Well Played

a journal on video games, value and meaning

A Journal on Video Games, Values, and MeaningSpecial Issue on Intergenerational Play

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ERIC KLOPFER

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INTRODUCTION

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I remember watching Drew Davidson do an early Well Played talk at Games Learning and Society. I don't remember what game it was about. I almost skipped it, thinking that I was not interested in the game, but I went anyway. I quickly learned that it did not matter that the game itself was not something I would immediately identify as something of interest. Drew's Well Played was less about the game as an object, and more about the act of playing the game. It was about the relationship between the game and the player, how it made the player react, think and feel. In subsequent years I never missed one of the Well Played talks. Some were about games I would never see or play again. Others introduced me to games that would go on to become important parts of my life.

As the versions of Games Learning and Society ticked by, I thought about a Well Played that I could do. As the parent of a tween and pre-tween at the time, many of the games I played were with my children. I looked for games that would be interesting spaces for us to explore together, and games that would have parts that we could all play. I looked for games that we could talk about afterwards, think about while we were not playing, and have lessons that we could take away. While some

games were better candidates than others — offering different ways to participate, opportunities to reflect and deliberate, or lingering challenges we could dwell upon — I realized it was more about what we did with the game than the game itself. It was about the insights I was able to offer, the perspectives my kids brought with them, and the ways we interacted with each other.

The opportunity to give a Well Played-like talk arose at PAX East in Boston. A colleague asked me to speak on a panel about gaming with my kids. I immediately agreed – but only if one of my kids could offer their perspective on the experience as well. He thought this was a great idea, and we both wound up speaking to hundreds of strangers about our experiences on the family Minecraft server. This subsequently became a family tradition speaking for a few years at Games Learning and Society as a family Well Played.

I hoped at the time to provide insights into how parents and kids could have fun and productive interactions with varying types of games, and how those games supported those kinds of interactions. As video games quickly become a leading (if not the leading) medium of the post-millenials, we ought to better understand how we interact in these spaces, what makes them fun and interesting, and what parents and kids can both do to benefit from those experiences.

That is what the authors in this special issue have done here. Each of the papers in this issue is a Well Played that contains the voices and experiences of both parents and children. The games and cases that they examine span many genres of games (both analog and digital) as well as a diverse range of ages and styles of interaction. They provide unique insights and weave together common threads. I thank all of the authors for their thought and dedication to these presentations.

GAMES, PLAY, MEANING AND MINECRAFT

DIANE CARR & CHEESYCAT PUFF

What criteria come into play when children assess challenge, intimidation and harm in games? To explore this question we use material from an interview co-produced by a parent (Carr) and child ('Cheesycat Puff' aka CC), in combination with the transcription of an audio-recorded, co-played session of *Minecraft*. The approach is informed by literature on auto-ethnography (e.g. Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011), and shaped to some extent by the game-like assessments that we have encountered in clinical settings, including child development units and audiology departments. This is relevant, because it is our experience that even in clinical settings the meaning of a game is not determined by its rules or goals. As with the games that we play at home, these game-like assessments (with their beads, puzzles, buzzes, tricks, rules, challenges and goals) can generate varied, elusive and contradictory meanings.

Consider, for example, this session with an occupational therapist: it's summer 2012 and the health-worker is playing a game of catch-and-pass the sandbag with CC as part of an assessment of her coordination and motor skills. At the same time, CC is playing a game of "Can I hit that light, with this sandbag?" She is having a good time. The health-worker is not.

What is evident is that the rules, goals and the scoring of the sandbag game as set by the health worker do not determine the meaning of the game for CC, or for me as spectator. It doesn't follow, of course, that all potential meanings are equal. My daughter's glee in non-compliance might be considered ephemeral whereas the score that is generated by the health-worker has repercussions. It goes on record. What matters, in the context of this particular paper, is that the health-worker's production of a score involves a process of extrication. She produces an authorized meaning of the game by threshing out and discarding the alternatives.

Game studies literature suggests that game-play involves a mobilized set of structural, textual and contextual factors, and different aspects of the game might be prioritized at differing times by those involved. Games are actualized through play, where 'play' is fluidic, contingent, reactive, embodied and experiential (e.g. Malaby 2007, Pearce 2004, Carr 2017). If the meaning of a game (even a game of catch) can vary because games involve play and because players differ, what are the implications for the assessment of games? What might game assessment reveal about meaning-making? These questions are explored in two parts. Firstly, through an account of the discourses, rhetoric and content that a young player references when assessing harm, intimidation and challenge in games. Are criteria drawn primarily from the rules of the game, from the setting and game content, or from the actions that are simulated within the game? Secondly: how relevant are these interpretations and assessments once play begins? To what extent does the game described in the interview resemble the game that is actualized during play?

The methods employed combine an interview-styled conversation (parent, child) with a game-play session (child, two parents).[1] The game session was audio-recorded and then transcribed. For the sake of privacy, the child-contributor is

using a pseudonym ('CC'). My initials, DC, are used on the transcript. That does not undermine CC's anonymity as I do not use our family name at work. CC was made aware of the potentially public nature of this work, and reminded that she had the option to withdraw at any time during the interview, or to retract any information shared either during the interview or afterwards. She has read and agreed the completed paper, which is shared with her permission, and her father's. Her father took part in sections of the interview and during our game session, and he appears on the transcript as F.

PART 1: TALKING ABOUT *MINECRAFT*

To begin with, CC was reminded about her privacy, and that she could end the interview at any time. She chose a pseudonym and made choices about what was appropriate to disclose.

DC: What's your name for this?

CC: It's Cheesycat. Cheesycat Puff [aka 'CC']

DC: Should I include how old you are or anything else?

CC: No. Because it is my private information.

After a discussion of potential titles for the interview, we moved on to the first attribute: 'helpfulness'. CC was aware that the interview would be followed by a session co-playing *Minecraft*.

DC: How does a parent know if the game that their child is playing is helpful?

CC: I think *Minecraft* is helpful because it makes your body think about what you need do in the game to make yourself safe from

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1. CC and I agreed the ethical framing of this work though a discussion of the BERA ethical research guidelines, including sections on confidentiality, informed consent, collaboration and authorship. The focus on the assessment of harm, intimidation and challenge was suggested by the Call for Papers for this special issue.

monsters that come in the night. Such as the black things that make the teleports. Teleporting is where you move to another place in your own time. I will show you an example [picks up stuffed toy]. Imagine if Julie is here. Then she's there. That's teleporting.

DC: So…the game is helpful because..?

CC: It helps you to build structures that keep you safe in the night and also you get to level up.

When CC assesses the helpfulness of a game she highlights its goals and resources: The game is helpful because it offers you a chance to teleport, level up and stay safe, as well as the means to do it. When asked about 'helpfulness' CC emphasizes what might be described as the game-as-designed (goals, resources) while referring to an implied player: 'your body', 'you move' 'you safe', 'you need') that is partially distinguished from the position she's taking as informant ('I think', 'I will show'). CC makes claims about the game using evidence drawn from within the game. Yet, when it comes to the next issue, that of 'harm', CC switches to considerations that are external to the game and its rules and simulations.

DC: How would a parent know if a game is 'harmful'?

CC: Because… Basically on the television when a game comes on, it says "do not play if you have epilepsy or seizures". That's how you could know that a game is dangerous.

DC: Are there other ways a game could be harmful?

CC: No, just that. If you do have epilepsy or seizures, you need to consult a doctor before playing.

CC plays *Minecraft* on a PlayStation console using the television. When considering 'harm' CC ignores game content to focus on

hardware, and avoids defining harm in relation to an implied, universal or abstract player. Instead, she talks about people that she believes to be at risk according to information (a paratext) that she has read and regards as factual. Later, when it comes to a question about assessing if a game is 'appropriate' or not, CC suggests the potential benefits of particular games, and discusses these in relation to the needs of a specific player (herself).

CC: *Knack* is appropriate because it has a bit of surprise and it helps your focus and your skills. The racing game [*Sonic and Sega All Stars Racing Essential*] is appropriate because it helps your fingers to get relaxed and stronger if you have trouble with writing.

DC: Is that your experience?

CC: Yep […] The main reason why games are important is because they help your focus and your muscles get stronger if you have a have a writing disability, or just a disability, and it helps you learn more.

DC: […] Do you think *Minecraft* makes you better with handwriting?

CC: Yes, and focusing. That is for real. I don't focus much. *Minecraft* helps focusing skills and instructions. Instructions are important and *Minecraft* has instructions.

DC: I think you are trying to sell me a copy of *Minecraft*.

CC: Exactly…Are you seriously going to write this?

DC: I don't know. But I do think it's interesting that you say that games help with your hands and writing. I just can't tell if you're saying it so that I put *Minecraft* on now, or if you really think so.

CC: I think it is important because I don't really focus at school and stuff.

DC: Can I include that in the interview?

CC: Yes!

CC is keen to emphasize the benefits of 'appropriate' gaming. This is the first time she has suggested that console gaming supports an improvement in fine motor skills. She combines this with claims that the game will support her with 'focus' (concentration) and then suggests that these new powers will transfer into a formal learning environment. I'm mystified as to where she's picked up the 'edutainment shtick' but I am impressed by her attempts to leverage it in to game-related negotiations. When it comes to the question of what would constitute an 'inappropriate' game, CC combines references to a specific game that (she says) she only knows by reputation, with references to gender, health and safety. When CC discusses the idea that a game might be inappropriate for children she does it while referencing a series of concerns that are not specific to games.

DC: Are there games that are NOT appropriate?

CC: Scary games. If games make your epilepsy worse. Like a shooting game. Like *Fortnite*. I haven't actually really played it but I have an idea because it's a shooting game so it might be too violent for somebody who has epilepsy.

DC: Tell me about *Fortnite*.

CC: I haven't played it I told you already.

DC: Do kids at school play it?

CC: Yes. J and B play it. They are basically boys. They like it and Miss [teacher] says – and sometimes I say: "No that's a shooting game, and it's a bit inappropriate".

DC: Why inappropriate?

CC: It's too scary if you have epilepsy because of the blood and shooting and yelling and violence.

DC: Yelling?

CC: You know – shooting. Sometimes people yell. It's just an example because shooting is wrong, but Donald Trump probably thinks shooting is right.

DC: Does he play *Fortnite*?

CC: I don't know, because he's American, and I don't live in America […] but I don't know him, because I don't want to […] every time he does something bad to people and the earth or cities I feel bad then I talk about it to try and feel better. I get those facts from the news [*Newsround* on Children's BBC] and I have my own opinions about it and that's why I tend to talk about it a lot.

DC: So, the news can upset children. Does that mean that the news is inappropriate for children?

CC: Yes. It's scary and it upsets people and at the end of every *Newsround* it says that if you are scared or upset or frightened about anything you saw on the news today tell a parent or guardian to help you fix it.

CC doesn't argue that 'shooting' in games is inappropriate because of the real-world act that it simulates. Instead, CC is concerned here with 'violence' as a genre of intensity, where the intensity itself could harm people that she considers vulnerable on the basis of being a child, and/or being susceptible to seizures. Through a reference to a children's news programme CC also makes it clear that she doesn't consider this kind of troubling intensity to be specific to games. For CC, players actually shouting at each other is more of an issue than simulated shooting, and she makes a related point when asked about games

and intimidation. It is intensity of feeling that is the issue, and that is not at all limited to games.

DC: How would a parent know if a game was too intimidating? Can you think of an example of something that makes you feel like that?

CC: Yes. *Harry Potter*, the movie. Can you put on *Minecraft* now?

DC: Is the *Harry Potter* movie scarier than a game?

CC: Yes

DC: Why?

CC: Because I'm mostly scared of blood and violence and I don't think it's for me…I like some bits but it's a bit too violent. And I don't need to be asked twice. My brain has run out of answers. Can I get daddy?

DC: Yep alright.

[CC goes off. Then comes back].

CC: He says he doesn't want to [put *Minecraft* on immediately]. I'm just trying to persuade him.

CC regards certain varieties of intensity as a problem, yet when it comes to content which might otherwise seem reasonable to describe as 'violent' (e.g. exploding monsters) she remains unfazed. Here's an example of an action that might be considered violent, yet CC only mentions it when speaking of teaching and learning.

DC: What are the rules in *Minecraft* and how did you learn them?

CC: The first time I saw a monster I thought it was basically harmless but then it went near me and exploded. That's how you

learn the rules. And the most important one is to have fun and be creative.

DC: So, the monsters taught you the rules

CC: Yes. Of the game. Being creative is the most important thing to be safe.

CC keeps dropping in references to fun and creativity (she's lobbying for our *Minecraft* session to begin). She suggests that safety is contingent on creativity. Perhaps she imagines that as an adult I will be drawn to games that embed an enforced, punitive or medicinal model of 'creativity' as something that is 'good for children'.

As noted, CC refers to violence, and links it with a disturbing intensity of feeling that is not specific to the games, or to the actions simulated within a game. However, when it comes to considerations of game 'challenges' and assessing difficulty in games, CC emphasizes criteria that are specific to games. While CC mentions goals, leveling up or skills elsewhere, here she's describes glitches and design faults. It's not her role as the player to improve. It's up to the game to incorporate better design. While my questions frame the player's learning as something that relates to (and potentially changes perceptions of) difficulty levels, CC is clear that it's the game's problem: If the game design improved, her playing would get better and she'd achieve the goals set by the game.

DC: How does a parent know if a game is challenging enough or too challenging?

CC: Yes. I've already discussed this. The most challenging game is the Mickey Mouse game [*Disney Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two*]. Nothing works and it takes…Like Oswald for example. The lucky rabbit. He hovers for about 2 seconds.

DC: So it's challenging because it's hard to reach the goals?

CC: Yes – the goal that you are aiming for in the game.

DC: How could it be easier?

CC: If Oswald would hover for longer.

DC: What if you were a better player, would it be easier?

CC: Yes it would.

DC: How do you get better?

CC: If there were more clues. Most of the characters don't say anything at all. They just sit there.

DC: Yes – but how would YOU get better?

CC: I've already answered that.

CC identifies the kind of design flaw that can't be resolved by improved skills on the part of a player. At least one reviewer of that same game agrees: "Jumping, the most important element of a platformer, is a clumsy mess" (McShea 2012). Our interview ends with CC offering to help me with the controls, if I will help her find the game: "Let's go and put *Minecraft* on".

PART 2: PLAYING *MINECRAFT* TOGETHER

At different points in our discussion CC refers to elements of the game (e.g. rules), the hardware (e.g. the warning about photosensitivity), player actions (e.g. shouting), and phenomena from outside of the game (e.g. aspects of player identity, news, films). She draws on various discourses, including the notions of therapeutic, creative and constructive gaming. When referring to harm, she ignores game content. When asked to consider 'scariness' she speaks about the news and then a film, rather than game content. Alternatively, when it comes to questions about

challenge and difficulty, CC doesn't talk about the acquisition of skills, she talks about poor game design. As the following transcript of our *Minecraft* session indicates, when making sense of a game during play, CC makes similar shifts (game, player, cultural references) but there's a further framework to consider, and that is play itself. As will become evident, we are playing *Minecraft*, and we are not playing a building game.

When the session begins CC spots a lakeside mansion in the distance. The steps in are very tall, so CC (in the guise of our avatar, Cardboard Thing) attempts to dig her way in. She gets inside and wanders the hallways until she encounters a guard called a Vindicator. The vindicator slays Cardboard Thing. For most of the rest of the session we're wandering around trying to find the mansion again, stumbling across chickens, pigs, cows, horses and the occasional monster. CC wants to get back to the mansion. CC's dad knows *Minecraft* well, so he offers advice ('F' on the transcript). Here's our arrival at the mansion:

CC: I want to get into the castle.

F: You can't jump two blocks.

CC: I'll have to dig.

DC: They're going to be mad if you start digging away at their front steps aren't they?

CC: I'm just investigating because I found a whole new world here. I'm trying to get in.

DC: [Laughs] …you're just smashing up their house.

Having demolished her way inside, CC begins to explore.

DC: This is creepy.

CC: You try.

[CC passes the controls to DC, who passes the controls back to CC]

DC: No, it's creepy.

CC: It's just dark.

F: A deserted mansion at the edge of a lake…

DC: …what could possibly go wrong?

CC: Nothing. I'm gonna dig some.

DC: No, don't smash up their carpet [laughs]. You've already destroyed the front of their house. I still don't understand why you're carrying a stick.

CC: Who wants to go in and investigate?

DC: Alright…oh, look, go upstairs.

CC: I'm scared.

F: You want to go upstairs?

CC: Can you try?

[CC passes controls to F]

DC: Okay, scary music for when you go up the stairs…

CC: [Laughs]….Ah, maybe we should just check the outside first.

One of CC's strategies for managing the level of scariness in *Minecraft* is to pass the controller to somebody else. She continues to watch, but the threat apparently becomes somebody else's problem. The scariness is connecting to varieties of intensity, just as in the interview, but in this case, it's an (almost) manageable intensity that mixes shouting, laughing and

screaming. We spend more time exploring and a second strategy for managing scariness becomes evident:

CC: Giant spider! I'm scared of these things.

DC: Scared of what…

CC: Giant spiders. They're coming

[CC suddenly flicks over to one of the game's menu screens]

CC: They're so scary.

DC: Can we go back to the game…?

CC: No, this is, it's so scary.

DC: Oh, okay. So…what part of it is worrying you?

CC: Hear that slurpy noise?

DC: The what?

CC: Hear the slurpy noise.

DC: No…[laughs].

F: It's, it's, there's a, essentially it's the noise a spider makes.

DC: Okay, so there's a spider coming?

F: Yeah.

DC: Is it in the tree?

F: We don't know.

DC: Oh. Oh, I saw something up there.

F: That's a pig.

DC: That's a pig?

CC's second strategy for managing scariness is to switch to a menu screen. One of CC's favourite game mechanics is collection, so the line between collecting things within the game-world, and collecting in the sense offered by the game's menus might not be that distinct. Eventually CC decides that she wants to return to the mansion. CC has shown interest in collecting pumpkins (in order to restore Cardboard Thing's health) but she doesn't bother to collect anything else, or engage in any crafting or building. She has made houses before when she's playing quietly on her own (she also likes digging giant holes). Yet in this particular session we're engaging in a collective, chaotic and experimental version of play, and so we are producing a chaotic, anarchic version of the game. For CC, deciding what version of the game to actualise is her choice, "cos it's my game". For me as co-player, and a researcher, it's a reminder of the degree to which our participation shapes and changes the mode of play that's adopted, and hence the game that's actualized.

DC: So what happens now?

F: Well… [sighs] if you were playing it as the game was intended to be played you'd be mining resources and constructing things.

DC: Why?

F: Uh, essentially to make your…[sighs] yeah, I don't know why.

CC: I decided I'm going to sneak into the house.

DC: [Laughs].

CC: I'm going to dig into their house.

DC: Won't they get cross?

CC: Dude, no. I'll just check it out.

DC: You're just going around destroying other people's houses. Is that…?

CC: Yeah, why?

DC: Is that the point of *Minecraft*?

F: No, but this is clearly…

CC: My choice cos it's my game.

DC: Hm. To be fair it's mostly what Lara Croft does.

F: That's true.

[CC explores the house and finds a Vindicator]

CC: Oh dude, they're getting cross.

DC: Oh, look, there's somebody. Oh!

CC: [Screams/laughs].

[Vindicator kills the intruder]

DC: He died. Cardboard Thing was slain by Vindicator.

CC: I hate them!

DC: [Laughs].

CC: Maybe I should have rung the bell first.

DC: So…OK, you messed up their house so they chased you out with an axe and killed you.

CC: Yeah [laughs]. Sounds a lot like a thing Miss Trunchbull would do to Matilda.

Here we're making sense of the game (or imposing meaning on

events in the game) using external references. The adults connect the hostile intruder theme with the *Tomb Raider* franchise, while CC connects it to Dahl's book, *Matilda*. We respawn, and wander around trying to find our way back to the mansion. We encounter more creatures. By this point CC has decided that the vindicators do not like Cardboard Thing because Cardboard thing is a spider (and for all I know, she's right). CC then proposes to 'act more human' as a disguise. She plans to 'pass' as human by ringing the doorbell and entering through the front door, rather than smashing her way in to the mansion through a wall. But to do that, we'll have to find our way back. Sometime later:

CC: Just swim quick, you'll drown if you…

F: It's very easy to get disorientated.

DC: It's just, agh…

CC: [Laughs]

DC: What's that?

CC: That's a wolf, that's a wolf.

DC: Are they dangerous?

F: No. Sometimes they are, but they seem to be okay.

CC: They're cute.

[Action: Cardboard Thing tries to befriend wolf by patting it]

CC: Don't hurt them, don't punch them mummy. It's getting to be night-time, find that house. Slay the vindicator. Slay all the vindicators and then you get to rule your house.

DC: …I get to rule the house?

CC: Yeah.

F: I've never, I've never…[sigh]

DC: Hang on, so…your idea of playing *Minecraft* is to break into the castle, kill everyone who lives there and then take it over?

CC: Yeah, because they killed me

F: And then destroy it, block by block.

DC: [Laughs].

We're getting louder and laughing more when stupid things happen, which loops back into how we're playing, what we do, and how we react. As noted, in the interview CC emphasizes that intensity of feeling can a problem, but as the amount of shouting, exploding and laughing we are all doing by this point indicates, intensity doesn't have to be a bad thing.

CC: Oh, turn around, turn around, quick!

DC: Turn around what? That way?

CC: [Screams/laughs] –

[Action: a green-headed stick monster has arrived]

F: That's going to kill you. It's going to explode and you'll die.

CC: Yeah. There's your monster.

DC: Can I hit it?

[Action: Cardboard Thing hits monster a with a stick]

DC: Oh. I killed it.

CC: Dude…so rude.

DC: I won. Ha.

F: Wow, that's amazing. How did you do that?

DC: I dunno...

F: Normally [if you get close to one of those] you just die.

CC: [victory chant] Mummy, mummy...

We're all enjoying some very conventional video game tropes, including combat with monsters. We are lost, we are being loud, we're having a good time, and we'd be happy to experiment by poking whatever we came across with a stick to see what happens. In retrospect, if I'd asked more about resource collection, and directed more curiosity towards building, a different mode of play might have been generated, and a different version of the game would have emerged.

Once we're playing together, we're collaborating in the production of a particular version of *Minecraft.* Although, as anyone who's played MMORPGs or *Monopoly* will know, players can disagree about the most appropriate way to actualize a game. Arguments over loot division and strategy, back-seat driving and player-to-player pedagogy are all reflections of the difficulties involved in the management of (potential, multiple and contested) meanings during play (Carr 2012).

In this particular instance, the *Minecraft* that we've collectively actualised is a puzzle game involving killer robot guards. It doesn't much resemble the creative building game that CC described in our earlier interview. Furthermore, the player that CC performs during the session (the role, the actions) doesn't much resemble the industrious and creative player hinted at during the interview.

DC: So... can I go and kill some vindicators now?

F: Yeah, off you go.

CC: Oh, yeah. Go to the front door, open their house and go in.

DC: Yeah… I'm just going to dig my way in through the side.

CC: No, dude, you're gonna get killed, trust me.

DC: Now, can you tell me why you like this game?

CC: It's just a puzzle, like a puzzle.

DC: If it's a puzzle what are you trying to solve?

CC: The puzzle is to get in the house and not get killed by vindicators, of course. There's a spider nearby… stand by everyone! Quick, swim, quick…

DC: I'm not worried…oh! I'm riding a fish.

CC: But, mummy, you're going to drown, get up quick.

DC: I'm not going to drown, I'm a robot. I am going to kill the vindicators.

CC: [To F] Mummy's brave.

[Cardboard Thing finds a vindicator]

CC: [Screams / Laughs]

F: [Laughs] You died.

DC: [Laughs]

CONCLUSION

During the interview CC is trying to persuade me to put the game on, and she's using parent-friendly, pro-education rhetoric to make her case: It's all about 'being creative and having fun!'

and it's the first time she's used the "games help me to improve my fine motor skills" argument. As our play session makes apparent, the version of the player and the version of the game that were evoked during the interview don't survive for long in *Minecraft*. As co-author, parent and interviewer I had not attempted anything like an 'objective' role and yet I'm still surprised, in retrospect, about the extent to which my involvement in a *Minecraft* session apparently resulted is our actualizing a cube-headed version of *Dead Space*. From a research perspective it raises questions about the role or presence of a researcher – who laughs at particular events rather than others, or expresses an interest in certain kinds of actions rather than others. It's a reminder that, as researchers, we are implicated in the meaning-making that takes place during play, then during analysis, then during writing up. We're engaging in processes of selection and omission that position us in a particular way in relation to game content, co-players, research practices (Taylor 2008) and debates in the field. It's not that different from the kind of 'pick 'n' mix' work that CC does when assessing harm or appropriateness in games.

Our interview and play session indicate that meaning-making related to games is shaped by the contexts of play. 'Contexts' might involve the location of play itself (in a clinic, a classroom, at home), the game's framing within paratexts and by genre, the conventions that exist within a player community, or the proclivities of your co-players. There are player communities where only goal-directed play is considered acceptable, just as there are forms of analysis that presuppose particular modes of play, including my own work on interpretation and representation in narrative-orientated game genres (e.g. Carr 2017). This is one of the reasons why it might be important to continue to reflect on and distinguish between claims about meaning-making that pertain to games-as-designed, claims about meaning-making during play, and claims about the

interpretation of games as a situated practice. These distinctions will have implications for game scholars wishing to engage in game interpretation while acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between meaning and the game-as-structure, the game-as-played, and play as a variable, multiple, embodied and contextual mode of engagement.

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IT IS DANGEROUS TO PLAY ALONE, SHARE THIS!

Simulacra and simulations via inter-generational games

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses how game features are informed and shaped in and through the relation between different generations and backgrounds. More specifically, the co-play (involving two parents and their 8 years old daughter) of *The legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Octopath Traveler* has been under scrutiny for three months collecting viewpoints, interpretations, and emerging heuristics. Such an observation drawn its cornerstones from game studies and critical studies, with the distinction between simulation and simulacra as a leading analytical key. Methods spanned critical auto/ethnography, game diaries, thinking aloud instances, and creative exercises as debriefing processes. The two video games were selected for their different and yet complementary approaches to digital entertainment past: *Zelda* is an updated re-interpretation of an historical brand, while *Octopath* is a new license mimicking old aesthetics and mechanics. Implications shed light on how gameplay and ludic mechanics change along with personal and generational traits, and on ways to harness shared play for triggering family reflection and communication.

INTRODUCTION

Videogames can work as effective inter-generational bridges. An increasing literature is addressing benefits and best practices in co-playing, from peer-mentoring networks to family well-being. Digital entertainment is no more a new medium, and nowadays parents and caregivers may share common game interests and references with their children. Such a possibility is strengthened by nostalgic trends affecting the sector, providing titles that are both old and new – a crossroad for different gaming ages and then audiences. For instance, historical brands like Zelda, Super Mario and Final Fantasy keep receiving installments and episodes, while remakes and titles mimicking old game mechanics are thriving (e.g., *Resident Evil 2, Spyro, Crash Bandicoot*). However, little efforts have been done in shedding light on how this trend occurs in a domestic setting and from an ethnographic perspective. The current emphasis of the literature is on how collaborative and competitive gaming may 1) foster a positive climate between parents and children and 2) prevent game addiction and disruptive behavior. Flipping this perspective, family interactions can work as lenses through which it is possible to analyze the medium and its players, providing opportunities for constructing new meanings and reflections.

This article aims to fill this gap by presenting an ethnography of family co-play involving the games *The legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (since now on, BOTW) and *Octopath Traveler* (since now on, OT), which are both cross-generational but in divergent ways. Subjects involved were an 8-year-old girl and her parents, whose play was observed and analyzed for three months. This combination of ethnographic and autoethnographic lenses was driven by the sensitizing concepts of simulation and simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983, 1994). Moreover, game design concepts such as game heuristics and game decisions supported the inquiry. Highlights point to a dynamic status of the playing experience,

which is strongly affected by personal background and yet can work as an instrument to find a common ground for sharing perspectives across generations. The article is structured as follows: the first section introduces subjects and games involved; the second explains methods and leading concepts; the third uncovers sensitizing highlights and results; finally, the fourth is for discussion and related conclusions. The perspectives of all the three family members are presented providing a multi-angle overview of co-play.

LET'S PLAY A GAME

Sofia is 8 years old and has been engaging with video games since she was 3. However, she shows to be extremely selective, picking only few titles as long-term playing experiences. *Marvel Super Heroes, Mario Kart*, and *Pokémon Go* can be considered her leading references although she has been exposed to a variety of different titles, from *Splatoon 2* to *Minecraft*. She loves to play alone as well as with the family, which happens once or twice a week for sessions of 2-3 hours (however, it can be less frequent when there are no relevant games); game turns are fluid and do not follow specific standards, while video gaming is not usually discussed outside playing. It can be argued that Sofia prefers exploration-based gameplays to action ones. Her father is a game scholar who started to play in his childhood on Nintendo home consoles. He prefers role-playing and strategy games, and he keeps playing for both pleasure and work. Her mother is involved with the medium as well, although she tends to play more randomly and with casual and puzzle games. Sofia has also a little brother, Alessandro, who is getting used to comment her matches and game sessions, taking part of a such a family dynamic.

The premises of this study can be traced back to the first sessions with BOTW in Spring 2018. The father was supposed to be the only player due to his game preferences, with Sofia and the mother not particularly engaged. However, the first hour with

BOTW was able to involve both in divergent ways: Sofia started to embrace the open world structure of the game in an intuitive way, starting to behave and make decisions beyond the apparent game rationale; the mother appreciated the shrines' structure and their "concentrated cognitive challenges". By contrast, the father struggled with the game itself even if he started to play Zelda games in the Nineties. The idea that a revised historical brand was able to connect with new audiences and problematize the approach of an old player was fascinating. In other words, the father was moved out of his comfort zone, finding that a skill-set developed through the years was not so effective anymore. This take fostered discussion and sharing among the family, pointing to how some game mechanics can acquire a fluid and dynamic meaning. Therefore, a family ethnography was planned and staged in Summer 2018; it was possible to expand this reflection further with the release of OT, another Role-Playing Game (RPG) that deals with the game industry's past but differently – i.e., presenting a fresh brand with nostalgic elements (e.g., 16-bit graphics, specific mechanics). Remembering those first plays:

- Sofia: I did not like Zelda at first. The cave part [Shrine of Resurrection] was…boring. I do not like those instructions. And so much blablabla [text] but then…there was so much!

- Mother: BOTW seemed to me overwhelming – it is me, but it looked like a tedious experience. But the first shrines were different. They looked like levels, slots of engagement that I was able to handle.

- Father: The idea was to play Zelda alone … a sort of personal quality time. My first Zelda was *A link to the Past*, and since then I have missed just few episodes. The first minutes with BOTW were quite disorienting, especially because of all the details to take care of.

The games

BOTW is the last installment of the game series *The Legend of Zelda*, started in 1986 and published by Nintendo. It was released in 2017 for Wii-U and Nintendo Switch, receiving popular and critical acclaim. It is can be considered an action-adventure game with RPG elements set in an open world (i.e., a broad virtual environment to explore). The leading protagonist is Link, who is asked to save the world from the villain Calamity Ganon. The gameplay relies on a combination of exploration, action, and problem-solving tasks. Through the game players can improve their skills, gather a variety of objects, train horses, prepare/cook potions, descent into shrines and overcome their challenges, and so on. The game environment is particularly populated by elements and characters, from wild animals to resources to gather, from enemies to hidden treasures and enigmas. The weather changes dynamically, and game mechanics tend to be realistic (e.g., if there is a storm and the player wears metal, she is going to be hit by a lightning; fire spreads on wood and weapons deteriorate). In terms of plot, there are several references to previous episodes, from starting with neither information nor memories to recurring characters and zones (e.g., princess Zelda, Zora realm).

OT is a Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG) developed by Square-Enix and published by Nintendo in 2018 for Nintendo Switch. The player can control eight different characters with unique storylines and abilities in a fantasy world. Proceeding through the game and completing all these narratives, it is possible to team the characters up combining their specific skills. Game rules follow the traditional standards of JRPG genre, with turn-based battles, random encounters, and a tendency to long combat sessions (also called grinding) for becoming competitive enough to succeed. The visual style deploys a hybrid approach, with characters and textures in 16-bit graphics moving in highly defined polygonal environments. The game has been well

received by both players and critics, being associated with past masterpieces like *Final Fantasy 6* and *Chrono Trigger*.

For Sofia and her mother, BOTW represented the first experience with an open world game and OT was the first JRPG ever played.

THE ANALYTIC EQUIPMENT

Coplay has been increasingly addressed in game studies. With this term, the reference goes to experiencing videogames with peers, parents, and family members (Costa & Veloso, 2016), implying that the medium may play a proactive role in domestic and relational wellbeing. Several studies have addressed such a potential in improving communication and social skills across personal backgrounds. For instance, domestic play has been seen as an opportunity to stage intergenerational perspective-taking (De Grove, 2014, Eichberg, 2016). Empirical evidence suggests that family coplay triggers social benefits and positive emotions for both younger and older players (Osmanovic & Pecchioni, 2016; De Schutter & Vanden Abeele, 2010; Rice et al., 2012; Wang, Taylor, & Sun, 2018). Attention has been given to how families pragmatically deal with technology and gaming (Villegas, 2013), from game turns where parents tend to adopt a more passive involvement supporting their children during play (Voida & Greenberg, 2012) to the importance of selecting appropriate content and titles (Coyne et al., 2011). The intent is often to mitigate undesirable effects of video gaming by harnessing contextual and familiar dynamics. Several studies have explored the tie between digital entertainment and (cognitive, emotional, social) outcomes targeting young players (DeLisi, Vaughn, Gentile, Anderson & Shook, 2013; Markey & Ferguson, 2017), while parental concerns have grown (Wang, Taylor & Sun, 2018; Livingstone, 2009). Although the balance between negative and positive effects of videogames is still unclear (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014), it can be argued that

domestic settings are becoming a proactive front for dealing with the medium scope, especially in terms of social ties and processes.

Nevertheless, the argument informing this article follows an inquiry line with alternative premises: using family consumption for better understanding how videogames work and, therefore, playing with related highlights for fostering reflection and mutual understanding. From a methodological perspective, ethnographic observations have been conducted for 2 months (BOTW) and 1 month (OT) (the briefer involvement with the latter was due to the absence of interest from Sofia and her mother). The leading approach was critical (Crawford, 1996; Smith, 1999), focusing on how the researcher (the father) was not a distant observer but rather someone with well-established schemes and viewpoints; it implied to adopt instrumental key terms and seek sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2006) during the observation itself. Moreover, the main orientation was creative and generative (Gauntlett, 2007; Pink, 2009), collecting and creating materials for fostering individual as well as shared reflections. Finally, the digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013) inspired the whole study due to its focus on how technology can entail novel practices in terms of expression and self-perception.

The aforementioned family routines about video games did not change because of the study. Solo and shared sessions remained fluid, with Sofia's leading role and possible parental support (from active play to aids). However, Sofia was asked to 1) take a diary about her experience with the games (she called it the "journey-report") to fill as she wanted, from drawings to text; and 2) being involved in two different exercises: the spring design and the ideo-cards design. Additional notes and thinking aloud instances about the play were collected by the father.

The spring design was staged after weeks 2 (ROTW), 6 (ROTW), and 10 (OT) and consisted in discussing what was relevant and

what secondary in terms of game elements (mechanics, actions, characters) in the game played. The objective was to break the gameplay itself applying a "contractile elasticity", which is a swing between "tight design" – i.e., a design that keeps only the essential rules – and "elastic design" – i.e., – a design that takes into account both fundamental and minor mechanics – able to enlighten how games work, may work and cannot work (Bateman & Boon, 2006, 110-114). Discussions targeted which game features do not work or do not make sense, trying to envision new insights and features.

The ideo-cards design was staged after weeks #4 (BOTW), 8 (BOTW), and 12 (OT). This exercise was inspired by two board games played as family (*Dixit*) or individually (*Scythe*) and their focus on evoking decks. It relies on using random cards for envisioning hypothetical games and, for this study, new episodes of BOTH or OT. It has already been used in social research (Gandolfi, in press), but in this case it was preferred a simplified version. The family created three decks – blue, red, and green. They filled each with 10 to 15 cards referring to topics (blue), characters (red), and mechanics (green) extrapolated by Sofia while playing. Therefore, family members drawn a card from each deck in sequence (blue, red, green) creating a sequel/remake of the game with the elements picked. This design session was composed by several rounds (7 to 9) and therefore prototypes. In the end, a winner was selected by vote. The rationale of this task was to finalize the spring design session and exploit the potential of thinking by making (Gauntlett, 2007). Cards reported the name of a feature to include (e.g., cooking, environments, enemies) and a related drawing by Sofia.

At the beginning of the observation, two instrumental concepts were deployed for supporting the analysis:

- Range of possibilities: freedom given to the player in exploring and experiencing the game (Adams & Dormans,

2012). It is the feeling of autonomy and control that a game may or may not provide.

- Heuristics [b]: the "rules of thumb that help (. . .) [players] play the game" (Elias, Garfield & Gutschera, 2012, 29). In other words, the lesson taught the game itself in terms of best practices and winning strategies.

They were chosen for their practical dimension, providing clear criteria for reading the game experience and keeping track of it. Sofia was asked to think about them along with emotions and feelings triggered by the play, and also to use working metaphors while describing her experience. Metaphorical thinking can indeed function as a reflective trigger (Ricoeur, 1990), shedding lights on inner processes and opinions that may be challenging to uncover in other ways.

THE PLAYS

The first month

After an initial involvement, the first week with BOTW was difficult for the all family. The initial area was indeed challenging for the absence of the paraglider, which is a crucial instrument for exploring the rest of the map. Moreover, enemies were lethal since the beginning, implicating frequent defeats.

- Father: this the most underpowered Link I have ever seen (thinking aloud).
- Sofia: I do not like it too much. You have to fight enemies, you do not have time to look around (thinking aloud).
- Mother: there is not a clear direction. How are you supposed to escape this area? (thinking aloud).

However, Sofia came up with a basic lesson from her notes: "a good strategy is to run and climb trees. You can breathe". She spent minutes exploring the available map – such an approach

seemed not productive to both the parents, who suggested her to focus on the indications given by the mysterious old man (the non-playable character that guides the player in the first part of the game). By contrast, she was able to understand the simulative layer of BOTW, which is not just a special effect but also a take on the overall gameplay. She started to make her own list of objects collected, and she played with the cooking tools trying different combinations of ingredients. This is how she was able to develop a hot sauce able to warm Link up, allowing her to reach a shrine on cold (and therefore lethal) mountains. Because of this discovery, she was able to fly away from the first area (i.e., Great Plateau) and access the whole game environment.Sofia: "I made it, all the way through!" (thinking aloud) [block quote]

From her notes (see image 1 for an example):

when you shake a tree the apple [on it] falls.

You cannot run too fast for too long because you may not have enough stamina.

When you come close to an animal it runs away because it's scared.

When you get a horse it still needs training.

If you eat hot food you will go in the snow and won't be cold.

How you cook makes a difference.

When you kill an animal, you can eat it.

Image 1: Sofia's note about cooking.

Weeks #2 and #3 were about exploring the broader game setting, overcoming shrines' trials and figuring new rules out: "When it rains you can't climb anything because it's slippery and wet" (note); "if I reach that mountain, I can see better" (thinking aloud). The father started to help Sofia in dealing with menaces (especially monsters), while the mother was involved in solving shrines' enigmas.

The first spring session brought up Sofia's intolerance for the combat system. According to her, "enemies are too strong and you break your things". What was essential to her was the autonomy in walking around with neither limits nor constrains, and the "agential readability" of the environment itself – "things work as they should [in real life]". From the father's perspective, the combat was a crucial component; he motivated his position by highlighting the importance of an opponent, a villain. Sofia

replied that the wild nature of the game was already dangerous, a menace to neutralize. The outcomes from the ideo-card section were aligned with these reflections. The winning remake was *The Green Link*, where the player must learn how to deal with nature (topic) by interacting with animals (characters) and collecting resources (mechanics) (see image 2). A world narrative was preferred to a mere "fighting monsters" progression, with an emphasis on an improved physical engine – "I cannot dig, I cannot grab water, I cannot build (…) I want something more" (referring to the actual game).


Image 2: Cards generating The Green Link game.

For the father, the first month was what Roger Caillois (1973) would call a "dissymmetry" – a provocation able to overturn standards and expectations suggesting a novel take on a well-known subject. BOTW deployed a straightforward simulative approach based on elements of nature and a living world that

puts the player to the test rather than giving her an advantage. According to him, previous episodes did not adopt such a lens (intuitively also for technological reasons), relying on more guided problem-solving tasks in smaller settings with less variables to consider. With simulation, the reference is to an attempt to recreate and mimic a source realty by keeping specific dynamics rather than others (Adams & Dormans, 2012; Frasca, 2003). A simulation can be seen as a metaphorical translation, through which some processes are filtered and re-shaped within and through an alternative context. The father struggled with such a wide horizon at first, seeing it as a stretch for following open world trends (e.g., *Assassin's Creed* series, *Horizon Zero Dawn*). However, the preparation of the hot sauce worked as a sort of epiphany: he realized that his schemata (Di Maggio, 1997) about gaming were relative and not effective anymore. Sofia's discovery worked as a sort of epistemological rupture (Bachelard, 1986). Since then, he started to see the game in a new light, interpreting it as a *discovery box* rather than as a setting to control.

The mother was more proactive in uncovering the realistic ties of the game. Her pragmatic approach was able to deal with several challenges (e.g., using wood for lighting torches) without suffering from years of game genre-related conventions (Adams & Dormans, 2012). She engaged with shrine-related quests, observing that – "this is the pure ludic spirit: a problem and tools [the special abilities] for solving it".

The second month

The second month was characterized by a refinement of Sofia's game strategies, which became more tactical and spatial-related. She started to draw maps (see image 3) and take pictures for keeping trace of her play. She partially overlooked the main plot (she defeated the first divine beast Vah Ruta), focusing on reaching apparently inaccessible places. Such an effort required

a new focus on fighting due to some required encounters. The father kept helping her, suggesting an initial observation of the enemies before any attack – "it is something real…you must survive" (thinking aloud). Framing the experience as a combination of survival and discovery worked an interpretive (and realistic) lens for her.
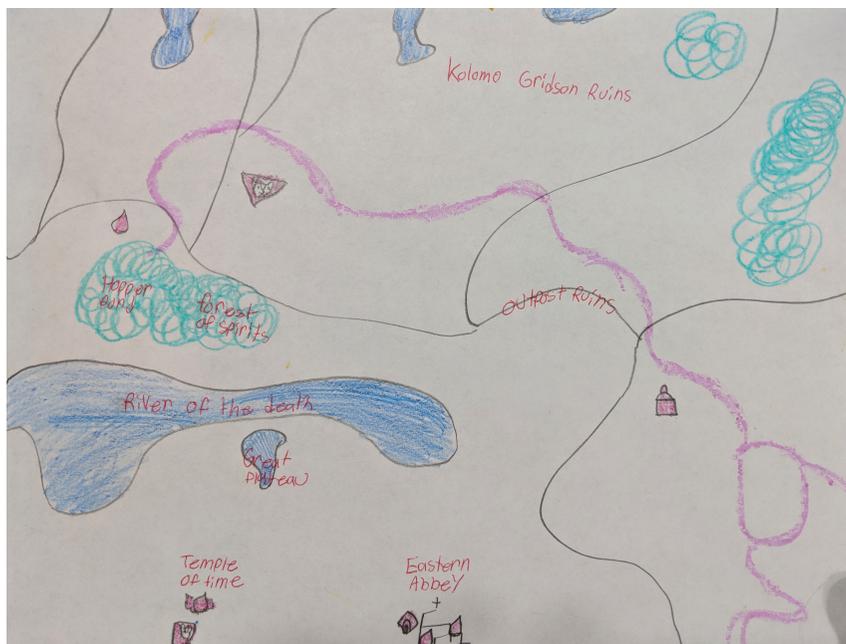
Image 3: Sofia's map

From her notes and thinking aloud instances:

- that dragon [Farosh]…it was wonderful. My dad and I did not speak for a while (note).

- seeing all these animals is so cool…I cannot see what it is next (note).

- let's wait until the monsters sleep, then we attack (thinking aloud).

- if you look at the monsters, you know how strong they are (note).

- there are things I cannot immagine in my head (thinking aloud).

- around enemies there are things you can use against them, but you must have time (note).

The embedded camera became a crucial tool for framing her goals and items. It worked as an instrument to deal with the unexpected and uncover it (e.g., studying monsters) (see images 4 and 5). For example, Sofia stopped her game session just for taking a picture of a lighting: "it is…beautiful" (thinking aloud). At the same time, she started to look at the enemies, implying a new phase of observation and analysis. For instance, she waited minutes before attacking a monster camp because her objective was to use magic powers for saving her equipment. From her parents' perspective, such a caution did not seem the best strategy in terms of time, but she was confident it was the "more appropriate" line of action.

Sofia: "this is how you should play"

Mother: "even if it takes so long?"

Sofia: "yes, it is how it works…it is how the game works."

Image 4: Lighting (picture taken by Sofia).

Image 5: The dragon Farosh (picture taken by Sofia).

In the second spring design the combat was re-framed and partially justified as a need. Training a horse became a new crucial element, able to trigger a significant attachment to game dynamics. Even though her first horse was not particularly skilled, she decided to keep it: "Cheetah [her first horse] is mine,

I do not need other horses". The story was addressed as well: for Sofia, the plot was not important by itself, but some characters like Princess Mipha and Princess Zelda were considered important – although not properly explored – drivers: "Why cannot I play Zelda rather Link? Why did Princess Mipha have to die?" (from spring design). The second deck-cards session saw *The Legend of Zora* as a winner: players have to save a water realm (topic) by impersonating a female character (characters) and training fishes (mechanics) against an increasing pollution.

For the mother, the second month was especially focused on how the sector is dealing with equal representation and gender bias: "it is unbelievable that a saga like this one is still having issues and delays of this kind". It moved her to read more and to support a proactive take during the ideo-card session. Due to her background in puzzle and casual games, these issues were perceived as marginal; during the observation she realized how "the whole sector is behind (…) even if princess Zelda is a strong figure, she stays in the shadows (…) we want to play her, we want to be her". Regarding heuristics, she started to see patterns in the environment beyond the shrines: "if we move all the rocks into the holes, something has to happen" (thinking aloud).

For the father, this month was crucial for understanding the fascination that the game was entailing. Unexpected elements like lightings and enormous flying dragons (see image 5) surprised the whole family; the feeling was to have sensed a secret and yet not to have fully understood it. Such an emotion can be tied to the concept of "seduction" by Baudrillard (1973): the desire fostered by a phenomenon that you cannot completely handle and yet invites you to expand your horizons. This absence of control implies the fact that the source reality (see above) that the secret is referring to is not accessible, and never will be. Rather than "feeling an environment", it is "wondering the environment". Even though current simulations are trying to replicate reality (Baudrillard, 1994), there is always something

missing, a trace of an absence (Derrida, 1967) that triggers an ongoing sense of wonder. This is made feasible by the clear gameplay, which supports such an attitude balancing control and random elements; Sofia noted that "I like…the fact that there are few rules, and they work everywhere". Having a limited set of mechanics with a broad range of application is indeed a design choice suggested by several practitioners (e.g., Adams & Dormans, 2012; Sylvester, 2013). There were exceptions, though. During the spring session Sofia observed that even if you can beat enemies by exploiting the environment (e.g., launching rocks), after a while it becomes "boring and always the same stuff". While working with ideo-cards, she added that "I love to train the horse, but what about dogs [present in the game]? I want to do the same with them".

The second month pointed to 1) a lack of representation that Sofia and her mother were able to detect better than the father and 2) a virtual world that cannot be completely understood, and therefore an environment where you can lose yourself. While the simulative mechanics were able to support an initial feeling of agency (strengthened in the second month), BOTW was also able to feed a sense of wonder and surprise. This combination worked effectively in keeping the family engaged.

The third month

The third month was about OT, with an emphasis on Ophelia's story (one of the eight potential characters). Father's involvement was predominant at the beginning due to the importance of textual instructions and the old-fashioned gameplay. After week #1, Sofia was able to handle the game by herself. OT became a sort of loop – an engaging and yet inconclusive sequence of actions – for her.

- It is like Pokémon Go. You do the right moves, you keep going (thinking aloud).

- Fight and fight, go back to the village, heal, and fight again (note).

- Octopath is a like an aquarium. It is not like Zelda (note).

- That's it, but I like it (thinking aloud).

- Potions are never too many (note).

She was involved with neither characters nor the narrative. Plot decisions were not perceived as "meaningful" and related outcomes were a matter of numbers, an ongoing path of level-ups and damages. She liked the aesthetics but considered them "kawaii and funny", suggesting a struggle with the serious themes characterizing OT. The spring design highlighted the importance of grinding mechanics, while the narrative was not considered essential: "Characters always repeat the same actions until they beat someone…Ophelia wants her sister back, but I do not feel it". The ideo-cards design winner was a game about friendship (topic) in which players had to bond (mechanics, the "path action") with enemies (characters). Such a proposal appeared as a critique to the linearity of OT, with some references to the game *Undertale* (never played by Sofia) and its *pacifistic* mechanics.

While the mother was not particularly engaged with the game, stating that "it is a frustrating circuit", the father felt emotionally attached to it because of his previous experiences with JRPGs (especially *Final Fantasy VI* and *Chrono Trigger*). From his perspective, Ophelia's narrative line seemed meaningful enough and the long fighting sessions worked as necessary steps between plot milestones. Nevertheless, when Sofia stated that she understood the game theme but she did not see any tie to the concrete game mechanics, he realized the limits of his perspective. His satisfaction with the game relied on game "simulacra", which are the result of simulative interactions shaping the sector since the beginning (Crogan, 2011) and now

represent autonomous instances able *to satisfy themselves by themselves*. With simulacra, the distinction between source reality and simulation fades (Baudrillard, 1983), and there is not more room for the secret, the fascination of the unknown, the driver of a playful attitude. The resulting reality sounds like a freezing *lullaby*, written in stereotypical stone and cuddling old gaming generations (see Burrill, 2008). In Roger Caillois's terms, the reference is to a symmetry able to hypnotize players via its familiar patterns and references. Such a pulsion can be referred to recent entertainment trends, from nostalgic movies (e.g., *Ready Player One, Alita: Battle Angel*) to gaming remakes (e.g., *Resident Evil 2, Crash Bandicoot*). For the father, who was the one suffering for such an impasse, playing with a younger player worked as an antidote to such a nihilistic viewpoint. Going back to BOTW, a possible cross-generational bridge was indeed the game ability to surprise old and new audiences, a question mark that cannot be answered. Even though it may be problematic at first (especially for long-term gamers), such a shared feeling may work across generations – i.e.*, seeking control but not really looking for it.*

THE SCORE

It can be argued that these three months and the related exercises provided a remarkable opportunity for the family to re-evaluate the medium itself as a communicative trigger. Before this study, video games were present but yet secondary and rhapsodic foci in family relations. While doing this research, BOTW and OT became an excuse to discuss and share gaming experiences and ideas as never before. It implied talking about personal memories associated with games (for instance, the father remembering the wonder after leaving Midgar in *Final Fantasy 7* and mother's satisfaction in solving the first problems in *The Witness*), trying to situate them within personal narratives (Gauntlett, 2007; Ricoeur, 1990). It provided an opportunity to understand the rich and complex overview that Sofia was developing while playing. Her ability to read and criticize a game environment as

a whole – and to go beyond formal limits and requirements (e.g., spending time for taking a good picture) – surprised her parents, who were not expecting such an open and yet critical approach to the medium. A debriefing was staged after the ethnography for wrapping the whole study up. Parents and daughter spent one hour going through notes and reports. For Sofia, it meant to realize that there are different ways to experience technology and especially videogames. For the mother, it meant to expand her notion of game mechanics and dynamics, selecting what is relevant from apparently complex systems (like an open world). For the father, it meant to realize how his approach was characterized by what Koster (2010) defines "jargon factor" – the tendency of a game genre to become self-referential, a niche destined to consume itself (a simulacrum that does not need external references). Therefore, intergenerational play worked as a break, a way to weaken personal symmetries and expand his take on the sector itself.

As Järvinen (2008) argues, game experiences can be described as a communication between the game system and the player. In this relation, individual stereotypes and schemas play a crucial role (Sylvester, 2013), but they can be overturned fostering a proactive exchange between media habits and patterns. Video games are becoming wide cultural objects, able to acquire a fragmented identity based on being rather than on to be (Hall, 1997). Reflecting on how they can problematize well-established cultural standpoints (Lotman 1993) can work as a stimulating strategy for coplaying, considering the medium as an object to enlighten rather than just as a tool to deploy. These highlights echo what Villegas (2013) claims about the inclusion of parent-child discussions after media use, which would strengthen communication and mutual understanding. In addition, Sofia's creative engagement allowed her (she was able to see her journey reports anytime) to frame her ideas and stay on track for design and creative exercises. In other words, she developed a shared

roadmap with her parents generating new ideas and insights. The implications of this experience are already visible, with *Kingdom Hearts 3* and *Into the Breach* as current leading family games. Sofia and her parents decided to keep the *journey report* and the ideo-cards design as heuristic instruments for discussing playing and expanding its scope.

Even if limitations related to ethnography approaches have to be considered (from situated findings to an emphasis on specific viewpoints), the present research depicts a case study (with related methods) that may suggest a peculiar way to use video games as intergenerational devices – i.e., harnessing them as battlegrounds, environments to analyze, instruments to problematize. This approach has been particularly effective in the authors' domestic setting, and further studies and explorations are needed to uncover its potential and detect its limits. In the end, simulations and simulacra are fluid attributions, and generational leaps happen every day in digital entertainment.

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ESCAPING WITH THE FAMILY

Cooperation and Collaboration in a Single-use Boardgame

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the intergenerational play of an Escape Room-style boardgame in a family setting. Through analysis of five key moments during play, it shows that this style of game is congruent with the 'core' model of family leisure, and highlights the importance of naïve operation to avoid privileging particular social and cultural knowledge as a prerequisite for successful completion of a game. This is important for the design of games that can be played by intergenerational groups, as it focuses attention on the play of the game rather than on prior, frequently age-dependent knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Participation in family leisure activities is linked to improved quality of life (Hodge et al., 2017), however leisure is experienced differently by different members of a family (Hebblethwaite, 2015; Shaw, 1992). In particular, women (Holman & Epperson, 1984), girls (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003) and adolescents in general (Larson, Gillman, & Richards, 1997, p. 81) report lower satisfaction with family leisure activities. This paper examines intergenerational play of a boardgame as a specific form of

family leisure, connecting research on intergenerational play and family leisure through a set of autoethnographic observations.

To date, much of the literature on intergenerational play has focused on digital games (Chua, Jung, Lwin, & Theng, 2013; Costa & Veloso, 2016; Wearing, Wearing, McDonald, & Wearing, 2015), on object-based free play (Roggman, Boyce, Cook, Christiansen, & Jones, 2007), on sports and outdoor recreation (Goodenough, Waite, & Bartlett, 2015; Haycock & Smith, 2014; Karsten, Kamphuis, & Remeijnse, 2015; Quarmby & Dagkas, 2010), and/or on play(ful) activities developed as a research tool to provide insight into a setting or interaction. For example, Vetere, Davis, Gibbs, Francis, and Howard (2006) developed a technology probe to explore object play as a means to maintain healthy grandparent-grandchild relationships over distance. Moreover, most literature on intergenerational play and family leisure[1] is concerned with the play of younger, preteen children and their parents or grandparents (Goodenough et al., 2015; Hebblethwaite, 2015; Karsten et al., 2015), and with the potential for play to foster intergenerational interactions (Costa & Veloso, 2016, p. 55; Vetere et al., 2006). This paper, by contrast, examines the dynamics of play in a family with teenaged and young adult children. It contributes, therefore, to understanding boardgame play, collaborative puzzle-solving, and intergenerational play and leisure practices in families with older children.

In a previous work (Rogerson & Gibbs, 2018), we examined the ways in which hobbyist boardgamers seek to continue to engage with boardgames even after the arrival of a child. We showed that, rather than indoctrinating a child into the boardgaming hobby, playing boardgames as a family fulfils a phatic role, reinforcing the close emotional connection between family members (Rogerson & Gibbs, 2018, pp. 288-290). Playing a game thus contributes to family cohesion (Harrington, 2015, p. 472;

1. We see intergenerational play as a form of family leisure. Thus, references to family leisure should be understood to include intergenerational play, unless otherwise noted.

Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001), and to "showing our kids that they are loved and important" (Mactavish & Schleien, 1998).

In this paper, we describe an intergenerational problem-solving or puzzle experience, in the form of an "Exit" or "Escape Room-style" game[2]. These collaborative games have been shown to be effective in building communication and teamwork skills (Williams, 2018). We consider how different family members bring different skills, knowledge, ability and approaches to solving the game. Moreover, we examine how different generations within one family negotiate the different roles in a collaborative puzzle experience. In particular, we are interested in the game as a mediator of face-to-face communication in a family with older teenager daughters for whom recreational time spent with parents may be more chore than social highlight (J. R. Agate, Zabriskie, Agate, & Poff, 2009; Shaw, 1992; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003). Rather than focusing on boardgame play as a learning mode or a therapeutic tool to elicit particular emotions, this paper positions boardgame play as a normal leisure activity which families can share. Our motivation here is not to answer what boardgames can do for a family, but rather to explore and understand the lived experience of intergenerational boardgame play within a family.

REVIEW OF RELATED WORK

Many authors have documented the positive benefits of family leisure and its links to higher quality of life (Hodge et al., 2017). Parents may see family leisure experiences as part of their responsibility towards their children and point to instrumental benefits of leisure, such as learning skills and acquiring knowledge, enhancing children's development (Goodenough et al., 2015, p. 378), building family connectedness (J. R. Agate et al., 2009, p. 207; Hallman & Benbow, 2007; Shaw, 2008, pp. 695-696)

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2. We have tried to select examples and frame our discussion in such a way as to avoid 'spoilers', should the reader wish to play The Abandoned Cabin. For this reason, identifiers on cards have, where practicable, been redacted.

and reinforcing shared values (Hebblethwaite, 2015, p. 361). These latter two benefits are at times presented as an overt reason for leisure, even above inherent interest in and enjoyment of the activity (Loveday, Lovell, & Jones, 2018, p. 7). Providing opportunities for happiness and success through family leisure may thus be related to a positive sense of being a "good parent" (Goodenough et al., 2015, pp. 384-385; Schwab & Dustin, 2015, p. 181). Accordingly, family leisure is frequently a conscious and deliberate activity, "planned, organized and 'constructed' so that it has a particular value or quality." (Shaw, 2008, p. 694). One study, which focused on families with a child with a developmental disability, found that shared intergenerational leisure activities were "especially helpful in developing social skills such as learning to problem solve, to compromise, and to negotiate." (Mactavish & Schleien, 1998). This instrumentalization of leisure has been termed 'purposive leisure' (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). This literature suggests that, to parents, leisure activities fulfil multiple, sometimes contradictory, functions.

Although parents typically value family activities, specific choices about leisure are informed and shaped by family structure (Quarmby & Dagkas, 2010), by social class (Harrington, 2015; Karsten et al., 2015, p. 207) and by gender (Gracia, 2015; Stalp, 2015), as well as by idealised versions of family life (McCabe, 2015, p. 177) and by religiosity (S. T. Agate, Zabriskie, & Eggett, 2007). Moreover, individual members of a family experience leisure differently (Shaw, 1992). In some cases, family activities may not be experienced as leisure at all (Larson et al., 1997; Shaw, 1992, p. 277) but rather as "an ambiguous mix of leisure and care with different degrees of freedom for the parents" (Karsten et al., 2015, p. 169). Indeed, "family activities may not typically be freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, or even necessarily enjoyable" (Hebblethwaite, 2015, p. 360). In particular, women may experience leisure less positively than

other members of a family, and have less access to leisure activities than men (Holman & Epperson, 1984, p. 282; Stalp, 2015, p. 266), although they have a significant influence on family leisure activities.

The emotional labour – or "work" – of organising and managing family activities "falls disproportionately to women" (Craig, 2006; Shaw, 1992, p. 283); motherhood is thus "often experienced as stressful and exhausting" (Shaw, 2008, p. 690). Although there are considerable benefits associated with fathers' direct involvement in children's play (Buswell, Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Hawkins, 2012), a mother's social position influences not only her children's leisure activities but also her husband's experience of leisure with children (Gracia, 2015, p. 300). Although research suggests that couples who engage in shared leisure time may experience lower rates of divorce and separation (Orthner & Mancini, 1990), having children reduces this shared leisure time, and the effects of this are unclear (Flood & Genadek, 2016; Hill, 1988; van Houdt & Poortman, 2018). Nevertheless, "satisfaction with their leisure involvement together is clearly the best predictor of overall satisfaction with family life" (J. R. Agate et al., 2009, p. 218).

Literature on family leisure typically focuses on pre-school and pre-adolescent children; parents may be anxious that "their children will be less interested in family activities and family vacations once they become teenagers." (Shaw, 2008, p. 699), reflecting the influence of different life stages (Larson et al., 1997). In one of the few studies to consider the experience of older children, Zabriskie and McCormick (2003) studied the family leisure experience of families with children aged from 12 to 15. They found that girls reported significantly lower family satisfaction and family leisure involvement than boys (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003, p. 184), a factor which may be linked to gender differences in adolescents' development. Two separate studies found that adolescents do not identify family activities

amongst their leisure preferences, possibly reflecting the changing needs and increased desire for autonomy experienced at this life stage (Larson et al., 1997, p. 81).

ABOUT THE GAME

The *EXIT* series[3] was launched in 2016 with three titles: *The Abandoned Cabin* (Brand & Brand, 2016a), *The Pharaoh's Tomb* (Brand & Brand, 2016b), and *The Secret Lab* (Brand & Brand, 2016c). Just as Escape Room players try to escape a locked room within a limited time by solving a variety of interlinked puzzles (Nicholson, 2015), in an Escape Room boardgame, players are presented with a series of puzzles to solve in order to 'win' the game. The play experience of an *EXIT* game is, like many boardgames, explicitly material (Rogerson, Gibbs, & Smith, 2016); the games are designed to be destroyed through play. Players must write on components, cut them, or tear them as part of the puzzle solving process. Even so, the games' low cost ensures that they remain a reasonably economical choice for a group – and each is considerably cheaper than a family night at the cinema. In this way, they build on a history of 'single play' games including the popular *How to Host a Murder* series (Hansen, Bonsignore, Ruppel, Visconti, & Kraus, 2013; Pearce, 2001) which was launched in the early 1980s. Each game in these series has a single solution; once played, there is little replayability as participants already know the outcome. More recently, *Legacy* boardgames, which are customised through play, have extended this lack of replayability by modifying – and in some cases destroying – the game components.

METHOD

This autoethnographic study describes an evening of game play

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3. The authoritative Boardgame Geek website www.boardgamegeek.com lists 26 Escape Room games that were released in 2018, including a new Exit Kids line. Well-received by critics and players, in 2017, the EXIT series was awarded the prestigious German Kennerspiel des Jahres award and Unlock!, another series of Escape Room boardgames which uses a hybrid app element for resolution of some game elements, won the French As d'Or Jeu de l'année 2017.

in a white, middle-class Australian family. The four participants live together: the first author (A1), her husband, and their daughters . The elder (A2) is aged 20 and in her third year at University, and the younger (A3) is aged 15, with two more years until she finishes high school. Both parents are tertiary educated keen hobbyist boardgamers who have participated actively in local and international boardgaming communities for more than 15 years. A2 and A3 identify strongly as coming from a family which plays boardgames. Although A2 frequently joins her parents to play games at home as well as with friends, A3's gaming preferences are more focused, and she usually prefers to play two-player games with her father.

A1 proposed this project and suggested "an Escape Room game" as a suitable option; A3 chose *The Abandoned Cabin* from two that the family owned but had not played. The family has previously completed several Escape and Puzzle Rooms, which A1 had identified as a good opportunity for a family activity to which everyone could contribute. This aligns with other research findings which show that parents frequently associate family leisure activities with opportunities to promote positive family bonding and connectedness (Hebblethwaite, 2015; Shaw, 2008). The inspiration for this paper came from the family's collective enjoyment of those activities, as well as from prior experience playing the deductive, mystery-themed game *Watson and Holmes* (Castro, 2015). In playing this game with her parents, it became apparent that A2, who had not read a wide range of 'whodunnits', was at a considerable disadvantage due to her lack of knowledge of the genre. This experience highlighted not only the importance of understanding intergenerational play as a family activity but also the need to understand the situated and cultural knowledge that players bring to a game.

The game was played at the family dining table, which doubles as a game table (see Figure 1). The session was video and audio recorded and was professionally transcribed. After checking the

transcript, the authors watched the video recording together and identified several key moments and activities during the session. These moments were selected because they showed interactions between different family members and the game components, or explicit discussion of gameplay elements, and are representative examples of the types of social actions, activities and practices that arose during the gameplay (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010, pp. 82-84). As such, they are the focus of this paper. In the absence of any formal ethics approval process, both A2 and A3 contributed to the authorship of this paper by assisting with selection of vignettes, by reading and commenting on them and an early draft of the paper. Their comments are included here verbatim and influenced the focus and findings of this paper. They had final approval over its contents and over the material discussed, although much of the analysis and the connection to other scholarly work are the work of A1. This aligns with other research within a researcher's own family setting, for example that by Wearing et al. (2015) or by Bean, Bean, and Bean (1999). Their father chose not to participate in this process, but consented both to the recording of the play session and to its use as a research artefact, and read over the paper in draft form. He is referred to as 'Dad' in the transcripts.

igure 1 The game in play. The image shows the players, with A1 to the left, then A2, A3 at the end of the table and 'Dad' opposite.

Data analysis

The SOC model proposed by Conway and Trevillian (2015) offers a framework for understanding interactions during games as occurring at the level of the character, the operator, and the social environment. It builds upon the work of Erving Goffman (Deterding, 2013; Goffman, 1974; Linderoth, 2012) as well as on work from phenomenology, on Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) and on Giddings' discussion of the "Game Event" (Giddings, 2009) to explore the hermeneutic orientation of a player in relation to a game at a given moment. These levels are hierarchical; "One must always exist in the Social World for a Game Event to take place" and "if one's intentionality is oriented towards the Character World … then we take for granted that the player always-already inhabits the Operative and Social World" (Conway & Trevillian, 2015, pp. 72-73) and are intentionally equilibrial in that movement between them is collective and collaborative and requires the work of all participants (Deterding, 2013, p. 62). Importantly, Conway and Trevillian

note the importance of objects as actors in the game: a card showing a knife, for example, is simultaneously a manipulable object in the Social World, a playable/usable "knife card" in the Operative World, and a knife in the Character World. It is through collusion between players and objects that they achieve entry into and maintain a place within the Operative and Character Worlds. In *The Abandoned Cabin*, a Character World interaction would occur if the players referred to the game's setting – "Oh no, we are stuck in a scary cabin". Such comments were made at the start of the play session, when the players were responding to the narrative setup for the game, and frequently referenced other pop culture tropes ("Is it Dr. Frank-N-Furter?" asked A2). During the play itself, the players' activities were more directed towards solving the puzzles than towards role-playing within the setting. Accordingly, this discussion focuses on the Social and Operative interaction levels to identify a distinction between interactions in the Operative World.

In the tradition of ethnomethodology, we examine how the play of the game is accomplished (Kew, 1986; Liberman, 2013). By this, we mean the practices, negotiated activities, and articulation work that are necessary for playing a game, as well as the ways in which these are realised in an intergenerational family setting. In particular, we observe that *control* of the game – in this situation, expressed primarily through control of the physical elements of the game – is fluid and shared amongst the players. This is due both to the orientation of the pieces (small cards, which cannot be seen by all family members) and to the need to coordinate several tasks in first solving puzzles, which may require combination of elements from the supplied clue booklet as well as from cards, then entering the solution on the code wheel (Figure 2), checking and cross-referencing answer cards (Figure 5), locating a reference symbol on an image in the clue booklet (Figure 3), and bringing new elements in to the game by retrieving them from the riddle card deck, removing them from

the booklet, or pressing them out of a card. These individual components are shown below; Figure 4 illustrates their use during play.

Figure 2 The Codewheel. Players align a reference symbol (eg a hexagon) and three-digit solution code (eg 346) to reveal a solution number in the inner row (here: 26). This directs them to the corresponding answer card.

Figure 3 The reference image from the game booklet.

Figure 4 This image shows the components in play. To the left of the image, A1 and A2 are attempting to solve a puzzle, while A3 reaches for the code wheel. This image highlights the different activities involved in solving a puzzle but also the difficulty (especially for 'dad', right) of seeing all of the elements in play.

FINDINGS

We present our findings as a series of five vignettes, each of which focuses on a different behaviour or type of interaction. The first vignette demonstrates this process of learning to use the game and to coordinate its various elements as a puzzle is solved; the second shows a discussion of how to solve a particular puzzle. The third presents an example of explicitly directive 'parenting' behaviour, the fourth highlights an instance where too much knowledge of games was potentially misleading for players. Finally, Vignette 5 shows the family discussing the game as they pack it away.

Vignette 1: Learning to operate the game

This example shows the players attempting to understand how to situate their solution to an early puzzle within the setting of the game and how to coordinate their own activities and the information that they reveal. It therefore focuses on the players' interactions with one another and with the game materials at the Operative level. After they solved the first puzzle, A3 entered their solution on the code wheel (Figure 2) (an activity for which she took responsibility throughout the game) by aligning the puzzle's 'solution' (a 3-digit number) with a reference icon. This reveals a number in a single, central window on the codewheel. This directed the players to answer card seven (see Figure 5), which required them to cross-reference a symbol on an illustration in the supplied booklet (see Figure 3) to retrieve an additional answer card from the deck. It is only after going through this process that the players learn whether their answer was correct, in which case they are directed to add additional riddle cards to the game, or incorrect, in which case they must revisit their solution, potentially by drawing a 'hint' card to help them solve a tricky problem. An example response to an incorrect solution is provided in Vignette 2.

   A3: This thing says that … [she peers at the code wheel]

A1:Okay, the little window

A2: But how did you code wheel it?

Dad:[repeats code]

A2: Are they the same numbers on different things, or …

Dad:No, that's the only option.

A2:Okay, so I turned over the answer card seven, "The code may be right. Where do you see the code symbol?" So if we go back …

A1:So, it's on the L. No?

A2:It needs to be on a …

Dad:Where do you see the card symbol?

A2:Oh, wait on riddle card seven …

A1:Wait, there, look.

A2:It means answer card seven, which we do not …

A1:No, it's there. Right? There's L so it's on the safe.

A2:Oh, yeah, it's on the safe. So now I need to look at answer card nine.

A1:Yup.

Figure 5 Game components: a pair of Answer cards, showing (a) the requirement to locate a code icon, leading to a more specific Answer card and (b) a specific answer card with instructions to add additional items to the game.

In this play, A2 took responsibility for the decks of cards (riddle cards and answer cards, as well as the unused hint deck) throughout most of the game, although A3 also took on this chore at times during the play. This vignette shows A2 attempting to understand the use of the code wheel, which was led by A3. Although this did not appear to cause conflict during play, in discussing the play some two months later, both A2 and A3 commented unfavourably on the other's taking control of specific components.

A2 notes that these shared operative responsibilities helped to compensate for information being spread all over the table; at

times, she found it difficult to track all the activities on the table as different players took control of cards and objects:

> "The cards were put near me when taken out of the box so it felt natural to take on the task myself. I did feel it made it easier to ensure everyone knew what was going on because they knew I had to give them that information when it became available."

She remains annoyed that her sister had sometimes taken cards directly from the piles without waiting for her to pass them across. These squabbles interrupted the gameplay, downkeying the players into the Social World as they negotiated and resolved them before returning attention to the Operative World.

By contrast, A3 feels strongly that she would have enjoyed the game more if responsibility for these tasks had been varied during the game.

> "Claudia wouldn't let me do anything else but the code wheel was right in front of me … I would have preferred to share the jobs around more and do different things."

To A3, the value of sharing the jobs around was worth the associated risk of being slower to complete the game. This highlights the existence of multiple, sometimes competing goals, which may be highly personal to one member of the family and which may conflict with the stated goal (to complete the game within a given time). For A3, operating the game and interacting with its material components represented a meaningful pleasure of play.

A further source of particular pleasure for A3, a keen photographer, was the opportunity to demonstrate her familiarity with the video camera used to record the session and to take photographs of game components. The game thus offered her a further opportunity – beyond the gameplay – to demonstrate her competence and authority. Even two months

after the game session, she considers her ability to use the video camera an enjoyable highlight of the play.

Vignette 2: Collective problem solving

In this Vignette, the group is responding to an incorrect solution to the riddle card shown in Figure 6. They move between the Character, Social, and Operative Worlds to as they attempt to resolve the problem.
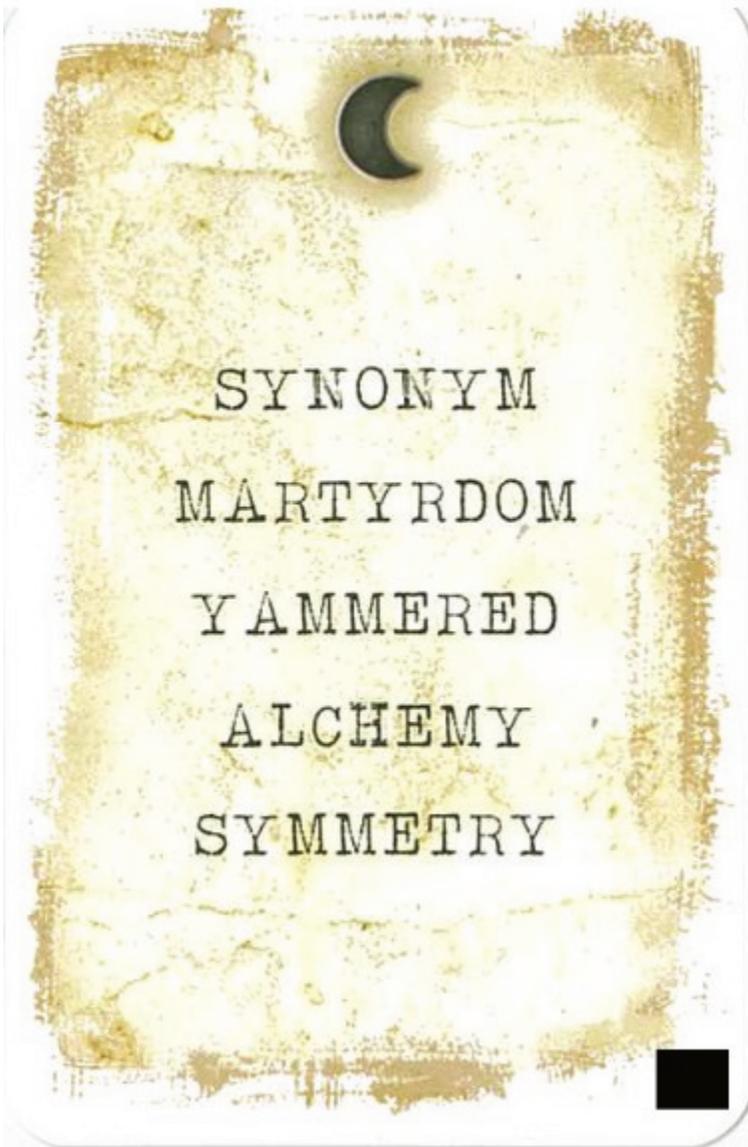
Figure 6 A riddle card

A2:[reading from Answer card] "I guess solving riddles isn't your thing, isn't it? Unfortunately the code is not correct." Just for the record, I'm reading out what this says.

A1:So, I've tried crossing out the Ys and the Ms, because they all have Ys and Ms. They are the only letters that they all have and S-N-O-N-A-R-T-R-D-O-A-E doesn't make sense.

A2:Have we done the moon, right? [reads] "The moon rises in M-A-Y." M dash A dash Y.

A3:How many Ms, how many As, how many Ys?

Dad:Yeah, that's good.

In this example, the players have failed to solve a problem and are brainstorming possible answers. A1 has tried a solution which she is not happy with; A2 identifies an earlier unsolved clue that might be relevant, and A3, the youngest of the group, proposes a new solution. Dad's "Yeah, that's good" refers not to an outcome but to the novel suggested approach. This was something that A3 particularly enjoyed about the game: "it wasn't all easy, and we all got to solve some of the puzzles."

Moments like this demonstrate that a game like this can act as a leveller in family relationships, transcending generational barriers (Costa & Veloso, 2016, pp. 44-45). Although, as we will show, the interactions during this game included directive 'parenting' behaviour, they also provide an environment where both children and parents are free to experiment, to try new approaches, and to negotiate a solution to a shared problem, as well as to share responsibility for the experience and the components.

Vignette 3: Sociality and parenting

Explicitly 'parenting' behaviours (which were frequently directive) represent a specific subcategory of these social interactions. These occurred more frequently during the (extended) setup and packup phases of the game.

Figure 7 Reading the rules.

A1:(reading from the introduction narrative) "What's the game about? You and your friends are in the car on your way to a well-deserved vacation. Your spirits are high, as you talk about spending a few relaxing days on the beach, and lively evenings playing games in your vacation rental. The last thing you need is for your car to break down." … Nell, are you listening?

A3:Um-hum (affirmative)

A1:Good. What's happening, where are we going?

A3:We're going to a vacation …

A1:At the … ?

A1:You weren't listening!

A3:I was!

In this vignette (see Figure 7), A1 is concerned with orchestrating the experience. Her role is not only to play the game but to uphold and enforce family behavioural norms. She is concerned that A3 is missing out on the narrative setup at the start of the game, which may be important as they play. A3 indignantly protests that she is listening, despite being unable to repeat

substantive material, with her echoing of the unfamiliar word 'vacation' suggesting that she is not paying attention to the meaning of the text (Australians would more typically say 'we're going on holiday').

In discussing this vignette, A3 commented that she did not think that the story was important; "I wanted to get straight to the puzzles." Unlike her sister, A2 felt that this scene-setting was valuable "as we were essentially playing out a story of escaping the cabin, it helped connect the game to the feeling of actually doing an Escape Room." For her, the narrative served as a link not only to the activity at hand but also to evoke the broader activity of Escape Rooms which the game attempts to replicate, whereas A3 felt uninterested in that broader context. This highlights the differing experiences of family leisure activities, where family members place different value on elements of the experience, and highlights a potential source of conflict.

Related to this directive behaviour, a Social World activity which we observed throughout the game, rather than within a particular vignette, was praise. Unlike directive parenting behaviours, praise occurred amongst all the participants. In Vignette 2, we see 'dad' praising A3; elsewhere during the session, we observed the parents praising one another, or the children praising a parent or each other for a novel or innovative solution. Players affirm others' suggestions and even their (mutable) roles. "You're the boss," A3 tells A2, describing her control of the riddle and answer cards. Although both A2 and A3 subsequently identified control of cards as a source of ongoing tension and conflict, these comments suggest that it was uncontroversial during play. In some cases, praise is prompted by the answer cards ("Congratulations" or "Very good"), and in others it is spontaneous praise for the group.

Vignette 4: Naïve and extended operative behaviour

In understanding the Operative World (Conway & Trevillian, 2015), we identify a distinction between 'naïve' operation of the game itself, with no external knowledge required, and a more extended operative behaviour, which references the players' understanding of how various forms of "games" – and perhaps explicitly "Escape Rooms" – work, as well as their general and cultural knowledge.
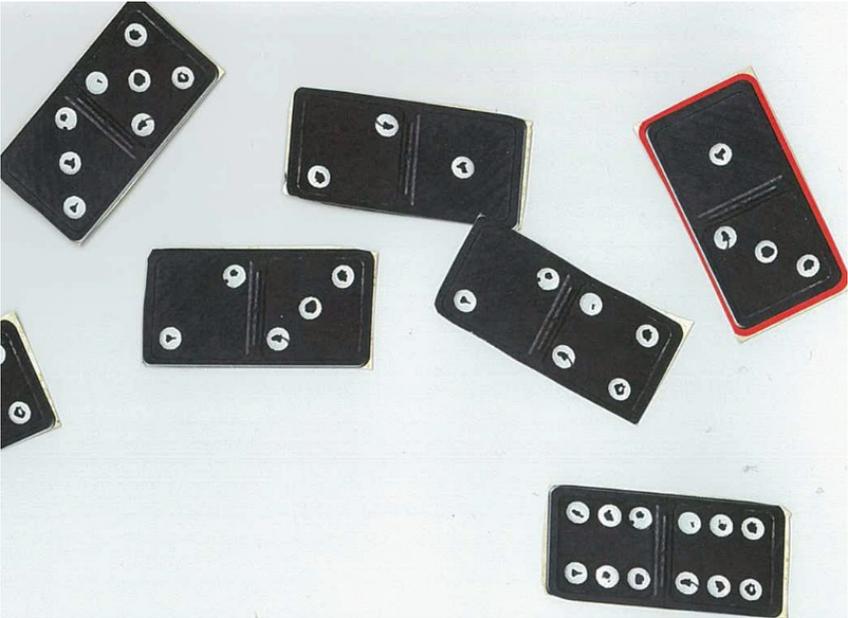
Figure 8 The 'Domino' pieces, cut from the clue booklet. The 1-3 domino (top right) is outlined in red.

[A1 is cutting paper domino shapes (see Figure 8) out of the clue booklet]

Dad:Is there a double six there?

A1:There is a double six.

Dad:You start with the double six.

A1:No you don't.

Dad:Yes, you do.

A1:[emphatically] You start with the one that is outlined in red my friend. And that is a three and a one. It says, look, it shows you very explicitly the first domino is the domino outlined in red.

Dad:So, that's the one? No, that's the first.

A1:And then, that's the last one. Okay. We aren't really playing dominoes.

Figure 9 "Dad" points to the double 6 domino; A1 is cutting out the shapes while A2 is ordering them into a line on the table.

In this example, "dad's" knowledge of the rules of *Dominoes* has the potential to interfere with the family's ability to solve the problem. His familiarity with *Dominoes* as a game invites extended operative behaviour, intruding into and informing the play experience. The design of the game, however, successfully communicates (through outlining one domino in red) that the chain should not in fact begin with the double six because "we aren't really playing dominoes" at all. This is an effective approach for an intergenerational game as it does not

presuppose situated cultural knowledge, but requires players to recognise and acknowledge that this extended operative behaviour is not required within the game.

In this way, *The Abandoned Cabin* successfully privileges naïve and situated knowledge and operation. This contrasts with the game *Watson and Holmes*, which we described earlier, where a player without cultural knowledge of a Golden Age Mystery novel trope (the internal construction of a piano and the potential use of piano wire as a garotte) was unable to successfully solve a scenario.

A3 compares this to her experience playing the *Marvel* themed version of *Codenames* (Chvátil & Sershon, 2017), a clue-giving and deduction game best played with others who share similar knowledge of and exposure to the fictional setting of the *Marvel* movie universe. As a fan of the movie franchise, A3 finds it frustrating and "annoying" to play with A1, who has seen few of the movies and therefore fails to understand the complex clues that A3 provides. To play *Marvel Codenames* requires extended knowledge of the setting rather than simply naïve understanding of the game's operation. The structuring of *The Abandoned Cabin* to support naïve play on both an operational and a cultural knowledge level thus supports intergenerational play by bypassing these opportunities for conflict and confusion – whether it is a parent or a child who holds the additional cultural knowledge.

Vignette 5: Forms of enjoyment

In this vignette, the family is collectively packing up the game and discussing the play experience.

A1:Did you like it, Nellster?

A3:Meh.

A1:Meh? What was meh?

A3:I preferred being inside a room doing an Escape Room.

A1:Okay.

Dad:This is slightly cheaper. [they laugh]

A1:I think they do a good job of capturing that feel though, don't they?

A3:It's less of a big thing though. [she walks out of view, to the video camera]

A1:Yeah, it's not like we did with [family friends] or something. But still kind of nice.

Dad:[spins code wheel] That's cool.

A1:And we could do all of these for the cost of doing one escape room.

Dad:They don't need —

A2:They got a good deal on this.

A1:Cool. Thank you everybody.

Dad:[to A3] Can you turn that off now?

A1:I'll shut it down …

A3:Family hug.

Further conflict between naïve and extended expectations of the game's operation is highlighted in this post-game vignette. As the family packs up the game, they express how much they have enjoyed playing it – but A3 has qualms. The use of the term "Escape Room game" built on her expectations and led her to compare the boardgame unfavourably with her expectations of an Escape Room. A3's feeling that the activity was 'meh' appears to originate in an expectation that she would experience the same sense of surprise and enjoyment and of "unpredictability or novelty" (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, p. 284) as she has previously found in an Escape Room. It may also reflect her sense

that escape rooms offer more potential for individual activity and success, where the Exit game generally focused all members of the family on a single puzzle. She found this both enjoyable and frustrating. Nevertheless, A3 is sufficiently happy with the experience to initiate a 'family hug' at its conclusion.

Two months after playing the game, A3 remains uninterested in playing another Escape Room boardgame "but I might play if you ask me to." She prefers the experience of "something that can be replayed, like *Pandemic*[4]." It appears that her cultural expectations of a game as replayable are not met when it can only be used once.

DISCUSSION

The vignettes presented above identify a number of key tensions or issues that surround intergenerational play: coordination of and with players, activities and components; the tension between directive "parenting" behaviours and the desire for free play; and the distinction between "core" and "balance" leisure activities (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, p. 283). Moreover, they suggest a possible extension to Conway and Trevillian's SOC model (Conway & Trevillian, 2015) that distinguishes between naïve and extended operation. Lastly, the process of analysis and writing has led us to some methodological considerations about autoethnographic work in the family setting.

Coordination

Coordinating activities or 'chores' (Xu, Barba, Radu, Gandy, & MacIntyre, 2011), an activity that takes place in the Operative World (Conway & Trevillian, 2015), ensures that play continues without interruption and without undue delays. Williams (2018) has suggested that collaborative puzzle-solving builds effective problem-solving and teamwork skills, highlighting that Escape

4. (Leacock, 2007)

Room style games are overtly focused on in-game collaboration. In Vignettes 1 and 2, we see this coordination as an overt activity that is discussed amongst the players. Significant effort is required to keep track of the many pieces in the game as well as the actions of other players – we observed several instances where the players back-tracked to see what had already been solved or acted upon. Moreover, these vignettes demonstrate flexibility in family members' leadership roles, which has been linked to the positive attribute of family adaptability and reflects an ability "to adapt and learn from different experiences and situations" (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, p. 281). In a boardgame, in-game cooperation is not just between people but between people and material objects (Conway & Trevillian, 2015; Rogerson, Gibbs, & Smith, 2018).

Parenting

Vignette 3 provides an example of the "emotion work" of articulating play and "facilitating positive experiences and encouraging positive interactions among family" (Shaw, 2008, p. 697) and of teaching and reinforcing desirable behaviours. It demonstrates that parents may "use purposive leisure as a tool for promoting their children's personal growth and skills gain." (Goodenough et al., 2015, p. 379); A1 uses the game setting to encourage and support A3's active listening behaviours[5], playing an "effortful, instrumental" role (Larson et al., 1997, p. 80). Throughout the play session, directive comments and instances of praise highlight A1's role as not only player but also as parent and mother, emphasising the ambiguity of play as both leisure and 'work' for mothers (Cowan, 1983). This links to our earlier finding on in-game cooperation and the value of leadership roles.

Leisure activities

This play session particularly evokes the distinction between

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5. This was not a consciously planned part of the session.

'core' and 'balance' activities presented by Zabriskie and McCormick (2001). *Core* family leisure activities are characterised as "common, everyday, low-cost, relatively accessible, and often home-based" (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, p. 283). By contrast, *balance* leisure activities "are generally less common and less frequent than core activities and … therefore provide novel experiences" (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, p. 283). Thus, "a family that plays board games [sic] once a week" may experience this activity differently than a family which rarely plays boardgames together (Melton, 2017, p. 464). A3's frustrations with the session, at least initially, appear to revolve around a mismatch in expectations, where she associated "Escape Rooms" with novelty and excitement that the boxed game failed to deliver (Vignette 5), although they may also simply echo the finding that teenaged girls between 12-15 may be less satisfied than others with family leisure activities (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003, p. 184).

Forms of operation

The differing skill levels and cultural knowledge highlighted in Vignette 4 suggests a fruitful extension of the SOC model (Conway & Trevillian, 2015) to split the Operative level to accommodate naïve and extended operation. It builds on understanding of literacies (Bean et al., 1999; Mäyrä, 2017; Zagal, 2010) and gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007; Walsh & Apperley, 2009) to highlight the particular forms of knowledge that boardgamers may bring to the table. What we have termed extended operation is closely related to procedural literacy (Bogost, 2007, 2008), a way of understanding games as games which builds on the particular expertise of the serious hobbyist (Stebbins, 2015).

Methodological considerations

Our final observations relate to the experience of conducting

autoethnographic work in a family setting, and to the collaborative analysis process. These speak once again to family members' differing experiences of family leisure. Although both A2 and A3 were interested in playing the game and in collaborating in the analysis, A3 in particular found it boring and repetitive to rewatch an experience that she had already rated as "Meh," eventually refusing to engage further with the source material. In fact, in the process of rewatching the videos and discussing their experience, both A2 and A3 appeared to become considerably more negatively inclined towards the experience with the passage of time, each focusing on the specific things – often minutiae – that made the play "annoying". A particular source of frustration was the (perceived) loss of control over the material game components – the cards and the code wheel. These frustrations contrast with the many instances of spontaneous praise and evident enjoyment that we observe in the video, suggesting that the process of analysis may have led to a less favourable evaluation of the game.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that an Escape Room style boardgame provides an enjoyable and interesting opportunity for intergenerational play. It highlights the value of the core and balance model in conceptualising intergenerational play, demonstrating that teenagers and younger children may have differing expectations of the novelty of an activity. There is potential for disappointment when a 'core' playful activity fails to deliver the novelty and excitement of a 'balance' leisure activity. This points to the importance of not overselling an activity as that may raise a participant's expectations and lead to disappointment when the activity fails to meet those inflated standards. This was the primary concern of the youngest player, A3, whose criticisms of the play experience focused primarily on its mismatch with her expectations.

Moreover, this paper extends the SOC model (Conway & Trevillian, 2015) to contrast between naïve and extended operational activities, identifying intergenerational play as an environment that benefits from explicitly rewarding naïve operation over cultural experience. This requirement for naïve operation – or the lack of procedural literacies (Bogost, 2007, 2008) – extends also to the situated cultural knowledge that is used during play. We identify directive "parenting" interactions as a specific subcategory of social activities which may occur during intergenerational play. Further research could examine the extensibility of these findings (beyond an n=1 study) to further explore the value and structure of naïve tasks in the design of games for intergenerational groups.

In addition to the intrinsic benefits of promoting family cohesion and interaction observed in the literature, we demonstrate that intergenerational play provides a structured environment that enables and encourages social interaction. By welcoming teenagers and young adults as equal participants, an Escape Room game encourages a levelling within the usual family hierarchy. Despite this, some parenting behaviours may persist through the articulation activities of the game and particularly during setup and packup. The game's embracing of the naïve framework for operation and knowledge, by providing all required contextual information and by establishing rules for activities that appropriate familiar items like *Dominoes* without adopting their associated rulesets, enables all members of the family to participate as equals in solving the problem.

This cooperation is enacted not only in the puzzle-solving activities but also in the materiality of the game artefact, as the different materials of the game allow each participant to share responsibility for controlling the work of play. Both A2 and A3 pointed to the game's materiality – the opportunities to interact with the pieces – as both a pleasure of play and a discomfort. The game components were a source of tension not only during the

gameplay but even afterwards, as we analysed the play session, as each noted occasions when her sister had taken control of pieces that she would have preferred to administer herself: interacting with the components was enjoyable, sharing the components with other players – especially across the table – was less so. They found it almost distressing to destroy pieces of a game, with A3 in particular noting that she would rather play a game like *Pandemic* that can be replayed. Her preference for a 'real' Escape Room, which also lacks replayability, suggests that it may have been the destruction of the components that she found particularly unsatisfying rather than the lack of replayability.

Nevertheless, *The Abandoned Cabin* provided a playful and enjoyable evening of family leisure for an age and gender group (adolescent women) that has been identified as particularly resistant to family leisure activities. This opportunity for positive interactions amongst family members and for the family to collaborate as a single unit in pursuit of a common goal is both valuable and increasingly rare as children age and develop their own interests. The game presented a variety of challenges and puzzles that allowed each family member to feel that they had taken an important role in solving the mystery regardless of their age, and encouraged the players to play with and manipulate objects in solving puzzles. Our analysis highlights issues relating to the experience of playing the game as well as the experience of observing one's own play. The vignettes presented in this article demonstrate a range of parenting and leisure behaviours which support prior research on intergenerational play and leisure, offering insight into the materiality of play as well as into directive behaviours, praise, and the importance of controlling game components. They highlight the distributed material practices embedded in the game and the collaboration between objects and players that allow players to operate the game.

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A FATHER AND SON EXPERIENCE IN GLOOMHAVEN

PAUL GESTWICKI & ALEXANDER GESTWICKI

INTRODUCTION

Gloomhaven (Childres 2017) is a notable board game for many reasons. It is an ambitious design that combines elements of tactical miniature combat, resource management, legacy gameplay, and branching narrative in a unique fantasy setting. From a production perspective, it involves hundreds of cards, sealed boxes, permanent stickers, and roughly 22 pounds of cardboard. It is only the second game published by Cephalofair Games founder Isaac Childres, whose first Kickstarter campaign for the game raised $386,104 and whose second printing earned more than ten times that amount (Childres, 2015, 2017). *Gloomhaven* rocketed to the top position in the overall, thematic, and strategy categories on hobbyist site Board Game Geek (BGG) where it remains as of this writing; according to BGG administrator Scott Alden, this top ranking has only changed six times since its founding in 2000 (Alden, 2017). We believe that this means it is a game that deserves to be well played.

We, the authors, are a father and son pair. Paul is 42 years old, a Computer Science Professor, a lifetime gamer, and a married

father of four sons. Alex is the eldest of these boys, 12 years old, a Boy Scout, and an avid reader. We have played games together for practically all of Alex's life, starting with simple games such as *The Bird Game* (Wernhard, 1974) and *Reiner Knizia's Amazing Flea Circus* (Knizia 2003) and leading up to some of our more complex current favorites, *Mage Knight Board Game* (Chvátil, 2011), *Runebound* (Litzsinger, 2015), and *Charterstone* (Stegmeier, 2017). Paul began using BGG to log all of his plays in January 2016; between January 2016 and December 2018, we logged 937 board game plays together. We started playing *Gloomhaven* in February 2018, and we have logged 63 plays since then, a count that includes all attempts at scenarios, not just the number of sessions.

A note for readers who have not yet played *Gloomhaven*: this is a spoiler-free article. The only information shared that one would not know from reading the game's rules is a summary of the introduction to the first scenario and a brief discussion of a specific non-unique monster's special abilities.

Game Systems and Theme

It is important to have an overview of the fundamental systems of *Gloomhaven* in order to contextualize our play experience. *Gloomhaven* is a relatively complex game as evidenced by its 52-page rulebook and 122-page scenario book. Interested readers can reference the rules online or view one of many rules explanations available on the Internet.

Gloomhaven is a fantasy adventure game set in an expansive, changing world. Each player controls a character, but these are neither stereotypical heroes nor conventional Tolkienesque orcs and elves. Instead, the characters are loosely affiliated mercenaries, each with their own motivation for adventure. The opening scenario establishes that the characters came to the eponymous city of Gloomhaven just looking to make enough

coin to buy a meal. The game is designed to focus on the stories of these characters in a persistent world: players may come and go, and characters will retire, but the changes to the world are permanent, enacted by writing on game components, placing stickers on cards and the map, and breaking the seals on secret game content.

Gloomhaven plays out over two overlapping games: the scenario game and the campaign game. During an individual scenario, one to four players each control a character in a tactical miniatures game. Modular boards are laid out in accordance with the instructions of the Scenario Book, and these boards are populated with enemies, traps, and treasures. Each scenario specifies the players' victory condition, such as defeating a specific enemy, clearing the board of enemies, or obtaining a particular treasure. The difficulty of each scenario is based on the levels of the characters attempting it, and players can optionally raise or lower the difficulty with concomitant increases or decreases in rewards.

Each player has a set of cards that are particular to their character's class, and the player chooses a subset of these for use in a particular scenario. Each card has two abilities, a "top" and a "bottom" ability, the top often being combat-related and the bottom being movement-related. On a player's turn, he or she plays two cards—one for its top ability and one for its bottom. The starting hand contains between eight and twelve cards (depending on the character class), and so after just a few turns, players have to "rest" to regain used cards. Some cards have powerful effects that remove the card from the scenario irrevocably, and each time a player rests they must also eliminate a card. Hence, the total cards available to a player is always diminishing, and a player is eliminated when they are out of cards.

Most of the effort in a scenario is focused on moving around

the map and attacking enemies. Each attack has a basic strength that is modified by flipping a card from the corresponding attack modifier deck. This is a deck of small cards that has modifiers ranging from -2 to +2; each player has their own attack modifier deck, and there is another that is shared by all enemy attacks.

The campaign game describes the rules for how players choose characters, level them up, purchase equipment, select scenarios, unlock new characters, encounter interactive narrative events in the city and the wilderness, and, crucially, retire their characters. Each character has a Personal Quest that defines a condition by which that character retires, meaning that its player must start a new character to continue the campaign. This fits well into *Gloomhaven's* grim setting: the characters are not archetypal fantasy heroes but individuals with their own motivations for joining an adventurer's guild.

The campaign includes many aspects of "legacy" gameplay, meaning that decisions have permanent consequences. (The name for this mechanism comes from *Risk Legacy* (Daviau & Dupuis, 2011), the first commercially-successful game to deploy it.) Two good examples of this are character class unlocking and the world map. The game box includes 17 smaller boxes, marked only with unique icons, that contain the materials for each character class. Six of these are available from the start of the game, while others become available when specific in-game conditions are met, frequently upon the completion of Personal Quests. The world map is a large and mostly-empty board, but new locations for scenarios are unlocked during play; these are marked on the board using permanent stickers. When a scenario is completed, the sticker and the scenario book are marked to indicate that they may not be played again for their campaign effects.

PLAY EXPERIENCE

Progression

A scenario of *Gloomhaven* presents a very different power curve than conventional fantasy adventure board games. Most such games represent a power fantasy in which the character gets progressively stronger, encountering greater challenges as they progress. This is seen in some of our favorite games mentioned in the Introduction as well as genre classic, *Talisman* (Harris, 1983). By contrast, in *Gloomhaven*, you become progressively weaker throughout the scenario. Many of a character's most powerful cards require removing them from the scenario when they are played, often for significant effects and experience points, but then they may not be used again. Keeping in mind that the cards also serve as a gameplay timer—run out of cards and your character is eliminated from the scenario—this means the short-term gain can lead to longer-term stress. This interesting decision is at the heart of what makes a scenario of *Gloomhaven* so compelling: there is rarely an easy choice, and there is always a consequence. It is an excellent example of what Burgun (2011) describes as endogenously meaningful ambiguous decision-making.

While characters become weaker during a scenario, they become slowly more powerful during the campaign. Leveling up a character means that new cards become available; however, the character's hand size does not change, which means that choosing the cards for a given scenario actually becomes a harder and more significant decision. This challenge scales with a player's familiarity with the game, producing a great example of the cognitive-based *fun* described by Koster (2013): it is the form of fun where challenge and skill rise in tandem, leading players into a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

As described above, when a player's character satisfies their

Personal Quest, that character retires, and the player must create a new character for the next scenario. The new character will almost certainly be weaker than the one that retired. However, the starting level of new characters and the strength of new characters are also tied to legacy aspects of gameplay, so the more you play, the more powerful your starting characters will be. This is another example of elegant balance between skill and challenge. A new player would be overwhelmed by the choices required to play a fifth-level character, but veteran players will be able to draw upon a rich cognitive model of *Gloomhaven*'s various systems. Hence, the veteran would not be intimidated to start a character at a higher level, even of a new class. Even though all the character classes have different foci, they all play within the same fundamental systems.

Competition and Cooperation

Gloomhaven is cooperative in the sense that players either win together or lose together. However, what makes *Gloomhaven* a truly excellent cooperative game is that it includes incentives not to cooperate. This point was clearly articulated by Lees (2017), and we would like to expand upon that point here. Many cooperative board games, including the iconic *Pandemic* (Leacock, 2008), task players with working together toward a shared goal. There is no reason not to cooperate, and so it is a forced cooperation; that is, pure cooperation is the only viable way to play the game as it is intended. By contrast, *Gloomhaven* contains many systems that incentivize seeking personal rewards instead of cooperative goals. One example of this is treasure: that which is looted by one player belongs to that player alone, and neither items nor gold can be traded between characters. Obtaining treasure has an opportunity cost, since a character who is looting is spending valuable time and cards without contributing to the goals of the scenario. To be clear, then, a player who seeks personal gain is generally making the scenario

more challenging for the entire party. The competition for scarce resources is embedded within the larger cooperative framework.

Another example of incentivized competition can be found in Battle Goal cards. At the start of each scenario, players secretly choose one of two randomly drawn Battle Goal cards. These provide a personal goal for that player that, if they meet it, earns personal rewards. However, these goals are often at odds with the shared objectives of the scenario. This leads players to make the difficult choice between self-serving actions that may earn them rewards or cooperative actions that serve the scenario goal. Crucially, the rewards from Battle Goal cards are only earned if the players collectively succeed in the scenario.

These examples demonstrate that *Gloomhaven* makes sacrifices meaningful. There is an incentive to be selfish, which means that choosing to be selfless comes at a real cost. We have seen it in each others' faces as we play, the furrowed brows that indicate that we are trying to choose between an immediate selfish gain and a maneuver that is better for the party. During our analysis of *Gloomhaven*, it was Alex (the younger author) who pointed out that this is essentially the tension of free will and morality: choosing good is only virtuous if you could have chosen evil.

We observe that certain kinds of actions have leaned us more toward cooperative or competitive play. Working together toward a scenario's objectives requires a cooperative approach with occasional selfish maneuvers to maximize treasure or satisfy Battle Goals. We share an interest in unlocking and experimenting with new classes, and so actions that move toward unlocking classes and retiring characters are pursued cooperatively. For example, when we know one character needs to go to a particular location or region for their Personal Goal, we will generally prioritize that action. Even though items and gold are not shared, looting some treasure chests results in unlocking new locations and new items appearing in the town

shop. Therefore, we will regularly take a cooperative approach to accessing treasure chests as well: even though most of the time only one character gets the treasure, there is still shared delight in revealing what is inside. Of course, some chests are also trapped, which can lead to disappointment or schadenfreude, depending on the circumstances.

The campaign regularly requires the party to make a collective choice. For example, the party must draw a random Road Event when traveling between scenarios, and these require choosing one of the two available options. We find ourselves discussing the expected costs and benefits of each path. Although we recognize that our characters are not heroes *per se*, we regularly choose what seems to be the more altruistic and order-preserving options. The in-game consequences are cleverly designed such that one does not always know whether an altruistic or selfish approach will yield better tangible rewards; this increases our engagement with the narrative, as we see our choices have real and sometimes unintended in-game consequences.

Another layer of cooperation is required due to the complexity of the game: players have to cooperate to understand and remember the rules, and failures here can lead to unexpected dynamics. As described earlier, the game provides a recommended level of difficulty for a scenario based on the levels of the characters attempting it. It also provides additional rewards for attempting a level at a higher level, or lesser reward for attempting at a lower level. Our first experience in lowering the level was an early scenario that required the elimination of all the enemies on a wide open board. We were both playing stealthy characters who specialized in taking down one target at a time, and we did not have a "tank" to absorb damage as we tried to eliminate a crowd of enemies. It was disheartening for us to reduce the level of the scenario after a series of failures, but we were able to complete it after doing so. It was not until after the session that we reviewed the rulebook and realized

we had actually been attempting the scenario at a higher than recommended difficulty, which means we had dropped it down and succeeded at the recommended "normal" level, not an "easy" level.

INTERESTING GAME PROPERTIES

For the player who enjoys the tangible elements of the hobby, *Gloomhaven* is bountiful. Within the enormous box one finds hundreds of cards of varying sizes and types, individually-boxed miniatures, sealed character class boxes, plastic bits, envelopes, a sturdy board, giant sheets of stickers, and nigh-countless cardboard chits. It presents a real logistical problem for storage, and it is likely intimidating to those who are not enamored of game "bits," a point we will return to later. Indeed, *Gloomhaven*'s success on Kickstarter was almost certainly because of its grandiosity: board gamers on Kickstarter seem to be drawn to ambitious and original designs.

We find the attack modifier decks to be particularly intriguing. A first level character's initial attack modifier deck consists of twenty cards whose average value is zero (ignoring, for our analysis, the two special cards that give double damage and a guaranteed miss, respectively). Players can add and remove cards from this deck as part of character advancement. Each individual change has relatively small statistical impact. For example, the lowest card in the starting attack modifier is a single -2 card. A character who is able to remove that card changes the average value of the deck by one-tenth, from zero to 0.1. One one hand, this is hardly a noticeable change; on the other hand, the player now knows that they will never hit and have a modifier worse than -1. Also, taking that unwanted card out of the deck produces a rare feeling of *fiero* during the campaign game. Hence, while the statistical impact of an individual change may be small, the emotional impact of that change is high.

Unlocking a new character is always exciting for us, but we did find ourselves occasionally disappointed to see that a character appeared to be geared toward larger parties than our twosome. While support-type characters are probably of great use in a larger party, we could not help but feel deflated afterward, given the length of time between character class unlockings. That said, part of the fun of the game has been that Paul has been painting the miniatures, so unlocking a new character has also meant both the opportunity to paint a new miniature and the pressure to do so. Interested readers are welcome to visit Paul's blog to read more about painting the base set *Gloomhaven* characters and, should we finally unlock all the character classes, a planned spoiler-filled post with the rest.

As mentioned above, a player's most important decisions during a scenario of *Gloomhaven* are which cards to play and when to rest. In addition to the two abilities, each card and rest action has an initiative number from 1 to 99; these numbers, along with those on the randomized monster tactics cards, determine turn order. *Gloomhaven* includes an important rule that players do not reveal what specific numbers they are playing when they choose their cards: we lay our cards face down to show we have chosen them, and when the other player is ready, we reveal simultaneously. Players can share general information about what they are planning to do, but not the specific numbers. This has led us to organically develop a terminology about our planned initiative. One of us might ask if the other is going "early", and the response might be "yes, really early" or "mid-early" or "more early-mid." This breaks the 99 possible initiative values into rough, relative chunks. We can communicate about these ranges quickly without falling into analysis paralysis: when timing is crucial, we can make a plan that we hope will succeed, without spending inordinate time on the planning. Sometimes we still end up in the wrong sequence, and the random values on

the enemy tactic cards are generally unpredictable, which means we also have plenty of surprises.

Rule-bending

The previous discussion of card selection provides an appropriate segue into another important topic: *bending the rules*. While a video game will enforce its rules through software, a board game can only enforce its rules through a social contract and players' knowledge. In competitive games, players will hold each other to the rules in a competitive game due to the desire to win within the game's structure, what Caillois (1961) calls *agôn*. A cooperative game provides a different kind of social contract, however, as nothing except the players' consensus stops them from bending or breaking rules to meet their desires. For example, a simple cooperative game like *Hanabi* (Bauza, 2010) requires players to hold their cards backwards, so only their fellow players can see their values. A player could peek at their cards, which would make the game much easier, but fellow players hold each other accountable to the rules. Whether the players collectively win or lose, the playing of the game was legitimate.

Gloomhaven provides a tightly designed puzzle, and some missions required us to attempt them several times in order to succeed. However, there were some cases where we found ourselves so frustrated that we bent the rules in our favor in order to finish particularly difficult missions. One example was a mission involving enemy oozes, which have a random chance to produce additional oozes. The nature of random generation is that it's possible to get a string of extra enemies' appearing that leaves the mission practically unbeatable. Hence, there have been a few cases where we flip yet-another-ooze-spawn, groan in unison, and then quietly reshuffle the deck for a different result.

The attack modifier decks is also prone to strings of good or

bad luck. Usually, this adds to the enjoyment and tension within the game. However, we have witnessed an interesting occurrence of rule-bending within the tumult of managing multiple attack modifier decks and initiatives. The order of actions changes every round based on the initiative scores on players' selected cards and enemy tactics cards. With so many to keep track of, we find that we sometimes get them out of sequence. Most of the time, when we discover that we made a sequencing error, we simply unwind the steps and play the same cards again in the right sequence; indeed, if the result was catastrophic for our party, we always roll back and follow the "right" sequence. However, we have occasionally had cases where something truly epic happens in the card reveals, after which we discover we had the sequence wrong. In some of these cases, we agree that it was too fantastic of a result to revert, and so we opt for cinematic excitement rather than perfect fidelity to the rules.

We had a similar situation in which Alex's character had a Personal Goal to defeat a large number of a certain type of enemy. It was his first character, and we played roughly twenty different scenarios without seeing a single instance of this enemy type, let alone enough for him to retire his character and try a new one. We ended up searching for this particular enemy type on the Internet and discovered a thread of similarly-befuddled *Gloomhaven* fans who had the same Personal Goal on their characters. A helpful community member pointed out a particular mission path, and hence we were able to meet this character's Personal Goal and try some more characters. We had sacrificed some of the thematic mystery of the world and some strictness of legacy gameplay in order to produce what we believed (and still assert) was a greater good. After all, if the game had role-playing and a gamesmaster, Alex's character at this point would have certainly visited every tavern in *Gloomhaven* to gather rumors about how to hunt down his hated enemies.

We have deeply enjoyed our experience playing *Gloomhaven*, and we have been happy with the weight of the rules, the pace of unlocking new content, and the unfolding of the world's narrative—but it's not a game for everybody. Our first two games were played with a previously-unmentioned third player: Jessica, who is Paul's wife and Alex's mother. She also plays all manner of board games, stranger neither to party games nor crunchy Euros. However, she dislikes fiddliness in a game and has no particular affinity for miniatures. She also is ambivalent about legacy gameplay (despite having won our *Charterstone* campaign) and would have no qualms about peeking into secret content or stories. Jessica found the rule preventing our sharing specific initiative values to be frustrating, as she prefers to plan out the specifics of each move rather than accept ambiguity. Having a third player also meant more enemies on the board to manage and more down time. Clearly, this is not the game for her. We found our play experiences to be much more enjoyable as a father-son pair when Jessica gracefully bowed out of the campaign. Indeed, this also speaks to the cleverness of *Gloomhaven's* design, that it is robust to having a player leave the campaign. (Paul later took over Jessica's character after retiring one of his own, and the reader will be glad to know that this character also met its Personal Goal.)

THE INTERGENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Intergenerational Play

We have had several discussions in preparing this article about the nature of intergenerational play, focusing on *Gloomhaven* and also reflecting on our gaming relationship more broadly. We believe that we play primarily as peers. There are relatively few moments where Paul pauses the game, switches into didactic mode, and tries to impart wisdom about courtesy in victory or grace in distress. These moments are more common with Alex's younger siblings, and certainly were more common with Alex as

well in years past, but he has grown into a skillful and gracious player. In *Gloomhaven* in particular, we have both helped each other to make good tactical decisions and identified synergies between our characters. The times we have most disagreed have been about the choices presented in Event cards. Some of these have been rooted in different interpretations of the text on the card, where the author was leaving parts of the story implied that Paul noticed but Alex did not recognize. In such cases, Paul explained his interpretation, and Alex learned to recognize the narrative cues. There was one frustrating case, however, that led to frustrating negative results not so much due to our interpretation and decision, but a rare instance of poorly-written, ambiguous prompts.

The other cooperative games that we have played most often are *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game* (Selinker et al., 2013) and *Runebound* with the *Unbreakable Bonds* expansion (Fanchi & Litzsinger, 2017). These games also feature hidden information in the form of cards, but neither has any real incentive to keep such cards secret. We are impressed by *Gloomhaven*'s semi-competitive scenario game, where the secrecy of a player's Battle Goal provides a real incentive not to bend the rules around hand management and action selection. This also prevents quarterbacking, which is the unpleasant phenomenon seen in some cooperative games where one dominant player "plays" other players turns for them.

Despite playing primarily as peers, we do have different experiences and expectations. Alex has mostly played games with Paul: he has almost no experience playing games with anyone outside his immediate or extended family. That is, Alex does not have much else to compare intergenerational play against. Paul, on the other hand, has played games with friends through life's various stages. Reflecting on this, he still sees playing with Alex as being very similar to playing with a gaming friend. Playing with his son, there is generally more focus on the game itself

rather than table talk because, living together, there are many opportunities to discuss the events of the day. Playing with adult friends over a beer tends to involve much more banter about work and current events, and the general catching-up that friends do when they see each other rarely.

Intergenerational Authoring

In the spirit of sharing our intergenerational experience, we would like to conclude by sharing a reflection on how we write this article. After reading the call for papers, Paul asked Alex to consider whether he would be interested in the collaboration, to which he readily agreed. Paul dumped about two page's worth of ideas into a document in order to determine what might be of interest to the journal's readers, and he asked Alex to consider what he considered the most interesting aspects of the game. Alex wrote a short draft, which he expanded into three paragraphs after discussing it with Paul. There were several weeks where we did not work on the paper but occasionally talked about it.

We rebooted our efforts by meeting around the dining room table with a stacks of index cards and sticky notes. We organized our ideas together and fit them to a skeleton, with specific ideas or anecdotes written on thirty index cards that were organized under six headings and subheadings. Paul transcribed these into Google Docs, adding text to flesh out the ideas as well as references to related games and research, while Alex did the mathematical analysis of the starting attack modifier decks. Alex asked about citations while doing unrelated academic work, and we used this article as an example of how references work, mechanically and culturally. Alex reviewed the article independently, leaving comments via Google Docs, which Paul reviewed and resolved from his office. After Paul's final pass through the text, he turned it over to Alex with the suggestion to read it beginning to end, identify any vocabulary that was

unfamiliar so as to avoid misrepresenting our experience, and leave any questions in the document as comments. We reviewed Alex's 15 comments and decided we were ready to submit. We hope you enjoy reading the article as much as we enjoyed composing it.

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PLAY AND PERFORMANCE

Confronting Vulnerability through Karaoke

JEFFREY S. BRYAN, FALLON BRYAN, & QUINN BRYAN

When karaoke began in the United States, it was commonly seen as a stepping-stone toward rockstardom (Drew 2001). Though a Japanese import, karaoke was quickly adapted to an American audience (Drew 2001). Thus, as karaoke became a more known phenomenon, notions of stardom have faded and instead karaoke has become a form of leisure entertainment meant to draw crowds to venues. But more than just leisure entertainment, karaoke is a unique sort of casual simulation game (Bryan & Tanenbaum, 2019) that relies on performance for its primary method of engagement, turning that performance into social play. As detailed in "Adapting the Empty Orchestra" (Bryan & Tanenbaum, 2019), karaoke is constrained within a sparse set of explicit rules, an amorphous list of implicit rules, and open-ended goals that are set by and for the individual, toward a community of shared performance. Karaoke's design, eschewing competition in favor of collaboration and community, allows players to explore themselves and grow from that exploration. In this paper, we explore the experience of a father and his two daughters playing out our projected selves, confronting our vulnerabilities through the "as if" of karaoke. Performance play through karaoke allows players, and play communities, a unique opportunity to explore identities, and confront vulnerabilities, in a safe public space, using the

expressive potential of music and a built in audience community support system.

PLAY CONTEXT

Our games of karaoke were held at The Decades Bar and Grill in Anaheim, California, which bills itself as an 80s and 90s themed bar. This location was chosen because it is a bar and restaurant and as such, children are allowed entrance until 10PM. Karaoke at this location is held on Sunday nights, from 6PM to 10PM, making it an excellent choice for observation because the kids could play from start to finish and still make it home at a reasonable time. The patrons that attend karaoke here are a mix of locals and one-time visitors. The local regulars tended to be middle aged, blue collar workers out for a date night before heading back to work in the morning, or young 20-somethings partying in small groups of fellow college-aged friends. The one-time visitors tended to be young professionals attending business conventions or team building retreats, as Anaheim is a popular destination for that. Each participant played in concert with each other as both performers and audience, needing no formal explanation of how to play, informed by the ubiquitousness of karaoke in popular culture toward playing "as if" together.

Appropriate to the theme of the bar, the interior decor is stenciled with silhouettes of famous musicians from the 80s and 90s, like Run DMC, Freddie Mercury, Gwen Stefani, etc. On the exterior, the windows are decaled with typical words and phrases ubiquitous during the 80s and 90s, like "Party On!" and "Radical." The logo and the primary coloring for advertising the bar, including window decals and bar lighting, are in hot pinks and neon blues, while most of the walls are black with white accent walls, and silver metal accent panels, while the exterior is a simple, stark white. The menu is also themed, featuring appetizers, salads, and burgers with names like "I Will Always Love You Nachos," "Little Red Corvette Flatbread," "Wang Chung

Asian Wrap," and the "This Is How We Do It Burger." Even the bathrooms join in on the theme by including photos of 80s and 90s musicians in various bathrooms along the walls of each bathroom. The theming is more facade than anything, not going much deeper than simple decoration, but the KJ for the karaoke held here adds his own flair that elevates it a bit.

Every Sunday, Kevin Cable, otherwise known as Kevin Karaoke, hosts karaoke at The Decades. He comes with a laptop loaded with a huge selection of karaoke music, books cataloguing that music, and his often sparkly, colorful outfits complete with 80s and 90s themed sunglasses. He also brings his tiger-striped guitar, which he plays sporadically throughout the night, with either an impressive ear for impromptu music re-creation or a huge catalogue of memorized songs. Kevin is the consummate host and karaoke jockey. He performs his role with panache, incorporating play and playfulness into his engagement with his players. In his role as host and facilitator of the game of karaoke, Kevin acts as a performer himself, usually opening his shows by singing the first song, keeping himself in the queue when the night is slow, graciously pulling out as the queue fills up, and constantly staying engaged with the other players. He fills the evening with small jokes, like ringing a call bell when lyrics reference sexual themes, or using puns related to song titles. And he persistently maintains positivity in the play space, encouraging audience players to take on the singer role, congratulating singers on their efforts, and personally reaching out to individuals all throughout the play space. Players at Kevin's shows go up not only with the support of knowing the crowd is implicitly encouraging, but that they will have Kevin's support. He not only fills awkward lyric-less moments with guitar playing, he also adjusts the soundboard to enhance singers' performances. His years of experience hosting games of karaoke shines through during every game, as his multiple nominations as best KJ in Orange County can attest. His expertise, and the

degree to which he knows how to encourage play in his players, is the reason his game was chosen for this exercise.

PERFORMANCE PLAY

As Richard Schechner says in *Performance Studies*, "performance may be defined as ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play" (2007, 89), because play is at the heart of every performance. Schechner says, "Play is intrinsically part of performing because it embodies the 'as if'" (2007, 89), echoing one of Caillois's four rubrics of play, *mimicry*, "the pleasure of playing a role, of acting as if" (2001, 8). When one performs a role *as if* they were someone or something else, they are playing. In fact, Schechner goes further to claim that play is always performance "when it is done openly, in public" (2007, 89). In acting theory, Stanislavski describes this in terms of the "magic if" (2016, 60) whereby an actor acts "as if" (2016, 53), they are a person experiencing the "given circumstances" (2016, 53) on the stage. We see parallels in game studies, including Margaret Mackey's work on the *subjunctive mode* in which a reader or player steps into the "as-if" (2008, 2) of a work of fiction. This is a performance of identity, a trying on, as it were, as if heart and soul were clothing toward an expression of self. Such performances negotiate incredible vulnerabilities, vulnerabilities we draw upon to perform, a concept discussed by Lesa Lockford and Ronald Pelias as a type of performative knowledge used when performing without direction, in which "inspiration comes less from the imaginative dwelling within a character or the circumstances, than from his/her affective understanding as a person in an uncomfortable, difficult, or alien situation" (2004, 438). We become, to use their term, "not me" (2004, 438), another form of "as if," that allows us to explore and move beyond those vulnerabilities. John Paul Gee calls this an exploration of the *projected identity*, seeing the "as if" role as "one's own project in the making" (2003, 50), defined by our own personal aspirations, that allows us to learn something about ourselves and grow. Gee

sees this as an interaction between the self and the "as if" of the persona we're playing, developing a third identity that translates between who we are and who we want our persona to become. As such, the "as if" becomes a bridge for developing new literacies of self, a bridge that allows the player to explore the inner depths of who they might be. Karaoke is a game of performance play that is designed to facilitate personal goals, a design ideal for exploring the "as if" of the projected identity toward personal growth.

So this is how we spent our Sunday nights, a father and his two daughters playing karaoke together at the Decades Bar, performing "as if," allowing ourselves to explore our projected identities, learning more about ourselves and each other by confronting deep vulnerabilities.

QUINN BRYAN – AGE 14

As someone who has been on stage and has performed in a crowd, karaoke should not be so different from the several plays I have performed, but this was not the case. I know how to play someone else, to put on another character. When I play a character, I play the emotions *they* feel. I imagine I'm them and place myself in their situations. I'm not a method actor, but I'm not playing a version of myself, I'm playing the character. But karaoke isn't just playing someone else. In karaoke, I'm really playing a version of *myself*. When I go on stage, I imagine, and grab the emotion of, being confident. Singing is one of my insecurities. I love to sing, but my voice never seems to get the emotion, quality, and overall talent that I wished that I had. It just never does what I want it to do. So when I go on stage to sing karaoke, I learned to let go of that insecurity and play that confident emotion instead.

On the first day of karaoke, I felt largely out of place next to the loud and happy party goers who sang in groups in 80's aesthetic

clothes. I did not want to go up on the stage, but knowing I had nothing else to do but watch as tipsy girls sang to songs I hardly knew, I prepared myself for going up to the stage. I tried to remember the beat, the rhythm, and the lyrics of the song "Misery Business" by Paramore (all while worrying if it was okay to say "whore" in front of an audience) and walked up towards the stage when my name was called. A familiar sort of panic swelled up in my chest— the sort of panic that usually flutters in me when I am in front of an audience, but this grounded me a little. "I've done this before, there's no need to worry," I try to tell myself. Once the music started, and the lyrics were shown, I was startled. These were not the same lyrics I'd blare out as we'd ride in a car. I was more focused on getting the lyrics right than I was with actually singing, and unsurprisingly was unimpressed with what I managed to sing. Normally I loved going up on the stage where I was wiped clean of my doubts and energized with adrenaline, but this time I enjoyed being in the audience watching my sister sing like I haven't seen her do before, and listening to my Dad (unsurprisingly) nail every song he sang. The excited and happy adrenaline coursed through me now as I sang along to every song that played after my performance— stumbling and stuttering along to 80's songs. Being in an audience (in the several nights that I've been to) was always fun and enjoyable, but I still wanted to own the stage.

On the second night of karaoke, I attempted a song that my Dad was amazing at. I was more nervous than the first night and all I could really think was what if I made a fool of myself? But I was still willing to try. I sang my best, but would not hit those low parts and gave up trying them, belting out the familiar yell-sing tunes and laughing off my bad attempts. Although I was not particularly good at that song, I found it enjoyable and settled down in my chair and watched the other players go. Again I found myself singing along to whatever song happened to play as I sketched in my book or played on my phone. These nights were

enjoyable, but I still wanted to prove to myself that I was good, or at least okay.

The rest of the karaoke nights went the same with a few differences here and there, singing "Let it Go" with my sister, listening to a little girl sing "Baby Shark" with her mother, and the one night when it seemed every person in the bar could sing at the levels of *America's Got Talent,* and although I became more fluid and relaxed when I went to sing, I knew I wasn't quite where I want to be. But on my latest karaoke night, when I sang a song suggested to me called "Ex's and Oh's," I really tried my best. Originally I was skeptical that I could sing this song because it was a pop song. But, it was a good song, and one I was willing to try. And I partially knew the lyrics by heart because of all the times I've heard it played. Butterflies fluttered in my chest again, and I was again reminded of theatre and being on the stage. Though nervous at first, I felt myself begin to be wiped clean— all nervousness, fear, and doubt were gone and I was simply living in the present. I sang as if I knew what to do and how to sing. I let go and just sang, and before I knew it, I was done. This was by far my best performance in karaoke. And when I sat with my family and listened to them cheer for me, I was immensely pleased. Of course, I'll never get to that emotional and perfect singing that I wish I could do, but I felt close to it. Singing has been something I've enjoyed since I was little, but I had kind of given up on it a while ago because I just didn't feel like I was very good at it. It had simply become one of those things I wished I could do— like speaking spanish, being able to dance, or having the ability to do the splits— an idea I often visited, but only in my daydreams on a particularly boring day. But letting go of myself and singing "Ex's and Oh's" as if I could really just do it gave me confidence, just as theatre does.

Singing was different than acting because I have confidence in my acting ability, but not when I sing. So even though theatre and karaoke have a stage, speakers, performers, and audience, they

were different to me. But once I let go, I realized karaoke could be the same as acting, I just have to let go— and sing because I want to sing, not to prove my worth to an audience who may not care, or to perfect myself. Karaoke is a great game and one you should play to gain confidence.

FALLON BRYAN – AGE 16

My experience in karaoke has been incredible, and, dare I say, even life changing. I've learned what I'm able to overcome and gained back confidence in performing that has been gnawed away at for years, confidence I never even knew I was capable of in the first place! Through karaoke, I've discovered who I was underneath the person who desired perfection by pretending to be more than who I was on stage. I played as if I can do this. I played the part of me that I believe, or want to believe, can do this. Like I'm tapping into the part of me that fear blocks access to. And in doing so, I found a new connection to something I love to do.

Stage fright has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I can recall early performances I did as a kid, in ballet, piano concerts, singing groups, school presentations, etc. where I would feel the effects of stage fright. My heart would beat rapidly, my palms would sweat, my mind would run at a million miles per hour but I wouldn't be able to think of anything useful to help me with my performance. But back then, I was at least able to perform. I was quiet, and incredibly shy, but I could at least attempt to perform my songs.

When I was in middle school, I joined the orchestra, and started playing violin. Violin is a very complicated instrument to play. It requires a lot of resources outside the violin itself, and takes a lot of time and the ability to multitask with several developed skills at once. It's a formula set up to trap insecure kids like me. When I was put into higher level orchestras, I began to feel even more self-conscious. Many of the players had their own violins,

private tutors, and years more experience than I did. They were capable of things I couldn't even imagine doing. That feeling of inadequacy still lingers with me whenever I play the violin, and it's almost ruined my enjoyment of violin playing, of performing in general.

When we started karaoke, I began learning how to actually sing. I had to overcome my tendency to sing shyly, more inward, to myself. I had to figure out how my real singing voice worked, what it sounded like. I had to learn how to forget about my perfectionist needs and overcome my fear of my own failure by letting go of myself. And, to a certain degree, I was able to. Not perfectly, of course; I still fall under the stress of perfectionism from time to time. But, I am making steps towards letting it go by inhabiting a different me when I get on stage. That's how I had my best performance.

The restaurant and bar were busier than they had been the past couple of nights. It was later, and the crowd seemed enthused in the performances. It was the perfect circumstance for a good performance. I remember wanting to perform for the second time that night, when the crowd was more lively, and I was more able to immerse myself in the song. I wanted to amaze my family with my performance. I wanted to redeem myself after the half-failure I performed earlier that night. However, part of me didn't expect much. Or, more realistically, part of me didn't want to be disappointed if I didn't do too well. But, I wanted it to be a true performance. I spent several minutes playing the song quietly in the bathroom, dancing and practicing lip syncing while fellow players were in the stalls with the doors shut. I've been told in the past I needed to incorporate dancing, so I was going to. On that night, as I stood on the stage, I was able to access every part of who I am, despite the fears of judgment I always hold, especially when performing for a crowd.

I stood up, the song opened. Lady Gaga sang the intro, and I took a deep breath, and let my voice ring out.

> *"Rah rah ah-ah-ah!*
>
> *Ro mah, ro-mah-mah!"*

I swung my hips to the side occasionally, and mimicked the dance moves my family was miming. I felt the rhythm of the song, and my voice sounded strong and confident. When the chorus would come, I sang out loud, and let my whole body move with the song. I sang, exposing myself and my singing, allowing myself to be vulnerable in front of this crowd of people, no longer yielding to the part of myself that wanted to stay hidden.

I was still nervous, of course, but I let it add to my performance. "The nervous kid overcoming her fear to sing on stage," another new "me." And yet, it also became who I was right at that moment, a projection of me and somewhere toward who I wanted to be, and I took advantage of it to make my performance *more*. It felt like I was telepathically allowing my fear to be communicated to the crowd. I wanted to immerse the audience in my performance, allow them to feel what I felt. I wanted them to understand the full effort, the full meaning, behind everything I was doing. So if my leg bounced, or if my voice cracked, I let a sheepish smile cross my face and coupled it with an awkward giggle, and continued on, not minding at all that I looked nervous and awkward. Even when I would mess up the dance moves I was miming, and missed a couple of lyrics by getting too focused on my dancing, I wanted my performance to be real, to be *honest*.

> *"I want your love*
>
> *And I want your revenge*
>
> *I want your love*

I don't wanna be friends"

I felt the music building up, I felt my passion getting stronger. Orchestra taught me several things, one of which is musicality, and I was giving the song as much of a crescendo to build up the climax as I could. I had confidence in my french, and I was sure it would impress the crowd.

"Je veux ton amour

Et je veux ta revanche

Je veux ton amour "

My dad motioned for me to move down stage. I always thought when people performed offstage, it was kind of cheesy.

"I don't wanna be friends"

But, the steps looked inviting. And the crowd was cheering. And I felt a buildup in the music and couldn't resist the call.

"No, I don't wanna be friends"

I had a brief moment of hesitation. My skin felt tingly on the edges as if I was being ripped off the background like a bandaid.

"I don't wanna be friends!"

But I took the first step, and each step afterwards gave me more strength and confidence. Everyone around me cheered, guiding me, dancing with me. I felt like the song was controlling me, guiding what I was doing, how I was singing as if I was truly a performer. I love music!

"Want your bad romance!"

And finally I was off the steps, singing my all into the microphone, arching my back into the performance.

"Want your bad romance!"

"I want your love and

I want your revenge

You and me could write a bad romance!"

I sang the part I always loved, and felt the release of all that tension. When I hit those higher notes near the end, it makes me feel so talented, and sometimes it's so easy to nail. At that moment, I knew I not only nailed that line, but the entire song too. Everyone around me was engaged with me, immersed in my performance. We were a group of people celebrating together. It felt pleasant to know I'd done a good job. I was so impassioned, I didn't really register the people dancing behind me, I could only focus on my own movements and nervousness, but somehow I felt the passion of the room. When the song ended, the crowd cheered, and I was complimented by a lot of people. My family was so proud of me. I was so proud of myself too. Watching the video of my performance later, it's not nearly as glamorous as it felt, which makes me laugh. If that small performance made me feel like *that*, then I wonder what an even better performance might feel like. I plan to continue karaoke after this. And, maybe, I can learn how to love playing the violin again, too.

JEFFREY BRYAN

I estimate that I have attended roughly 600 hours of karaoke performances as a researcher. Even before I began researching karaoke, I had been playing karaoke once a month, or so, for several years, on Friday nights, during happy hours with fellow teachers. I guess karaoke just appealed to me. I had always loved to sing, so karaoke provided an outlet that was otherwise unavailable to me in my adult life. And yet, when you start to examine a thing so closely, you can lose what had once drawn you to it. So when I began this little venture of father-daughter

karaoke, it was simply a matter of course for me. Gone was the strange mix of terror and excitement. Sure, I still got nervous as I approached the stage; that never really goes away. But there seemed no more mystery to it. It could no longer hold me in awe. And then my girls got on stage, their first time singing on a real stage, replete with stage lighting and a professional sound system, and all the novelty came back. I knew how vulnerable they had felt going up. I knew how hard it was to push down those insecurities. So watching them take that stage… I have never been more proud. That, right there, would have been enough. I could have watched them crumble on stage and still have felt as proud simply knowing they had challenged themselves to get up there. So imagine my elation as I watched them meet that challenge with strength and perseverance! And then, week after week, they grew and grew until they had hit that high-water mark of *performer*, using both body and voice to create a dynamic performance that energized and engaged. I needed to push myself just as much as they were. I needed to reconnect with those vulnerabilities and play as if I were as strong as they are.

When I signed up on that first evening together, I had done so simply to encourage them. Getting up is no big deal anymore, but I figured if I went first, they might feel better about it. So I got up and sang, like always, but this time I had two young faces staring at me with pride and excitement in their eyes. That was surprisingly intense. And vulnerable. You want, in those moments, when you're proving yourself in front of your kids, to come through. And certainly, I've had enough practice to know I would do fine, but suddenly I had a drive to *perform* in a way I hadn't felt in some time. But I couldn't quite register that feeling on the first song. I tend to lead with my voice, not that I have an amazing voice or anything, but I can hold a tune well and can belt out some very high notes to some very loud rock, so I can usually get a crowd cheering. But I don't really *perform* otherwise.

I don't move on stage. I don't embody my song. It's just *not me*. I can reflect some passion in my gestures, sure, especially when I lose myself to a moment, but I'm not one who can air guitar during the solo, or bust out the rock moves to punctuate that rock voice. I just feel too silly. So I leaned on my voice, letting it carry me through, and walked off stage. We watched some more, the girls got up and sang, doing an amazing job, and my turn came again. Yet again I couldn't muster the courage to push past my comfort zone. I should have danced or something, but I just *couldn't*. Finally, we hit the end of the night, after my girls had already proven themselves, and I knew that I needed to give it my all. I wanted to show them what this karaoke thing *could be*, show them its power to transform, its power to lift you up and hold you there, a god on the stage for four minutes while everyone suspends their disbelief and acknowledges you as a rockstar. It felt good to have that drive again. I had to do more this time. I needed to. So, I dug deep, clawing at myself as I found that hole inside that makes Radiohead's "Creep" so heartbreaking, until, at that most desperate moment, wailing "Run!" into the mic as I stumbled down the stage, I dropped to my knees, face to the sky, pulling on my shirt. In that moment, I projected into my performer self I had long imagined but never attained. I wasn't the dabbler playing at performance, I was the rockstar stripped clean and laid bare by passion. And once the moment was over, the "as if" evaporated and it was just me on that dance floor, awkwardly evaluating how to return the mic to the stage while still looking "cool." I'm pretty sure I looked the fool, but my girls didn't seem to mind. In fact, they seemed ecstatic.

On paper, it really doesn't take much to play karaoke. You show up, you sign up, and you sing. No matter how you do, the implicit rules of karaoke will protect you; the crowd will never boo, they will never call you out, and they will always provide at least a little placid clapping. But those simple set of procedures don't describe the challenge of performance play. When you get up

there, on stage, in front of a crowd of strangers, you're preceded by years of people's experiences watching similar performances. We have a literacy for musical performances and a clear, if varying, sense for what makes a good one, so in karaoke you're always up there performing against the specter of the original performance, embodying the "as if" toward a projected identity, whether it exists in the minds of the audience, or only in your own mind as you recall the voice and performance that typifies your song. It's that mimicry, that performance "as if," that's at the heart of play in karaoke, the amateur game of singing in public spaces. But karaoke is also an act of exposing yourself, standing up on a stage as the singular center of attention for all to see, because you have the audacity to stand up there and pretend that you have something to say, even though someone else has already said it before, and likely done so much better than you're about to. Still, it's in persisting at that projection of self, that wish to hold a crowd's attention, the desire to be noticed, the need to push beyond your own limitations, or even the deceptively simple act of challenging yourself to be there at all, where we find our strengths. I performed as I never do because I wanted to show my girls that I could face myself as much as I'm asking them to face themselves. Yet, there's a lie in there somewhere. I know my challenge is nothing compared to theirs. I know how much Quinn struggles with her voice, finding it hard to match what she hears in her head. I know how fearful Fallon is of that stage, of being the center of attention, of being scrutinized and judged. I know in that way a father does the vulnerabilities my daughters are confronting. And I'm glad, actually, that because they're there, looking at me with expectation, that my vulnerabilities made an appearance as well. Maybe they're always there and I just learned to ignore them. So how could I not challenge myself a bit? How could I not pointedly seek out my insecurities and face them like they were about to? I watched my girls stand up tall while feeling small, prove themselves amongst a crowd, and face their fears to come out stronger for it. I had to

at least play at being as brave as they are, these two teenagers in a room full of strangers, singing on a real stage for the first time.

CONCLUSION

Karaoke has been an incredible bonding experience for us. Each game, we learn something new about each other. We find new songs we didn't know we liked, we try new things we didn't know we could do, and we face new vulnerabilities as we grow past our comfort zone. It's regrettable that there are so few family friendly karaoke venues, and yet, this also helps us to appreciate how rare this opportunity has been. We were able to expose our vulnerabilities through an act of public performance, protected and bolstered by play and by the structure of this particular game, playing as if we weren't quite as vulnerable as we felt, *as if* the "bad singer," the "shy girl," and the "awkward performer" were gone. We embodied our "as if," allowing ourselves to explore our projected identities, learning from our new selves just what we were capable of, and we did so as a family, together. In *Karaoke Nights*, Rob Drew says karaoke in the United States is seen as a chance to "be a star" (2001, 13). He says this not just in the micro scale of the moment, the star of the space for five minutes, but also as a legitimizing pathway to some sort of broader stardom, even if only on the local level. Maybe that was true of karaoke in the 90s, when it was new and fresh. But our experience of karaoke, as both performers and audience, watching so many others wear their personas and then take them off again, is that karaoke isn't seen as a launching pad to anything other than a vulnerable expression of self. Any stardom is fleeting and almost tongue-in-cheek, with a clear acknowledgement from both performer and audience that you are playing "as if" you already were the star and not toward aspirations of becoming one. In fact, that's the draw of karaoke and a lesson for designing games toward personal growth. When you design a game without establishing preset goals, with collaboration instead of competition, you build a play system

that supports personal development. No one is competing with anyone. No one is elbowing their way to the top. We're all just stepping on stage, playing "as if" so we can share our vulnerabilities with each other in a safe space.

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PURSUITS FOR THE HEART

Monument Valley 2 and Intergenerational Play

LAUREN CRUIKSHANK

Sitting close together on our living room couch with a blanket covering both of our knees, my nine-year-old daughter Adria sits beside me and cradles my iPhone, excited for a chance to gain possession of my phone, to finally open the new game she's been looking forward to playing, and to spend some uninterrupted time with her mom while her younger siblings nap and hang out with her dad respectively. On my nod, she clicks on the app and the game begins with an opening screen that reveals a small figure seated alone on an angular geometric structure, playing a flute while snow gently falls. The vibrato tones of the flute's gentle song float out of the iPhone's speakers as the words "Tap the path to move Ro" appear in white on a background of muted greys. Adria says, "Oh she's good." "What is she doing?" I ask. "She's playing the flute…a little pink flute. And she has a little black bun and she's wearing like this flowery cape thing. I don't want to make her stop!", Adria responds, listening to the ethereal flute song. Listening too, I say, "Oh, I can hear some rain or snow or something." Adria says, "I think that's snow… Ready?". I respond with a "yep", and she uses her finger to touch the screen, carefully spinning a crank in the structure, rotating the geometry of the shapes to create a consistent path for Ro to travel. She has learned how to do this in the first game of this series, and successfully applies that experience here to turn

components of this first puzzle to connect up the gap in the path. Having solved this first architectural challenge, Adria taps the spot on the touchscreen where she desires Ro to go, causing the little caped figure to tuck away her flute, stand, and walk with echoing footsteps along the path now organized for her, up a set of stairs to a decorative platform at the top of the screen. Adria says, "This is just the introduction," to which I add, "It's so pretty though". "Mmhmm" Adria says absentmindedly as she watches the in-game animation that follows Ro's arrival on the platform. As Ro's featureless face tilts up, the camera pans upwards and the music swells and slides with dramatic glissandos, revealing a sun setting behind a mountain range tinged with greens. White lines begin to slowly trace a pattern in the sky at the top of our screen. Adria says excitedly, "Oh, look it's a 2! Never noticed that till now." "Oh! Me either!", I say. Adria continues, "An M and a 2". "And a V," I add, *Monument Valley 2*". The music swells again as an eight-pointed star-shaped button appears over Ro's head, indicating the end of a chapter and the opportunity to start a new one. Adria turns to me and with a smile, says, "Let's do it!" "Let's do it." I respond, returning her smile.

MONUMENT VALLEY 2

Monument Valley 2 was released by British independent game studio Ustwo Games in 2017 and follows their immensely successful *Monument Valley* title, which debuted in 2014 to critical acclaim, millions of downloads and the title of Apple's iPad "game of the year" *(Webster, 2017; ustwo Games , 2017)*. Both *Monument Valley* and *Monument Valley 2* are mobile puzzle games that encourage players to traverse mazes by spinning and sliding architectural elements to manipulate the environment and find a path for the main character(s) to traverse through each level. Players must make use of perspective tricks, clever mechanics, and optical illusions to negotiate the games' structures in ways that defy ordinary physics. Both games feature silent, featureless, female protagonists that navigate each level, and striking art

styles inspired by influences that range from the drawings of M. C. Escher, to Bauhaus posters, Brutalist architecture, Nicki Minaj music videos, and the colour palettes of licorice allsorts candies *(Campbell, 2019)*. Where *Monument Valley* focused on a white-capped princess as its single protagonist, *Monument Valley 2* takes its 2 to heart, and presents players with two protagonists in a mother figure, Ro, and her unnamed daughter. Although its mechanics situate this game undoubtedly as an isometric puzzle game, *Monument Valley 2,* like its precursor, is also explicitly a game with storytelling at its heart. Levels are presented to us as "Chapters" with titles and subtitles such as "The Viaduct, in which The Child Learns Her First Lesson", or "Menantol, in which Reflection Unfolds Old Memories". Interspersed between puzzles are animated scenes in which characters approach ghostly ancestral figures, who then speak words of explanation and wisdom to help reveal the game's story and acknowledge the emotions the characters are experiencing as they journey through the narrative arc of the story. At first Ro leads the way and her daughter skips along behind, trailing her mother's every move. As the game progresses, however, mother and daughter are separated and reunited several times in small and larger ways, and the daughter begins to not just trail behind her mother, but mirror her movements in helpful ways. Eventually the daughter is controlled on her own or even leads the way herself. In many ways, these shifting player controls exemplify the main story and emotional sweep of the game. The exact story is largely open to player interpretation, but richly draws from the bittersweet themes inherent in being a parent, and in being a child. It is about growing up, learning new skills, and striking out on one's own. It is simultaneously about the pain of letting go of someone you love, the challenge in navigating loss and finding oneself again, knowing that things will never be the same, but taking comfort in the cyclical nature of life and legacy.

PLAYING TOGETHER

Having long had a research interest in games, gender, avatars, and lately, representations of mothers (and the lack thereof) in digital games, I was intrigued by MV2 and the choice by Ustwo to follow the success of the first iteration with this mother and daughter story. The design team at Ustwo has articulated that the explicit goal for their second *Monument Valley* game was to be more story-driven and emotionally engaging, and that while brainstorming characters for the second game, they concluded that "of all the characters that we had, the mother and the child felt the most fresh and presented the best opportunities for storytelling" *(Huerta, 2018)*. Knowing also how much my two older children, aged six and nine respectively, had enjoyed playing through the first *Monument Valley* game, and how they had often called over their shoulder for a parent's consultation on a particularly challenging puzzle level, I made plans with my eldest daughter, Adria, to play through this sequel in its entirety and document our experience with an audio record of our play. This game was an ideal choice for an intergenerational play analysis thanks to its accessible puzzles, its relatively short duration, its relatable story of a mother and daughter, and its play-at-your-own-pace speed, which allowed for ample real-time discussion and collaborative play. I was intrigued to see how playing this game together might illuminate or inform aspects of the game experience, or in turn, our mother-daughter experience. In other words, how would our interactions and roles as parent and child both mediate and be mediated by the experience of playing this mother-daughter game together? And how might the themes of this game in particular have potential resonance or resistance for us as players that echo the mother-daughter dyad of protagonists in the game?

In order to explore these questions, Adria and I agreed to play through *Monument Valley 2* over the course of a weekend in mid-February, 2019. We downloaded the game on my iPhone X, and

played it sitting side-by-side on the couch or on a bed in the home we share with the rest of our family of five. Adria held the phone and controlled the touchscreen actions for most of the gameplay, although we did pass both control and device back and forth between us often, taking turns manipulating the environment and moving the two characters. We made suggestions, asked questions, and exclaimed at each other actions throughout the time we played together. At several points in our gameplay, on Adria's suggestion, we took responsibility for the actions of a character each, alternating who would touch the screen and initiate a game action.

Image 1: Intergenerational collaborative play on a smartphone

In total, it took us about three hours of contact time to finish this relatively short game, which we accomplished in three play sessions of about an hour each – two on the first day, and one on the second day. The unhurried pace of this particular game

allowed for plenty of time during play for pauses and reflection in order to discuss the story and what strategies might work best to address a given chapter's challenges. We took screenshots of moments of play we thought were particularly important or resonant through our play sessions, making use of the phone's capture function often for this purpose. Once we had completed the game, we spent a few additional minutes reflecting on the game as a whole and our experience playing it together. After the audio recordings were complete, I reviewed and transcribed our three gameplay sessions for further reflection. Adria also created some artwork in response to our gameplay collaboration, included later in this work.

INTERGENERATIONAL PLAY

A: On to the next. (reading) Chapter 3: The Oasis: In Which Young Eyes See New Wonders.

L: Mmhmm.

A: Oh my gosh, ok. Oh no, that's gonna fall. That's gonna fall. Oh, it didn't fall. Really?

L: Cool music.

A: Oh, this thing moves. I love those little floating bricks. (gasps) Her daughter just fell! Oh no! They're.. They're running down the hill. Oh my gosh. Ro! No! They can't lose each other! Oh no! I think…

L: They're separated for the first time.

A: Ok, you be the mom and I'll be the daughter, ok?

L: Ok.

Playing this game cooperatively with Adria was a rich experience in more ways than one. The transcripts of our time playing

Monument Valley 2 suggest several interesting phenomena that bear considering further in terms of intergenerational gaming, and specifically parent-child play.

Parent-child play of digital games is common, according to "Essential Facts" paper published by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), a not-for-profit trade association for the digital game industry. For example, the 2018 Essential Facts report notes that 67% of parents play video games with their child at least once weekly, and report the top reasons they play with their children are: "1. It's fun for all of us. 2. My child asks me to. 3. It's a good opportunity to socialize with my child. 4. I enjoy playing video games as much as my child. 5. It helps me monitor what they are playing" *(Entertainment Software Association, 2018)*. The Canadian-specific ESA describes even higher intergenerational play prevalence in Canadian families, with 71% of parent respondents reporting playing video games with their children at least once a week *(Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2018)*.

Despite the popularity of parent-child play, intergenerational play is not frequently taken up by digital game studies scholars. There are some important contributions by scholars such as Alison Harvey, whose work on familial play in domestic contexts explores the gendered and generational dynamics that colour gameplay access and practices for children and parents in their homes *(Harvey, 2015)*. Kelly Boudreau and Mia Consalvo consider adult family members playing social network games together across distance to describe how how familial bonds "shape the reasons for and means of gameplay" *(Boudreau & Consalvo, 2014, p. 1128)*, including how playing with family may keep players playing a particular game longer out of a sense of familial obligation and a desire to stay connected. Other work on intergenerational digital gameplay from diverse disciplines traces how playing games in combinations of children, parents, and grandparents can strengthen existing intergenerational

bonds, help to forge new ones, and challenge age-based stereotypes for players (*Chua, Jung, Lwin, & Theng, 2013*). Playing digital games together has also been found to enhance intergenerational interactions by encouraging prosocial behaviour, combatting senior loneliness, and facilitating the sharing of knowledge and skill (*Costa & Veloso, 2016; Deterding, 2018*). In one of the only studies to look specifically at parent/young child cooperative and co-situated digital play, Siyahhan et al. find support for parent and child play producing quality time together, but also providing a valuable opportunity for parents to engage and support their children's thinking, development and learning (*Siyahhan, Barab, & Downton, 2010*). In this way, play becomes not only leisure, but is productive for parents as a tool for parenting, in which "to play is to provide" (*Deterding, 2018, p. 265*).

This is one of the main distinctions of intergenerational family play, that, unlike potential peer play partnerships, the parent-child interaction is inherently unequally balanced, since parents are responsible for their dependent children as guardians and care-givers (*Dalsggaard, Skov, Stougaard, & Thomassen, 2006*). However, the mediation of play through digital technology serves in many cases to help level this playing field somewhat, with a perceived or actual generation gap in skill and experience with games and technology often giving children the opportunity to exchange or share roles with a parent in terms of who is the novice and who the expert (*Siyahhan, Barab, & Downton, 2010; Aarsand, 2007; Barendregt, 2012*). This potentially provides a situation where "children's competence is celebrated and where the child is cast at the centre of the attention" (*Aarsand, 2007, p. 252*), pushing back on parent-child norms of interaction and allowing for more balanced exchanges of expertise as parents and children play digital games together.

Certainly in our play experience, we experienced a variety of intergenerational play dynamics first-hand. Negotiating how to

play this normally single-player game together was not established by Adria and I in advance, but patterned in large part after our parent-child experience in working together on other kinds of tasks. She was the main apprentice of the game-world, and I was there to observe, discuss, advise, and take a turn when prompted or requested. We physically passed the device back and forth many times as we played, or held the phone for the other as our partner attempted a manoeuvre. Given the relatively small play surface of the smartphone we were using, playing collaboratively necessitated sitting very closely together and positioning the screen in such a way that we could both see, hear, and interact with it as we played. Our relationship as a parent and child made this tight physical closeness comfortable for both of us and our sharing of the game device worked relatively smoothly for most of our gameplay, although there are moments in the transcript when we have to remind each other to share the screen, positioning it in such a way that we can both participate. Fiona Maine, who has written about the first *Monument Valley* game and her observations as pairs of children worked together to play through that game, notes that collaborating on a mobile game such as this is a physical challenge. Tablets and smartphones are designed to respond to a single touch, and more than one finger on the screen means the interface is unresponsive or reacts unpredictably. This single-touch feature necessitates "negotiation for successful collaboration and enhanced dialogical interaction" *(Maine, 2017a, p. 221)*.

This constant ongoing negotiation between parent, child, and game as we played made especially transparent the process of meaning-making that occurs in more opaque ways when one plays a game solo or competitively. Maine, using the work of James Gee, reminds us that game texts are inherently conversational to begin with in their interactivity. She writes that "whilst it is useful to identify the parallels that games have

with other visual media that we might 'read', there is a difference in the transaction of meaning-making that occurs with a digital narrative game… games answer back through their response to a player's actions and this then creates a dialogue between text and reader as each responds to the actions of the other." *(Maine, 2017b, p. 139)*. In this case, as we engaged in three-way conversation with each other and the game itself, our negotiation and interpretation of the game text was not only visible on the screen, but also audible in our verbal reactions, strategies and observations to each other as well. In our play transcript, words and phrases such as "maybe," "I wonder," "let's try" "so now" and "what if?" appear frequently throughout the three sessions. We debated not only how to forge a path through each puzzle, but also the possible meaning of changes in the character's appearances, the connection of the story to the first *Monument Valley*'s characters and lore, the relationship of minor characters to our protagonists, and the significance of colours and lights in the architecture we were traversing. Ro and her child do not speak or have facial expressions to communicate their intentions or emotions to players, so we speculated as well based on their movements and each chapter's environmental cues how they might be feeling, why they were acting in the ways they were, and what their larger goals within the story might be.

There were many moments of success and surprise in the beauty of this game's design, and pride in solving its more challenging puzzles as we played through each chapter. However, it was the resonance of the simple, bittersweet story at the heart of *Monument Valley 2* that provided our gameplay sessions with their most evocative moments. Siyahhan et al. call attention in their own research to how "intergenerational play can also be a transformative experience when interactive narratives are designed around issues that are meaningful to the family". *(Siyahhan, Barab, & Downton, 2010, p. 430)*. While playing a game together, regardless of what title we had chosen, would have no

doubt yielded an interesting collaborative experience for Adria and I, working through this particular game became a meaningful experience for both of us in ways we hadn't necessarily predicted.

The bonds of parent and child and the poignant intertwined experiences of growing up and letting go are at the very core of the story of *Monument Valley 2*, a decision made explicitly by the designers of the game. As art director David Fernandez Huerta states in detailing the design team's philosophy for the game, "It has to be personal". Huerta himself reflects on how the birth of his son Atlas inspired many of the details for the game, and how his becoming a parent is "a big reason why the game is the way it is". He notes that of course, as a sequel, *Monument Valley 2* was already embedded in a generational relationship of its own, "and like every good sequel, it turned out to be about family. And guess what? It was more specifically about heritage and legacy. The people that come before and the people that come after" (*Huerta, 2018*).

In an unusually intimate peek behind the curtain of a small studio, the developers of Ustwo games acknowledge and expand upon these familial themes in a short video published on their development blog, titled "The Parents of *Monument Valley 2*". Parents and other family members of the development team are shown being flown in and celebrated at a special launch and playtest of the *Monument Valley 2* game, and are then asked to reflect upon their experiences of the game's main themes in short informal interviews. The mother of an Ustwo programmer tells us that for her part "what I see in the game is to let them go, to let your child go. Every parent has that problem. But it is still quite scary. But that doesn't stop the world turning. And it doesn't stop people pursuing their dreams (*Gray, 2017*).

PURSUITS FOR THE HEART

One of the most effective ways the game communicates its story of a child coming into her own is through clever shifts in the mechanical controls of this game that mirror the growing independence of a child. Players' ability to move one or both characters in tandem or independently via the touch interface changes at different points in the game to reflect the character development and evolving relationship of the protagonists. In terms of the narrative, Ro's daughter evolves from merely following her mother around a few paces behind, to mimicking her actions as an apprentice, to setting out on her own to learn independently, and finally returning fully realized, able to act skillfully in the world, to partner her mother as an equal, and even take a leadership role in picking up a legacy. It is a process well known to parents and one that is inherently bittersweet. As Ro and her daughter experience a number of separations throughout the game, some accidental and others seemingly agreed upon, the music, colours, architecture, and pace of the game impart emotional tones of trepidation, loss, acceptance, self-discovery, resilience, and reunion.

For Adria and I, these scenes were particularly meaningful and memorable. The transcript excerpt above reflects in particular Adria's alarm and concern at the first distressing separation of mother and child on-screen. She expressed concern multiple times throughout the rest of our gameplay that the characters might experience separation again. When they do, in a calm departure scene that surprised both of us, she characterized these events as "so sad" many times.
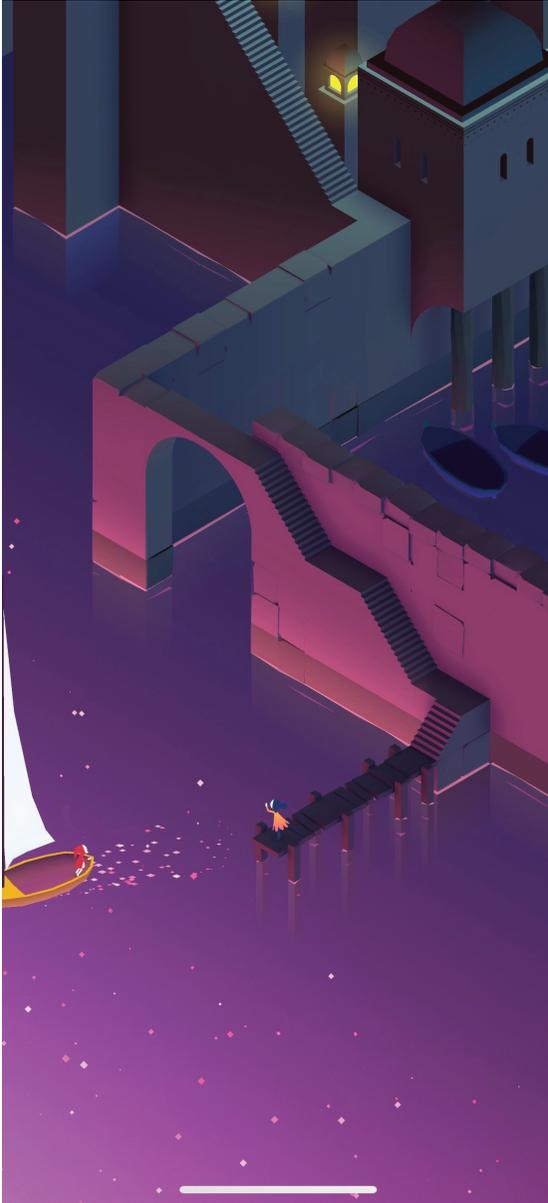
Image 2: Screenshot of a key moment in Monument Valley 2 from Chapter VI: The Docks

A: (reading) Chapter 7: The Towers,: In Which There Remain other Purse…

L: pursuits.

A: Pursuits for the Heart.

L: What do you think that means?

A: There are other occupants for her heart?

L: Hmm. It's black and white now.

A: Yeah, probably because she's sad. How do I do this? It's so hard to… Ah, poor her, it's so sad… You'd be sad too, right?

L: If what?

A: If we had to do this.

L: if my daughter jumped in a boat?

A: yeah, and sailed away?

L: Yes, I would be very sad.

A: And you didn't even know if you could see her again… That'd just be sad.

L: Do you think they'll see each other again?

A: I think they will, knowing this game. I don't think they can support sadness. Oh, so now I can go up.

L: So now there is some red in the picture.

A: Maybe this is like hope or something. And hope that she'll come back.

This moment in our gameplay is one of many in which Adria

connects the story of Ro and her daughter to our own mother-daughter relationship, and relates on an emotional level to how the characters must feel – more explicitly how she would feel and how I would feel, if we were in their situation. I didn't appreciate until I reviewed the transcript of our play sessions just how often Adria expressed concern or sadness about the separation of the two main characters. This preoccupation, I have no doubt, was stirred by the knowledge that a few days after our play sessions together were complete, I was scheduled to get on a flight to a different part of the country to spend a few weeks supporting my own parents as my mother recovered from major surgery. Ever since she was quite small, Adria has always expressed anxiety about saying goodbye to me for any length of time, or having distance between us when life necessities I travel without my kids. The themes of parent-child separation we were navigating in the game world were made all the more affecting by our real-life current circumstances and concerns.

However, this connection to personal meaningful markers in the game's text was not an outcome she alone experienced. Similarly, the points of the gameplay that stayed with me the longest after the game was finished touched on themes that are very real and resonant to me in my own daily experience as a parent of three growing kids. With apologies for revealing some of the key scenes in the game, these moments included the representation of melancholic grit required to get on with one's work after a tough but necessary separation, and the emotional punch of watching a child transition from a carefree and curious dependent to a tall and capable individual seemingly in the blink of an eye or, in this case, the brief passage through a leafy doorway.

Image 3: Screenshot of a child transitioning into an adult from Chapter XII: The Orchard, in Monument Valley 2.

With one daughter now initiated into her preteen years, and

my other two kids also growing impossibly quickly each day, these short, abstracted scenes embedded in *Monument Valley 2* intersected with my own experiences in ways that compounded the meaning of these in-game moments exponentially and gave them very personal poignancy.

While I transcribed our gameplay sessions and composed this article, Adria was interested in contributing something further of her own to the dissemination of our joint gameplay project. To this end, she presented me with two pieces of original artwork inspired by the game and our time playing it. The first is her rendition of Ro and her child, inspired from the icon that accompanies the game's app on my phone.

Image 4: Monument Valley 2 fan art by the author's daughter, Adria, 9.

The second is her interpretation of her and I in the style of *Monument Valley 2*, replacing Ro's black bun with my graying brunette ponytail, and the child's red hood with her own characteristic red curls. The image serves for me as a fitting

exemplar and reminder of how the meanings available to us in games are richly co-constructed and always already interpreted through personal experiences and relationships as we play.

Image 5: The author and her daughter, depicted in the style of Monument Valley 2. Artwork by Adria, 9.

L: Anything else you want to say about this one?

A: It was very challenging, but it was also very fun to play with you.

L: It was fun to play with you too. We had good teamwork, I thought!

A: Yeah! High five!

L: Haha! Does it make you feel sad, knowing that I'm going to be going away for a while?

A: Yeah.

L: But just like the game, we'll be back together soon.

A: Mm.

L: Don't grow that much when I'm gone though…

A: I'm not going to! I don't think I'll be a teenager by the time you come back! Unless I have a magical tree sprouting flower things, 'cause like the tree was in a petal and then she was in a petal at the top.

L: Don't walk through any tree doors while I'm gone.

A: I won't. At least I'll try not to.

L: I love you.

A: I love you too.

L: Thanks for playing with me.

A: You're welcome.

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PLAYING TOGETHER ACROSS SPACE AND TIME

IAN SCHREIBER & JANIS SCHREIBER

The last time I played a Pokémon game was the original *Pokémon Red* on my giant brick of a GameBoy. The year was 1999. I can still recite most of the details of the game from memory. I have a pretty good memory for games to begin with, and the amount of time I put into that one game was enough to get it to stick.

The year is now 2019. Over the winter holidays, we purchased a Nintendo Switch for the whole family. My daughter Janis, who just turned 8, was familiar with the Pokémon IP but had never played any of the games. I felt it was time, so I purchased *Pokémon Let's Go Eevee*. I chose Eevee over Pikachu for gameplay reasons. In the original game, Eevee could evolve three different ways, including into the rare and powerful Ice type, while Pikachu was stuck in electric type, making Eevee more versatile. While my daughter initially was more excited about Pikachu (*Pikachu is the famous Pokémon*, she said), I hoped my daughter would eventually come to value her Eevee and forgive me. In time I was vindicated; after nearly finishing the game, she agrees that Eevee is cuter than Pikachu, and would not give up her Eevee for anything. (Ironically, your starter Eevee in *Let's Go* can't evolve, thus nullifying my rationale, but I did not know that at the time.)

I have not played *Let's Go*. Janis has played it incessantly for the last couple of months. But we talked about the game frequently when she wasn't in the middle of playing, and to my surprise, I was able to understand what she was talking about and even give her gameplay advice. While *Let's Go* isn't an exact replica of *Red/Blue*, it returns close enough to its roots that we were able to relate to each other's experience, despite that experience being separated by a score of years. What follows are her observations on the game, and my observations on her observations.

ON COLLECTION

> Janis: *I like the idea of studying different species of Pokémon.*
>
> Me: Why?
>
> Janis: *The Professor told me that I should, and I just like it when I know more stuff.*
>
> Me: What if Professor Oak told you to do something you didn't want to do?
>
> Janis: *He only tells you to do things that you'd want to do anyway. Otherwise, that would be catastrophic... you wouldn't play the game!*

Indeed, *Pokémon*'s NPCs and quest givers – especially along the main quest – push the player towards engagement with the game's core mechanics of exploration, battling, and collection. *Pokémon* in particular goes to great lengths to chain together its narrative and its mechanics: the player character's profession is a collector and trainer. To the extent that the player enjoys the gameplay and wants to engage with the game's systems, they should easily buy in to the narrative that asks them to do just that.

When I first played *Pokémon*, I remember this being just as effective a hook for me as it is for Janis. When I was growing up, I played a lot of video games and took pride in being skilled at them. I had the drive and available free time to play games to

completion and even beyond to the level of absolute mastery, and the idea of a game that made completionism a core value from the outset appealed to my desire to show all of my content.

ON ANTICIPATION

Janis: *I just got a Master Ball! The game told me it's a Pokeball that never misses.*

Me: You should save that one for Mewtwo, it's the most powerful Pokémon in the game and you get it much later, and being able to capture it right away without having to fight it will be useful to you. The game only gives you one Master Ball and you can't get any more ever, so I suggest you hold onto it.

Janis: *What's Mewtwo? No one in the game said anything about it. Maybe it's not in this game.*

Me: No? Well, in the game that I played, it was a big part of the game. You found an entire area that was completely destroyed, and you found out that it was one Pokémon, a Mewtwo, that did it. The story in the game is that there was a research lab where people were trying to make the cutest Pokémon ever, and they called it Mew. And then they tried to improve it even more, and they called the new one Mewtwo because it was the second one, but something went wrong and it got a lot less cute but also really powerful and it got mad and destroyed everything around it, and you find it pretty late in the game.

Janis: *That sounds neat, but a little bit scary. I want to catch both of them!*

Me: Well, in the original game you couldn't catch Mew, though there were a lot of people who made up stories about ways to get it, but I think they were all just stories. I'll look it up for you, though… yes, according to this FAQ, you will find Mewtwo but only after you beat the Elite Four. It was different in the first game. I'm sorry, my advice was bad this time because it looks like they changed this part of the game.

Janis: *Wow. What do Mew and Mewtwo look like?*
Me: Well, Mew is really cute, kind of like a kitten with really big eyes, and Mewtwo is… a lot less cute and a lot scarier looking and

really mean. It's not Mewtwo's fault, though, people were mean to it first.

Janis: *I'm going to draw what I think Mew and Mewtwo look like. Is it like this?*

Me: No, but I'd like to use this in our Well Played article if that's okay with you.

Image 1: Janis's rendition of "Mue" and "Mue2" [sic] from my description

Image 2: Mew and Mewtwo (images from bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net, accessed 2/28/ 2019).

As she progressed to the later stages of the game, Janis noted that *Let's Go* makes heavy use of anticipation throughout the game to make certain encounters more exciting. With legendary Pokémon such as Articuno and Zapdos, the player hears rumors of them and gets clues to their locations long before encountering them face to face, which makes the final encounter that much more exciting. Relatively early in the game, the player meets the character Lorelai, one of the Elite Four (essentially one of the final bosses of the game), notifying the player of their existence and suggesting a final goal. Throughout most of the game, the player is collecting badges from Gyms, some of which are inaccessible until the player completes other small quests (such as a gym that is closed until the player explores a nearby mansion). At most points in the game, the player has an immediate short-term goal which unlocks the path to a longer-term goal, with several side goals that are known, so at every point the player has several major game events that they know are coming, and that they are anticipating. While many games make use of this technique, it is central to the *Pokémon* experience.

Aside from anticipation for its own sake, this layering of short, medium, and long term goals that are all exposed to the player has another critical effect on the play experience. It keeps the

player moving through the game's content because the player is never very far away from completing something. While this technique is perhaps best known from Sid "one more turn" Meier's *Civilization*, it is also strongly present in the play of *Pokémon*. Interestingly, *Let's Go* allows the player to save anywhere, allowing them to break out of this compulsion loop and exit the game at any time. While this would seem to work against the game's systems that keep the player playing indefinitely, the ability to offer a safe exit is typical of other Nintendo titles, and plays to the company's "family friendly" image. This same attitude can be seen in other Nintendo games: *Animal Crossing* has a real-time day/night cycle based on the system clock that severely limited what players could do at night (so that children were less likely to stay up late), and both *Wii Fit* and *Brain Age* reminds the player to take breaks at frequent intervals. While neither the original *Pokémon* nor the new Switch version explicitly prevent extended play – as noted above, they rather encourage it – both games seem to be designed with the use case in mind of a parent telling their kid that it's time to stop playing, and they remove the excuse of "just let me play until the next save point."

When I was actively playing *Pokémon*, I appreciated the feature so that I wouldn't lose progress if I was told to turn off my game immediately or otherwise had to stop due to an important interruption. As a parent, I appreciate this feature so I can convince my child it's time for bed without having to deal with her deep hatred borne of losing progress in her progression-based game.

ON CUTENESS

Janis: *I like that my Pokémon look cute.*

Me: What makes them cute?

Janis: *Their eyes. The eyes carry a lot of their expression.*

Me: Are there other things that about them that are also cute?

Janis: *The way they look, the way they sound, and their animations in battle or walking around.*

Me: Why is it important to you that they're cute?

Janis: *It makes it easier to love them. They're more likeable if they're cuter. You can dress your Eevee and [my trainer] the same way so they have the same clothes. Isn't it cool?*

When designing a game to appeal to children of all genders, one way to do this is to find universal non-gendered themes that appeal to everyone, and another option is to use gender cues of both genders. *Pokémon* opts for the latter: it's a game about cute cuddly animals that beat the snot out of each other.

The visual look is part of the appeal for her. It provided the initial hook to get her to want to play before she knew anything about the gameplay, and made it easy for her to learn the characters and personalities of her team (combined with the text descriptions in the Pokedex entries, which she read immediately as soon as she got a new entry). While wandering on the map, the player can also talk to a Pokémon that is following them, letting the player see the Pokémon's thoughts.

She noted that when many Pokémon evolve, their evolutions look creepier and scarier. Shellder is a simple bivalve with a rounded shell, large eyes, playfully sticking out its tongue; its evolution Cloyster has "angry eyes" as she puts it, a profile with sharper lines, and multiple spikes sticking out at all angles. Koffing is smiling and has two small pointy teeth as might be seen on a kitten; when it evolves to Weezing, it has two faces, both of which are frowning, and its teeth are much larger and pointing up rather than down (see Figure 3). While not all evolutions follow this pattern of getting less cute over time (the caterpillar-like Caterpie, for example, eventually evolves into the butterfly-like Butterfree), it happens enough to be noticeable.

While this might seem to go against the initial premise of making the game as cute as possible for wide appeal, by the time a Pokémon evolves the player has generally been playing with them for some time already, has already emotionally bonded with them, and is able to accept that they now look more powerful and able to fight against advanced opponents.

Image 3: Shellder and Koffing evolutions (left to right: Shellder, Cloyster, Koffing, Weezing; images from bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net, accessed 2/28/2019).

True to gender roles, the cute aspect of the game was never a major appeal to me. Until Janis talked to me about the aesthetics of the game, I had never even noticed the shift in visual style during evolutions. As a systems designer at heart, I see JRPGs as thinly-veiled spreadsheets. By contrast, Janis has the heart of an artist, and I had to agree with her assessment of the visual impact and its role in denoting the power and progression of the player's party.

ON THE STARTER POKÉMON

Janis: *I like playing with Eevee. I can feed her and groom her, and I get all these different responses from her.*

Me: Can you do that with anyone else?

Janis: *No, but you can walk with or ride on other Pokémon, but Eevee can travel on your head and you can also pet her.*

One of the places where *Let's Go* diverges from *Red/Blue* is in the player's starter Pokémon. In the original game the player

was given a choice: Charmander, Squirtle, or Bulbasaur. In *Let's Go*, the choice is made at point of sale, where either the Eevee or Pikachu cartridge is purchased. *Let's Go* puts much more emphasis on the player's initial Pokémon as well. It is treated not just as the start of a collection (that will inevitably be replaced by other more powerful Pokémon shortly into the game) but as the player character's primary companion and, at least in Eevee's case, a powerful companion who gets strong attacks early on in order to keep it relevant in combat throughout the game.

In the original GameBoy game, the trainer was the main character and the trainer's goal was to "catch 'em all." In the new Switch game, the starter Pokémon is as much a main character as the trainer, and new interaction mechanics were added to emphasize this link.

Image 4: Feeding and grooming Eevee and Pikachu (image from Twitter Post of @Pokémon, https://twitter.com/Pokémon/status/1017425259652308992, accessed 2/28/2019).

In addition to petting and grooming, the game puts additional emphasis on the role of the starter Pokémon character. Throughout the game, the player collects five Secret Techniques that help to move around the map and access new regions, but it is the Pokémon and not the trainer who learns these techniques. Janis explains why: *Eevee is the main character. She can make her Pokeball move even when she's inside, and they become best friends. You even get to control Eevee directly when you're in the Team Rocket hideout.* I asked her why Eevee is the main character, and she rolled her eyes as if this were obvious. *It's called Pokémon Let's Go Eevee, not Pokémon Let's Go Janis. Well, you get to choose the name of the human but not the name of the Pokémon.* This was one of the only areas of the game where I felt there was enough of a difference between *Red/Blue* and *Let's Go* that I could not relate my own

experience to hers, because the original game did not encourage any kind of relationship between the human main character and their starter Pokémon.

ON BATTLING

> Janis: *Whenever you aren't in combat, you can look at your box of Pokémon to build your team. You can have up to 6 Pokémon on your team. Most of the other trainers in the game only have between 2 and 5.*

> Me: That hardly seems fair that you have more Pokémon on your team than everyone else. Why do you suppose they designed it that way?

> Janis: *Because then you'd have to go to the hospital after every fight, which would slow you down. It also wouldn't be fair if your opponent's Pokémon were more powerful or higher level than yours and they also had as many of them, then you couldn't beat them. It also means that when you do meet a trainer with 6 Pokémon, it feels like an important moment.*

At the time we had this conversation, she had not made it to the end of the game, but she predicted correctly: the final battle in the main quest line, against your rival after beating the Elite Four, has 6 Pokémon (the rest of the Elite Four have 5 Pokémon each). In general, the number of Pokémon held by opponents slowly increases as the player progresses through the game, and significant enemies such as Gym Leaders do tend to have larger teams than those around them, making these battles feel more dangerous, more significant, and more gratifying.

When I played the original game, I enjoyed the combat systems for the same reason that I've enjoyed the combat systems of any JRPG: it's repetitive enough that I can easily enter a flow state, allows enough player agency that I can optimize and win battles above my weight class, and it's driven by numeric systems that appeal to my analytical nature. For these reasons, I expected my daughter to be less excited about this element of the game (she

is less analytical and more creative than I am), but she ended up enjoying the combat for entirely different reasons.

When asked why she liked the fighting, Janis's immediate reaction was the rewards. She earns money and her Pokémon level up. The player only earns money if they win (they lose money if they are defeated), but overall the player tends to earn more than they lose. Money is mostly used to buy consumable items in the game and it doesn't play a major role (the player can generally ignore their funds for most of the game, which makes losing money after a defeat feel like only a minor setback and not a devastating blow). To Janis, the appeal of having more money is just to have more money so she can feel rich. Parallels to the real world aside, this would seem to be in line with the rest of the game: with a focus on collecting Pokémon, it's only natural to want to collect other things such as currency.

By contrast, Pokémon themselves do not get weaker when defeated. In fact, as long as the player doesn't lose to the very first enemy in an encounter, their own Pokémon level up in the middle of battle after each individual defeated enemy Pokémon, meaning that the player can come out ahead in combat strength even after multiple defeats. To me, the appeal of Pokémon getting stronger is the ability to progress in the game. To Janis, the appeal is to please the characters that she has emotionally bonded with over their cuteness.

She also noted that some Pokémon start out powerful and at a high level when you first catch them, and this usually corresponded to how rare they were and how long it took. Highly anticipated Pokémon that the player had been tracking down for a long time would feel like more of a reward if they started out at Level 50 rather than Level 5. While this left the player with less time spent with that new Pokémon to level it up, and thus less of an emotional connection through training it, that time had already been spent up front in anticipation of

hearing about it, tracking it, and finally capturing it, giving the player plenty of time in advance to become invested in this new character.

ON EXPLORATION

> Janis: *I like running around and not having to go anywhere. I mean, you can go and battle the Elite Four but you don't have to, you can go other places.*
>
> Me: What makes you decide where you want to go?
>
> Janis: *I don't know. Maybe I think of the Pokémon that are there that I want to catch.*

While exploration as a mechanic does not change throughout the game, the regions of the game feel distinct from one another, in their descriptions, their visual look-and-feel, and the different Pokémon that inhabit them. This change in scenery denotes progression as the player travels through the game, providing an additional reward (beyond money, leveling, and narrative advancement) as the player moves forward in the game.

This is one area where my experience deviated strongly from Janis's. She views this as an open-world game because the game gives her the agency to go wherever she wants. While the game does restrict or gate her movements in certain areas to make sure she is of a sufficient power level before reaching more dangerous zones, those are the exceptions and feel like significant barriers because of it. For most of the game, the player can go where they want within the zones they have unlocked.

To me, the game felt linear. Yes, I can hypothetically follow any path available, and yes, the game does reward exploration through offering some hidden paths to secret areas, but the map still has a clear path that the player meant to follow. The main quest line pushes the player in a very specific direction, and uses the narrative and promise of rewards to incentivize the player

to follow. The game promises agency, but then turns around and manipulates the player into doing what the game wants them to do. This is not a difference between *Red/Blue* and *Let's Go*, but rather a difference in perception between an excited eight-year-old and a jaded forty-four-year-old.

CONCLUSION

Pokémon's core gameplay, overall presentation, and even content are more similar than different between *Red/Blue* and *Let's Go*. This allowed me to provide strategy tips that I remembered from the old version and that were still valid in the new one. Since the Pokémon in both games are the same, if she told me there was a Snorlax blocking the way or came to me excited because she just caught a Cubone, I knew what she was talking about and could celebrate, commiserate, or strategize with her. We played different games, but we shared nearly the same experience, twenty years apart.

And yet, we are different people and approached the play of the game in different ways. I initially approached the game as a JRPG with an emphasis on grinding, leveling my party, and maximizing my combat effectiveness. Janis is much more interested in her relationship with the Pokémon characters (especially her Eevee companion), emphasizes collection and exploration, and sees combat as merely a means to those ends. To the extent that *Let's Go* adds new elements on top of *Red/Blue*, those elements are geared towards Janis's play style, with more of a focus on the relationship between the trainer and their Pokémon, and making the Pokémon feel more like playable characters than game resources.

To the extent that *Let's Go* also caters to players like me, it has added more choices in character builds: Pokémon learn techniques more rapidly than in *Red/Blue* but they can only can only have four combat moves at a time, forcing the player to

choose which techniques to learn and which to discard. This allows a single Pokémon species to have several different viable combat styles depending on the choices the player makes. Pokémon can be further customized with techniques found along the way, which are found more frequently and can be used more often in *Let's Go*, allowing a combat-focused player to optimize their roster more carefully.

Playing games with my daughter is always a singular pleasure for me, and seeing her play (and conquer) games independently fills me with pride and nostalgia. Being able to share in her experience of a game I haven't played without playing alongside her was unexpected, and added to the depth of my interest in both her and the game itself.

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LIFE LESSONS WITH ATREUS AND CHLOE

Mature Video Games as Opportunity Spaces for Family Conversations
ANGELA M. VANDEN ELZEN , ADAM L. VANDEN ELZEN, &
DEXTER R. VANDEN ELZEN

INTRODUCTION

The effects of childhood and adolescent exposure to mature video games has been a recurring topic in popular culture as well as academic research for many years. While many studies have been conducted, a consensus has not been reached. Video games have been shown, however, to play a positive role in family togetherness and act as an opportunity space to encourage family discussion. Through a review of the literature, this article argues that mature video games can serve as opportunity spaces for families with older children and teens. A case study in which the M-rated video games, *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017) and *God of War* (2018) were played in a parent-child context is then presented to demonstrate how these games were able to stimulate discussion of important developmental topics.

BRIEF SOCIAL HISTORY OF MATURE VIDEO GAMES

For many years, video games have been portrayed in the media as dangerous for children and overtly violent (Williams, 2003). One of the first major public moments in video game history occurred in 1976, when the arcade game *Death Race* was denounced on the television program *60 Minutes* because of its simulated automotive violence, leading to public protests

(Montfort & Bogost, 2009). While the controversy led to an increase in sales, distributor Exidy eventually pulled it from the market. In 1993, parents and government officials were outraged when they discovered the realistic graphics complete with blood splatters, grotesque finishing moves, and women wearing very little clothing in the fighting game, *Mortal Kombat* (1993). Discovery of *Night Trap* (1992), and its violent content against women, led to a Senate inquiry into video game violence. The result of this inquiry was the formation of the industry-managed Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) (Donovan, 2010). To this day, the ESRB reviews video games and provides age-appropriate ratings to give insight into a game's content. Another major moment in the topic of video game content and children occurred in 2011, when the Supreme Court ruled that the state of California could not prohibit the sale of video games to minors (Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association, 2011). Video games have been also blamed for school shootings, including the tragic killings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 (Steinkuehler, 2016). These examples demonstrate that video games with mature content have been the topic of public debate for many years, and have been portrayed as negative and damaging to children and teens. It is with this in mind that this article will explore the research surrounding children and mature video games, families and video games, and benefits of intergenerational play of mature video games.

RESEARCH ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND VIDEO GAMES

Childhood Exposure to Mature Video Games

While video games have become a popular topic of research in recent decades, literature focusing on children and adolescents and mature video games has mostly been limited to the study of exposure to violent content. Some exceptions focus on how the sexualized or secondary treatment of women characters in

games may provide children and adolescents with negative views of women, though minors are often one of many populations included in these studies (Miller & Summers, 2007; Ward, 2016).

The wide range of literature covering the effects of childhood and adolescent exposure to violent video games leads to many different conclusions. Some studies have shown that exposure leads to higher levels of aggression, bullying, and violent behavior over time (Anderson, et al., 2010; Dittrick, Beran, Mishna, Hetherington, & Shariff, 2013; Prescott, Sargent, & Hull, 2018). Another concludes, "violent video game play negatively impacts benevolence, ultimately leading to a reduction in prosocial behavior" (Coyne, Warburton, Essig, & Stockdale, 2018, p. 1875). A study by Engelhardt, Bartholow, Kerr, and Bushman (2011) reports that MRI brain patterns of those who play violent video games are less likely to respond when a subject is viewing violent content, therefore showing a desensitization to violent behavior. However, another group of researchers has studied this same phenomenon, and found no evidence of desensitization (Kühn, Kugler, Schmalen, Weichenberger, Witt, & Gallint, 2018).

Many academics have argued that it's not as simple as whether or not violent video games negatively affect children and adolescents. In an article from 2001, researchers report that reducing all media, not just violent media, leads to reduced aggressive behavior in children (Robinson, Wilde, Navracruz, Haydel, & Varady, 2001). Ferguson (2010) argues that aggressive behavior must be more clearly defined in these studies, as "intentional behavior produced to cause physical harm or humiliation," since aggressive play can be a positive experience if consensual (p. 68). The affectivity of the parent-child relationship, exposure to verbal abuse, and physical violence in the home environment are argued to be the strongest indicators of maladaptive gaming behaviors and youth violence by other researchers (Yee-Iam Li, Chuen-yee Lo, & Cheng, 2018; DeCamp

& Ferguson, 2017). Others have argued that video games are the next in a long line of new technologies to be blamed for the "larger struggles within the culture," and that studies showing a positive correlation between video games and violent behavior in children are more likely to be cited in academic publications and covered by the news media (Williams, 2003, p. 543; Copenhaver, et al 2017).

The focus on the negative behavioral effects of mature video games causes researchers to overlook the potential benefits these types of games could provide. It is the potential social-emotional benefits that may be afforded by video games with mature content and themes that will be explored later in this article.

Benefits of Playing Video Games

Many academic articles demonstrate a range of benefits for children and adolescents who play video games including cognitive, motivational, emotional, altruistic, and prosocial improvements (Granic, Lobel, and Engels, 2014; Whitaker & Bushman, 2012). Video games have been shown to provide improvements in moral reasoning, team building, and leadership (Passmore & Holder, 2014). They can allow players to gain empathy for others' experiences, through both game narrative and online interactions with other players (Ferguson, 2010; Khoo, 2012). In an educational setting, video games can deepen a learner's understanding and support deeper levels of systemic thinking (Barab, Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010; Squire, 2011). Students who play strategic video games are found to have high problem-solving skills and report a high concern for academic grades (Adachi & Willoughby, 2013).

Parental Involvement in Media Consumption

While the literature is often conflicting, one point has remained consistent- the importance of parental knowledge of the media being consumed by their children. The American Academy of

Pediatrics (AAP) urges parents to co-view media with their children and discuss how violent solutions could have been solved with nonviolent alternatives (2009). The AAP describes viewing and playing with children as a fun, family activity that, "encourages social interactions, bonding, and learning," and allows parents an opportunity to "introduce and share your own life experiences and perspectives- and guidance- as you play the game" (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2015, np).

Not only will the consumption of media as a family allow parents to be more aware of what their children are viewing, it can also contribute to a sense of family closeness. Multiple studies of parent-child relationships have shown that positive relationships and open communication lead to lower levels of adolescent drinking, higher self-esteem, and a more positive overall well-being (Ainsworth, et al, 2015; Kuendig and Kuntsche, 2006; Wang, Taylor, & Sun, 2018).

Families Playing Together

In 1985, Professor Edna Mitchell surveyed families on the impact home video games had on their interactions and relationships. The families surveyed contributed overwhelmingly positive comments including new opportunities for father-daughter interaction, much-needed in-home leisure time for mothers, and sibling interaction where age and gender are overlooked. Mitchell (1985) concludes that her study had found, "families enjoying a unique moment of discovery of each other and development of new interpersonal relationships within the family circle" (p. 135). This survey had been conducted at a time when video games were marketed as a gender-neutral family activity that turned the television from a "disreputable, passive medium," into an active, family-centered pursuit (Chess, 2017; Newman, 2017, p. 47). Later in the 1980s and early 1990s, the marketing and advertising of video games shifted to an activity for teenage boys to play in their bedrooms.

The industry marketing approach began to shift back to families in 2005, bringing video games back into the living room (Chambers, 2012). The timing in this marketing shift tracks well, as the average gamer age in 2005 was 33 years old, suggesting that the teens who were playing video games in the 1980s and 1990s now had families of their own (Entertainment Software Association, 2006).

Video Games as an Opportunity Space

Video game play provides an excellent opportunity to facilitate intergenerational communication. Research has shown that it improves the overall well-being of family members, allows for the sharing of knowledge, provides a space to connect and share feelings, and creates a venue for sharing for families that struggle with communication (Costa & Veloso, 2016; Wang, et al., 2018). A space where families come together to share, learn from one another, and form values is defined by authors Siyhhan and Gee (2018) as an opportunity space. Traditionally, the most common opportunity space for families is the dinner table. Siyhhan and Gee argue that video games serve as an opportunity space where families can consider identities and experiences that are different from their own, that can be discussed and considered within the individual identities and values of the family members. They argue, "this aspect of video games is quite powerful for families, especially during a time when children go through cognitive, social, and emotional changes as they transition into adolescence" (p. 108).

Thoughtful, intergenerational play of video games can also serve as an excellent way to teach children how to approach video games in a conscientious and critical way. While video games are all "architectures of engagement," they are not all the same (Steinkuehler, 2016, p. 51). They all carry different messages, experiences, and themes (Steinkuehler, 2016). It is important to teach children how to look at individual games to find these

messages and make sense of them. Critical consumption of media is an important skill that should not be overlooked when preparing children to become informed digital citizens (James, Weinstein, & Mendoza, 2019).

Mature Video Games as an Opportunity Space

As previously described, much of the literature surrounding children and mature video games focuses on the negative effects violent video games, specifically, may have on children. Very limited research has been published arguing for benefits gained by children playing mature games along with a parent or guardian. One argument recommends harnessing the popularity of violent video games as a way to deliver informational content, and adds that adolescents can improve their reading and writing skills by contributing to the well-supported forums and wikis that already exist for many popular mature titles (Ferguson, 2010). Games with mature content may also contain a wealth of prosocial content. Gentile, et al. (2009) define prosocial content in games as, "scenes in which characters help troubled persons and scenes where friendships or affections between parents and children are shown" (p. 757). Many mature games include rich, impactful narratives in which characters face challenges and circumstances that, as Siyahhan and Gee argue, can be immediately discussed and evaluated in the context of individual and family values. Characters' choices can be questioned, family and interpersonal drama can be applied to life experiences, and alternative solutions to violent actions can be discovered.

MATURE VIDEO GAMES AS AN OPPORTUNITY SPACE: CASE STUDY

This case study illustrates an example of how video games that contain violent and mature content may provide positive prosocial experiences, lead to open family communication, serve as opportunity spaces for important family interactions, and provide children with the tools to think metacognitively about

the media they consume. The games played in this case study are not typical for family gaming time; notably because both are single-player games and both are rated M 17+. Those major differences aside, they do include many qualities that can make a video game a meaningful, immersive opportunity space for families. These titles explore issues of discovering one's identity, navigating difficult family relationships, the struggles that come with growing up, coping with anger and grief, and the consequences of making harmful choices.

The titles were chosen primarily because both had received high praise from game reviews and the podcast, Giant Bombcast for the quality of the gameplay experience. Additionally, the games were not reviewed as showing sexist representations or gratuitous violence. Above all, the games were selected for the well-crafted stories that could potentially lead to a memorable experience that could be shared together. The presence of at least one parent during all gameplay meant that the games could be stopped at any point if they were found to be too intense or inappropriate (by parent or child). It wasn't until the mother observed the gameplay and both parents acknowledged that it had prompted their child (age 10) to begin asking important questions about life and relationships, both during and outside gameplay, that this experience revealed itself as a potential for further study and documentation.

The Games

God of War (2018) is an action-adventure game featuring warrior Kratos his eleven-year-old son Atreus (Barlog, 2018). While this is the fourth game in the *God of War* franchise, the 2018 version is quite different from previous titles that featured a hypermasculine antihero Kratos hacking and slashing through light storylines, where women were mere sexual objects. This title follows Kratos and Atreus as they journey through a land of Norse mythology to scatter the cremated remains of Faye,

Krato's wife and Atreus' mother, from the highest peak of the realm. One reviewer describes the adventure as one where, "enemies are destroyed, allies are made, secrets come to light and unwanted memories surface" (Marrow, 2018).

Life is Strange: Before the Storm (2017) is an episodic three-part game in the graphic adventure genre, where players take on the persona of Chloe Price, a sixteen-year-old high school student. Chloe's story includes negotiating a difficult family life in which she and her mother struggle after the death of her father, as well as the strained relationship with her mother's boyfriend. Chloe also navigates complex interpersonal relationships with her classmates. One reviewer describes *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* as "both a critical and commercial success, it proved there was a mainstream audience for a female-centric game about friendship, family, and relationships" (Byrd, 2018). This game is the prequel to *Life is Strange* (2015), in which Chloe Price was a supporting character.

Topics and Conversations

While the two games seem very different at first, many parallel topics recur throughout both that served as life lessons and conversation starters. The gameplay responses are divided by topic, then game. The scenes described are by no means complete summaries of these complex games, but have been chosen because of the memorable dialogue they prompted.

Parent-child relationships

In both *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* and *God of War,* a recurring theme is tension within parent-child relationships. This topic was especially relevant as gameplay happened in a parent-child context. Chloe and Atreus push boundaries, show disrespect, and struggle to establish open communication with their parents.

God of War (2018) opens with Kratos cutting down and chopping

up a specially-marked tree, then proceeding into his home where Atreus is praying and crying over Faye's shrouded body. Kratos and Atreus then proceed outside and place her body on the funeral pyre. Without thinking, Atreus removes the knife that once belonged to his mother that had been ceremoniously placed on the pyre, burning himself in the process. In a touching moment, Kratos places snow on Atreus' wounded hand and wraps it in a bandage. This touching scene is cut short when Kratos immediately insists that Atreus proves to him that he is able to hunt. While in the nearby woods, Atreus takes a wild and careless shot with his bow causing his father to sternly share his disapproval of his son's sloppiness. Later, after taking his father's advice, he makes a well-aimed shot against his prey, fatally wounding it. As the animal is slowly dying, Kratos motions to Atreus to finish it with his mother's knife. Atreus hesitates, looks to his father, and says he can't do it. Kratos then takes Atreus' hands in his own and forces him to kill the animal. This sequence of actions in the game prompts a conversation about the emotion of the events and Kratos' stern approach to interacting with Atreus.

Dexter (son, age 10): "This is the scene where he [Kratos] starts to get harsh on Atreus. If I was in the scene, I wouldn't be mad, I'd be scared- since I'm not used to getting yelled at like that. Kratos was hard on him because his wife just died, and because he could fight so well, he was expecting the same from Atreus. He was feeling impatient and sad."

Adam (father): "They set the tone that Atreus was much more attached to his mother than his father. They talked to each other in a very formal way"

Dexter: "It made me think, 'what would I do if I lost a parent?' It would be really scary."

While Kratos, Atreus, and Faye lived in a magically contained

area of the woods throughout Atreus' life, Kratos remained emotionally distant from his son. The almost jarring transition between the heavy emotional weight of the funeral pyre followed immediately by Kratos commanding Atreus to kill an animal provides insight into the relationship between the two characters at the start of the game. The emotion of the scene led to a discussion about how Kratos eventually learned how to show affection for Atreus.

Adam: "Kratos is gentle with Atreus at many important points, like when Atreus is upset after killing someone, though these interactions are followed by strictness, and brief comments like, "let's go home," "give up," and famously, "don't be sorry, be better.""

Dexter: "Yeah, Kratos loved Atreus more than he showed. That definitely got better through the game."

Adam: "For example, in the beginning of the game, there's a scene where Kratos almost touches Atreus' back to comfort him, but pulls away. Throughout the game, he eventually does learn how to comfort Atreus- so there's a lot of development there. Though it takes him a while to show he cares in the traditional way a father does, there are many times during combat when he shows it, like sticking his arm in a giant's mouth to protect Atreus from getting bitten."

Throughout the game, the player learns that Faye's final wishes to have the tree cut down that lifted the magical protective barrier she had placed many years ago, and to have her ashes scattered far away from home, were to set father and son on a journey to force both Kratos and Atreus become aware of truths about themselves and each other.

Dexter: "When I first learned the tree he [Kratos] cuts down in the beginning breaks the shield, I didn't know why she would have asked them to cut it down, but then I realized that she had them do that on purpose so the monsters that came in would

make them go on a journey. She wanted Atreus to grow and knew that he was ready, and wanted Kratos to help Atreus grow on the journey."

Angela (mother): Did the mom's influence show in any other parts of the game?

Adam: Yes, especially when they would come upon troubled spirits throughout the world. Atreus would always want to help them where Kratos would say that it's a waste of time. This is where Atreus would likely mention how his mother would have wanted them to help others. A 'what would mom do in this situation?' kind of thing. Kratos would maintain his gruff exterior but melt a bit inside and then cave to his son and help out the spirit, begrudgingly.

In *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2018) the main character Chloe and her mother, Joyce, have a very tense relationship that is eventually shown to have developed that way since the accident that killed William Price, Chloe's father and Joyce's husband. This relationship is made more difficult by her mother's boyfriend David, whose strict demand for respect makes Chloe even more distant. While the player is able to determine the direction of the dialogue between Chloe and Joyce, there is no getting around the often strained nature of their conversations.

Dexter: "Chloe was sassy and kinda sad and I feel bad for her to have to go through all that stuff. It gave me a good idea of what might be happening with a girl at my school. She would sometimes argue with my teacher and say 'you're just like my mom' and talk about stuff that would happen at home at recess. Seeing Chloe helped me to have more understanding toward her and makes me feel grateful for my family"

Angela: "What do you think Chloe's mom is feeling?"

Dexter: "The mom is trying to get the family to stick together

and get Chloe to like her boyfriend, and that's making her really stressed out trying to get both of them to work together. Plus she's trying to get over losing her husband."

Adam: "Did Chloe and Atreus have anything in common by both losing a parent?

Dexter: "They both have a hard time controlling their attitude, and sadness can sometimes turn to anger because they don't know what to do with the sadness they have."

By experiencing an immersive story about a family that is different from his own, Dexter is able to empathize with children at his school and gain a better understanding of their lives. He is able to step into both the perspective of the child as well as that of the parent to understand that there are often struggles adults are dealing with that impact interactions with their children.

Making bad choices

Throughout the games, both Chloe and Atreus make selfish choices that often lead to both physical and emotional harm to themselves and others.

Around the midway point in *God of War*, Kratos tells Atreus that he is a god, making Atreus part god. This causes the previously polite and restrained Atreus to become arrogant and dominating. Upon their next encounter with Brok, a character whom they've met many times at this point in the game, Atreus tells him to, "do something about it or shut up already" in response to Brok's ongoing complaining about his brother Sindri, and continues by saying he and Kratos are, "sick of hearing about little people's problems" (*God of War,* 2018). This arrogant and unkind behavior is very different from how Atreus has interacted with Brok in previous encounters.

Adam: "What did you think when you saw Atreus act so differently?"

Dexter: "I started to think, 'woah that was really rude' I kinda felt scared for him thinking Kratos would burst and grab his arm and yell at him. It was a huge jump in his character- a big change. It made me think, 'I hope he gets what he deserves,' not in a violent way- but get yelled at by Kratos."

Adam: "Did it make you think how you'd act?"

Dexter: "Yeah, I'd just think it was a big change to know that, and I'd be kind of surprised, maybe happy, but I wouldn't think 'I'm a god, I can be rude to everyone.'"

Adam: "What do you think his mom would have wanted him to do?"

Dexter: "I think his mom would be proud if he learned he was part god then used his powers for good."

Earlier in the game, Kratos kills a character named Magni. His brother Modi becomes belligerent (especially about Atreus' mother) and emotionally unstable and returns to attack Kratos and Atreus multiple times throughout the game. His final return happens while Atreus is still acting out from the knowledge that he is part god. After Modi is defeated, Atreus does not follow his father's wishes to allow him to live, but stabs Modi in the neck (paralleling the deer at the start of the game), and pushes him off of a high ledge. When Kratos responds with disappointment and tries to reason with Atreus about why that was wrong, Atreus responds with, "Nobody cared about him anyway. What's the difference?" followed by "whatever," as he walks away.

Dexter: "When Atreus is going to kick him [Modi] over the edge, Kratos says stop, Atreus says, 'we're gods, we can do anything we want,' the game did a really good job of making me wish he

stopped being so sassy. It made me feel angry at him. We thought Kratos was being hard on him, but then we start to wonder if Atreus was also like this when he realized he could shoot a bow perfectly, and that's why Kratos was so hard on him."

Angela: "Did Atreus' behavior remind you of anything you've done, or that you've seen kids at school do when they've won or found out they were good at something?"

Dexter: "Yeah, when kids have won something at school, they say, 'haha, I got this and you didn't. They'll tease, brag, poke…"

Adam: "After a lot of these scenes with Atreus acting out, we had to pause and discuss why he was doing a lot of these things. Without the adult guidance and discussion, that's how a lot of these scenes can be damaging to a kid."

Throughout *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, Chloe makes many choices that upset her mother and mother's boyfriend, and that the player can see are destructive or unhealthy behaviors.

Angela: "What kinds of bad choices does Chloe make throughout the game, and why do you think she does these?"

Dexter: "Because of dealing with things like her dad dying, she doesn't like her stepdad, has problems in school- she does drugs, at least it shows that she has in the past, you see her smoke, she runs away from home. When someone has problems like she does, I think the person would be sad and scared, but she was more mad than anything. She did feel a little better when she found that old truck in the junkyard and repairing it helped her to remember when she fixed cars with her Dad. She also found the car from the accident that killed her Dad. That's when she got a baseball bat and started hitting things at the junkyard. I felt like she must be going through hard times and I feel bad for her, and I'm glad I'm not her."

Angela: "Did seeing Chloe experience those things help you understand where others were coming from and why they might make mistakes and bad choices?"

Dexter: "When Chloe and her friend ran away, I know she knew the things she was doing were bad. She hesitated a little when her friend said to run away, and she hesitated to jump on a train in another part of the game. She hesitated and knew they were wrong."

Adam: "Do you see people act out like Chloe?"

Dexter: "Sometimes kids in my class talk back to the teacher, and even though I know that's bad to do, it can be satisfying hearing what I kind of wish I could say. It's like that with Chloe. She always knows what to say."

Angela: "But you see how much it hurts the other people?"

Dexter: "Even though it's going fast, time feels like it slows down to see what the person's reaction is going to be. Sometimes the mom is yelling and says, 'Why are you doing this? Just behave for me,' and you see in Chloe's eyes that she does feel bad, but she just acts like, 'whatever.'"

Angela: "So when you're a teenager, we'll both try our best to communicate and talk when we feel frustrated and angry?" [laughs]

Dexter: "haha, yeah"

One scene in the game shows Chloe looking for something in a secret spot in her locker and showing disappointment when it is empty. Following this scene, she encounters Joyce and David and is told to empty her pockets.

Dexter: "This one part when her parents were telling her to empty her pockets… at school there was a hole in her locker

where there were supposed to be drugs but they weren't there, but she had cigarettes in her pockets. She would have gotten in HUGE trouble if there were drugs there. Things for her could have been much worse if she had the drugs in her pocket"

Angela: "Do you think she learned a lesson by almost getting caught?

Dexter: "I don't think she learned a lesson from that. I think she was just happy she didn't get caught with drugs."

Angela: "If she had been caught, do you think she would have learned a lesson from her punishment? What do you think her punishment would have been?"

Dexter: "I think she would definitely be sad from her punishment- that would probably be to not be able to go out of the house and get yelled at. She probably would have to have a private teacher following her around all the time at school."

The implication of Chloe's drug use led to a conversation about why people might take drugs, and what types of punishments or treatments are fair in the context of learning about why some might be lead to want to take drugs. Though Dexter's age and inexperience with legal matters did show when he thought she would simply be grounded and have a teacher follow her around at school as a penalty for carrying illegal drugs, this topic provided an opportunity to share the seriousness of partaking in illegal activities- not just because of the punishments, but also because of the hurt it would cause to family members.

In addition to the implication that she takes drugs, Chloe is often seen smoking cigarettes.

Dexter: "There's a couple of parts where Chloe takes out a cigarette and I was just willing her to stop. Today we had someone from a high school come to school and show us pig

lungs that are healthy, and pig lungs filled with tar from smoking and it was really gross. I felt bad for her and wanted her to stop doing that to herself. She would smoke and [mimes smoking coolly and breathing out in relief], and it was so bad for her."

Angela: "Even though she felt cool and calmer after, you knew that she was hurting herself?"

Dexter: "Yeah, like even before I saw the pig lung."

Seeing Chloe smoke happened to line up with lessons that were currently being taught at school for Dexter. Having an example of someone who smoked at the same time as these lessons provided a great opportunity to discuss that even someone you like could make choices that are bad for them and not to forget about how harmful activities like smoking can be.

Violence

The games in the *God of War* series have been well-known for their combat and violence. The major difference in the latest installment in the series, however, is the approach to death and violence. Kratos teaches Atreus the importance of mercy and kindness and that killing always has consequences. This game also shows Atreus, a child, contributing to the violence and having it enacted upon him. We see Atreus carry out many attacks, get commended for the improvement in his fighting skills, but also get attacked and injured.

Dexter: "It is different to have a kid who is a main character along with a big strong character in an intense game. I think it's cool that he fights and tries to help his Dad and that they also show love for each other, and the dad helps him. Like when they climb, he's on [Kratos'] back, and he lifts him onto things. Atreus can not only fight, but also read language of giants that he was taught by his mother."

Angela: "Does it make you feel uncomfortable seeing a kid get injured in a game?"

Dexter: "The game puts a lot more effort into explaining when he's injured [as opposed to Kratos] and makes it more dramatic because Kratos is so used to getting hurt."

Angela: "When does [the violence] feel like it's too much?"

Dexter: "There's one animation where the red circle shows up [the finishing moves]. One of the animations is kind of too much, where [Kratos] puts his axe into a troll's mouth and swings around… the realistic animation is too much. I liked that the most common enemy was a draugr and I like that they're like zombies and they just glow when they get ripped apart."

Adam: "Do you think it's because they don't look human-like, or alive?"

Dexter: "Yeah, it's like that troll that gets sliced- that's too much and I felt really bad for it."

Adam: "During a lot of the more realistic violent scenes he had to look away and I told him when they were over."

The violent scenes in this game also led to a discussion about anger, and how that's often tied to violence.

Dexter: "The anger the characters feel makes me sympathize with them. I like how Kratos doesn't immediately commit to fighting. He gives enemies chances to leave before they fight."

Adam: "What does that say about him?"

Dexter: "That he's good at controlling his anger."

Life is Strange: Before the Storm is more grounded in reality than the fantasy setting of *God of War* with a more realistic approach

to violence and its effects. One scene includes Chloe's friend Rachel unexpectedly get stabbed by a peer.

Dexter: "That kinda came out of nowhere- wasn't gory, more 'oh my gosh, what's going to happen?"

Angela: "Did it seem realistic, and did realistic stuff happen after?"

Dexter: "She went into shock and fell over a little, then Chloe picked her up and took her to the hospital."

Adam: "There was violence- but it wasn't the focal point, but they were dealing more with the emotions you would feel and the consequences that would happen after something like this."

Dexter: "Yeah, it was more real. She didn't pull out the knife, make herself glow to heal, pull out her axe and attack the person like Kratos."

Bullying

Because of the graphic adventure gameplay style of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm,* a major portion of gameplay involves making decisions on behalf of the game's protagonist, Chloe. In one particular scene, Chloe gets in the middle while one classmate (Nathan) is getting pushed and teased by another (Drew). As the dialogue continues, we learn about the struggles both students deal with, hear them insult one another, and have to make the choice about whether or not to step in.

Dexter: "Standing up to the bully shows she doesn't want to be bad or emo, it's just her self-defense right now, but she's really a good person"

Adam: "Chloe is an interesting role model. She doesn't feel like she fits in anywhere and that causes her to get into trouble with a lot of authority figures. Despite the trouble she gets in, she shows

her capacity for kindness and caring for her classmates and other characters in the game. She doesn't have a lot of friends, which isn't surprising with how much of a non-conformist she is. On the other hand, her thoughtfulness and kindness should have attracted many friends. This showed us that you don't have to sacrifice kindness if you're inclined to take the lonelier path and be an outcast."

Dexter: "If she came across someone who needed help, she would help"

Adam: "How do you think she determined when to be nice or mean? She could do both really well."

Dexter: "She would usually be nice to her friends and people who shared the same experiences as her."

By choosing to stop the bully, they were able to bring together different parts of Chloe's personality, and talk about how someone who may not seem outwardly friendly, or who makes bad choices, can still be kind to others and stand up for what they think is right. It also led to an opportunity to talk about how some behaviors are always wrong, though they may sometimes seem more complicated.

Growing Up & Adult Situations

Experiencing a storyline that featured a young woman provided Dexter with the opportunity to experience and relate to someone with a different identity.

Angela: "What do you think about seeing an interaction between a mother and her teenage daughter? Does it make you relate to Chloe differently than you might relate to Atreus?"

Dexter: "Her being a teenager gave me something to think about

as I get closer to becoming a teenager. I imagine there will be a lot of similarities with peer pressure and friendship drama."

Rather than focus on the differences, the discussion became an example of experiences teenagers face. The realistic nature of Chloe's story also made it more relatable than Atreus' fantasy-based story.

Life is Strange: Before the Storm contains a number of adult situations, including an arc where Chloe and her friend Rachel learn about some complex family secrets involving Rachel's parents.

Adam: "There's a moment where Chloe and Rachel are witnessing, from a distance, Rachel's father kissing a woman that's not her mother. This results in a heavy emotional scene where Chloe tries to comfort Rachel after she realizes her dad is having an affair. As an adult, it was easy for me to follow along with what was happening, but for Dexter he didn't piece things together as smoothly. This very-pause-worthy moment resulted in a good discussion about how complicated adult relationships can get."

Dexter: "Part of my mind thought that I should be lucky to have someone to explain it to me and I feel sympathy for people who have to go through this stuff, and some more understanding with what some people might be having troubles with."

Adam: "If something happens suddenly that I wasn't prepared for, or if I can tell if something is about to happen that needs some parental guidance. I'll pause the game and say, 'what do you think is about to happen.' If he says he doesn't know, I'll start to peel back the layers of complexity in the situation to make an adult situation easier to understand for a kid. I'll ask questions to help him figure out what is happening without me telling him. If I were to have gotten the feeling that he wasn't taking a lot of the

more mature topics seriously, I would have turned the game off and told him he's not ready for these games."

Sexuality and Consent

Throughout the course of the game, Chloe and Rachel's friendship becomes very close. Depending on the choices made by the player, Chloe and Rachel's close friendship can turn into a romantic relationship.

Adam: "When it was obvious that dialogue options were suggesting to have Chloe pursue something romantic with Rachel, we would talk it through. We often didn't think it was safe to assume that Chloe thinks that Rachel likes her. When they designed the game, they didn't make that obvious, so it's up to the player to decide how it should go. We analyzed the situation to see if we thought the signs had been there for Chloe to act on, but we'd talk and decided they weren't there. There could have been a great love story, but we decided not to act on that."

While the game mechanic did allow players to pursue a romantic relationship between Chloe and Rachel, Adam and Dexter decided not to do this. While it could have provided an opportunity for representation of an LGBTQIA+ relationship, it turned into an opportunity to discuss the signs to look for when pursuing a romantic relationship. The fact that the gameplay signs were not explicit enough to make Dexter and Adam feel comfortable pursuing the romantic actions and dialogue options with Rachel led to an extremely important conversation on consent. In our present time when so many women and men are speaking out about decades of unwanted sexual advances and behavior, this was a welcome opportunity to broach this topic.

Gameplay Summary of Experiences

After playing both of these games together, the family members described what the gameplay and discussion experiences meant

to them. Dexter expressed a feeling of being lucky to have had the opportunity to not just play these games, but to have his dad with him to help him understand the complexities he would have missed if he had played them alone. He also acknowledged that if he had played these games by himself, the violent content would have scared him and the adult situations would have confused him to the point where he would have simply stopped playing them. Adam explained that these games almost felt like flashcards for difficult life situations. The topics and scenarios were neatly set up in the games to be dealt with and discussed without the seriousness or repercussions that would have followed if they had happened in real life. Both Adam and Dexter expressed a feeling of togetherness that was strengthened by playing these games and having the resulting conversations. They agreed that it felt like they had gone on a quest together, especially with *God of War*, and had been positively impacted by the realness of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm.* Angela indicated that she was happy that the family was able to find so much meaning in these games that, at first look, seemed inappropriate for a ten-year-old child.

CONCLUSION

A variety of topics that prompted further discussion and important life lessons arose in parent-child gameplay of both *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* and *God of War.* These games can be seen as an opportunity space, similar to a family dining room table, despite the fact that they are both rated M 17+ and not intended for children. Parents should use caution when playing games like these with their children, and be sure to stop whenever the child feels uncomfortable and is unable to talk about the events of the game, or if the child is not behaving in a mature and thoughtful way. Even when played alongside a parent or guardian, games that are rated M 17+ may not be appropriate for many children. It is important to consider each individual child and their life experiences when considering playing mature games when they are present. If the child is able to remain

engaged in the content and shows they are able to discuss the occurrences in the game, co-playing of mature-rated games could provide an enriching family activity and an opportunity space for important, often difficult, conversations. Families that are having a difficult time communicating or parents/guardians who are looking for an opportunity to connect through challenging conversations may especially benefit from co-playing games with mature content.

How to do this (or Not)

Parents and guardians who are interested in exploring mature topics with their older children and teens through mature gameplay should be sure to prepare themselves for the content of the individual video game titles they may be selecting. The ESRB includes both age-related ratings and content descriptions on the game box and listing (if downloaded digitally), as well as a ratings summary on the ESRB website, http://www.esrb.org/. More in-depth reviews are available from the Common Sense Media website at https://www.commonsensemedia.org/game-reviews. In addition to an age recommendation and content summary, these game reviews include a section titled, "What Parents Need to Know," gameplay video clips, charts indicating the amount of occurring themes (including positive messages, violence, sex, and consumerism), community-contributed reviews written by parents and children, talking points for parents and children who may play this game, and a variety of game and story details. These resources can help a parent or guardian make an informed decision on whether or not a title is right for their child or teen, and begin to generate conversation points to enrich the experience of intergenerational play. After considering the game's content, parents and guardians should then consider the child's maturity level, openness to discuss difficult topics, possible triggering life experiences, and temperament. If it feels appropriate to continue with the game, keep in mind that every child's experience is different, and even

though a game may have been working out in the beginning, it may be necessary to turn it off and revisit it at another time in the future.

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INTERGENERATIONAL AND TRANSMEDIATIONAL PLAY PARTNERSHIPS

MAMTA SHAH, PH.D & BRENNA HASSINGER-DAS, PH.D.

INTRODUCTION

To answer the question central to this special issue, we engaged in part autoethnography and part self-ethnography over a one-month period. During this time, we positioned ourselves as researchers of play and learning, academic parents, and parent-researchers to individually (a) reflect upon the significance of play, (b) document the theoretical and empirical perspectives on play from which we draw inspiration, (c) describe how we choose games for our children, and (d) record instances of game play with our sons using some of our favorite games.

We believe that by reflecting on our own stance as parent-researchers and by teaming up with our 5-year-old sons, we provide unique yet complementary perspectives on two forms of play partnerships . First, the *intergenerationality of our play partnerships* led us to use our sons' interests as a starting point to select games. Simultaneously, being the adults and the academic-parents in the relationship allowed us to assume many roles (e.g. a model/collaborator, guide/coach, co-learners; Siyahhan & Gee, 2017). Second, we expanded our sons' play experiences and

further honed their interests, skills, and/or knowledge through opportunities that went beyond the game. We refer to this as the creation of *transmediational play partnerships* (Siegel, 1995). We conclude this paper with thoughts that will resonate with parents or caregivers seeking to understand what makes a game helpful, harmful, appropriate, challenging or intimidating for a child (Green & Cohen, 2019).

WHO ARE WE?: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY PARTNERS

I (Mamta) study play mediated by digital and non-digital environments, as a gateway for engaging learners to experiment with complex ideas and possible selves, and to explore new interests and deepen existing ones. My work uses this potential of play as a starting point to support educators in (a) identifying, examining, repurposing, and leveraging well-designed game environments (Foster & Shah, 2015a), (b) designing and implementing associated curricula or pedagogical approaches (e.g. game-based learning) in formal and informal settings (Foster & Shah, 2015b), (c) facilitating nuanced forms of student learning (e.g. identity exploration; Foster, 2014; Shah, Foster & Barany, 2017), and (d) reconstructing professional identity and practices in learning ecologies as educators engage in a pedagogical partnership with novel play-based environments (Shah & Foster, 2018).

H is my 5-year old son, studying in a Montessori preschool. I am confident that his favorite game play genres are puzzles/logic, role-playing, and construction/strategy. I say this because he can spend good amounts of time at school or at home either building 100-200 pieces floor puzzles, building-testing-refining different models of marble runs, rollercoaster challenges or LEGO models, and/or creating and living the life of fictional characters. H likes playing by himself, with his mixed-age peers, and with family and family-friends alike.

I (Brenna) also study play, but with a somewhat wider focus. I research playful learning, which is a broad play category focused on child learning that features the child-directed play methods of free play, guided play, and games (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017; Toub, Rajan, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2016). Playful learning is active (not passive), engaged (not distracted), meaningful (not disconnected), and often set in a context of social interaction (Hirsh-Pasek, Zosh et al., 2015). It embodies how children learn best while also promoting transfer to new contexts (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Kittredge, & Klahr, 2016). In order to more fully understand the role of play in human development, I believe that research needs to carefully examine children's environments, cultural customs and practices, and the role of adults in children's lives.

As for my son, A is a 5-year-old who, like Mamta's child, is also enrolled in a Montessori preschool. A is a very active child who loves all kinds of gross motor activity, including karate, playground play, and cooperative outdoor games with friends. He also shows a special interest in mathematics and spatial play, particularly block play and puzzles. For the most part, A prefers to play with others, including school friends or family members. He can also get absorbed in solo play with his favorite LEGOs for a significant length of time.

We (Mamta and Brenna) know each other professionally because of our somewhat similar professional interests. We also know each other personally, because our children became friends while attending the same Montessori school. Given many mutual interests, we decided to draw upon our professional stances and personal accounts of playing with our play partners (our sons) and address the following question, "How does a parent know if the games that their child is playing are helpful, harmful, appropriate, challenging or intimidating for their child?

OUR PROCESS: PART AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, PART SELF-ETHNOGRAPHY

We wanted to address the central question of this special issue by reflecting on our own work. This was crucial because decisions we make for H and A regarding the selection of a game as worthy or not, and how we play the game with our children are largely inspired by our professional views on play and learning. Hence, reflecting on our work would allow us to make our implicit beliefs and actions about intergenerational and transmediational play more explicit. At the same time, we wanted to illustrate detailed accounts of the play partnerships we engage in with our sons. This back and forth between the study of self and participants in a natural setting that is difficult for outsiders to have insight into prompted us to adopt a part autoethnographic and part self-ethnographic approach. Other studies by parent-researchers have demonstrated the benefits and challenges of adopting a self- or autoethnographic approach (Vedder-Weiss, 2017; 2018). We believe that combining the two approaches would afford us to respond in a richer and more systematic manner.

Over a one month period, we responded to prompts including: (a) Why is play important to you? (b) How do you choose a game for your child? (c) What are some of your favorite games to play your child? (d) What about these games makes you want to play them with your child? (e) How do you play a game with your child? (f) How do you go beyond the game play to make the learning meaningful to your child? (g) Provide an example from an actual/naturalistic game play session. Include conversations with your child, (h) What would you like to say to parents as it relates to being aware of what makes a game helpful, harmful, appropriate, challenging or intimidating for their child? We used these prompts to organize the rest of this piece.

SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAY AND STANCE ON GAMES

Mamta: Play is at the core of the questions that drive my endeavors as a designer, researcher, and educator. I study (a) how people learn about themselves and society through digital and non-digital play-based environments; (b) how can play-based environments be designed/repurposed and implemented to afford nuanced forms of learning for students; and (c) how can educators be supported in leveraging emerging and existing play-based environments as pedagogical partners? These questions are crucial because new media forms, such as games and maker tools, have galvanized the energy around play as a medium of learning in novel ways. Learners are afforded with individual, participatory, and connected learning opportunities in and out of school to experiment with complex ideas and possible roles and to explore new interests and deepen existing ones. Yet, less attention is given to the praxis of teaching and learning with these environments across multiple learning settings (e.g. teachers in schools, parents at home, educators in after-school and museums).

I have a background in human development; as such, I recognize the developmental significance of play as a parent and an educational researcher. As is reflected in the works of seminal scholars such as Lev Vygotsky, who believed that play is a tool for children to develop intellectually and that children learn how to use language at play, and John Dewey, who expressed that play is the mediator between child and society and that play and work should be integrated together in curriculum opportunities for play are important because they impact the affective, cognitive, social, motivational dimensions of learners' development (Huang & Plass, 2009). Contemporary scholars have also emphasized on the significance of cultivating play or playfulness as an attitude for holistic development. A lifelong love for play can be promoted when learners have opportunities to pursue their

passions, to construct and share projects, and to learn naturally with peers (Resnick, 2017).

I also have a background in educational technology, educational psychology, and the learning sciences which inform the way I approach the design, selection, and use of play-based environments such as games. Games are designed experiences (Squire, 2006), and by extension, designed curricula with affordances and constraints for content (what someone can learn) and pedagogy (how someone can learn) (Foster, 2012). Some scholars have proposed specific principles to appreciate the design of games for learning (Klopfer, Hass, Osterweil & Rosenheck, 2019). Other scholars have argued that well-designed games can allow players with opportunities for self-transformation (Foster, 2014; 2008) and enculturation (Gee, 2003; Shaffer, 2006), both of which are valuable to support learners' agency and participation in a constantly changing society (Thomas & Brown, 2011). Finally, scholars have theorized how well-designed games can afford transformative educational experiences in a Deweyan sense by tapping into learners' natural curiosities for inquiry, communication, construction, and expression (Foster & Shah, 2015b; Shah & Foster, 2014). However, learning with games is often implicit; educators can serve as a catalyst to make learning with games meaningful and personally relevant for children (Barzilai & Blau, 2014; Siyahhan & Gee, 2017).

I believe I am privileged as a professional and a parent to recognize the developmental significance of play and theoretical promise of games. As a result, my research has focused on making game-based learning accessible to educators in formal and informal settings by way of developing and applying analytical and pedagogical models that guide educators to systematically select, analyze, and incorporate games for supporting student learning (Foster, 2012; Foster, Shah & Duvall, 2015; Shah, in press; Shah & Foster, 2015). Having said that,

I believe parents are a critical form of educators for children and youth. If more parents are empowered (a) to understand the affordances and constraints of a game based on their children's development needs and interests and (b) to create playful opportunities for children that go beyond the game itself but promote children to make meaningful connections between themselves, others, and their world, these would set the stage for forging rich play partnerships.

Brenna: As a researcher who studies play, I spend a lot of time thinking about how I involve myself in play as a parent. I have written about the importance of playful learning, which includes free play, guided play, and games for children's development (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017). Learning is supported in all three approaches because children are active, engaged, interacting with activities that are meaningful to their lived experiences, and socially-interactive with adults or peers (Hirsh-Pasek, Zosh et al., 2015).

Free play, whether with objects or pretend or physical, is fun and voluntary, involves active engagement, without extrinsic goals, and often incorporates make-believe (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, & Berk, 2011; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). During free play, children can engage in discovery learning and practice social and other skills without constraints from adult involvement (Singer & Singer, 1990). Guided play retains most common characteristics of free play, especially the enjoyable nature, but adds an additional focus on a developmentally-appropriate learning goal (Toub et al., 2016). Guided play involves children exploring their environment with adults through interactions focused on implicit learning goals (Weisberg et al., 2016). Adults support a learning goal by using strategies including commenting and asking open-ended questions about children's ideas (Weisberg et al., 2016), fostering the serve and return interactions that are critical for development. Finally, by infusing games with learning content,

their playful, active, and engaging elements increase children's motivation to learn that content. Games may be successful learning tools since they foster an environment that activates children's intrinsic motivation and a positive attitude toward learning through the inclusion of characteristics such as challenge, control, curiosity, and fantasy (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017).

In addition, I am committed to exploring play in different communities. I am influenced by Göncü et al.'s (1999) sociocultural theory of play, which suggests that we should explore 1) the ways children represent their world through play activities and narratives; 2) the social and economic structures that impact the availability of play objects and spaces; and 3) the community beliefs about the purpose of play that may shape play opportunities.

IS THERE A RECIPE FOR A GOOD GAME?

Mamta: In my view, I do not outrightly dichotomize any game in categories such as good or bad, educational vs. non-educational. Instead (a) the experiences mediated by a game (which may be unique to each individual or setting in which the game is played, and is impacted by the design of the game itself), (b) the purpose for which a game is used, and (c) the manner in which the game is used results in specific outcome(s) which may or may not be favorable.

As such, as a parent, I start with a bigger picture in mind such as, (a) what are H's interests at the current point that he would like to explore further, (b) what are some ideas or experiences I want to expose H to, (c) what are some skills I want H to cultivate, and (d) what are some issues H is struggling with, which I can address by way of game-play? I use the answers to these questions to drive the choice of games for him. Simultaneously, from a play and learning researcher perspective, I seek games that can allow me to facilitate one or more 21st century knowledge and skills

in H. These knowledge forms include foundational (core content, cross disciplinary knowledge and digital literacy), meta (creativity and innovation, problem solving and critical thinking, communication and collaboration) and humanistic knowledge (cultural competence, ethical/emotional awareness, life/job skills; Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe & Terry, 2013). These skills, transdisciplinary in nature, include perceiving, patterning, abstracting, embodied thinking, modeling, deep play and synthesizing (Mishra, Koehler, & Henriksen, 2011).

I believe some of our current favorite games offer many opportunities for H to cultivate 21st century knowledge and skills. For instance, *Rush Hour* by Thinkfun is a logic game for 8+ years that comes with 40 multilevel challenges (beginner-intermediate-advanced-expert), a set of cars and car grid. We often play this game collaboratively, engaging in a think-pair-share process to clear the traffic jam. *Rollercoaster Challenge* by ThinkFun is similar in design (multilevel challenge cards, grid, logic-focused). However, we have flipped the rules and built the roller coasters by following the solutions on the reverse side of the cards. This has empowered H to independently engage in the process of building, testing, and observing the different configurations of a rollercoaster. *Disruptus* by Funnybone Toys is a card game that engages players in seeing ideas and objects in new ways. H has combined his interest in a cartoon character called Captain Underpants and characteristics of deep sea creatures, and applied the process of Disruptus. This has given way for GreenClover–H's superhero alter ego who fights his nemesis with the power of bioluminescence and farting. Finally, the *Felt Mosaic Game* by eeBoo is a tangram-like game that comes with 72 colorful felt triangles, a felt board and a set of 50 cards cards that illustrate 100 patterns and representations of creatures and objects. H equally enjoys arranging the felt pieces as depicted in the cards, engage in free play with the pieces,

and recreate patterns observed in nature (e.g. concentric growth rings on a tree).

I know a game is a good one for H when the experience of playing it (a) evokes a sense of wonder about himself or a phenomenon, (b) can be adapted to and can extend H's zone of proximal development over time by H himself or by an expert play partner (cousin, parent, grandparent), and (c) drives H to express about it and/or connect it to his lived experiences (Foster, 2014; Foster & Shah, 2015b; Shah, Foster & Barany, 2017; see Figure 1).
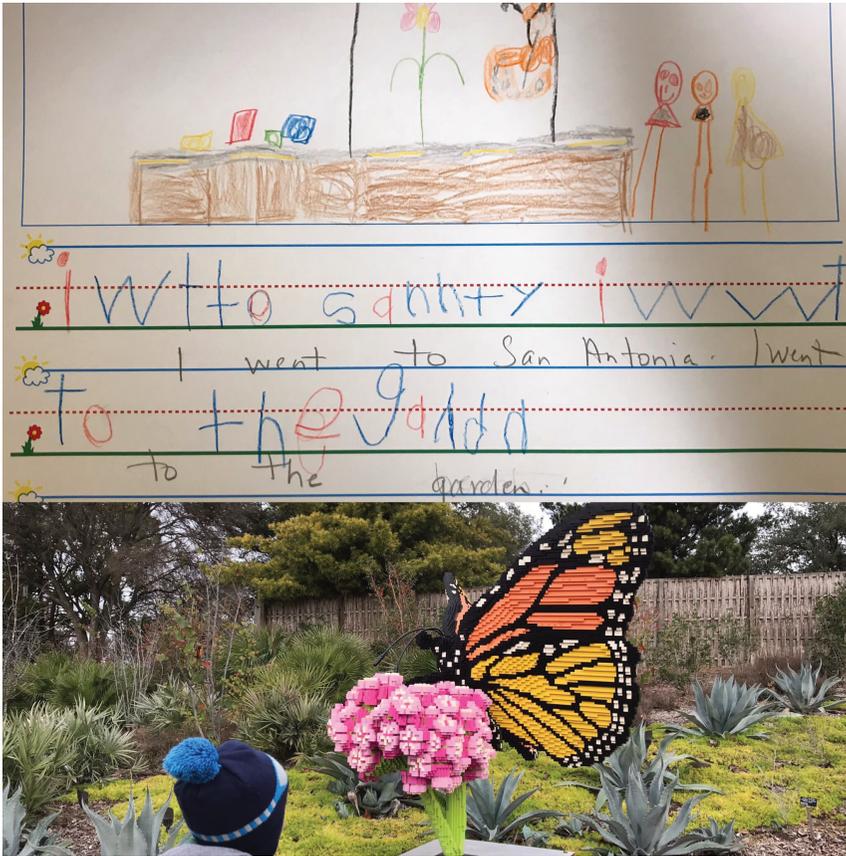
Figure 1. H writing and drawing from school depicting his experience of visiting the San Antonio Botanical Garden where we went on a LEGO nature + art scavenger hunt.

Brenna: When selecting a game to play with my son, I primarily consider his interests and what would "hook" him in to playing. This reflects on my theoretical framework highlighting the ways that people learn best–through active, engaged, meaningful, and socially interactive (Hirsh-Pasek, Zosh et al., 2015). At his current age, my son is very interested in being physically active as well as in spatial and mathematics tasks (see Figure 2).
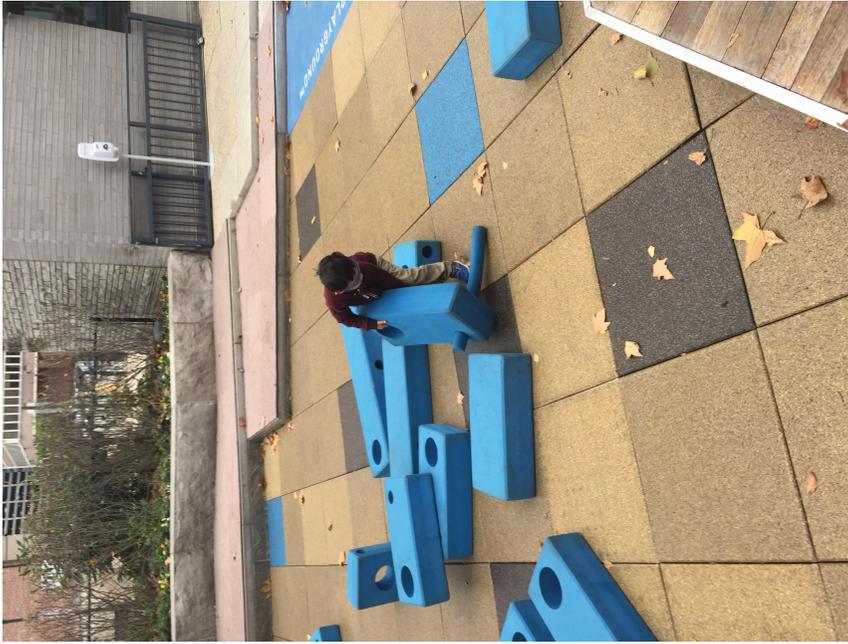
Figure 2. A engaging in block play with Imagination Playground materials.

I think that is true for other parents as well. You are able to use your knowledge of your child to help design an ideal gameplay situation from which you both will benefit and enjoy. For me, I use the framework of active, engaged, meaningful, and socially interactive contexts to determine the best games to play with my child. As you can see by the conversation during gameplay with my child, I am very focused on giving him agency in the play–in other words, making it an active or "minds-on" experience for him. I do not want it to be about me telling him the rules and him simply following along. I want him to see the gameplay as our joint activity–not as my activity in which I have included him. This method of approaching gameplay has made our time playing more productive and appropriate for his age level.

I also look for games that do not have a lot of bells and whistles that distract from the goals of the game. For example, when he

was younger, he always wanted to play The Cat in the Hat I Can Do That! Game, but only because he wanted to use the man in the hat and boat figurines as toys. He would get distracted by playing with these toys and stop playing the game. Now, he enjoys playing this game, but I think this example demonstrates the need to find games that work for your child at their developmental stage (and not necessarily following the suggested ages on the box).

As I mentioned earlier, I always look for games that will trigger his interest. Whether this is a game based on a favorite show (like PJ Masks) or a game that targets a content area of interest, games that speak meaningfully to a child's own life are much more likely to be favorites. This also means that it is less likely that children will feel intimidated by a game to which they can closely relate. For example, A's love of the PJ Masks characters is a great hook to get him engaged with the PJ Masks Night Sight game, which I describe in detail in the next section. He can put on a Catboy mask and engage in some sociodramatic play before diving into the actual game. Seeing himself as a superhero I think helps him persevere at the memory aspect of the game, which can be difficult at his age.

Beyond this current favorite game, one of our all-time favorite brands is Thinkfun. The mission of Thinkfun is to make learning through their games fun and engaging. The very first game A and I played together was Roll & Play by Thinkfun. In this game for toddlers, children roll a plush cube with different colored sides. Then, they select a card with the same color as the side that landed face up and complete the action depicted on the card–like hopping on one foot or roaring like a lion. He loved this game, because it was physically active and kept him engaged.

Currently, we are enjoying their game Zingo! 1-2-3. This game builds on his interest in mathematics by asking players to recognize different numerical representations–such as the word

"seven," the numeral "7," and seven items–and by completing simple addition. We play together, and the game is very fast paced, which keeps his interest.

He is also interested in other numerical games, including Ratuki and Blink. We play these games by their original rules, but also make up our own–depending on any learning goals I might have for our play. For instance, Ratuki is a perfect game for learning about numerical representations. Cards feature numerals, tally marks, fingers, and die, each representing the same numbers. Some days we play by sorting by all the cards for one number at a time, sometimes we play using the game directions and making piles of the numbers 1-5 in order. I like games where I can adjust the level of challenge based on the needs of my son.

Finally, I cannot stress the socially-interactive element enough. I look for games that I can play WITH my child. He can watch me model appropriate play behaviors, and I can scaffold his experience with relevant comments and suggestions. I can work with him in his zone of proximal development–making sure that there is enough challenge to keep him engaged but not too much that he becomes frustrated and gives up (Vygotsky, 1967).

PLAY PARTNERS IN ACTION

Mamta: Below, I describe instances of play experiences with H using some games/game/toy types.

1. Gathering a Garden by eeBoo: In this board game, players take turns while on a trip to visit vendors to gather flowers, vegetables, and herbs for creating their own garden. H, his father, and I played this game for the first time at the onset of Spring 2018. Over the remainder of the season we extended his experience of playing this game by (a) visiting the library to read books about things that happen in Spring, (b) taking a trip to the local arboretum to observe birds, and (c) introducing him to our community garden. This year H wants to revive our kitchen

garden. We will play the game using it as a springboard to discuss what we want to grow in our garden (flowers, vegetables and/or herbs). This will be followed by a trip to Home Depot or Lowes to pick seeds and/or saplings of the chosen items for our garden.

3. Construction Toys: As I mentioned previously, H enjoys playing with construction sets. We have owned and expanded our collection of many of our current favorite sets since he was 18 months old (e.g. LEGOs, Marble Run, TinkerToys by K'Nex, Magformers, Tegu Blocks. Collectively, these sets are built with different materials (wood, plastic, magnets), have different shapes (cylinders, bricks, planks, wheels, triangles, spools) and function on different mechanisms (interlocking, stacking, magnet). These characteristics in themselves have provided many opportunities over time for me to model cognitive processes of asking, observing, imagining, creating, reflecting, and iterating to H, which are central to many disciplines. Additionally, these games stimulate hard fun experiences (Papert, 1997), which have allowed me to shape his motivational orientations such as self-correcting and help-seeking strategies, and mastery over performance learning (Foster, 2011). In addition, most construction sets come with instructions for building ideas. H learned to 'read' the manuals from his older cousin, particularly for LEGOs. This literacy has given him autonomy and a good foundation to independently construct models meant for much older kids (12+) and to be a coach to his peers; thus expanding his zone of motivational and cognitive proximal development (Vygotsky, 1967; see Figure 3).

Figure 3. H creating with K'Nex.

2. What's Gnu? By ThinkFun: At school, H is learning to sound and spell three letter words. Unlike with puzzles or construction sets, where he has acquired self-competence and fluency to express himself, H and I or H and his dad have to engage in a co-operative and guided play to support his emergent reading abilities. We have taken a liking to What's Gnu? which we have played using our own rules. Sometimes, each player gets a turn to challenge the other to spell a specific word. This requires the challenger to read the letter tiles that are dispensed and a word that is possible with the three-letter word boards (e.g. T-A-P). At other times, H's father or I pose a riddle, the answer to which is a three letter word new to H's spelling vocabulary (e.g. What is the word for short and fine hair on some animals? F-U-R; see Figure 4)
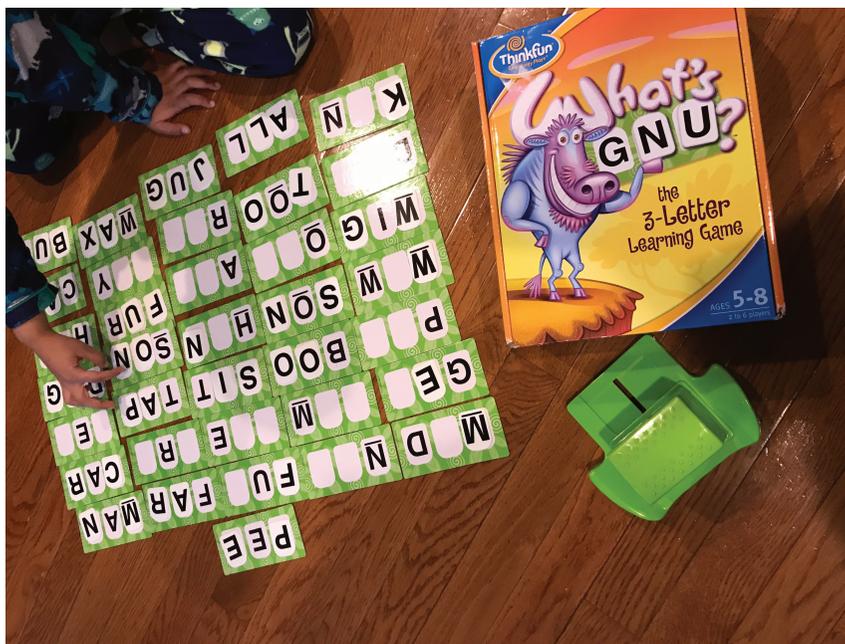
Figure 3. H playing What's Gnu?

Brenna: According to A, his current favorite game is PJ Masks Night Sight by The Wonder Forge. This is a view into what playing this game looks like at our house:

B: [After removing all of the pieces from the box.] Okay, A! Remember how we start?

A: Yes! We need to put on our masks for night time!

B: That's right. Why do we need to do that first?

A: Because we need to see what toys are on our shelves before we try to remember them in the day time.

B: Yep! Okay, masks on!

A: I'm Catboy! [Zooms around the room.] I'm going to defeat you, Romeo!

B: I'm Gecko. I'm going to carefully study my toy shelves so I can remember what I have. Catboy, shouldn't you look at your toys, too?

A: Oh yeah! I want to beat Romeo!

B: [After looking at the toy shelves for about two minutes] Okay! We've looked at our toys. Now what do we do?

A: It's time for day time! Take off our masks!

B: [After removing our masks.] Okay, now what do we do?

A: I'll pick three Romeo tiles from the pile. Then, I'll match them with my shelves, or yours, or the extra one for Owlette. Because we don't have an Owlette to play today so we have to do it that way.

B: Great!

A: Okay, I got the tractor, teddy bear, and dinosaur. I know I have the dinosaur!

B: Okay, think about where the dinosaur is on your shelves. Close your eyes and see if you can see it in your mind.

A: [Places the tile on the shelf.] I think this is the right spot. Mom, do you have the other ones?

B: I think the Owlette shelves do.

A: Maybe we can just put them next to that board and then use our night masks again once we finish our boards? And we can work together to do Owlette's shelves?

B: That sounds like a good plan. That way, we can do those we remember first and then work together to do the other shelves (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. A playing his current favorite game, PJ Masks Night Sight.

OUR COLLECTIVE VOICE *AS AND FOR* PLAY PARTNERS

In this essay, we have documented and analyzed our process of how we come to know as parents if the games our children play are helpful, harmful, appropriate, challenging or intimidating. Over a one-month period, we adopted a part autoethnographic and part self-ethnographic approach, positioning ourselves as researchers of play and learning, academic parents, and parent-researchers to individually (a) reflect upon the significance of play, (b) document the theoretical perspectives on play from which we draw inspiration, (c) describe how we choose games for our children, and (d) record instances of game play with our sons using some of our favorite games.

Our perspectives on game selection are informed by our professional stances on the significance of games and play for

learning, the learning goals we have for our sons, and the interests of our children. Each of us is interested in studying the benefits of play for learning and development, but from fairly different perspectives. Yet, even with our differences, we both focused on the importance of creating engagement with a game by building on our children's interests. This included selecting games that were recommended for children older than our sons and then adapting the play experience to our children's level (e.g. rule modification, co-operative/guided play). Additionally, we both highlighted the importance of connecting games to our children's lived experiences in meaningful ways. We believe that these two elements may end up being the most salient for other parents as well. It is also worth noting that the instances we have documented with H and A are those involving non-digital games. However, our process for selecting and playing the games is similar even with digital games or play environments.

Our analyses revealed that we engage in two forms of play partnerships–intergenerational and transmediational. The intergenerational nature of our play partnerships with our children allows for productive scaffolding opportunities as we bring to bear our experience as more knowledgeable others to help our sons construct new understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). As transmeditional, our play partnerships also focused on taking our sons' interests, skills, and/or knowledge and encouraging them to see the value of these both inside and outside the context of the game at hand. We think this framing may also be helpful to other parents in determining the importance of play partnerships for supporting children's learning and development.

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