be to identify the patterns of evolution (as Fiske (1992) do about forms of sociality) of the game "playing experience", and to uncover the factors that could explain the evolution from a given Common World to another, that is to say from a conception of the gaming experience to another. These factors can be internal to the game system (e.a. game type), or related to the players' experiences (seniority in the game, type of achievements they intend to reach, etc.). Each step in these evolutions can be identified by specific justification principles.

Endnotes

(1) A lot of studies have also focused on the hierarchical and technical structures of forums, and the way they are used to retrieve information. See for example Papadakis (2004) for a bibliographical compilation of studies about IT point of view on virtual communities.

(2) Nerf is a term that means: to be rendered ineffective or less effective by a change in the rules or the game system. The term nerf is based on Non-Expanding Recreational Foam, a substance used to make toy weapons. To nerf could be translated as “turn a real weapon into a toy weapon” (see <http://www.wowwiki.com/Nerf>).

(3) Examples are from French-speaking forums and then are translated by us in English. The shaping of the dialogues has also been formatted to provide greater clarity.

(4) Different studies suggest different representations between former and new players (see for example Mora 2005). But we have to highlight that the only “measure” of seniority is the player’s level in the game: high-level player should be more ancient. But this is a questionable indicator: it is possible to build high-level character in a short space of time.

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Why we Glitch: process, meaning and pleasure in the discovery, documentation, sharing and use of videogame exploits

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Glitching is a mode of play where instead of observing the game rules and goals, the glitcher aims to find, document, share, and ultimately exploit weaknesses in game code. It is a practice predominantly conducted upon unmodified videogame systems, and any glitches discovered should be replicable on any equivalent system and often across platforms. Glitchers, those who willingly identify with this mode of play, or those that have been labeled as such by the playerbase, are almost always configured as malign, destructive and antagonistic within mainstream videogame communities, the game press, and frequently game studies literature. They are considered a problematic influence that justifies active management in order to protect the intended experience of a game. This framing of glitching as destruction foregrounds the authorial intent of the designer and the primacy of the game as product, yet it has meant that little importance is placed upon the practices, meanings and pleasures attributed to glitching and therefore very little is known about it as a gameplay experience.

Based upon ethnographic study of the chaoticPERFECTION and Map-Monkeys glitching groups on the Xbox360 platform and glitchers more generally, this article aims to offer first-hand insight into the meanings of glitching: what pleasures are attributed to glitching by glitchers; how glitches are discovered; the ways in which glitches are documented and shared; and the communities and practices that glitching facilitates and sustains. In doing so it is hoped that this article challenges the reductive reading of glitching as a solely destructive practice, instead presenting it

as a significant mode of engagement and player productivity, and a locus for complex negotiations related to ownership, visibility, game production and the role of the player. Glitching creates artifacts, such as the videos that document it, the communities it sustains, the community knowledge and sophisticated practices used to find glitches and the hierarchies and meanings therein. Glitching can be conducted on any videogame environment, whether single-player or multiplayer, however within multiplayer spaces glitching becomes especially problematic and divisive. Within single player games the player decides whether to exploit a glitch (e.g. to progress through a game in a faster or different manner), whereas in a multiplayer game the use of a glitch may confer unfair advantage on the protagonist while others attempt to play conventionally. In a multiplayer context glitches bend and break the rules unilaterally, and this imbalance opens up the reading of glitching as destructive and disruptive. Yet, while potentially disruptive and destructive to the intended experiences of a game, glitching is a practice that enables a diverse range of outcomes and gameplay experiences that are not necessarily motivated by the intent to disrupt.

The framing of glitching as destructive and malign is understandable from a commercial perspective. Glitching has the capacity to significantly damage the experience of a game, making it unfair, unenjoyable and even unplayable. Glitches can radically alter the balance of a competitive multiplayer FPS by making glitchers invisible or invulnerable, virtual economies may destabilize and hyper-inflate due to the duplication of rare high-value items, or enable the player to selectively renegotiate their progress through a game. This damaging potential is reflected in the ways that publishers discuss glitching, such as Activision's definition as 'player behavior that violates the spirit of the game', the penalty for which ranges between 48 hours and thirteen-and-a-half years of exclusion from the game (Activision, 2011). This has become the prevailing rhetoric within player communities, the gaming press, development cultures and game

studies, where counterplay and glitching are regarded as almost entirely destructive.

The framing of glitching as destructive game-abuse exposes that play is subject to a binary ‘normalizing gaze’ (Foucault, 1977: 25), which separates it into distinct configurations of good and bad play, and good and bad players (Myers, 2005: 15). While there are a number of terms that are applicable to unexpected or challenging modes of play this article will adopt counterplay (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2005) as the universal term, and regard practices such as glitching as specific located manifestations.

Within game studies literature counterplay tends to be addressed in two divergent ways: with it regarded as either an undesirable product of flawed game design (e.g., Yan & Choi, 2002; Yan & Randell, 2005; Parker, 2007); or conversely, as an organic feature of play as a cultural practice and social activity (e.g. T. L. Taylor, 2003, 2009; Flanagan, 2009; Consalvo, 2007; Kücklich, 2007, 2008; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2005, 2009). The opposing stances inform whether counterplay should be actively managed and discouraged, or studied in order to inform a broader understanding of play (and potentially introduce new game design features as a result).

Literature that aligns with the former approach supports the view that counterplay is incompatible with the spirit of play. A mean-spirited and hollow rejection of the lusory attitude that signals ‘...a retreat from the demands of the new, [and] ...a disposition that does not want to be performatively challenged’ (Malaby, 2007). In contrast those that approach counterplay from a more sociological perspective regard it as part of a rich continuum of instanced and temporary modes of play. One approach prioritizes the designer as author, the other the (counter) player as author. Yet, while the interaction between these two stances has extended the perspectives from which gameplay experiences are theorized, relatively little is known about the grounded processes, pleasures, meanings

and significance attributed to counterplay forms by those that engage in them. Little is known of why or how we glitch.

Who discovers glitches – and why?

Developers encourage players to report any glitching that they encounter, which, if substantiated, is negated by the release of mandatory software patches, warnings to any perpetrators, and the occasional high profile invalidation of player accounts. These are the ways in which the game ecosystem polices glitching. Through intelligence gathering, counter-insurgency work, the expulsion of violators, and jubilant reporting of the victory to the playerbase. Glitchers are othered – separate to good players, to be castigated. This is attitude towards glitching is reflected in the following tweet, released by David Vonderhaar, multiplayer gaming design director at Treyarch, the developers of the Call of Duty: Black Ops (Treyarch, 2010) series (henceforth BLOPs):

We are disinterested in making mini-celebrities out of douche-bags. You better think twice before you glitch. You never know who in your game doesn't like glitchers who reports you ...and tells us about it.
(Vonderhaar in Watts, 2010)

Yet those who embrace glitching as a mode of play encounter a diverse range of gameplay experiences and outcomes: exploration, where they are able to access unintended interactions and areas of the gamespace; productivity, where the potential uses of the game are transformed, such as enabling the creation of new grassroots game modes; renegotiation, where game rules are circumvented or renegotiated in order to progress; and domination, which confers competitive advantage over conventional players, which depending on how deployed and perceived, may be configured as harassment and grief-play.

Glitching communities

Both chaoticPERFECTION and MapMonkeys were founded in 2006 and have become regarded as the two primary glitching entities on the Xbox360 console. While other smaller teams and individual glitchers exist, the chaoticPERFECTION and MapMonkeys sites, YouTube channels and forums tend to act as the locus of much glitching discussion and community engagement. ChaoticPERFECTION exclusively utilize YouTube and social media tools to host and publicize their glitches, while MapMonkeys initially developed MapMonkeys.com as a video archival and sharing platform before moving to YouTube delivery in early 2012. Prior to the move to YouTube MapMonkeys.com hosted more than 3,500 glitching videos and over 130,000 registered users. By October 2012, the MapMonkeys YouTube channel hosted 93 glitch videos that had been viewed over 19 million times, with 45,000 channel subscribers. At the same point, chaoticPERFECTION's YouTube channel (their third due to copyright claim related account suspensions), hosted 200 videos with 900,000 views and 2,500 subscribers.

The two entities have different core remits: ChaoticPERFECTION is a glitching team that focuses upon the creation of high-end releases by verified team members (of which there are currently eight), 'as a form of education and entertainment' (xRyan350x cP, 2011); by contrast MapMonkeys adopts a community approach, enabling registered users upon MapMonkeys.com to submit, catalogue, and share their own glitches. The differences also inform the ways that they engage with their audiences: ChaoticPERFECTION seeks to engage with the widest possible audience – whether glitchers or members of the public; while MapMonkeys is steadfastly for glitchers by glitchers.

This offers some indication of the scale and significance of glitching as a productive practice, and a brief introduction to the central communities studied. In turn the sustained engagement in this fieldsite, interacting

with hundreds of glitchers over eighteen months enables the discussion of the pleasures and meanings that underpin glitching.

Glitching in context

One of the core principles of glitching is that it is conducted on unmodified videogame hardware and is therefore replicable on any equivalent system. On this basis glitching focuses upon exposing interesting or exploitable flaws within a videogame that have been missed by Quality Assurance teams, and other glitchers. Within such a context glitching becomes a race to identify exploits or anomalies, and in doing so those that find glitches assert superiority over others who have failed to discover the flaws. Yet, despite the inherent competition within glitching, it is a collaborative activity, best conducted in flexible and close-knit teams. Therefore overt competition between glitchers is often suspended if it is likely to facilitate the development of a new glitch. While this forms bonds among fellow glitchers and acts as a way of inducting new glitchers into the community and practices, it is also a pragmatic way of responding to the time required to effectively identify, develop and document a glitch. The more glitchers willing to work on the same task, the more likely that the glitching session will be successful and a glitch identified.

When a glitch is discovered it is typically documented as a video with a voice-over tutorial that explains its replication. This is then uploaded onto a video sharing website for distribution and eventual consumption by other glitchers and members of the public (a term repeatedly used to describe and differentiate conventional players). In addition to the implicit pleasures associated with the identification and use of a glitch, glitchers enjoy the vicarious pleasure as it is exploited by the public, and then if it is recognized and eventually patched by developers. This recognition and use by the public and developers is also paradoxically a source of significant consternation amongst glitchers, many of whom are concerned about the impact that publicizing the glitch may have upon its

longevity and availability. Those glitchers that feel this way are opposed to the widespread use of glitches within highly visible spheres, such as public matches, due to the reputational damage and frequent defensive initiatives that such behavior invokes. Put simply, glitch use raises the stakes of glitching across the board, and as a result some glitchers believe that glitches should be saved for private game modes, the consensual, and the occasional descent into misrule. This is not to imply that glitchers never utilize glitches for domination, but that the risks and rewards are made so much more apparent by an awareness of the temporal investment required to identify and release a glitch.

Therefore glitchers recognize the capacity of a glitch to damage a game, but also the implications and pleasures associated with that damage. They therefore spend time negotiating the space between visibility, use, and censure, and some glitches are withheld by glitchers until they have tired of their exclusive use. In practice the duration of this withholding is short, as each day that a discovered glitch is not shared the greater the risk another glitcher will discover and release it, or even worse attempt to claim attribution for it. Therefore sharing a glitch is a simultaneous act of asserting ownership of an exploit and altering the understanding of a gamespace.

Glitch significance

While each glitch is protean, reflected in the various uses or outcomes that it affords (exploration, productivity, renegotiation and domination), glitchers appear to additionally rationalize glitches two continuum: advantage, and visibility. Advantage is the glitcher benefit, the extent to which it facilitates exploration, productivity, renegotiation or domination, while visibility is simply how disruptive, conspicuous, spectacular or replicable it is. Through rationalizing glitches along the advantage-visibility continuum the significance of a glitch can be categorized as trivialities, strategies, glitches and game-breakers.

Glitches that are neither advantageous, nor visible, are trivialities – of interest to (some) glitchers, but not the public, and therefore rarely necessitate response from developers or publishers. Glitchers still document these as every glitch discovered indicates glitching skill, and seemingly trivial glitches may unexpectedly contribute towards the development of much more potent glitches.

Glitches that offer little advantage but are highly visible – i.e. are particularly easy to do or are spectacular in their deployment – are often regarded by players as strategies that are adopted throughout the playerbase as part of the repertoire of play. Examples of strategies include Call of Duty franchise (Activision, 2003-current) reload cancelling where players interrupt the weapon reload animation by sprinting at a specific point after the ammunition count has been reset, but before the animation has completed. This enables the glitcher to be ready to attack sooner and constitutes a considerable advantage. Strategies are not generally subject to widespread censure, indeed some may be institutionalized as legitimate moves and reconfigured as knowledge that betrays player expertise e.g. FPS rocket jumping.

Glitches that confer advantage but are difficult to conduct, and are therefore restricted to the dexterous practiced minority, are configured as glitches proper, and if observed by the public these are likely to be regarded as unfair grief-play and ‘game-abuse’ – resulting in developer or publisher intervention. Glitches include ‘Out of Maps’ (OOM) those that allow the glitcher to exit the conventional gamespace for exploration and domination.

Where a glitch is both highly advantageous and visible it is regarded as a game-breaker. These are highly potent glitches that result in almost immediate and escalatory intervention from institutional stakeholders. The Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (Infinity Ward, 2009) Javelin glitch is a salient example. It is conducted in the competitive multiplayer FPS

through priming an explosive charge that is immediately substituted with a Javelin rocket launcher. When the glitcher is eventually killed by an opponent the primed explosive detonates alongside the equipped Javelin rocket payload. The cumulative explosion engulfs an enormous radius killing all in reach – and a game based on twitch-timing, muscle-memory and skill is reduced to a chaotic game of chance. The Javelin glitch spread across virtually all public multiplayer matches after discovery and the game became a farce. This disruption necessitated a mandatory patch deployed fewer than two-weeks after the glitch discovery at a cost of \$40,000 excluding the development cost and any lost sales due to reputational damage (Stuart, 2012). These four glitch types: triviality, strategy, glitch and game-breaker illustrate some of the complexity of meaning so lacking in the conceptualization of glitching as solely destructive, and this contrast becomes more pronounced when glitcher attitudes towards game-breakers is explored.

While some glitchers expressed reticence regarding the distribution of game-breakers, it was generally agreed that they constituted the most desirable glitch discovery. This was not due to the implicit pleasures of their invocation, or the immediate subversive damage that they cause, but often the secondary symbolic dialogue that they enabled between institutional stakeholders and glitchers.

Rezzzo, one of the MapMonkeys glitchers who had contributed to the initial adoption of the Javelin glitch, (his glitch video had been viewed more than one million times), felt little culpability regarding the damage attributed to the game-breaker. Instead he rationalized the glitch as a service to the game developers, whom he regarded as core members of the glitching audience. This perspective was shared by many glitchers interviewed, who suggested that any response from the developers, such as patching a glitch, constituted a kind of interaction that recognized glitching skill, showed that the glitch was valued by developers and motivated continued glitching.

Glitches are fun to discover, enjoyable to document, amusing to use, but also hold the potential to establish reputations within glitching circles and beyond, and instigate (symbolic) dialogue. Yet, while game-breakers or the destructive over-use of glitches represent the most effective way of gaining attention it also has the greatest capacity to undermine each of these pleasures, resulting in patches, bans, and ultimately the swift removal of the glitch. While certainly echoing some of the mini-celebrity status so ridiculed by Vonderhaar, glitchers valued the social capital and opportunities that the glitch generated. Interestingly very few of the glitchers that I spoke with had any issue with Vonderhaar's vitriolic statements (or those released by other development teams). Instead they tended to reiterate the notion of glitching as service. In addition there was general consensus that the threat wasn't really aimed at those who discovered exploits – at authentic glitchers – but that it was a warning to those that indiscriminately used and abused glitches.

Glitching is after all an illicit activity that is contextualized by the risks attributed with being reported to a platform live team e.g. invalidation of player accounts and game bans. This risk colored the practice of glitching, becoming part of its attraction and a contributing factor to the understanding of the mastery or skill of a glitcher. Not only had glitchers discovered exploits that professional QA teams had not, but they had done so while simultaneously eluding detection and censure – the perception is that glitchers are therefore much better than the QA teams employed directly by the developers. Glitchers would naturally make ideal members of development teams, would be valuable to the developers, and that this betrayed the flimsiness of Vonderhaar's statement. Glitching was regarded not simply as antagonistic to games and their consumption, but as viable means of entering employment within the games industry.

A concrete example of the value attributed to glitching by developers is that of Infinity Ward's utilization of MapMonkeys glitches during the development cycles of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 and 3 (Infinity Ward,

2012). Robert Bowling, Infinity Ward's creative strategist described MapMonkeys glitchers as '...a great addition to an already rigorous QA process ...here at Infinity Ward' (Bowling in Ivan, 2011). While MapMonkeys' work with Infinity Ward was mutually beneficial (the glitchers received payment and were able to feel included in the development of a franchise they cared deeply about) this public recognition is unprecedented and understandably it became part of the motivational folklore that colored many of the discussions of glitching that I experienced. Yet, despite Bowling's apparently positive statement, less than three months later he was publicly denouncing both glitching and glitchers:

Any attempt to cheat, hack, or glitch in #MW3 will not be tolerated. 1600+ bans issued....Every ban unique to the level of douchiness of the offense. The greater the douche the greater the length. PermaDouche possible.

(Bowling, 2011a, 2011b)

Once again this was seen as a necessary response to minimize glitch abuse by the public. Despite the relationship between glitching and game development, it would be unfair to suggest that employment was the prevailing motivation for glitching. The majority simply regarded glitching as the most accessible way to explore and deconstruct games, any opportunity to engage further with games, such as through employment, was simply an additional benefit. Glitching enables a more profound experience and understanding of a game, something that appeared to resonate with a (potentially misplaced) sense of fascination and seduction with a game rather than a willingness to disrupt and destroy.

Glitches, and their public release therefore impact significantly on a range of stakeholders: the public, developers, publishers, and glitchers themselves. Yet, instead of a simplistic position of negation and destruction these examples already indicate the complex and significant meanings of glitching. Further differentiation and complexity can be seen when the form that glitch documentation takes is explored.

Exploring glitch videos

I click on the glitch video on the chaoticPERFECTION YouTube channel, it opens with a slick animation introducing the team: 'BRINGING YOU GLITCHES AND TRICKS WITH VOICE AND TEXT TUTORIALS... chaoticPERFECTION' (chaoticPERFECTION, 2011), and then it acknowledges the glitcher who found and documented the glitch – Nickncs cP – before fading to black. The opening drum beats and melody of Noah And The Whale's L.I.F.E.G.O.E.S.O.N (2011) strikes up. The Duke Nukem Forever (3D Realms, 2011) loading screen is displayed briefly and as the lyrics begin we watch as Duke drives his monster truck across a desert highway. Charlie Fink begins to sing about Lisa the Rock n' Roll survivor and the Monster Truck smashes into a rock tunnel wall and abruptly flips up and through it instead of being stopped – this is not what should happen. The player leaves the conventionally playable game area and enters the strangely rendered space beyond the boundaries of the game. One piece of scenery appears to have 'Fake Background' written on it – a secret message left by a developer. The player continues to explore, focusing on other interesting or striking locations. After about two minutes the music fades and the video dissolves to black and stops. This is an example of a high-production-value glitch video, carefully recorded and edited to offer information and entertainment, while simultaneously managing and developing the chaoticPERFECTION and Nickncs cP brand identities.

By contrast, the following MapMonkeys glitch video adopts a far more instructional approach. The glitcher conducts the glitch step by step in a conversational tone without titles, music or motion graphics:

Hey MapMonkeys, it's your boy Sewerwaste here. On Dome you're going to come to this part of the map. You're going to do this kind of strafe-jump up there. Then you've got to jump around the corner and crouch at the same time. I recommend being on default button layout because you've got

to crouch immediately after. Once you're up here you can just hang about, climb all over the dome, [and] stand on those little red bars. It's a good spot for infection if you guys play that... (MapMonkeys, 2011)

The chaoticPERFECTION glitch, devised for the single-player Duke Nukem Forever campaign, is of no competitive advantage, but instead allows the glitcher to explore the materiality of the gamespace, and as a corollary to learn something about the game's construction. The chaoticPERFECTION glitcher acts as something between a tour-guide and archaeologist, digging into digital terrain showing the viewer the fascinating constructions and artifacts beneath. The glitch prioritizes the material construction of the game. Rather than destruction, the glitch appears celebration of the game and the medium. By contrast the MapMonkeys glitch prioritizes the game function, presenting a method of accessing a specific location on a multiplayer map with competitive advantage. This may be conducted like the chaoticPERFECTION glitch, to explore, but as it takes place on a multiplayer environment, it also enables domination.

Both of these videos were uploaded onto YouTube as public listings. In November 2012, eighteen months after the chaoticPERFECTION video was uploaded it had received just over 1,000 views. By comparison, the MapMonkeys glitch had generated 120,000 views in two-thirds of the time. The difference in views may be largely attributed to the popularity of the games, but other considerations include the utility of the glitch in question – the advantage that it offers the glitcher and its visibility within the game. It will be seen by others, replicated by others, and it is likely that (at least at first) these glitches will perform better than the public – it is therefore of more value to most.

These example glitch videos offer some insight into the range of productivity within glitches, the varying forms that glitch productivity takes and the resultant different meanings. Glitch videos are produced in different ways for different audiences, and that in-turn they are differently valued.

What is also of note is that the glitch videos are not necessarily destructive, some, such as the Duke Nukem Forever example, can be reasonably attributed to a sense of seduction with the game and medium, allowing glitchers to explore the game as one might a heritage site, or a classic car engine. Yet, in both instances by releasing the glitches to the wider public the glitch can then be utilized for unpredictable and therefore potentially damaging purposes.

Identifying a glitch

As glitches exploit flaws within game code, they have the capacity to reside almost anywhere within a game experience. As a result of this glitchers must enter gamespaces in an investigative and opportunistic mode, observing, noting and developing anomalies and proto-glitches whenever and wherever they become apparent. Despite this need for responsiveness and flexibility, glitching sessions are generally conducted in groups with focused intent, primarily, but not exclusively, seeking out one type of glitch that has been agreed on prior to entering the game. The following example on BLOPs Rezurrection (Treyarch, 2011), sought to primarily identify barrier glitches, in particular seeking to get Out of Map (much like the Duke Nukem Forever example), beyond the playable gamespace. While the practices here are directly related to the discovery of navigational and barrier glitches, the processes adopted remain consistent and applicable to glitching more generally.

I was invited to join some of the team on a ‘mammoth glitching session’ on the BLOPs Rezurrection DLC. Building upon the franchise’s popular ‘Nazi Zombie’ mode, Rezurrection relocates to a low-gravity cold-war moon-base, where, taking the role of Richard Nixon, Robert McNamara, John F Kennedy or Fidel Castro, players must cooperate to survive successive waves of Nazi zombies. In Rezurrection, players must dispatch successive waves of the undead, which become progressively numerous and dangerous. Each zombie is naturally attracted to the closest player,

and the player need only be bitten a few times for the match to end. The zombies spawn in successive waves comprising of weak ‘normal’ zombies and powerful ‘boss’ zombies that explode on destruction, sending players flying into the air if caught within the blast. A new wave of zombies is only released once the final standard zombie has been destroyed. These core mechanisms were quickly understood and exploited to facilitate the search for glitches. I was instructed to download the DLC immediately upon its release in the UK and to wait online for other glitchers to join. My role was to primarily create a safe ‘beachhead’ to enable glitching, which was conducted through zombie herding.

In order to glitch we orchestrated a game state where only one slow standard zombie and one boss zombie remained within the map. Following initial exploration it was decided that the boss zombie would be lured to an apparently low staircase barrier and destroyed. It was hoped that the resulting explosion would send any nearby glitchers up into the vacuum, over the map barrier and ‘Out of Map’ (OOM) It was my responsibility to lure the final standard zombie away from the other glitchers, who in turn herded the boss zombie to the staircase. I had to remain close enough to the weak zombie to maintain its attention, leading it to locations that it would find difficult to navigate, at which point I would sprint back to observe and help with the glitching. Over the course of four hours we cycled the roles, and in periodic lulls we interrogated the space independently, looking for other anomalies that could be explored later.

Aside from the boss zombie hypothesis our systematic interrogation took the form of paying particular attention to the gamespace. We focused upon: inconsistently shaped level objects; differently textured surfaces; any location or edges that protruded and might offer unintended footholds; and for places where the glitcher felt something odd happen – such as their avatar sticking, catching, or ‘popping up’ during movement. Whenever this occurred we would call for another glitcher to observe, replicate and develop the glitch.

After twenty minutes and five restarts of the map the boss zombie glitch was conducted. The explosion launched the glitchers into the air. One slammed into a doorway, while another was propelled too low to test the barrier. Undeterred, the process was repeated. Eventually the glitch was conducted precisely as intended. The glitcher sailed high above the visible wall, only to highlight the existence of an invisible barrier. That particular glitch did not work at that point. We selected another location and began again.

The reputation of chaoticPERFECTION within glitching circles and the close glitch community meant that glitchers were constantly willing and available to substitute others as they left the match. As the hours wore on glitchers took breaks, went to sleep, went to work, and carried on their day-to-day business – all the while the glitching session continued. In addition to our match there were a number of simultaneous glitching sessions being conducted on other Rezurrection instances, with progress and leads reported periodically via Xbox Live and other messaging services. As a result there was a sense of communal competition and progress, contributing towards a growing knowledge and development of glitches. An hour after the release of Rezurrection we had a team of approximately fifty glitchers rapidly deconstructing it and building a constantly expanding knowledge of its idiosyncrasies and potentially exploitable vulnerabilities. After four hours of glitching I retired from the match and was kept up-to-date with periodic messages (while I slept).

Despite our best efforts the Rezurrection glitching session had failed to identify a replicable glitch, however, one of the glitchers known to both chaoticPERFECTION and MapMonkeys was successful in finding a glitch using a similar technique but in a different location. A boss zombie was lured and destroyed, the explosion propelled the glitcher into the air, but instead of going OOM they landed on the edge of a shipping container out of reach from the zombies. From here they were able to attack the zombies without fear of retaliation, and almost immediately after release the Rezurrection leaderboards were dominated by the use of

this glitch. Later, within the same glitch release video, a refined technique was presented. Instead of using the conventional boss-explosion process the glitcher performed a running jump, 'laying prone' whilst in the air (a 'dolphin dive' animation jump, a technique used to do other glitches on earlier Call of Duty games), and reaches the ledge independently. This illustrates the progressive and iterative nature of glitch development, that even within a single video a glitch may be refined and improved. The discovery and documentation of glitches becomes a productive process, spanning individual glitchers, motivations, platforms and even releases.

Conclusion

This article set out to challenge the reading of glitches as solely destructive acts, presenting them as significant productive gameplay experiences that sustain a complex range of motivations, meanings and interactions. While this does not temper their destructive or disruptive potential against established perspectives of authorship and consumption, it highlights that these processes are anything but as simple as the rhetoric of destruction implies. Examples of the complexity presented in this article include:

- The range of outcomes and uses of glitches - exploration, productivity, renegotiation and domination;
- The ways in which the potency of glitches is rationalized through the advantage / visibility continuum – trivialities, strategies, glitches and game-breakers;
- The risk and reward negotiations that inform glitch publication, and the symbolic dialogue with developers that glitchers often value above the use of the glitch itself;
- The range of productive outputs, including videos, websites, channels, community knowledge and the communities that these sustain;
- The social and collaborative construction of glitcher communities, whose overlapping ties facilitate glitching as a practice;

- The iterative and reflexive methods adopted during glitch discovery – including a glitching knowledge spanning releases, platforms and genres;
- And finally, a motivational generalized seduction with the materiality and production mechanics of the videogames and desire to get closer to games and development through glitching.

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