The Art of Learning: Games, Players, UCC and Paratext

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

With the rise of participatory culture and Web 2.0, what constitutes gaming and its attendant forms of skill has dramatically expanded. Participatory media heralds new forms of engagement inside and outside the space of gameplay. This phenomenon also proclaims new tensions around what constitutes professional and amateur skills. This is further enriched by the burgeoning of the online with ancillary texts adding to players experience, knowledge and expectation of the game. In game studies, multi-player games have gained much attention for their social and commercial dimensions, especially around the rise (and fall) of E-Sports and professionalisation of gaming as part of broader shifts in commodifying leisure and lifestyle.

In these shifts focusing upon the increasingly social aspects of gaming, single-player games have been relatively overlooked. No longer an isolated practice, single-player games have become progressively more social and collaborative. As such, there is a need to examine the ways in which single-players also redefine mastery and skill as part of a dynamic practice that involves negotiation between game and ancillary texts and experiences.

This thesis addresses the transformative role of the paratext (Genette, 1987) within the wider cultures of gaming. Through the discussion of changing notions of mastery as part of the sociality and creativity within games, this thesis attempts to understand how the contemporary form of paratexts shapes skill, social, creative and labour dimensions of single-player games today. In sum, how paratexts contribute to a gaming knowledge or “gaming capital”.

Acknowledgements

I've spent a lot of time writing, so I'll keep this part brief. I would like to thank my supervisors, Larissa Hjorth and Christian McCrea. Thanks for everything.

Introduction

Understanding mastery is contextual. It involves perpetually changing goal posts. It is subject to contestation and it is always changing. It shapes, and is shaped by, a player's experience and expectation. My first experience of mastery begins like this…

It is recess, a break in the school day usually occupied by a group of us with playing *Pokémon* (Red & Blue versions) on our GameBoy consoles. We were a group of children who associated with each other for support in-game, through trading *Pokémon*, battling with them, or just discussing the information that came through. Rumours that filtered down into the schoolyard from the Internet, magazines, and the fabrications of young imaginations were always a hot topic of discussion during these breaks. Recess became another class, a class in *Pokémon* strategy, mastering the game as a whole.

Through my relentless playing of the game, I was close to completing a goal which no one in our circle of 5th grade students had accomplished; I was only one *Pokémon* away from completing the Pokedex, the in-game encyclopaedia which contained the information of every *Pokémon* a player had captured. The rewards for the completion of the Pokédex at the time were relatively unknown, some rumours stated that the player would receive a secret *Pokémon*, others that there were secret areas to access, all usually rumours from mysterious origin, either the Internet or supposedly from Japan, where the game was originally made.

I had decided to embark on completion of the Pokedex a few weeks before, and through relentless trading with other players to obtain *Pokémon* that were unavailable in my *Pokémon: Blue Version*, I had collected 149/150 *Pokémon* in my own game. A friend was trading me Jolteon, and I was almost there. Once the *Pokémon* had safely made it from my friend's cartridge, into the link cable and inside my own game, I made my way to the in-game city where a non-playable character requested players to show them a complete Pokedex. My mind was racing, I was about to receive a legendary *Pokémon*, as the rumours had suggested and I had decided to believe unquestioningly, and could barely contain my excitement.

I talked to the non-playable character, and was presented with a certificate congratulating me on my accomplishment. My hopes were dashed. The cold realisation that there were no more secrets to unlock from the inner workings of the game had set in. Although I was a little depressed that my accomplishment had seemingly achieved nothing, I continued to play the game despite this crushing blow.

Beyond this, our small group's pursuit of knowledge continued during our times in recess, where breaks had transformed into lessons, and the more experienced taught the lesser how to navigate the digital worlds we shared in increasingly sophisticated ways, debunking the Internet myths and mysterious international rumours that filtered into our lives through shared experiences. This was my first experience of "mastery", and a crash course into the inner workings of a small gaming community— a process that has accompanied my playing life. This thesis is about how community and paratext help shape the contemporary definition of "mastery".

Games and Culture

"Mastery" is a vexed concept, shifting and transforming subject to interpretation. It is gendered. It is culturally and historically specific. For some, the difference between a casual and hardcore player is defined by a relationship to mastery. For others, the rise of gaming and ancillary fields such as E-sports (professional players) is indicative of players who take playing and mastery to new levels. In what games theorist Taylor identifies as part of broader professionalisation of leisure trends, E-sports represent a particular form of mastery that differs from that of types of expectations of a casual player (2012).

In a general sense, the concept of mastery in games is widely debated and theorised as a concept which is incubated by player vs. player (PvP) competition and playing practice; conclusions about mastery are generally drawn from this area of contemporary games culture.

While multi-player play has been a focus of games since the first primitive games such as *Tennis for Two* (1958) and the famous *Pong (1972),* the single-player experience has also helped shape the gaming world into its current form.

Just as mastery of games presents itself differently in multi-player and single-player contexts, the concept of mastery is something that touches both the casual and hardcore player, and one that binds and forms the social, creative and communal activities of these groups. Whether a player is looking up the latest tactics and information about an upcoming game, or is simply posting a Facebook status to their friend boasting about a high score, players can use their knowledge of the game beyond the screens on which they are played.

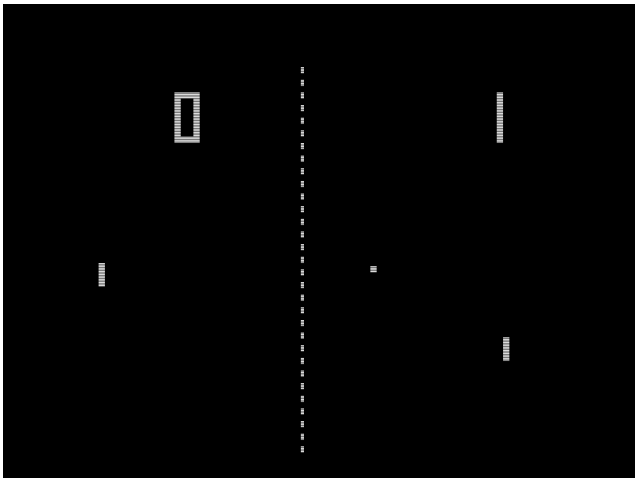

Figure 1- Pong was one of the first videogames brought to home consoles

In light of this phenomenon, the need to investigate the actions of players within the context of mastery arises. Through the media players' use and appropriation in and through media, what constitutes contemporary notions of skill and mastery is perpetually being redefined. To understand how players now situate their practice, it is imperative to contextualise the phenomenon within the current media climate, whereby the rise of user-created content (UCC) and Web 2.0 have transformed how we think about amateur and professional divides—a key trope in defining mastery. The mastery of a professional is different than that of an amateur player. The mastery of a child is different to that of an adult. Mastery is shaped by experiences

and expectations. And more than anything, contemporary notions of mastery have been shaped by UCC with its emphasis on collaboration, participation and sharing.

Web 2.0 and UCC

Throughout this thesis, user-created content (UCC) refers to material that players produce themselves, and how they subsequently disseminate and share these works through online contexts; we define this movement towards cultural participation of users when using the Internet as "Web 2.0". As Hinton and Hjorth write, "This idea encapsulates the transition from Web 1.0 which was all about reading or watching content, to Web 2.0, which is much more concerned with providing users with the means for producing and distributing content" (2013, p. 18). Web 2.0 is defined as participatory media whereby collaboration and sharing are key features. Web 2.0 is a shifting place, defined by malleable content and active audiences, as opposed to Web 1.0 where content was posted and consumed by a passive audience.

UCC is defined by Hinton and Hjorth as "the kinds of content produced intentionally by users, usually for the purpose of consumption by other users" (2013, p. 61). UCC is communicative and expressive, allowing users a space in which creativity and sociality can be overlaid. According to Burgess and Green (2009) UCC is defined by its "vernacular creativity"—that is, it is about the local, the social, the emotional and the expressive. UCC is contextual as it is flexible to reappropriation:

> Not all of this information is produced directly with the implicit intention of making something for someone else to enjoy… we draw a distinction between content that has been created purposefully by a user expressly for exhibition to others, and content that is generated by users as a result of using social media (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, pp. 60-61).

Throughout this thesis I refer to the types of UCC that are created for and by users to exhibit gaming skill. UCC is a type of vehicle that allows users to demonstrate their own creativity and knowledge within their subculture. This thesis considers the ways in which players use UCC in

the creation of gaming paratext, and how these artefacts reflect new ways in which players are demonstrating their mastery. This tracing of UCC gaming paratexts could be explored in a variety of ways—ethnographic (from the point of view of players) or textuality (reading the texts). It is the latter this thesis investigates to consider the textual nature of UCC paratexts.

Once, with titles few and far between, and difficulty levels with seemingly no limit, the greatest players were recognisable through their efforts in game, battling their way to the high score tables of a handful of games. Games scholar Consalvo (2007) identifies the roles early ancillary media such as magazines and later websites and forums played outside the game. Defined as "paratext", these game-centric forms—while seated outside the act of play—not only enriched the experience but also added key elements to the gameplay pleasure. Today players must negotiate a plethora of meanings and texts, while also having more opportunity than ever to articulate, distribute and share their own gaming journeys.

Paratext

Genette first defined paratexts in his 1987 text, "Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation". Genette writes, "More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold" (1987, p. 2). In the context of games, this thesis examines the threshold of paratexts, the point that links the text to the outside world, and work that transcends the boundaries evident in the usual reader-text relationship as in the notion of Web 1.0.

A study of paratexts can help to inform our understanding of Web 2.0, especially as smartphones transition us towards a seemingly seamless experience of online and offline interplay. This interplay is something that paratexts have always done. Genette continues, "It is a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that ... is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (1987, p. 2). For the player reading strategy guides online, the paratext allows them an ability to make a

transaction, exchanging knowledge for more knowledge, and in turn gaining more from their gaming experience.

As Banks and Humphreys (2008) observe, gamers are now more than ever co-creators. Whether through emotional, affective, social or creative labour, gamers add value to games and gaming discourses. Given this phenomenon, how can we define the labour of gaming "mastery" in a context of singular play? Despite narratives and design dictating an interaction only with the "machine", games are embedded within highly socialised settings. Even single-player games are highly social and do not exist in a vacuum. With smartphones enabling diversity in modes of engagements and embodiment in single- and multi-player games across mobile and immobile settings, the notion of divisions such as casual and hardcore, and offline and online gaming are challenged.

Distinctions between casual and hardcore players can no longer be determined by time (Juul, 2009; Taylor, 2012); genres like online multi-players have taken on various mutations within social media contexts and are now enjoyed by many. Studies around players and their social capital and skills have focused upon multi-players, and the professionalisation of the industry and play, as epitomised in the groundbreaking work of Taylor. However, in this phenomenon, the realm of single-players and the types of specific mastery have remained relatively under-theorised.

While mastery in multi-player games can be seen in the form of the "pro-league" and the commercialisation of games as noted by Taylor, how can we conceptualise mastery within the realm of single-player games? It is this idea of mastery within the neglected context of single-player games that is the focus of this thesis. Through examining a variety of emergent paratext such as "speed-runs" (as coined by their attendant subculture) and Let's Play videos, this thesis analyses the evolution of paratext in the wake of participatory media like YouTube and the "casualisation" of games.

Drawing from a collection of detailed examples of games, designers, players, and their associated paratext, this thesis considers the values, attitudes and tastes associated with contemporary notions of mastery, creativity, sociality and community in gaming culture through paratext. This thesis will address the following question—what do the emergent paratexts say about contemporary notions of single-player "mastery"?

Research Methodology

Drawing on game, cultural and media studies literature, this thesis will examine key emergent forms of paratext within their attendant game context. In order to do so, this thesis will firstly outline the birth and changes around definitions of the paratext. Drawing on the aforementioned work of Genette and then connecting these earlier definitions with Consalvo's (2007) work on paratext in her study of cheating, this thesis seeks to extend and expand upon the definition to encompass paratext within contemporary single-player contexts.

Consalvo's work is also informed by the work of the influential sociologist Bourdieu, specifically his work in the nature of social capital, and how society trades, defines and forms cultural capital, and in turn how people use it in the day-to-day. For Bourdieu, capital is a type of knowledge. In his important study of taste, *Distinctions*, whereby he surveyed 1200 people in France in the 1970s, Bourdieu outlined three key areas for capital—economic, cultural and social (1984). Social capital translates to knowledge in the form of networks and contacts. Economic capital is linked to finance knowledge and experience, while cultural capital correlates with one's education. Bourdieu identifies three forms of cultural capital—embodied, objectified and institutionalised:

> Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realisation of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc; and in the *institutionalised* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as

> will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee (1984, p. 47).

Cultural capital is an important concept in this thesis as it informs the interpretation and relevance of a paratext. A player's cultural capital—that is, their embodied forms of "gaming capital" (i.e. knowledge, skill and playing abilities)—enlightens their reading of a paratext as well as how their UCC paratexts can be institutionalised within the context of the wider industry, culture and business of gaming (how this embodied and objectified capital is given value by others). For example, paratexts are often intertextual. That is, they signify the interrelatedness of one text to another text. The more cultural capital—or "gaming capital"—of a player, the more they can draw on their knowledge and experience to make a richer reading of a paratext as an interconnected part of gaming culture.

Informing the understanding of texts and cultural artefacts as sites that embody social capital within game cultures is a social constructivist approach. This thesis deploys this approach which sees media as embedded within the social and cultural. Media texts and technologies do not live in a vacuum. Rather, they are shaped by the social context in which they live. As media theorist Baym writes, "Rather than viewing social change as a consequence of new media, it views new technologies and their uses as consequences of social factors" (2010, p. 44). The social constructivist approach allows us to view the role of player and text from a perspective in which the text is shaped by its audience, rather than the other way around. This thesis considers in particular, the role that paratext plays in shaping audience expectations, and furthermore how players define gaming culture. As I will examine, as much as paratext shapes player experience technically, culturally, socially and artistically, we can also consider how the role-player experience shapes paratext, and how these experiences elicit particular responses from culture.

As this thesis examines in the relationship between games, players and paratext, it is important to approach these issues from a point where we begin to articulate a body of knowledge into

how these three facets of gaming culture interact. To do so, this thesis focuses upon a textual analysis to explore the ways in which different forms of capital remain tacit and how emergent paratext like “speedrunning” are highlighting new paradigms between games, players and paratext. A textual analysis informed by social constructivism allows for rich readings of the changing nature of paratexts, which, in turn, informing mastery. Future studies of this paratext phenomenon might take an ethnographic focus and centre more on player experience. However, for this masters’ thesis the focus is on textual readings of paratext within single-player environments. The research I have discussed so far in games studies has distinctly focused on the player, and as such, the text has taken less precedence out of necessity.

From YouTube videos and strategy guides to art-books/visual compendiums and magazines, this thesis will examine how these paratexts help to form a perception of mastery, and how players use paratext to express their own playing styles/abilities and preferences. The first part of the thesis will form a historical study of single-player games and how paratext has evolved in and around gaming cultures. Part I seeks to bring earlier definitions of paratext into the context of contemporary environments, especially in relation to the burgeoning role of the online.

The second part of the thesis investigates paratexts and their role as conveying and reinforcing particular forms of cultural capital within the gaming world. These paratexts shape how skill and mastery is understood, negotiated and represented. Part II considers how players bring their game experience and knowledge to the paratext, and how the paratext then shapes expectations and interactions with social play. The case studies in this section explore the production material and game design history, variants of online gaming videos, and online encyclopaedias and websites that are deemed rich in gaming capital.

I have chosen these paratexts as they are viewed as dominate paratexts in the development of gaming capital. By this I mean that these paratexts become important in developing one’s knowledge of a game and also its connection within the gaming world. Mastery is linked formally and informally to one’s gaming capital. Each of the examples approaches the idea of

capital as a form of currency that can be exchanged and passed on to other players. While there is a plethora of paratexts to choose from, in this thesis I have focused upon three forms of gaming paratext as they demonstrate three prototypes for understanding the relationship between games, players and paratext in developing the role of mastery in single-player games. As previously mentioned, there is room to examine the wider breadth of sites rich in gaming capital that these subcultures offer, however as an introduction, it is prudent to begin with a general understanding of these main forms.

Structure of the Thesis

In Part I: Defining the Paratext, we examine the theoretical and historical underpinnings for understanding single-player mastery through paratext. Chapter 1, "A History of Mastery and Skill", explores general debates around gameplay and skill, especially in terms of the changing relationship between the amateur and the professional. Drawing on detailed examples like Taylor's research on E-sports, this chapter also introduces the concept of paratext as developed by Consalvo. Following on, Chapter 2, "Understanding Paratext", contextualises the history of gaming paratext from its original definition by Genette to Consalvo's repurposing within games studies. In this chapter, I will examine how the paratext forms a critical site of understanding for players and enthusiasts in their negotiations with the subcultures of gaming.

In Chapter 3, "The Modern Paratext", we examine how participatory media has influenced play in a modern context. From the ever-shifting notions of social play and the continued blurring of boundaries between users and producers with the rise of UCC to Küchlich's notions of "playbour" (2005), this chapter explores the contemporary single-player as what Bruns calls the "produser" (2008)—that is, the producing user who both consumes and creates content in and around the paratext.

Part II of the thesis examines three detailed examples of games and paratext to investigate the ways in which players negotiate between gaming and social capital and their relationships with

paratextual consumption and production. In Chapter 4, “Design and Paratext”, I explore how design history can transform into paratext, and how it is used in player valuation of gaming capital. Through paratext, players are defined as authorities on their chosen subject (i.e. a game) and can demonstrate, appreciate and measure each other’s mastery. I consider how players use gaming history to define their own measure of gaming capital.

In Chapter 5, “Video as Paratext”, I will investigate the moments during single-player games when a player cannot demonstrate their skill live to other players, and in turn utilise the online video to demonstrate skill. I examine how a player’s ability to edit and filter content that is suitable for viewing is an extension of the skills and gaming capital that allow players to demonstrate and appreciate gaming mastery.

Chapter 6, “Difficulty and Paratext”, investigates how difficulty directs and teaches players how to master game knowledge. Players use their understanding in demonstrating skill and mastery through the difficulty settings that games present, and ultimately shape their experiences beyond the game through the paths taken. This chapter investigates how the game itself shapes expectations of skill, and directs players in their valuations of paratext and their inherent gaming capital.

Research Limitations

This thesis focuses upon paratext as part of a broader circuit of culture informing multi- and single-player mastery. For the purposes of this thesis, I have focused on paratext as one way in which to make sense of the multiple forms of participatory media informing a player’s context. While I recognise the importance of phenomenological and ethnographic approaches, for this master’s thesis the study of the culture of gaming and mastery was limited to paratext. A textual analysis provides an important component in understanding paratext’s role in and around gaming capital.

Research Outcomes

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to provide a preliminary study for understanding of gaming mastery and skill within the context of single-player gaming. This thesis aims to contribute not only to game studies but also to media studies more broadly through its analysis of emergent paratexts such as Let's Play videos. These emergent forms of multimedia paratext not only suggest new types of skills and playing within games, but also shifting modes of spectatorship, visual cultures and participatory media more generally.

Part I: Gaming Practice and Paratext

Chapter 1

A History of Mastery and Skill

‘‘If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful at all.’’
(Michelangelo)

To some it seems like an unhealthy obsession to spend hours upon hours devoted to memorising the audio and visual cues of a digital character in the pursuit of beating a game. Though to many others, it is a simple part of daily life. To become the highest ranked, the fastest, the unbeatable, and the best; for many gamers around the world this is an intrinsic part of videogame play. This often tacit and yet significant part of playing, skill development and its link to mastery, is not just a preoccupation of videogames.

Indeed, as part of many other leisure activities and hobbies such as sports, art, and music, the realm of computer and videogames is underscored by the levels of skill possessed by its “masters”. The relationship between skill and mastery (as part of a broader commericalisation/ professionalisation of leisure industries) has been exemplified in the games industry with phenomena such as professional player leagues (Taylor, 2012).

Through understanding the contested terrain that is game mastery, this thesis seeks to explore how mastery and skill inform contemporary game cultures. By unpacking the myths around mastery and skill often implicit and tacit within gameplay, this thesis seeks to provide new ways for thinking about gaming capital. In order to do so, this chapter explores theoretical explorations of mastery through the work of Consalvo and Taylor. This is then followed by a series of detailed examples of online gaming forums and their constructions of mastery as part of gaming communities of practice.

Mastery

So how do we measure the value of a game? How does a player know when they have "mastered" a game? And how do players navigate the multitude of skills, knowledge, communities and other players in the landscape of this niche practice of gaming culture?

When discussing the skills, notions of mastery arise. But what is mastery? Who defines it? Game culture is splintered into micro communities; gamers quantify gaming knowledge into capital. As Consalvo notes in her study *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames,*

> The term subculture, however, is too limited to adequately explain the broader world of games and game players that currently exists… the term [capital] is useful because it suggests a currency that is by necessity dynamic – changing over time, across types of players or games (2007, pp. 3-4).

In line with Consalvo's definition of gaming capital, the combination of theoretical knowledge of a game followed by playing ability allows players who are highly skilled to not only demonstrate the dizzying highs of skilful play, but also to provide other players with explanations and lead discussion of technique and execution of play. Not unlike the elite sportsmen who retire into commentary, an in-depth knowledge of the play is borne from information (capital) exchange and the exchange of capital, which occurs during a session of play.

Gamers choose their paths along this road at every turn. It is a matter of taste—each choice proof of gaming capital. Every game mastered is another investment into capital. But this acquisition does not exist in a vacuum. It is rendered capital through its communication and validation by other players. The working definition of mastery this study will employ is one of high level of playing skill and knowledge, developed through an intense interaction with gaming media, particularly a specific mechanic, genre or thematic continuity. Mastery arguably

encompasses not only those who are famed for their competitive skill against other players, but also those who demonstrate great ability at single-player games.

Whether they choose the single-player titles or the chaotic world of player vs. player competition transcending genre and thematic content, mastery is a pursuit carved through adversity, frustration and sometimes sheer stubbornness. Players use a variety of content and experience to support each other, and though it may seem that mastery is a solitary devotion, they stand on each other's shoulders creating guides, exchanging information, strategies and tactics in an ecosystem that supports this mode of "serious" play.

Naturally, the movements of these communities and subsequent professionalisation of gaming piqued the interest of academic researchers. Of note is Taylor, whose groundbreaking work on MMORPG (Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games) has helped to shed some light on many of the current debates and discussions on player skill and mastery today. Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* (2006) utilised the researcher's own experiences as a player of *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 2001) investigating the negotiation of player lives both on and offline.

Power Gaming and the Casual Revolution

Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* considers the range of investment into play from the hardcore to the casual. From professional players known as "power gamers" to the discussions of professional play, Taylor explores these "power gaming" cultures to provide insight into an area of gameplay often overlooked through discussions on game design theory. With empirical material drawn from both auto-ethnography and interviews with various players and *Everquest* enthusiasts, Taylor offers us a glimpse into how players not only interact and pass through virtual worlds, but also into the interplay that is caused when these players navigate their various real-world relationships and cultures, invariably influenced by their online activities.

In negotiating both the online and offline worlds of *Everquest,* players continue their interactions often through ancillary media (which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter). The creators of these in-depth guides and material are generally identified as "power gamers":

> The level of attention power gamers give to understanding mistakes is notable. What are often viewed as the best player-guides—written tips and walkthroughs, usually put on Web sites—tap into this impulse…The willingness to critically examine others, let their own tactics be reviewed and repeat encounters until they succeed distinguishes the power gamer from the more casual one who may move onto a different location after several unsuccessful attempts (Taylor, 2006, pp. 74-75).

As Taylor notes, power gamers are marked by their attention to the mechanic elements of the game, "In worlds like EQ, power gamers often are juxtaposed with role players" (2006, p. 72). Where the role-player focuses on narrative and story elements, enjoying a gaming experience based on thematic knowledge and mastery, power gamers find their fun in "a commitment to understanding the underlying game systems/structures, and technical and skill proficiency" (Taylor, 2006, p. 72).

The value of the gaming capital power that gamers bring to a gaming community is highly important for all players, and feeds back to game designers and developers. Often, power gamers play the game to a point beyond its intended design—pushing the game to its limits. Through this highly refined style of play, power gamers have managed to sneak behind the curtain of many areas that designers and developers thought would remain hidden from their audiences. One such example of the capital that power gaming produces is "Theorycraft". Coined by players of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) according to Paul, Theorycraft uses "statistical analysis and mathematical modelling" to "seek out the underlying formulae that govern WoW, largely in an attempt to play WoW better" (2011, n.p.). As both Paul and Taylor highlight, the documentation of play is an important tool in refining the skills and style that power gaming requires.

With *Everquest* no longer the dominant MMORPG, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* has established itself as an unstoppable force in the world of online role-playing games. Although the titles have changed, users still embody the various play styles identified in the past. Power gamers are no exception, now bringing their vast knowledge and skill to a contemporary medium. Most importantly, as Paul notes,

> Theorycraft is a productive discourse that reshapes play. Theorycraft alters how the game works, and with similar phenomena present in sports and other games, this type of discourse offers a glimpse of a different way in which to conceptualise "games." Theorycrafting is as much a practice as it is a discrete thing. Theorycraft extends play and centres gamers, rather than developers, as authorities in a discussion of how WoW works (2011, n.p.).

As Paul argues, and in context with mastery, we can see that these players have reached a level of skill so refined and deeply thorough in understanding, it transcends the all-powerful position of the game's originator, as noted by Paul above. He argues that players are now the port of call for other players seeking aid. For example, websites such as Elitist Jerks[1] highlight how Theorycraft allows players to reclaim capital and construct a position of dominance, allowing other players access to resources unavailable from designers and developers. Elitist Jerks began as a website for a guild within *World of Warcraft*, which subsequently grew to become a database of information through the Theorycrafting activities of its in-game and external forum members.

The ancillary media that power gaming produces is one method of demonstrating mastery within the context of a game. Strategy guides, walkthroughs, videos and the wealth of statistics and information that power gamers amass during their play allow these players to reposition themselves as resources for gaming capital. They elevate themselves to a higher ground of

[1] (http://forums.elitistjerks.com/)

understanding equal to that of the original designers. Their mastery is apparent in the demonstrations they provide to others through the unique approach in which they play.

Figure 2 - Games such as World of Warcraft encourage players to refine skills through social interaction

Broadly speaking, the concept of skill organises itself from the level of the novice or complete beginner, someone with no prior knowledge, to the level of the seasoned expert. While we have looked at the activities of the "hardcore" niche of gaming in the previous section, the "casual" audience of gaming also merits an investigation. As argued in the introduction, the relationship between hardcore and casual playing is blurring, signposted by Juul's 2009 study.

As Juul notes in "A casual revolution: Reinventing videogames and their players", the casualisation of the market more broadly has been palpably felt within games. The American puzzle designer Kim notes,

> The point is that people play games for different reasons. Expert gamers [synonym for players] play for the longer term rewards of competition and rankings whereas casual gamers play for the shorter-term rewards of beauty and distraction (cited in Juul, 2009, p. 25).

In the above quote the common link—and polarized attitude—to casual and hardcore gaming is identified. Arguably, casual players are said to approach their play in a less serious matter, though cumulatively their hours spent on gaming often exceeds the "hardcore" audiences. Ultimately though, both parties are seeking an initial reward for their participation. As the quote from Kim highlights, rewards range from the technical skills for the hardcore to the artistic appreciation for the casual audience. For a casual audience, simply starting the game is a reward of light, colour and sound. On the other hand, hardcore players find reward within the prolonged and practiced play of mastering in-game commands and skills. The trajectory of the casual gives its players reward for a minimal expenditure of effort.

As the example of both audiences show us, motivation of play is encouraged through positive reinforcement. "Hardcore" players find the beauty and distraction that Kim identifies in high level, mastered play, their quest for competition and ranking rewarded in the form of beauty and distraction when they achieve a certain level of ability. Contrasting this journey, the casual player starts with visual and auditory beauty, and is encouraged to commit increasing amounts of time and effort playing the game in instalments. In regards to this commitment that games ask of players, Juul observes,

> Hardcore game design provides and inflexible ultimatum toward the player, asking him or her to commit much time and many resources to playing, but casual game design asks for small commitments while flexibly allowing the player to spend more time with the game if desired (2009, p. 53).

It is in this regard that mastery in games is generally seen as a painful, arduous road. Inflexible and unforgiving, players are perceived to offer sacrifice for the path to greatness. Whether a symptom of the nature of mastery in culture—"no pain – no gain"—casual gaming offers players a pathway into mastery which is covert, and players often fail to realise how "hardcore" their playing practice of their favourite iOS game is, despite playing in sessions that last a few minutes.

Juul's work offers this study a counterpoint to the investigation of the classical, "hardcore" gamer that Taylor examines. Juul's study of the casual gamer—just as Taylor's work does for the hardcore—offers us origin points for the casual player in this study. In the case of single-player games, comparison and competition are often retrospective. Your results after session playing define your success. Whether it is a quick round of a game played on a smartphone or a gruelling three-hour onslaught of the latest PC or console blockbuster, both forms define success at the conclusion of a level.

Thus we can see that whether the game or the player is identified as casual or hardcore, mastery need not be defined as an inflexible practice. The flexibility approach that Juul employs is useful for typifying games into "casual" and "hardcore" brackets, but as gaming culture and industry have changed through the years, these notions of commitment have also altered. As demonstrated in later chapters, today's "hardcore" games increasingly incorporate elements drawn from the schools of casual game design, and vice versa. Games themselves are becoming increasingly flexible to interact with, offering players mastery through simple, constant engagement.

Play

Huizinga writes in "Homo ludens",

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course…The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (1938, p. 10).

The hardcore attitude of flexibly managing "life" around a player's gaming habits demands that the magic circle is so sacred, and a place that demands no distraction, that players must not

permit any non-game responsibilities or commitments to divide attention away from playing. Contrasting this, the casual attitude of flexibly managing the game around one's life does not discount the power of the magic circle, rather it allows players to fluidly move between the circle and the rest of their lives. Casual gamers are not overtly forced by games to restrict distractions that detract from playing; most games attempting to extend their circle's reach through online and social media integrations.

Regardless of the game, rules and codes of conduct govern the engagement of all players. Huizinga writes about the magic circle, a space sectioned off from the rest of society where games are played. Society can often direct more ire to one who "breaks play of its illusion" than to a cheating player, as the cheat breaks the magic circle by disrupting its illusion. By robbing those involved of the fantasy of the magic circle, a spoilsport shatters the ascribed meanings these groups bring to the game.

This illusion that games construct forces players to divide attention within their own magic circles. As the case of cheaters vs. spoilsports indicates, to break away the illusion and deconstruct its meaning is an act which all participants disdain, acknowledging that even cheating, whether or not it is ethically/morally just, is less of an infraction as it sits within the illusion of the magic circle, "it is curious to note how much more leniency society is to the cheat rather than to the spoilsport. This is because the spoilsport shatters the play itself… [the spoilsport] robs play of its illusion" (Huizinga, 1938, p. 11).

In the case of a contemporary understanding of mastery, the magic circle is not fixed, and players of computer and videogames master their skills within their own virtual "magic circles", extending from the game to social interactions. For this study, the magic circles do not limit themselves to genre or a specific game, place or even media, often these landscapes of gaming merge and intersect in ways where the magic circles of today transcend the ideas of true boundaries and are more than ever incorporated into the daily lives of players. As the previous

examples indicate, we no longer operate within magic circles by Huizinga's definition, which demand clear boundaries (either material or ideological).

The question of where and why we play games is a difficult one, just as Crawford discusses in his 2011 text, "Video gamers",

> The meaning of a game will always be a complex social construction. It is therefore my assertion here that focus on the question, "what is a video game?" frequently detracts from the more important questions of what a video game means and how is it used, consumed and utilised by players (2011, p. 18).

Play is therefore just as complex, and as such the argument of a magic circle where play begins and ends is a blurred boundary, that is, ancillary factors such as sociality, creative practice and community influence games just as much as what occurs during play in the magic circle.

Drawing on Huizinga's work, Caillois' "Man, play and games" (1958) redefines play by categorising the many games and forms that play takes, from games of competition to role-playing fantasy, Caillois takes Huizinga's notions of play's sacred "magic circle" and seeks to deepen our understanding of the various levels and types of "magic circles" which exist. Caillois opens his study with a clear contention regarding the nature of play,

> Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money... In spite of this, or because of it, play constitutes an essential element of human social and spiritual development (1958, p. 5-6).

In this instance, we can begin to understand the degree to which the practice of play develops social and "spiritual" development. Communities such as those of the power gamers described earlier, or the shared experiences of a short session of casual play between friends all stem from the expenditure of effort into play.

To illustrate the various types of games and to categorise and classify the type of play they produce, Caillois evokes four distinct forms of play. The first is Agon, describing games of competition and skill such as Olympic Sports. The second is Alea, describing games of chance. Card games such as poker, a flip of a coin, betting and wagering all fall under this category. Third are Mimicry, games of Simulation—theatre, children's imaginations, games of illusion, masks and disguises all are representative of this type of game. Fourthly, games of Ilinx or Vertigo, a ride on a roller-coaster, walking a tightrope, horseback riding, moments of play that evoke an experiential result, the adrenalin rush of pure experience.

In addition to these four categories, games are also measured on a scale from Paidia to Ludus, Paidia referring to the free-form, unregulated kinds of fun produced through games, and Ludus referring to regulated, rules-bound types of play. As Caillois notes, "… the categories of play—agon (by definition), alea, mimicry and ilinx – presuppose not solitude but company. Moreover, a necessarily restricted circle is most often required" (1958, p. 40). Here we are to understand that play is always a communal activity in some sense, as Caillois notes, to truly understand play, a restricted circle is necessary to enrich and convey the benefits produced from play.

This communal nature of play then influences even those who devote their energy to single-player games. It is apparent that they are not isolated to their own pastimes, outside of their play they participate and disseminate their experiences in many ways. Today, players are gifted with unprecedented access and the ability to share their experiences, and although recent games studies have investigated the ways in which players do this in multiplayer environments in real time with other players, more analysis of the single-player gaming community requires further study.

In "Play matters" (2014), game theorist Sicart identifies the growing significance of play and playfulness in contemporary culture. From architecture to design, Sicart highlights that play is not only about creativity but also innovation—two key aspects to media mastery. As Sicart notes, while play has rules, playfulness is about an attitude. Playfulness can be found as to

underlinethe rise in casualisation and the professionalisation of leisure. It also manifests itself within paratextual culture and thus into gaming capital.

To conclude, early computer and videogame studies have focused on skill and mastery within the professional gaming arenas—as reflected in Taylor's work— and as a result, much has been focused around the relationship between gaming and sporting skill. While parallels and intersections can be found, it is important to note that gaming crosses into areas of the creative, social and communal differently to that of sports. Moreover we need to understand the roles that play and playfulness occupy in and around paratexts, and how this is integral to gaming capital.

Players

Between single- and multi-player games, games are played while mediating a plethora of social and cultural functions, personal and spiritual belief systems and a wide range of emotional reaction borne from play. Harper's 2010 dissertation, "The art of war: Fighting games, performativity and social game play" investigates the ways in which players navigate gaming worlds in relation to their various social and cultural networks and the frames in which they present themselves during play. Harper argues,

> Beyond the actual computer code of the game, and its story, the play experiences of the gamers in this study involved socialising and exchanging play information via online forums, attendance at social events focused on play, and the creation and maintenance of a very specific way of playing. These paratextual elements extend from social activities to specific, preferred technological interfaces for gameplay. This research argues that a game is defined as much by the ways it is played as by the formal aspects that make it up (2010, p. iii).

As we have observed in Taylor and Juul's studies, and as Harper notes, games are defined through the ways in which they are played. The aforementioned have investigated the ways in

which games are played between many people, or the relationship of the player to many other participants, with multi-player gaming occurring at a simultaneous rate. The question still then remains regarding players of single-player games. It is not accurate to apply the rules of multi-player gaming and project them onto singular players. As Harper notes, "the social setting or context was far more important than game-related variables, such as the competitiveness of *Mario Kart* or the need for cooperation in *Left 4 Dead 2"* (2010, p. 216).

It is apparent that multi-player gaming is generally guided by social and human relationships, supported by gameplay in real time. This is not to say that players of single-player games act in isolation and never communicate with others in regards to their play, rather, (as we shall see in the subsequent chapters) all players engage with communities whether anonymously on Internet forums, or by simply being the audience to a strategy guide freely available on the Internet. Historically, players of single-player games have engaged their communities and framing of gameplay activities in retrospect. Once single-play had stopped, players could talk about it to other people. The rise of social media, as discussed in subsequent chapters, has harnessed the social and communicative dimensions of single-player gaming, especially illustrative within its paratextuality.

The game-related variables that Harper mentions above then take on a whole new level of meaning, as single-player games demand players pay attention to these details to progress. Players cannot bargain or make alliances against a computer-controlled "AI", instead the relationship is one way, and players must rely on the innate human ability to learn and increase skill through failure or adversity to overcome the inflexibility of the machine they play against.

Sudnow's 1983 text, "Pilgrim in the microworld", chronicles the author's journey and obsession with the game *Breakout* (Atari Inc., 1976) for the original Atari gaming platform. His increasing fixation on a game he originally bought as a present for his children, and the lengths he takes to attain a level of skill he deems worthy of his time, correlates with much of today's research into the power gamer. The striking difference of *Breakout* to other games at the time was that it

was a strictly single-player affair. Unlike the multi-player *Pong (1972)* which involves players hitting a ball back and forth towards one another, in summary, *Breakout* involves players using a paddle to bounce a ball back and forth towards a group of bricks at the top of the screen which are broken when the ball hits. In his dedication to mastering *Breakout,* Sudnow journeyed to Atari headquarters in his quest to find out the secret behind the game's strategy and the answers to questions arising during his solitary play throughs. Sudnow states,

> Then the thought of that clock began driving me nuts. Did Atari just throw it in as a gimmick to create false excitement, or did it signify possibilities for mastery altogether beyond my sense of the game? Once I imagined myself playing the timer, glancing up every few seconds to watch it tick away, like racing an approaching T.W.A. to the airport in a Volkswagen. I needed information and figured I might as well go directly to the source (1983, p. 61).

Today, Sudnow's questions could be answered with a few clicks or a quick Google search, but without these conveniences, the author went direct to Atari to solve his dilemmas. However, the basic essence of his quest for answers remained the same; Sudnow sought out the creators of the game, whose positioning rendered them experts in *Breakout.* It was a question of gaming capital in the climate of 1983 with the home console an avant-garde hardware platform, and the location of *Breakout's* capital laid in the minds of its creators.

> It wasn't that I didn't know that already in some way, but so far there's been nothing I could specifically do with my knowledge that the thing was "programmed". Had there been a public arcade version at which to watch experts' movements, I figured I would've undoubtedly seen good players use their same shots each time. So I wasn't in possession of trade secrets. Just a perspective shift (Sudnow, 1983, p. 72).

Above we see the inherent struggle the single-player must contend with. During play, answers from the outside are unavailable; players must rely only on the information immediately present. In a multi-player setting the reactions from an opponent or crowd reactions can affect the player and arguably provide them with more information than those fighting against a

computer AI. To understand the differences the multi-player and the single-player must contend with, we must investigate the ways in which single-player gaming is committed, as much of the previous research mentioned focuses heavily on social and multi-player environments. Sudnow's auto-ethnographic work is well positioned to assist in drawing conclusions as to the unique nature of singular play. In contrast Harper's work allows us to understand the social and multi-player environments that all players contend with.

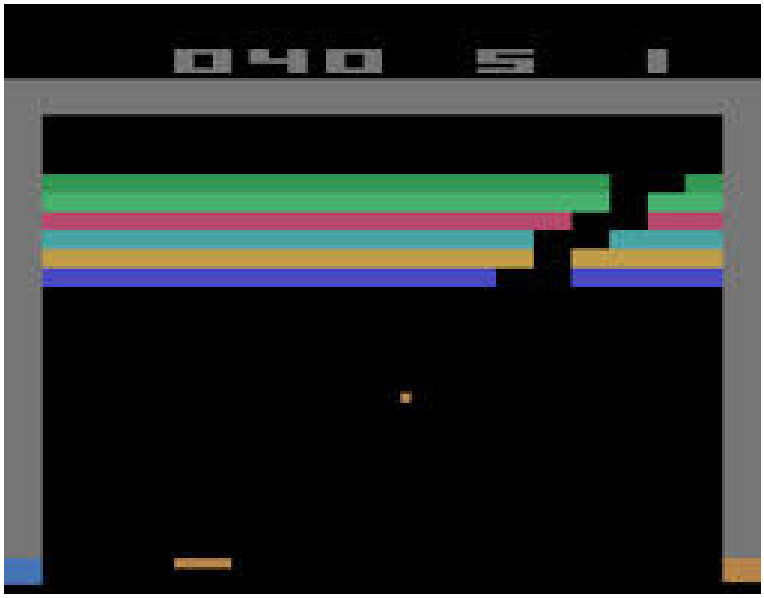

Figure 3 - Atari's "Breakout" was the focus of Sudnow's Pilgrim in the microworld *(1983)*

Throughout this chapter I surveyed the more general debates circulating games studies in regard to the area of gaming mastery and capital. Ultimately, mastery has been identified as a practice generally reserved for the "power gamers" or hardcore audiences. Through Juul's work, we see that fragmentation of play has allowed even casual players to develop high levels of skill (although at a much slower rate). While Taylor and Harper have discussed mastery in the context of multiplayer games, the aim of this thesis is to investigate the single-player area of mastery that has remained overlooked. There are some general commonalities between all players, or gamers, as to the way in which they navigate their resources and communities. "Theorycraft" is not restricted to multi-player role-playing games; of course these resources exist for games played by single-players as well. However, there are some striking differences

too. In particular, the role of the paratext in interplaying the social and cultural dimensions of single-player games, is unique.

The movement of gaming into the "mainstream" has seen a redefinition of distinctions between those who play recreationally and those who play games "seriously". Distinctions between casual and hardcore players can no longer be determined by time; genres like online multi-player games have taken on various mutations within social media contexts and are now enjoyed by many. Studies around players and their social capital and skills have focused upon multi-players and the professionalisation of the industry and play, as epitomised in the work of Taylor. However, in this phenomenon, we have seen that the realm of single-players and the types of specific mastery has remained relatively under-theorised.

Taylor and Harper's research gives brilliant insight into the activity of play, grounded by both Huizinga and Caillois' early work in play theory. Balanced by Juul's study of the casual revolution, and reinforced by Sudnow's own journey, we begin to see the common themes emerge from play as a pastime, and whether on one's own or in a group (virtual or in-person) it is inevitable that at one time or another, players will seek knowledge outside the game and the moment of play. Hindsight and retrospection allow us to learn from our mistakes, and as such, players utilise these skills to push their practice to its upper limits. Gaming capital is thus built on experience, and all players leverage their play experience into something tradable and desired by others.

We have observed gaming from "hardcore" to "casual", the worlds of multi-player and single-player gaming, the range of activities that all constitute play, and the 'magic circles' by which they remain sacred in. Whether multi- or single-player, the mastery of games is informed by paratext, therefore, the following chapter will study more closely the ancillary media that surrounds games and the people behind the design of this media—leading us closer to investigating the research question, how do players negotiate concepts of contemporary

notions of mastery, creativity, sociality and community in gaming culture through the usage of online and theoretical paratext?

Chapter 2

Understanding Paratext

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, much of the rhetoric regarding the concept of gamer "mastery" has generally been focused on the interactions and culture of multi-player gaming communities (Taylor, 2006). As such, there still lies a gap in understanding these motivations in players on their own, against the computer. While multi-player investigations explore gaming history and culture itself to draw conclusions, the research is as much about social relationships, behaviours and interpersonal connections that gamers share during play, as the games that are scrutinised. As such, there is a type of gaming mastery that remains relatively unexplored, mastery of the ***single-***player game.

Of course, this is not to say that single-player games do not engage community and cultures organised around their mode of play, rather the major difference between the two forms is the immediacy of experience that players share. Multi-player gamers share experience together, communicating through their in-game actions and weaving their stories in real time to each other. Conversely, the single-player gamer must rely on alternate methods to regale their stories of play, as play is conducted singularly; players rely on mainly their historical accounts and knowledge of the game world to transmit their experiences to each other.

In her 2007 work, Consalvo defines paratext in broader terms than originally described by Genette in 1987. Genette defined paratext in terms of a reader's experience with written text, such as the relationship a reader has between the main body of a book and its table of contents. The table of contents is an example of material which provides extraneous information not directly related to the act of reading the main story/article, however acts to enrich a reader's ability to read and enjoy the information within the text by offering the opportunity to find a particular page or chapter through an ancillary medium.

Building upon this idea, Consalvo's study extrudes this idea of the ancillary media and broadens its scope when discussing games, arguing that stand-alone media such as strategy guides acts in function just as a table of contents or index, that is, the function of a paratext to act as an ancillary medium, running alongside the main activity to enrich the experiences it provides. It provides a player with additional information that enriches the main activity of game-playing.

Consalvo's definition of paratext also draws from Lunenfeld's studies of digital media, arguing that often a paratext can transform into a text of its own (Lunenfeld, 1999). Understanding the paratext as a media form that can dictate its own terms of consumption and value as gaming capital, the boundaries between media and paratext become "even more fluid, and the paratext are often more interesting than the 'originary' texts" (Consalvo, 2007, p. 9). Through this lens of paratextual study, we can understand that paratext evolves and develops in many of the same ways that the original text it references does. Audiences react to both paratext and media, building their experience of the original in tandem with the experience of the supplementary forms.

Through the production of periphery media, games culture is supported by the base of paratext to enrich experiences. As Consalvo observes, "the peripheral industries surrounding games function as just such a paratext. Gaming magazines, strategy guides, mod chip makers, the International Game Exchange, Even Balance and other companies, and industry segments work to shape the gameplay experience in particular ways" (2007, p. 9). Although the study focuses on the dominant companies and business of gaming paratext, there remains room to explore how gamers themselves organise paratext, especially in the wake of how participatory culture and social media have changed the ways we now interact with games and culture since Consalvo's study.

Figure 4 - Official strategy guides are an example of industry-produced paratext

Drawing from this definition of paratext, this study seeks to understand the relationship of paratextual production as one between player and player. In broader terms, that the production of paratext represents the entrustment of knowledge and skill between players, where the highly-skilled transmit their ability to the new players through production of home-made versions of the paratext Consalvo describes, such as strategy guides, videos and walkthroughs, to name a few.

Players and Paratext

With a basic understanding of paratext more broadly, we can begin to investigate in more depth the kinds of paratext that oscillate around gaming culture. As a form of gaming capital, paratexts are continuously changing in value as they evolve with time. As we can observe through an analysis of Consalvo's study, and concerning the current climate of paratext and the paratextual industry, what was popular in 2007 (or even earlier in gaming history) may not be the case in a contemporary examination. Therefore, it is pertinent to reflect on and review some older forms of paratext, and contextualise these forms of capital in reference to today's gaming cultures.

From gaming's initial foray as a mass-consumed practice, players have always sought places to learn more about games. Whether the knowledge comes from other players, or popular media, the gaming industry has sought to capitalise on these niches from their audience in as many ways as possible. Monetising gaming capital thus evolved into its own industry, and magazines, strategy guides and various other print media carved a new position in the world of videogames.

Players found answers for many of their questions from magazines and strategy guides, which were often produced or supported by the developers themselves: "The revealing of secret rooms or god mode codes, along with reviews that taught readers how to tell a 'good game' from a 'bad' one" (Consalvo, 2007, p. 18). At this time, "player" was a more passive role, despite the player holding control over their purchased software, developers and designers still held the keys to unlocking the deeper secrets of games. Often, breakthroughs in master-level play were discovered through a combination of localised gaming communities and supported by paratext such as magazines, to whom both game companies and players would disclose "secrets" and answers to titles to disseminate to other players.

Alongside the successful magazines, the dedicated strategy guides were published with assistance from the developers of a game during production, "they [strategy guides] begin stratification of the player base" (Consalvo, 2007, p. 18), that is to say, these guides not only guided players into playing a game or passing a specific level, but also informed the rhetoric of gaming strategy. Developers would aim to release guides simultaneously with the release of a game, and in the process give players knowledge (capital) right from the very first day of a game's release. The transference of gaming capital is different today because of the ubiquity of its availability—in earlier times, a player base would need to play through a game to completion to uncover its secrets through trial and error, with the occasional tips and cheats trickling down from developers to community through printed media and word of mouth.

Today, information is readily available right from the game's release, players can find out how to beat the final level of a game in the most efficient way right from day one. In turn, this alters the perceptions of value into certain aspects of gameplay practice, it is one thing to know what method to use to defeat an enemy in-game, it is another to prove that you have the skills required to do so.

Ultimately, the combination of both user-created and industry-created paratextual content drove the growth of paratext as a legitimate form of gaming capital. Subcultures which formed around various titles and genres of gameplay and thematic content were supported by the paratext both parties produced, and through the trading of information and advice, the landscape of paratext has always lent itself to a unique dialog between players and developers rarely seen in other areas of gaming practice.

Through the years, the lines between creator and audience have been continually blurred and conflated by the evolution of technology and rise of user-created content. In light of this, paratexts such as game guides and magazines (both online and to a lesser degree offline) remain a powerful form of currency within the gaming world. Just as Consalvo argues, that strategy guides represent the divisions of game cultures, where "various types of players prize different sorts of knowledge, echoing the growing fragmentation of the game industry's products" (2007, p. 64). While intense mathematical number-crunching of role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) may be prized knowledge in one arena, this knowledge may have no relevance in a genre of gaming such as the first-person shooter—games such as *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998) *or Counter-Strike* (Valve, 1999) —which require a more dextrous and reactionary style of gameplay.

Yesterday's Paratext

As discussed in the previous chapter, to further understand the trajectory of paratext and how they have changed over time, Sudnow's "Pilgrim in the microworld" can shed light on the ways

in which players navigated gaming capital in the early days of pre-Internet gaming. To gain a critical understanding of how paratext functions in today's times, and following a cursory glance in the previous section over the early 2000's movement of paratext and industry, we can learn more about the modern functions of paratext through Sudnow's example.

The journey from novice to master and the avenues Sudnow was forced to take (often viewed as extreme by many others) in order to learn more about the game which was his obsession, allows us to understand how gaming capital, and more specifically ancillary information, enriches the experience for players. Sudnow's journey is not unique; scores of other players have followed the same paths towards mastery of a game.

> I started thinking about these so-called skills. They were odd, even scary. They took place a little too fast for comfort. It was five years at the piano before I looked down and saw my hands appearing to make music all by themselves. But within two weeks at Breakout, I watch them handling fast slams, with no consciousness of guiding their movements. And they look elaborate as all get out (Sudnow, 1983, p. 45).

However, in the early 1980s, well before the wealth and accessibility of information that the Internet provides, players were forced to take great steps out of their usual comfort zones and small social groups in order to uncover information, and ultimately gaming capital. The purpose of gaming capital is to trade with, and demonstrate the player's ability to others. Furthermore, gaming capital enriches the player's in-game activities and the social interactions gained through them.

Sudnow's journey into gaming began through his exposure to arcade halls through his teenage son. At first the arcade appeared to be a confusing and strange world, but with perseverance Sudnow found himself enraptured with the electronic, visual and auditory wonder and as a result, with the advent of the Atari home console system, Sudnow's journey expanded. With one purchase, the arcade had been relocated, losing some of the theatrical qualities of playing live in front of others, yet retaining and yielding its own advantages for the budding videogame

players of the time. The significance of gaming moving from the “social” to the “personal” is of particular interest.

With less access to other players who could bear witness to a player’s attempts, the home console environment restricted the amount of gaming capital one could demonstrate and retrieve from other players. Where once players could simply ask the next person in line the best strategy for an event that had just occurred, players at home were forced to document and recount their tales in retrospect, with hindsight changing and altering the experiences players conveyed to each other. Sudnow’s obsession was uncovered during his time playing the game *Breakout*, as he relentlessly played the game to achieve a perfect play-through with no mistakes,

> Forget about placement, a score, elegance as an end in its own right. Forget about a model of good play to motivate practice. Here's all the motivation you'd ever want: get that action again, those last few bricks left and that eery (sic) lobbing interim as the ball floats about so you never know when it'll hit and you don't dare try placing a shot because you're more than happy just to hold on with your eyes glued to the ball (Sudnow, 1983, p. 41).

As such, Sudnow was forced to take his questions to the only others with whom he developed a relationship and understanding with. Sudnow’s search led him to developers and designers at Atari and culminated with more of his relentless quest for perfection, “I followed my instructions to the *Breakout* place, to the Consumer Electronics Division, where I had an appointment with the programmer. If anybody could tell me how to play the game, he could” (Sudnow, 1983, p. 63). Sudnow’s journey from arcade (social) to singular play (personal) and his search for answers by asking questions and beseeching help from other vested parties (social) demonstrated the interesting dichotomy of games and paratext, especially at a time before widespread access to information.

Paratext in Sudnow's instance became his many diagrams and maps demonstrating his knowledge of the game, which was enhanced by his visit to the developers of the game who had their own images and advice in terms of calculations and game features. Many of the key elements that Sudnow learned about his craft intuitively and by playing the game were confirmed through discussion with the developers,

> He actually put it in rather more detailed terms, but I wasn't taking notes and missed the particulars. I was grateful just to hear him speak about a "lockup". I was amongst colleagues, fellow microathletes (sic). He even called them "lockups" just like I had. Praised be the powers of a common language (Sudnow, 1983, p. 65).

Gaming capital, which at one time seemed without use or value, suddenly became a prized knowledge, a common ground by which the author was able to converse with others who shared his interest in gaming. As we can see, paratexts function in this sense as a bridge between audiences, they are a currency with which one can obtain new information or access to groups and areas of knowledge that were previously unattainable. A paratext is not limited to a printed or industry generated/monetised product, especially in this instance; we can observe the function of home-made paratext such as Sudnow's plethora of drawings as an artefact of gaming mastery. Sudnow used his knowledge and the examples he created to demonstrate his ability to play the single-player game breakout and gain access to the lofty developers who seemed relatively out of reach whilst in the arcade.

Despite very little access to other players and resources (i.e. paratext), Sudnow leverages his gaming ability in a way that is unique to the single-player experience, differing to the arcade in which others watched and gave advice. Sudnow's personal journey was recounted to Atari in the form of simple drawings, diagrams and allegory, a retrospective glance at mastery often difficult to capture in the multi-player space. His experience was translated into a communicable gaming capital.

Today's Paratext—Paratext as Proof of Mastery

As we have seen through both the studies of Consalvo and Sudnow, gaming paratext was generally passed from player to player through word of mouth, and then into physical forms such as strategy guides and magazines, which were the first early examples of the transformation of gaming capital and knowledge into hard copy paratext. Players seek ways to make their knowledge long-lasting and communicable outside of their sessions in play, just as Sudnow demonstrated his knowledge of *Breakout* to the game designers at Atari, we see the parallels in the work of Taylor and Harper. As discussed in the previous chapter, both have focused predominately on multi-player settings and the social environments that are formed through this type of play.

In Taylor's study "Raising the stakes" (2012), she revisits the power gamer phenomenon and observes the differences between the playing styles of these players in contrast to multitudes of other fans, all playing the same game. Characteristic of the power gamer is to desensitise their gameplay, reducing in-game elements to numbers and values, stripping them of emotional content. Power gamers care less about the aesthetics of the world; instead they are entranced by the beauty of numbers,

> …the game is seen as a problem to be broken apart and solved. Working out solutions and strategies with focused intent then becomes central for players with Chris' mindset: "Efficiency is probably the most important word [for a power gamer]. Leveling is all about efficiency". While a player certainly can advance without this kind of orientation, power gamers structure and evaluate actions in terms of productive or wasteful strategies (Taylor, 2012, p. 74).

While from the outside power gamers appear to care less about their gameplay, they are in fact a niche part of the community that cares most about the state of a game's entire play ecology. The power gamer invests a great amount of time, therefore their knowledge must be expressed in a lasting and meaningful way. As Paul demonstrates in his aforementioned discussion on

"Theorycraft", these power gamers become scholars of the game world through the managing of websites, encyclopaedias and ever-watching the nature of the game and its players, the power gamer's motivation to play the game better demonstrates their pursuit of mastery.

Theorycraft allows players of MMORPGs to demonstrate their supreme knowledge of the game to other players, and in turn enhances their own skills and experiences during play. With rich bodies of knowledge behind them, and combined with the numerical and statistical knowledge so highly prized, the power gamers' skill during play is a performance for other players, which demonstrates the theory in practice. The Theorycrafter transcends the usual relationship between player and designer, and as demonstrated by their contributions to the body of gaming knowledge, their gaming capital gives them master-player status. Harper's study of fighting game enthusiasts demonstrates the ways in which power gamers can vary between genres, and the types of gaming capital that are required by communities and power gamers to demonstrate mastery.

Referencing the work of Erving Goffman in "Presentation of self in everyday life" (1959), Paul focuses on performative frames—that is, the idea that people construct themselves differently according to various social settings. Performative frames are also informed by a player's gaming capital. This is particularly prevalent in the rise of Lets Play videos, whereby the performance of playing is not just about the gameplay itself, but also about the affective gestures. Players in the case of real-time competition are judged by their ability to play whether they win or lose,

> … the goal of the game is that it's a skill test to determine a winner between challengers. The shared goal demands a certain play performance. The behaviour of online players who are bad losers is likely attributable to the same thing: the serious player might—as many of the interviewees did—view a casual match as a way to improve and practice (Harper, 2010, p. 138).

Although there are ways in which players within a gaming community can demonstrate their gaming capital outside of actual play, (and the subject of study in the next section) a player's

standing in the social hierarchy of the fighting game community is ultimately demonstrated by their ability to perform.

Guides, strategy and analysis are still generated by the fighting game community, and in turn these games share the benefit of a close discourse between players and developers just as in the MMORPG genre. The key difference between these two types of power gamers is that fighting genre power gamers rely more on demonstrating highly refined and viewable skill, which is in contrast with the emphasis on cognitive-type mastery that Theorycrafters demonstrate. Both parties require players to prove their skill in actual play, and whilst one may emphasise the need to perform more than the other, the social settings of both genres demand a demonstration of gaming capital. Paratext created by these players demonstrates mastery; however it is validated by the actions of those who use it.

Arcade Sticks as a Paratext of Mastery

In Harper's 2010 study, the author engages the fighting game community to enquire into questions of performance, and the types of frames players construct during their particular play. In line with this rationale, the author investigates the arcade stick, an important piece of hardware for both study and for the fighting game community itself. Harper describes the arcade stick as such,

> The typical method of control for most console games is an input device that for our purposes will be called a "pad": these are often rectangular or wing-shaped devices that are included with the console at point of sale… An arcade stick, by contrast, is a different animal; those observed at EVO were typically in a relatively large wood housing, roughly the size of a large city phone book, with two rows of face buttons and a single tall joystick. The term "arcade stick" comes from the fact that these sticks are built to resemble the joysticks and buttons that are used to control arcade fighting game cabinets (2010, p. 95).

Using Harper's research into the arcade stick phenomenon, we can delineate into questions of mastery and engage with the question of how paratext demonstrates this mastery. The hardware itself is not limited to multi-player or single-player gaming, as it is a controller; it is simply an alternative method of interacting with a game. As such, we can draw conclusions from this research to understand how paratext forms a proven example of gaming mastery to other players.

To note, while the aforementioned studies into Theorycraft and paratext in a traditional sense have focused on written material, actual hardware also informs the paratextual. Consalvo notes the ways in which cheating devices as paratext have supported the paratextual industries in games, and how they have allowed players to introduce gaming capital into their practice. Much in the same way, the arcade stick is a piece of hardware which arguably demonstrates how gaming mastery can be communicated, and in turn forms gaming capital in its own way for other players.

Figure 5 – Players create customised arcade sticks to create personalised paratext that demonstrate production skill, in addition to skills in controlling the game.

The home arcade stick finds its origins in the arcades of old; to players of these games it is important to replicate an optimum environment to play in. As Harper observes,

> If replicating the feel of the arcade is important, then using a controller that duplicates that experience is a logical extension of that…What advantages does the arcade stick offer over the 96 alternatives that justifies the cost and accounts for such widespread

use? The answer involves a number of factors, but it contributes to the idea of a "comfortable environment" (2010, p. 95).

To the arcade players in this instance, the arcade stick is implicitly tied to both playing practice (as a method of constructing an optimum performance environment) and demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the game by owning and using the item. By simply owning an arcade stick, players are demonstrating the knowledge (gaming capital) that to play seriously you need to own one. As Harper notes, "[t]hese factors encourage the idea that if you aren't using an arcade stick with the proper parts, you're already at a disadvantage against serious fighting gamers who are" (2010, p. 98). In this instance, the arcade stick becomes its own point of gaming capital. Compounded by rich knowledge into construction, types of buttons, wood or plastic casing and electrical circuitry, players build capital in the fighting game community through their ability to identify and construct arcade sticks for control.

As demonstrated, the arcade stick sits alongside the actual fighting games played within the community and forms an additional level of capital for players. In this sense, player mastery is demonstrated by both game knowledge, but also peripheral knowledge into fighting gameplay practice. The paratext of hardware is thus a path to mastery which transcends one game and extends to the entire genre of the fighting game and as such, positions its knowledge in a way whereby specific mastery for a particular game is supported by the gaming capital implied by arcade sticks. As Harper notes,

> In short, using the right technology and adapting to it helps to bridge the gap between the more higher-level issues of skill and strategy in the mental realm of play, and the execution of those strategies on-screen (2010, p. 102).

The issues of skill and strategy which are inherent to the quest in becoming a highly-skilled player (i.e. mastery) address the questions raised by usage of an arcade stick over any other control method. Players use the paratext in this instance to support and improve their knowledge about a particular game through control, and by this we understand how paratext

demonstrates mastery to a certain degree. In this sense, mastery of a game engages players in a way that demands understanding of both the main material and any paratextual elements that influence play. From input device to magazines and strategy guides, players use these paratexts (as demonstrated by the arcade stick) to show their contemporaries their abilities to play games at a high level.

Paratext and the World

Throughout this chapter we have investigated "paratexts" to understand both their function in the gaming world, and to a broader extent what we define them as for the purpose of this study. The paratexts mentioned are but a few examples of the kinds of media, which sit by the side of gaming to support its practice. From "soft" productions such as strategy guides, walk-throughs and forums, to the hardware produced by major manufacturers in the form of peripherals such as arcade sticks, it is apparent that paratexts address a need most players do not initially realise they have. The paratext is a mark of the master gamer, the engagement with paratextual content beginning with the "end game'—a state where players have accomplished the main story or campaign mode in a game and proceed to higher plateaus.

Players at this stage in their gaming knowledge rely on paratext to provide a capital that cannot be grasped or leveraged from pure play practice. To communicate their abilities to other players at times when playing the game is not possible, or to simply assist others and in turn communicate knowledge and mastery, the paratext a player produces or engages with becomes a symbol of their abilities. As such, the landscape for mastery is shaped by the material that players leave behind. Once the developer's engagement has ended with the final release of the game, players use paratext to draw development back into the cycle, and in this sense, elevate their positions in the relationship between producer and audience.

With the ever-changing world of the Internet and participatory media, gaming today is more than ever focused on this dialogue between player and creator, and the paratext is integral to

the formation and continued support of this relationship. Players have moved on from written texts to creating their own video walk-throughs, once the realm of the paratextual industry itself, now superseded by the actions of players. As most of the material covered has focused on the multi-player realm of gaming, single-player games have remained somewhat under-theorised, and as such it is pertinent to inquire how players use paratext in this sense, when direct competition is not an option for players. The next chapter will cover this phenomenon in more detail, outlining the current functions of paratext in Internet culture, and will illustrate how the YouTube phenomenon has affected the single-player game.

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed a wide range of paratextual media and form. Players use these many forms to obtain a certain gaming capital, as well as knowledge and the ability to mark their position in social and sub-cultural circles. As Consalvo has noted, the multitude of games, genres and styles of gameplay render gaming capital the most effective way to describe how players organise themselves in their local hierarchies and within the wider world of gaming. “Masters” in this sense use their capital to communicate to multiple circles—from their groups of friends to the anonymity of the Internet forums—and they use paratexts to illustrate and construct an ideal of ability to others. The master of a game is thus also a master of gaming capital, and outside of their in-game ability, uses the paratext as a tool for communication.

Chapter 3

The Modern Paratext

In the previous chapter I have explored a more historical definition of paratext. In order to understand gaming paratext we need to account for it within contemporary popular culture. Players play and interact differently due to their past experiences. The current paratextual industry, the state of player-generated paratext, the evolution of the game modification, or modding , of both software and hardware and the liberalisation of game design allowing independents to flourish has affected the ways in which players navigate the multitude of worlds that exist within gaming culture today.

Today's paratextual industry is very different from the one described by Consalvo in 2007. As content has increasingly moved online, and users have been afforded more space and technology to generate their own content than ever before, paratext today is inherently more user-centred. Knowledge travels between users in this sense more fluidly; gamers who watch videos can instantly discuss them with others, which in turn can influence a producer of a podcast or video review. This turns the paratextual experience into a collaborative one. Gamers unknowingly become producers of content, where a comment on a message board or profile can turn into valuable knowledge (capital) for other players.

The notion of players as creators—and the attendant argument regarding play and work—has been explored in detail by Kücklich in his thesis, "Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry" (2005). This work helps us to contextualise paratext today in reference to the participatory media cultures. Following this discussion, I will conduct a textual analysis of current software/ hardware modding trends and the state of independent development as part of the paratextual industry. The following detailed examples of participatory and social media, as used by videogame players and enthusiasts, will demonstrate the broader relationship between players and online experiences with paratext. To study the bounds of knowledge that

sit behind these vocal forms, online written collaborative material and older forms of paratext, such as magazines and printed material which have ceded into more obscure niches of the gamer culture, will form the final case study for investigation.

A methodology of textual analysis will allow us to understand how players of single-player games in particular utilise this media to socialise their gaming experience, and allow an avenue of congregation for masters of this solitary art of gameplay. With this understanding, I can then focus on the other facets of the gaming world—such as gaming companies, industry, and designers, and finally the games themselves that players converge for.

As the player experience becomes increasingly intense, and rises to a master-level of play, the line between play and work begins to blur. When the practice of gaming can look like work to others, and often feel like hard work to the players who commit themselves to undertaking the task, questions are raised as to how this type of play can be considered at all as "playing". In the next section, the topic of "playbour" forms our discussion to investigate how the playing skill, creativity and social activities informs the way in which "playbour" plays a role in the production of paratext by players.

"Playbour":
The Line Between Play and Work

In earlier times of gaming, players expected rigorous levels of difficulty in their games, to the point where completing one level successfully could take weeks developing the right skills (as observed in the example of Sudnow). Today, players devote enormous amounts of time to develop incredible skill—and coupled with unprecedented access to information as ushered in by Web 2.0 they are able to develop this experience and knowledge in unprecedented ways. To the uninitiated, it seems all too hard and a lot like work. But to the player who fights the battles to reach this level of skill, it can become a favoured form of "play".

As a result of the heightened forms of play that skilled players engage with, social relations are built through experience; players develop relationships by playing games at these levels together. Whether they play together in person, through an Internet connection, or share their experiences retrospectively, social play is an activity in which all players of games engage as they navigate virtual worlds. In these social circles, what some call work is viewed unanimously as play, and helps to develop deeper social relations with others who are experiencing things in the same way.

If this is the relationship between the two, how can we understand the way in which gamers walk the tightrope between play and work? Is there a definite point where play crosses over into the territory of work? Or is this notion relative to the player involved at the time? These are questions which can help us to understand the function of paratext in a player's quest for mastery. It is not only play that straddles this line however—many members of the gaming community balance play and work through their involvement with paratextual practices, and of particular interest, modding allows us an insight into how players participate in gamer culture outside sessions of playing digital games.

Modding practice was the focus of Kücklich's 2005 investigation into the function of the modding community and its role in shaping the wider digital games industry. The modding community can be initially split into two factions—the software modding community and the hardware modding community. Of particular focus for this chapter will initially be the software modding community, followed by a closer look at hardware modification, both of which Kücklich discusses in his study. The modding community is best defined as "players who are not content just to consume games, but prefer to create their own games using the tools provided by the games' manufacturers, or, in the absence of these, creating their own tools and utilities" (Kücklich, 2005, n.p.).

In this sense, the restlessness of these players who seek more from the game design moves into areas traditionally associated with the gaming industry. In past times, it was rare for the normal

player to delve into this level of the game, whereby they crossover into the realm of the designer. Today's climate, however, is vastly different, with personal technology for the most part on a par with industry standards. It is easier now more than ever for the hobbyist to become a developer. Modding is the method by which this can happen; players who enjoy their gaming so much can now become the designers who they admire. It is the power of user-created content that has displaced much of the balance of power in the producer-consumer relationship that has long persisted in gaming and its culture.

The notion that players are accustomed to receiving content from developers and enjoying it is now much more complicated territory. Rather, the relationship between the two parties is enriched by the actions of users in becoming co-creators. Kücklich emphasises the ways in which user imaginations and actions are increasingly affecting the state of the broader industry. In understanding the relationship between the global idea of a gaming industry, the notion of a grassroots or localised gaming community is important when we consider the wider relationship that skill and mastery of playing games has with these locales.

Kücklich's study allows us to see how players move into design and how this in turn affects the industry, as games today increasingly look for ways to monetise and gain financial benefit from the activities of their communities, and attempt to harness the massive amount of free production converging upon their products. It is in the spirit of improving the state of game design that modding takes place and as Kücklich notes, "Modders are also in a unique position to challenge the way we think about the relationship between work and leisure in the post-industrial age, and to explore new modes of non-alienated labour" (Kucklich, 2005, n.p.).

Figure 6 – Player-created software mods use an existing game engine to allow players to become creators.

Player-generated content is not limited to only in-game applications, as we have seen throughout the previous chapters. It is important now that I have examined the ways in which players conduct paratextual creation outside of play that we delve deeper into their motivations. As noted above, it is a restless quality in the player that drives them toward a path leading away from a game interface, but at the same time alongside its cultural trajectory.

The player's skill motivates their urge to seat themselves alongside the creator—they believe they are deserving of a dialogue with the designer due to the hardships endured during high-level play. The player is able to move through the game world in a way which differs to the position of a producer. Where a player is restricted only to which direction the designer wants them to proceed, a producer can move through the entire game space fluidly, with the ability to alter player experiences at a whim. The producer of content enjoys the freedom of the game space, whereas the player must struggle through the gameplay constraints.

As I have seen, this struggle through gameplay leads players to uncover incredibly complex networks of information, whether or not it was intentionally built into the design by the creative team. As time has moved on, designers have become increasingly aware of this layering of design and are especially vigilant as to how deeply players can delve into a game. The process of this work-like play provides a valuable, tangible resource for development that

can often be translated into profits through the refinement of an original game. As Kücklich notes,

> [t]he precarious status of modding as a form of unpaid labour is veiled by the perception of modding as a leisure activity, or simply as an extension of play. This draws attention to the fact that in the entertainment industries, the relationship between work and play is changing, leading, as it were, to a hybrid form of "playbour" (2005, n.p.).

A particular title may have been lacking on its initial launch, but through rigorous testing by the fan base and high-level players, the development teams leverage this experience into releasing an update or "patch" to turn gaming labour into reward, and these patches do different things. Some are driven by technical errors, whereas others may offer, for example, an aesthetic change, or gameplay modification. As such, this playbour can influence the design of the game, in that a team may overlook or underdevelop certain features to make sure they arrive at a target release date. As demonstrated in Sudnow's example, once the completed game was shipped by a developer, the dialogue between creative team and project had mostly ended, the creator could liaise with players, but the state of the game was for the most part fixed and immovable. In modern times, the game is an object in a state of flux, players can play a game and notify a developer of a problem, and then a few weeks later download an update, which has addressed the issue.

Player mastery evolves the game itself, and developer skills are improved by the relentless quests undertaken by players, as the original game released may differ from the latest update available. The line between work and play becomes even more complicated, with more forms of playbour than Kücklich had outlined a decade ago. It is an easy task for today's player to update their game with a quick download from the developer. As such, games are much more influenced by the state of the player base, and developers can react much quicker to their fans.

Alongside this cooperative process post-release of a game, we find many players engage with their community through a multitude of forums, video and audio (YouTube and podcasting) and

wiki-style material (massively community-managed encyclopaedias) to organise and demonstrate knowledge to each other. This paratextual experience is one which arises after a game's release, as the complete knowledge of the game can only be experienced by the general public after its release (which forms much of our discussion within chapter six of this thesis) Communal paratext can help players to edit their bases of knowledge, clarify the total sum of experiences gained, or as Consalvo notes, "Paratextual industries can support developer-imposed gameplay limitations or they may defy them" (2007, p. 183).

Play affects people in different ways, and paratext is useful for digesting information, and can be used by players to revisit an area previously misunderstood, or rectify lapses in player knowledge. Furthermore, paratexts such as game modifications (i.e. mods) can reposition a fan of a game into the illustrious role of designer, providing not only a new perspective on play, but also access to gaming/social capital.

As players generally derive cultural capital from playing the game, their understanding of how this capital works is generally through experiencing a finalised product. From the designer's point of view, their experience with the game world is behind the curtain, they see the cracks and tiny mistakes that sabotage their suspension of disbelief. The value in gaming capital that comes from working with the game world, rather than playing it is unique as it is usually gained from a position that goes against the conventions of value that a player normally experiences.

Kücklich's playbour concept is useful for understanding how this complicated player-designer position starts to draw increasingly from work practices. Fans of content no longer solely "play" with content, they also work with it. Where Caillois described play as "an occasion of pure waste" (1967 p. 5), the actions of users as producers of varying forms of content in tandem with their consumptive practices alters the understanding of play and labour.

If we understand play as an occasion of waste, that produces no tangible result, and labour as a method that deems success by the production of a result, the paratext symbolises the union of

once-wasteful activity and result-driven practice. Kücklich's argument considers how play can overlap with labour, especially when it produces artefacts that can be repurposed by others (or sold by the games industry). What was once thought of as an activity of pure waste is one which now produces something in the "real world", whether this is playing skills, guides for other players or a host of other paratext (that we shall investigate later in this thesis). The lines between play and work are growing increasingly thin. In the next section, we shall examine in greater detail how modding has evolved and the current state of independent development which has its origins in the modding community.

Players who are creators have been around since early days of gaming. Tabletop Dungeons and Dragons campaigns, role-playing games (RPGs) on early consoles, and the multi-user dungeons of early computing all strove to give gamers and an outlet for their imaginations and creativity whilst spending time gaming. Over time, games released would include powerful level and content editing software available for users to experiment with free of charge. This phenomenon led to the creation of some of gaming's greatest games, and as Kücklich observes, it allowed the gaming industry to enjoy monetary success from the labours of its dedicated creator-user fan base.

Modding today is largely distributed quite differently to that of previous times, where Valve Corporation's online client, *Steam* (amongst competitors such as Electronic Arts' *Origin*) has become ubiquitous with the online sale and distribution of games both professionally and independently manufactured. Players today have unique access; as Tassi writes,

> Steam crossed the 8 million active user mark for the first time, 8,020,552 users, to be exact. Previous records included 7.5 million near Christmas 2013 and 7 million earlier in December and it hit 6 million for the first time back in November 2012 (Tassi, 2014, p. 30).

As these figures suggest, Valve's user base reflects the proliferation of the online engagement of players with games and attendant software. While *Steam* is not a game itself, it provides many with access to the vast array of titles available on the market. This is in contrast to the

early days of modding, where players would be limited to the game they purchased at the retail level, or acquired through other, offline channels, such as other friends. A level editor would usually be shipped with these games, such as *Doom* (iD Software, 1993).

The "level-editors" became a paratext of the game they were shipped with, sitting alongside the main game and enriching players' experiences through the production of new maps, game types and experiments. A player's gaming experience allowed them to understand of their favourite games outside the realm of simply playing. With this liberation and the breakdown of barriers between creator and consumer, the player was given unprecedented access into the role of game designer. They could now have the final say as to what aspects would be included and what aspects would not be for maps and levels for their favourite games. Meta-rules such as items and collectables the community viewed as unfair or "broken" could suddenly be restricted by the person in the map-editing role.

Detailed Example: *Velvet-Strike*

In the early 2000s, modding had become a ubiquitous activity amongst PC gamers. The rise of games such as *Doom* (iD Software, 1993) in the early 1990s led the way in allowing players to have unprecedented access to changing the games through map editors. From humble beginnings such as aesthetic changes and mods based on popular comics, films, and other games, in the late 2000s mods had grown more sophisticated not only technologically, but also thematically.

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, a group of young artists mobilised to modify their gameplay to reflect their sentiments on such tragedy. Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre and Brody Condon created *Velvet-Strike* (2002), described on its website as,

> a collection of spray paints to use as graffiti on the walls, ceiling, and floor of the popular network shooter terrorism game *Counter-Strike*. *Velvet-Strike* was

> conceptualised during the beginning of Bush's "War on Terrorism". We invite others to submit their own "spray-paints" relating to this theme (Schleiner, 2002, n.p.).

In the wake of a violent attack, the artists criticised the then-government's decision to go to war. They used the game to express their discontent with the situation, a sophisticated leverage of the gameplay to decry violence. The game in which the modified gameplay takes place is *Counter-Strike*, famous itself for being a mod of the popular *Half-Life* game engine. *Counter-Strike* pits players in the role of either terrorist or counter-terrorist, and players compete to either successfully place a bomb or diffuse it, depending on which side of the game they are allocated. At the end of the round, the side which has successfully completed the objective wins.

The decision to use the space of a game which is based around terrorist and counter-terrorist actions is a deliberate one by the creators of *Velvet-Strike,* which abandons the normal parameters of victory and loss in favour of spreading a message through the game's graffiti feature. In *Velvet-Strike*, there are no winners in the war on terror, only the perpetration of violence, "Personally I would like to see computer games move towards fantasy, away from military fantasy which pretends to "realistic"" (Schleiner, 2002, n.p.). The game's objective had been altered by these artists, in turn their game was to send a message to the other players and wider society about their perspectives on war and violence.

From the above example, we see a far more sophisticated use of the ability to alter and change gaming spaces, modding them for the needs of the player. Through the ability to alter the game, the artists had positioned themselves as content creators while adding gaming capital to their activism. *Velvet-Strike* is an example of a mod which simply takes one aspect of the game, but changes its overall meaning. Highly-skilled players' expectations and understanding of a game greatly differs from the novice, as much of the world holds more meaning for them. The ability to use but one of the game features is an example of the ways in which players can reposition themselves as not only content creators, but masters of cultural capital and

information. The ability to give game space new meaning is not exclusively the realm of the game creator.

Figure 7 – "Velvet-Strike" is a mod that highlights a political commentary

This resulted in the high-level player becoming synonymous with the amateur designer. Players who were considered masters of play had the ability to make content that they wanted. Content produced by these players was widely seen as having a level of quality, mainly due to the experience these new creators had gleaned from their experiences in game. As such, amateur game development had evolved into its own subculture. The once ancillary role of this development stream as an avenue for creating content for existing games was now a road for breaking into the game industry through the release of "standalone" mods.

This form of software used the game engine as the basis for the game world, but bore no thematic relation to the original game. Just as the painter uses a canvas to illustrate their whims, game designers use the technology of existing games to create anew. Kücklich hypothesised,

> Once the gaming community at large wakes up to the fact that much of the innovation in the world of digital games stems from modding, the industry will be forced to

> acknowledge this, and grant modders more extensive rights to their creations. Ultimately, this is a matter of self-interest if the digital games industry does not want to be caught in a vicious circle of ever more derivative products (2005, n.p).

Undoubtedly, the community "woke up" and the movement of user-created games eventually evolved into a widespread independent development industry. Today's amateurs are able to release and monetise their own games without the need of licensing or proprietary software from major gaming companies. This is largely due to the proliferation of free and collaborative development game engines, and various gaming assets for these engines. The "independent developer" is today's term for yesterday's "modder". They take the worlds experienced through their histories of play and use them to create the next wave of titles. Ultimately, the paratext of the game engine has spiralled into a separate industry.

In today's climate of gaming, a higher focus on software and the liberation of hardware quality for all users has rendered hardware forms of paratext less successful, and has allowed the independent development industry to displace modding practice and become its own juggernaut industry. Independent Development monetises the "playbour" players produce and delivers these profits to their creators rather than the professional industry, yet still tries to embody the spirit of grass-roots development with which the modding community first emerged. Just like any other fan practice, modding and attendant forms of playbour have over time been monetised by big business, for example, through the buying of mods from their original creators, or end-user licence agreements in which player-created content is the sole property of the developer.

Conversely, what we can see from the side of independent development is the reclamation of this space back to the guerrilla level. What was once counter-culture to the games industry suddenly found itself being commoditised, in turn, Independent developers struck back to reclaim what was once theirs. This was both a symbol of the power of the consumer/player and the developer's ability to dictate the terms of engagement with industry bodies.

The Online Revolution

Gaming's social space in today's world is no longer the arcade floor. The discussions of skill, strategy and stories of gaming experiences are now shared online. The shift from the local to the global through this phenomenon has resulted in great changes to the ways in which players understand and disseminate their gaming experiences.

Whilst it may seem relevant that social media itself has integrated game platforms within which players can chat and share game statistics and information (for example Facebook), this project is more concerned with the social interactions that involve games which are not integrated into social media platforms, and the skillful, social, creative, communal activities which players engage with. The gaming platforms present in social media would merit future study. The current project will focus rather on social engagement of YouTube (specifically video paratexts as covered in Chapter 5), with brief overviews of Twitter and Facebook to inform our current understanding of contemporary social media.

Participatory culture, as defined by Jenkins in his 2006 work, "Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide", is "[an] emerging media system, what might traditionally be understood as media producers and consumers are transformed into participants who are expected to interact with each other according to a new set of rules which none of us fully understands" (2006, p. 9). Where before players would huddle around the arcade cabinet to witness demonstrations of skill, or use the high score table as a guide of the required levels of mastery, players now share their content in editable terms.

Play-throughs can be altered, cut and changed by video editing. The live experiences of skill still persist, where this event is usually done through either a "live-stream" (a live broadcast of an event online), or through attendance at a gaming event. The prevalence and popularity of Let's Play videos is the current incarnation of the aforementioned huddling masses of the arcade cabinets. In these variants of play-through videos, players record their play-throughs, edit the

content, and overlay narration to provide viewers with a shared experience of gameplay. If the game for example has moments of tension and horror, the surprises and delight of play can be shared through a retrospective glance by the original player and players can vicariously play games in many different ways through these online resources.

Strategies that may not have occurred to you through your own play-throughs can be brought to light through this spectatorship, and the dialogue between producer and audience of the content requires that players must be invested within the gaming culture to understand the significance of the games they are watching. This relationship is integral to understanding how paratext functions currently in game culture. Where once the masters of single-player gaming were judged on their live performance, the nature of single-player gaming as a personal journey and the relative demise of single-player arcade games played competitively has pushed the paratextual relationship into one of retrospection.

As we examine in more detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis, participatory culture demands that players share their memories of play, through recording and discussion online. Video content (for example, reviews and Let's Play videos), coupled with the multitude of forums and written material of online bloggers, allow like-minded players to participate in single-player experiences, as evidenced in Taylor's studies as aforementioned. In this sense, even the podcast (online radio broadcast), which relies on only voice, can communicate the memory of play through which this audience trades. As opposed to the multi-player ideal, where immediacy of performance is required, and who you are is judged on your state of mind/being during actual play (whether online or in-person), the single-player of today's culture is no longer a competitor but a historian.

Players are judged not necessarily on their playing skill, but on their historical knowledge of the game. How deep did they experience the game? This can only be judged through discourse on the content at hand and the recollection of moments, features and states of play. Whilst this

also occurs in the multi-player context, the importance of paratext in regards to this form of mastery is of great importance.

The historical player used paratext as a vehicle to disseminate these memories. As we examine in later chapters, the advent of social media such as YouTube, which allows users to share video content, is but one example of the ways in which players are increasingly sharing their experiences in this manner. Written pieces such as fan fiction, and also artwork which once dominated user discourse, is now converging with other forms of media, from audio mediums in the form of podcasts to visual media in gameplay videos and video blogs. The master single-player is one who can not only communicate their skill through the written word, but also through their artefacts of especially video demonstration.

With the shift in the location of where players socialise, it is also important to understand some of the mediums which have driven these shifts. Of particular note for gaming culture is the rise of the participatory media of YouTube and social media outlets Twitter and Facebook. While the forum format has of course contributed to the change, it is the major affects these three social media forms have had on gaming which differentiates today's culture from the times of Consalvo, Taylor and the other previous authors' work.

As previously discussed, players can record, edit and later distribute their experiences through the Internet. Something which previously was unavailable to the average gaming enthusiast, rather than sending through stories via mail to a popular magazine, players can now disseminate their content straight to their friends or other like-minded individuals online. This method of sharing has changed the way players experience games themselves, and in turn the dialogues between players and developers has become increasingly cooperative, moving away from the producer-consumer model of more traditional forms of media.

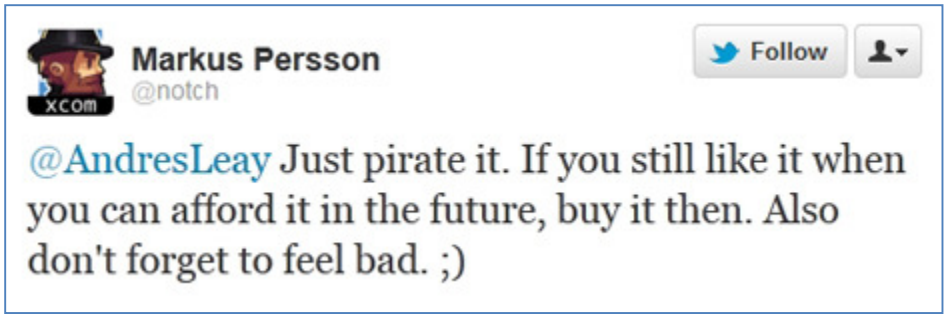

Figure 8 – Game developer "Notch" tweets to a fan in response to a question. Twitter lets developers and fans communicate like never before.

Illustrative of this dialogue is the proliferation of Twitter and Facebook. Twitter allows users to "tweet" or message other users directly and instantly, Facebook offers industry bodies and creators options to have publicly-listed fan pages separate to their private lives. While Facebook is mostly used as a platform for advertising and personal representation, Twitter is at the forefront of dialog between users and creators of gaming content. In contemporary games culture, these parties are communicating primarily through this medium, exchanging information and gaming capital that was once locked behind the closed doors of development. Players can now react to upcoming games, have conversations about past and current titles and interact with not only game content, but also those who create it.

Players who address their concerns are able to do so in real-time. No longer do players call customer helplines to complain about a specific game feature, or even write a letter by hand to their favourite gaming magazine to share their gripes or accolades. In the current climate, players can write a comment online and have it instantly available for the world to see.

In addition to these forms of social media, the mobile device itself has become a location of gaming paratext, where dedicated apps facilitate the dissemination of gaming knowledge. As Richardson and Hjorth examine in their study of mobile apps made specifically for *World of Warcraft* players,

> As Christensen and Prax argue, players have mobile and ubiquitous connection to WoW "without participation in what most gamers would consider to be the central skill

> elements of the game", (p. 29) thereby modifying the temporal, spatial, and social experience of gameplay. Player reviews commend the app for facilitating game-engagement "on-the-go", enabling the negotiation of time zones (for example, so gamers in Australia are not left with the "dregs" in auction houses), and providing always-on pathways of communication between guild members (2014, p. 100).

As we see above, the relationship that players have with their social media, devices and games continues to change expectations and playing styles as players continue to arm themselves with as much knowledge as possible to even the odds against others. Whether single-player, or as in the above case of multi-player gamers, we can observe that the mobile revolution has changed the way players interact with not only their communities, but with games themselves.
We can also see that players can now address problems and provide feedback to creators in an instant, and as such, experience in gaming becomes far more reactive to fan movement, as Jenkins notes of collectivism, "Right now, we are mostly using collective power through our recreational life, but it has implications at all levels of our culture" (Jenkins 2006, n.p). Due to the wide channel of dialogue between user and creator, it is difficult for companies or design studios to claim ignorance of a problem when their vocal gaming communities are clamouring for change.

This displacement of power in the relationship has also encouraged the aforementioned independent gaming movements. As major industry bodies are unable or unwilling to take risks in the current state of gaming industry, they can leave the realm of the avant-garde to the independent developer. Once success has been assured, then industry invests in the proven idea.

Ultimately, the shift in social media has affected gaming twofold. Not only has it encouraged and given rise to the player-producer, but it has also allowed players to step into the role of designer. Where once players dreamed of refining their skills to high levels to gain respect and

social capital in the world of the game-player, today's budding master gamers seek the knowledge to become creators of content through highly skilled playing ability.

The Written Word:
Wikis, Forums and Printed Guides

In addition to these visual and aural forms of paratextual content, the written word still persists in the online sphere as a major point of reference for players. In the case of the single-player, the multitude of user-created strategy guides, forums and "wikis" is one of the major resources to assist in gameplay and in the expression of experience. As Taylor's study into power gaming indicates, the forum and specific websites are some of the major tools in the arsenal of power gamers to communicate their knowledge of gaming. As Jenkins notes,

> Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives (2006, n.p.).

With the advent of the aforementioned "wiki", a community-moderated encyclopaedia pertaining to a specific topic, field of study or rhetoric, players now congregate and mediate their community's "mythology" by the use and moderation of articles in addition to the organisational and social structure that forums provide. Wikipedia is an online encyclopaedia that can be altered and updated by anybody. While this creates its own problems, users also moderate the content to ensure consistency and accuracy. Whether or not this system is successful is not the focus for this study, rather, the use of wikis by players is of importance. In their evolving role as "user-creators", players can use these wiki encyclopaedias that are specific to their favourite games or series to demonstrate knowledge and to encourage the cultivation of cultural capital. Historical and intricate knowledge that cannot be demonstrated through play but through the written word is expressed in an easily communicable way to other players.

Early examples of game guides and wikis have origins in dedicated websites such as www.GameFAQS.com. Wikis have content which is editable and constantly maintained; the knowledge in these places is always subject to review and evaluation by contributors and the community. In the example of the older site, GameFAQS, guides to games are separate files, which are maintained by the creator only, and while this content is produced in versions and periodically updated, past sites lack the instantaneous nature of the wiki. The word "wiki" itself is a Hawaiian colloquialism for "fast". As technology becomes faster, consumption and production are also subject to this change.

A guide-producer would create a guide, and then players would respond. In turn, the guide would then be changed accordingly. In today's knowledge bases, anyone can change (for better or worse) content. The wiki changes the notion of user and producer, as in past examples it is relatively clear-cut: the producer of the guide and the reader. Today's user is able to alter a passage as they read it, and as such differs from previous notions of users.

Where the wiki entry is one-sided and has very much a traditional author-reader relationship, the forum has always allowed players to converse, debate and discuss topics of interest. In terms of gaming communities, generally they are born on the Internet, circling around a game or series and blossoming into a fully fledged sub-cultural movement. From role-playing game players to fighting game enthusiasts, often the events held in person began as the threads and discussions on the online message boards the attendees frequent. For this reason, the online space of a forum is where players must demonstrate social (gaming) capital in alternate ways than in-person displays of skill. The proof of knowledge through paratextual production is thus the optimal method to prove one's worth to a community. Whether it is an in-depth analysis of a thematic point, or a breakdown of an in-game feature or system, players use the forum to not only demonstrate skill, but also to solidify their gaming personality and position within a community.

We can see from both of these forms of written content for the online space that players use the written word in much the same way. To demonstrate their capital to their fellow players, they must be able to articulate themselves without the need of a controller. A master's knowledge is based on not only their play ability, but also how competent they are as a contributor or as a fountain of knowledge. Interaction in practice and community is crucial, as Jenkins notes of audiences,

> Media producers will find their way through their current problems only by renegotiating their relationship with their consumers. Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture (2006, n.p.).

For the single-player, a walk-through, an entry into the history of the game's design, or the ability to critically analyse the themes and issues that a game may deal with all demonstrate a knowledge and cultural capital specific to their community, and fulfils their right to participate within the culture.

As we have seen, the advent of the online form of gaming paratext has drastically altered the industry. The classical forms of paratext still persist today, albeit in slightly different forms. Of particular interest is the current state of the strategy guide and magazine industries. With movements to the online sphere, magazines have altered into the gaming e-zine or article-based websites that provide users with all the content of original magazines, but coupled with the lines of communication that online media encourages. The strategy guide has also embraced the digital format, user-generated content as aforementioned has altered the organisation of strategy guides online and has spawned the rise of art and development-focused print media, offering more insight into the creative process.

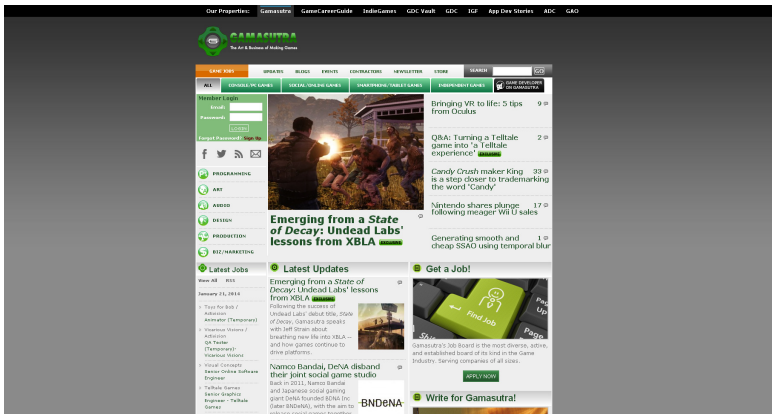

Figure 9 – Websites such as gamasutra.com offer users more instantaneous news and information than that of previous forms of printed media such as magazines.

The gaming magazine has seen its relative demise in the face of online journals and publications, figures of the industry such as *Nintendo Power* and *Edge* have since ceased publication, and the rise of websites such as gamasutra.com have ushered in the new age of gaming magazine. The key to this new format is the communication between the user and the material. Again, we see how the dialogue between the voice of the player and the intentions of content authors has drastically changed the stakes of gaming paratext. Transforming this industry into a user's domain, single-players who once sent their achievements through the post to their favourite publications, can now communicate with scores of other like-minded individuals instantly over an Internet connection. The magazine, once both a resource and meeting point for individuals has spiralled into a more immediate role, as players use magazine-like websites in the same way, but with an urgency of response not found in their earlier incarnation.

Where the magazine has spiralled into an online resource published and territorialised by both users and authors, the strategy guide has altered in different ways. Aspects that the strategy guides of old prided themselves upon, for example exclusive artwork, insider information and an authentication that facilitated a relationship between readers and developers has fragmented into focusing more on these specific areas. For the gaming strategy and tactics have been well and truly staked by master level players, and as such the producers of strategy guides have turned this paratext into not only a strategic resource, but one that is focused more on

the unique dialogue shared with designers and game developers directly. Art books packaged with a premium release of a game are not rare, and exclusive interviews and comments from the game's creators are commonplace amongst today's guides. In this sense, the guide has become less about directing the player through the game, and more about guiding the player through the development process. Offering insight into a world where even master gamers have limited to no access.

In closing, these traditional forms demonstrate the shift of the paratext into the modern context just as much as those previously mentioned. While the magazine and strategy guides printed today may not uncover "cheats" or are printed in their exact form, the spirit of these paratextual resources as links between various facets of the gaming world and culture remains the same. Whether it is a debate waged between players over a reviewer's opinion, or an interview with a game's soundtrack composer, the knowledge transmitted to audiences empowers them with gaming knowledge that is not necessarily directly related to the game, but enriches the experiences of play regardless.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have reviewed the meaning of paratext in a modern sense. This industry has moved into a new age, and with this has welcomed the voice of gaming's player community. Players have claimed a space for themselves as fountains of knowledge, or as resources for "fun". The work or "playbour" that players commit to a mod to simply experiment or try something different has given rise to a robust creative community, and the deep analysis of existing content by players has allowed designers to understand their own processes in much more meaningful ways.

In the new age of paratext, players are now considered to have greater power with their decisions about what games they play, often spelling the end of a development house should a game have remarkably dismal commercial success. Despite this, the importance of

communication between players, developers and publishers is the key to driving paratextual development forward. Even a badly designed game yields gaming capital for the discerning eye. We must consider the ways in which this relationship affects the current state of design, production and play, to fully understand how the player can use their own production of paratext and translate this into a viable form of cultural capital.

With a vigilant eye, we can observe how movements in gaming as a business, as a history of production, or as an artistic movement of a designer or specific team of creators, all allow their players to tap into the power of paratextual production, and rise to equal standing with these powerful entities within gaming culture. All are held together by the movement of the player, and the relentless quest for players to ascend into the mastery of their gaming knowledge has only emphasised this role in the world of gaming culture.

The next chapter will focus on this very relationship, providing a textual analysis of the *Final Fantasy* series, examining the series' innovations and numerous successes and failures followed by the paratextual movement of its users and fan base . An analysis of this detailed example will provide an understanding of the parallels and marked differences between players and the businesses that sell games to them, and will allow us to further understand how multi- and single-players use paratext to demonstrate their mastery to their peers, and affect the creative, social and communal interactions of players within gaming subculture.

Part II: Contextualising Paratexts

Chapter 4

Design and Paratext

In the previous chapter, I examined how a gaming corporation mediated the worlds of players and hardware, and negotiated the terms of production and consumption through their activities as a larger, regulatory body. To understand the function of paratexts as demonstrations of mastery we must first examine the methods employed by game designers and developers in using paratext during production to enrich gaming experiences for players.

Throughout this chapter, we will examine Square Enix (previously Squaresoft) and the *Final Fantasy* series of games to investigate how the quest for mastery is navigated between game designers and players. The multitude of games and various other related media produced not only by players, but also by Square Enix themselves is of particular interest for paratextual enquiry. *Final Fantasy* is a series not only successful for its playable qualities, but also its own mastery of combining various forms of media. It is the subject of this chapter, due to the ways in which production artefacts become paratext through the layering of each game's unique development history. Players can exchange capital through their knowledge of the game and its broad history is through the exchange of history as a form of gaming capital that *Final Fantasy* epitomises a form of single-player mastery, and provides its fan base a community where creative and social interactions can be made through paratextual production and wider discussions respectively.

This chapter will examine how Square Enix transitioned from its early beginnings as a game production company into the multimedia empire that stands today. Crossing boundaries of film, music, television, print media and games, Square Enix are a useful example in examining the modes of production that emphasise experience across many media forms. Initially, *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix, 1987) had been a predominantly single-player gaming experience, today, the series has since moved into film, television, comics, figurines and countless other consumable forms. To understand how players negotiate their skills in a single-player context, it

is prudent to not only investigate the games of *Final Fantasy*, but the plethora of media that support the franchise. To accomplish this, in the first section of this chapter we will briefly examine *Final Fantasy's* early and current production process, followed by the second section, which will investigate closely the multimedia works that make up the *Final Fantasy VII* family of content.

This chapter will introduce the concept of the paratext as one extending from the side of design and development. I argue that whilst there is a pressing need for an analysis of user-made paratext in the context of single- and multi-player games, it is secondary to the need to first examine the creator as a site of inspiration, and the chapter's broader assertion that player paratext is first informed by the activities of game creators. The analysis of actual player paratext would be relevant for future study; however as this chapter (and the wider project) serves as a foundation for future enquiry, a historical understanding of the *Final Fantasy* series trajectory as viewed through a methodological framework of textual analysis will allow us to understand the perspective that paratext must first begin with a central text, and to understand the wider narrative of a series with seemingly no thematic relationship between its projects, we must examine the history of Final Fantasy to understand its lexicon of knowledge that persists through gaming capital and homage attributed to *Final Fantasy's* history throughout each game.

As we have seen, when a game is released, it is no longer limited to a single product. Today, most media are released as clusters of information, nexus points for their audiences. As noted by Lunenfield in his work, "The digital dialectic",

> … the melding of publishers with moviemakers, television producers, and comic book companies, and the development of media conglomerates like Time Warner, Disney/ABC, and Sony—has bloated the paratext to such a point that it is impossible to distinguish it and the text (1999, p. 14).

Where Lunenfield's study contextualised this space for the state of film and television production, Jenkins' text, *Spreadable Media* further examines the ways in which the media landscape has changed across all forms, especially in the wake of the participatory media revolution as aforementioned in previous chapters. The rise of consumers as creators has affected the design process in similar ways,

> Audiences are making their presence felt by actively shaping media flows, and producers, brand managers, customer service professionals, and corporate communicators are waking up to the commercial need to actively listen and respond to them (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 2).

Players who play games help to shape the game being played around them and as we shall examine throughout this chapter, the dialogue between producer and active player participants within this context is not only limited to the multi-player, but also the singular.

The shifting role of consumers moving into production has been documented by Bruns in his 2008 text, "Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to produsage". Bruns argues that the role of a user in the modern technological age has conflated with production, "users are always already necessarily also producers of the shared knowledge base, regardless of whether they are aware of this role—they have become a new hybrid, *produser*" (2008, p. 2). In the context of single-player gaming, the cumulative history of players and a game's production help to form what Bruns calls a shared knowledge base, and fuels the users' ability to create, thereby shifting their role as a passive user to an active participant in the form of a "produser". Players of games are engaged with content in a way that lets them weave their own stories of interaction, creating their own unique experience.

Final Fantasy

The story of *Final Fantasy* begins with the last hurrah of Hironobu Sakaguchi, series creator and later executive vice-president of Square Enix. Sakaguchi's swan song *Final Fantasy (1987)* was

named after his personal view that should the game release poorly, he would leave the games industry,

> The name *Final Fantasy* was a display of my feeling that if this didn't sell; I was going to quit the games industry and go back to university. I'd have had to repeat a year, so I wouldn't have had any friends—it really was a "final" situation (Sakaguchi, 2007, n.p.).

As such, the development process of *Final Fantasy* had no assumption of a follow-up title,

> Way back then, the spirit was that we weren't making a product but a creation. It was putting our soul into the production—pouring all of your ideas into the game, even if they crop up during development; not saving anything for the sequel (Fear, 2007, n.p).

From its conceptual development, each new game in the *Final Fantasy* series was not a direct thematic sequel, instead it was a completely new game with new stories and casts of characters, "when you finish, you're empty—you've got no idea what to do next. But by pushing yourself forward, new things come to light. I think it's good if that spirit is continued forward with *Final Fantasy* from here on" (Fear, 2007, n.p). Essentially, each release was the "final" release of that game's universe, spurring the creative energies and reminiscent of the development process that took place during the original *Final Fantasy's* creation.

Figure 10 – Sakaguchi's "Final Fantasy" (1987) was the last hurrah for Square Enix (then Squaresoft), which became a runaway success

Being a role-playing game, it was integral to enrich the development team's understanding of the game through the experiences gained through passive forms of engagement. The production of the many ancillary media that supported the wider game archetype achieved this. Yoshitaka Amano, already a famous figure in animation and art circles at the time, joined Square Enix (then Squaresoft) as an illustrator,

> …Because the art was so small and pixilated, I created a design like that. But they came back to me and said, "Please design it normally so we can shrink it down ourselves". They wanted a real design from me, not something that looked like a game character (Amano in Mielke & Minamoto, 2006, n.p.).

In this recollection of development, Amano highlights how the overall "feeling" of production was the priority, rather than producing specific examples. It was more important for the developers to "feel" what the project was trying to accomplish. It was preferred that the various teams and individuals involved in development were given an emotive appreciation for the game, rather than a measurable directive, as Amano adds,

> Back then, my art couldn't go into a game without major adjustments. So I looked at sprites as just a symbol of my art. Here's an example: When you say "Mount Fuji" and you make a motion like this [makes a peak with his fingers], everybody knows what Mount Fuji looks like, so they get the mental image in their head. So I was in charge of making the master art piece that people would keep in their mind, and people would remember this art because of these symbols in the game (Amano, 2006, n.p.).

The symbols that Amano speaks of reflect the way paratext functions for most media text; much paratextual media can give audiences an overall impression of a text. After experience with the so-called "source" text, the paratext takes a new meaning, a new context and effect.

From its inception, the overall "feeling" of the game's experience was of most importance during development. The digital representations made by Sakaguchi's game development team were supported by Amano's artwork, and the addition of the game's classical musical score by

Nobuo Uematsu. This focus on paratextual material to enrich the development process demonstrates the way in which these creative people spread their imaginations across many media forms to achieve a final result.

As Consalvo notes, “paratext helped give meaning to the act of reading” (2007, p. 9). This is evident through development, the production of Amano’s artwork, Uematsu’s scores, and Sakaguchi’s storyline of the game that all contributed to the “meaning of the act of reading” made by the development team. Before any outside audience could read a text, the developer would need to experience it. The function of the paratext enriches the creation process regardless of how ancillary to the final product it appeared. In the example that Amano recounts, his art as paratext functioned as a tool to supplement the reading of what the game should be, and helped to convey Sakaguchi’s vision.

Often the tales of the production process form a part of the paratextual experience for audiences, as Lunenfeld observes,

> The back-story—the information about how a narrative object comes into being—is fast becoming almost as important as that object itself. For a vast percentage of new media titles, back-stories are probably more interesting, in fact, than the narratives themselves (1999, p. 14).

We can argue that Amano’s artwork, originally paratext for the development team, was then consumed by the game’s audience, and knowledge of this paratext forms a capital for players and fans of the series. Paratext can then demonstrate the level of skill of a game’s creators. They use paratext to help craft the gaming experiences they want the player to interact with.

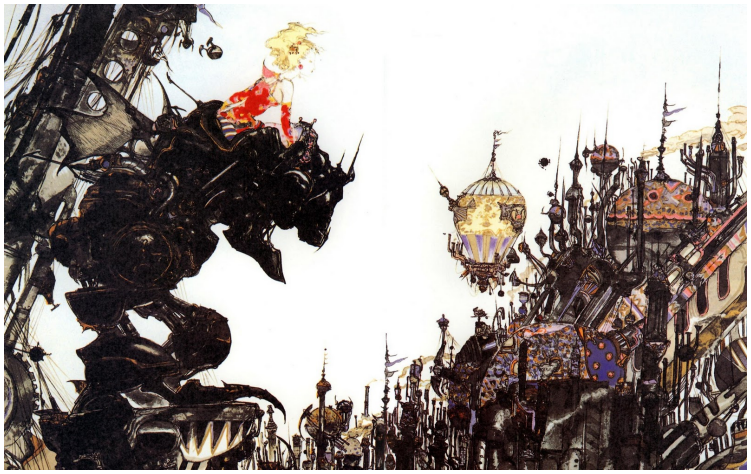

Figure 11 –Yoshitaka Amano's artworks were originally paratext used by production staff to gain an idea of the thematic and story elements of the game, and inspire them to represent the work digitally.

During the Super NES era, the *Final Fantasy* series focused more on the central characters, and continued to build games based around the evolving narrative. Sakaguchi notes,

> We put 100% of our resources and effort into developing games that don't just keep up with the evolution of game consoles, but also surpass previous works… the hardware has changed with every three FF titles. (Nintendo->Super Nintendo->PlayStation) On each platform, we've continuously succeeded in providing the users with a sense of "freshness", and I think this has also contributed to the series' popularity (Fear, 2007, n.p.).

With such a focus on narrative, it was only natural for the series to expand beyond the reach of gaming. Given they only had an "idea" of the game world, the creators had to build the reality. What the players experience in the final product, the creator must experience through the fractured paratext that inspires them. Not experiencing the final product as the player does, the creative process is a more disjointed gaming experience for them. In turn, the players who seek a deeper relationship with the game and by extension the creators use paratext as forms of gaming capital to demonstrate their own "mastery" of game production knowledge.

The paratext made during production allowed the creators to experience the world of the game before its final release. Shaped by these texts they create to provide backstory and context for

the game, they then translate this into the final product. With so much movement by creators between texts, the question of central and paratext begins to blur, as noted by Lunenfeld,

> Digital forms are even more prone to this, for who is to say where packaging begins and ends in a medium in which everything is composed of the same streams of data—regardless of whether the information is textual, visual, aural, static or dynamic? (1999, p. 14).

It is important to define then how we can negotiate the terms of central and paratext when discussing the pursuits of players. In the next section, we will examine more closely these terms and how they relate to the players seeking gaming mastery.

Final Fantasy VII

As we have seen through these accounts of *Final Fantasy's* production, the creators of the games frequently referred to a wealth of paratextual material to consciously shape their creative process. The fluidity of paratext however, does not limit these media to pre-production, and often what was once a "source" text or considered the "original", can often transform into a small part of a greater whole, relegating the content to a paratextual form. As noted by Gray in "Show sold separately" (2010),

> The text, as Julia Kristeva notes, is not a finished product, but a continuous ''productivity''. It is larger than any film or show that it may be part of it; it is the entire storyworld as we know it (2010, p. 7).

Although Gray refers to film and television production specifically, we can apply this knowledge in reference to games development and production, given the fact that all the industries have undergone a digital and online transformation in the wake of Web 2.0. Games, even when thematically unrelated, often share histories of development, especially in the case of a studio production such as Square Enix. The ideas and creative history shared by the various parts of the creative team generate the "continuous productivity", the art of Amano helped to convey

the meaning, and thematic concepts initially generated by Sakaguchi, Kitase and the pre-production staff, were made into reality through production.

Figure 12 – The hugely successful Final Fantasy VII *(1997) was the series' first foray into 3-D graphics*

We can observe how a game studio such as Square Enix can develop its own auteurship, a creative signature through the combined efforts of the many people involved in production. Just as a film or television program is fluid and cannot be fixed in place with a single release, the "entire storyworld" of a game production cannot be defined by the efforts of a sole producer. As often happens, peoples' roles within companies shift and change, and those who may have led an earlier production may move onto new things.

Upon the release of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) the chief character and story development roles passed onto Nomura and Kitase, as Sakaguchi and Amano were stepping back from the production process due to other responsibilities. Sakaguchi's role had shifted to executive producer; his focus was now on overseeing the production as a whole, guiding the project with an overview approach. As such, Kitase was given the role of Game Director and oversaw the production of the game and story. With Amano's creative projects leading him elsewhere, Nomura (who had started his career at Square Enix during the Super NES era) had been

promoted to lead character designer, a role, which combined with Kitase's, would drive the main thematic content of the game. The game was a critical and monetary success,

> …. with Sakaguchi's amazing animations and Sony's big-budget marketing, *Final Fantasy VII* became the biggest selling game of 1997 worldwide. Once when asked if the time and money spent on the game paid off, Sakaguchi happily replied, "Big time. It sold better in the United States than in Japan, and six million worldwide" (Kent, 2001, 542 - 543.).

What is most significant is that despite the shifting of roles and responsibilities, *Final Fantasy VII* embodied the audience and fan expectations that the previous six games had developed. The game is culturally significant for the series, as it directs players through their knowledge of previous game's material, and repackages it in such a way that unites expectations about the future and uses player memory to form a coherent world, both narratively and mechanically. *Final Fantasy VII* is the first quasi-3D role-playing game of the series, and to a greater extent, representative of the shift that Japanese role-playing games and their players faced in the wake of new technology.

By the time *Final Fantasy VII* had arrived, role-playing games had a formula tried and tested through the previous generation of consoles; players had become accustomed to a particular style of gameplay and presentation. The success of *Final Fantasy VII,* as evidenced by its enduring popularity to this day (and to a wider degree the success of Sony's PlayStation console) delivered on audience expectations as it brought a formula tried and tested over a long time into the present with expectations of powerful technology. *Final Fantasy VII* evokes a powerful sense of nostalgia, coupled with the "cutting-edge" that 3D technology brings to audiences; it asks players to bring their vast historical knowledge of the games into the present. The games are multi-layered, with the benefit of more memory that technology has brought, and presented in graphics players have not seen before. Players are rewarded for historical knowledge through the in-game weapons, magic, skills and hidden locations within the game; the historically knowledgeable player has access to more layers of the game, than the brand new player.

Compilation of Final Fantasy VII

In 2004, seven years following the initial title, Square Enix released the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix, 2004-2007), a collection of games, film and literature based on the *Final Fantasy VII* world. The *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* can be regarded as a collection of *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Product Development Division 1, 1997) paratext, however as we have seen, this relationship between "source" and paratext is a precarious one. Gray notes,

> the paratext may in time *become* the text, as the audience members take their cues regarding what a text means from the paratext's images, signs, symbols, and words, rather than from the film or program's…Individual audience members may not care to make the distinction between paratext and show (2010, p. 46).

Lines between properties continue to blur, as audiences experience the wider entity of creative production, rather than each in isolation. If we consider the ability of a paratext to become "the text", so too can the relationship be inverted, and texts can be redefined as a paratext, their relationship mediated by context. Context shapes the expectations of the audience, "there is never a point in time at which a text frees itself from the contextualising powers of paratextuality" (Gray, 2010, p. 45). For fans of *Final Fantasy VII* who began with the initial game, their experience of the compilation of *Final Fantasy VII* can be a very different one to that of those who experienced the compilation first.

The context of the compilation's films, games, figurines, literature and various other associated media, can change a player's perception of the "original" *Final Fantasy VII*. Story elements and characters are redefined by these paratextual experiences, and can change the representation that initial production sought to accomplish. As Gray notes, films and television programs can be redefined by the "toys or games [which] might place a text in a whole new setting" (Gray, 2010, p. 45). The experiences of these audiences are defined by the same notion.

The production of *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*, spearheaded by Nomura and Kitase, reflects the same contextual relationship that these audiences experience. As the original creators, their consumptive practice may differ to the audiences, however their expectations of the story world is shaped by their previous experiences in developing *Final Fantasy* games. For game creators, paratext are often the stepping stones towards the final release of a game, shaping the games they make. By the same reasoning, a released game can become a reference for a new production, and in effect become a paratext within its own thematic universe.

The relationship between designers and the games they produce does not end upon release, as we have seen; designers are constantly redefining their own abilities and skill in creative pursuits with each game they make. The design process is in constant flux, just as the consumptive practice of audiences is. In turn, the definitions and thoughts on source material and original releases for the designers are constantly challenged and altered through this experience.

Gray's discussion emphasises the importance of context in defining the role of a particular facet of a "text", and game creators and players use these fluid landscapes to constantly redefine their own demonstrations of skill. What could be viewed by one person as ancillary media or paratext can be defined as a "source" text for another—what is important is not the labels of source and paratext, but rather the ability to define these terms in context to experience. Players may refer to pre-production artwork as a paratext, but to the game creator who builds the in-game representation of this work, it is the source text.

If game creators and developers use paratext in their journey to creating a finished (i.e. professional standard for release) product, then we must inquire about how audiences use paratext in their consumptive practices of games. As we have seen, the relationship between source material and paratext is in constant definition by the audience. In the case of games, the released game embodies interaction, an experience only made real by the actions of players.

Therefore, if we take the perspective of an active player of a game, then the various artworks, films and associated merchandise can be regarded as paratext, and intricate knowledge of the production process can assist in cultivating and demonstrating gaming capital to other players, as noted by Consalvo,

> Although possessing gaming capital is supposed to be about game player's superior playing ability and knowledge about games, it is often through the consumption of paratext—not actual games—this knowledge can be gained. A player's knowledge of the latest graphical enhancements, secret codes and sequel release dates is the main currency of gaming capital, and that information is drawn from the paratext rather than the primary text (2007, p. 38).

Where the knowledge of graphics, codes and release dates is all common knowledge to the developer, the player is not usually privy to such information. As noted above, these intricate details are used by players to define their gaming capital. A player's ability to source such information becomes a unique skill of the game player, "becoming indistinguishable from actual game-playing ability" (Consalvo, 2007, p. 38). A good player demonstrates their skill not only through their ability to manipulate a game pad or arcade stick, but also through their knowledge of gaming culture and trends, development and production, even their consumption of gaming art and music all completes the display of the "master" gamer.

Demonstrating Mastery

While power gamers may reduce a game into numerical data and simplify the practice of play into win or lose, their knowledge of these deeper details demonstrates an ability or skill in playing games. Taylor commented on the power gamer's advanced workstations and ability to traverse multiple accounts in their playing of *Everquest*. These material and immaterial dimensions demonstrated and advanced the power gamers' gaming capital. As Taylor elaborates on the difference between her play and that of power gamers:

> While I was not an unknowledgeable player…their intent and focus had a different quality. Like those nonplayers I had tried to talk to in the past, this time I was the one listening, somewhat confused, somewhat bemused, and mostly feeling like I was peeking at an unfamiliar world. Mitch and Josh played a different *Everquest* than I did (2006, p. 68).

In the case of a single-player game such as *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Product Development Division 1, 1997) and the various media that make up *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix, 2004-2007), unlike the players of a multi-player world, the players of these games have little chance to demonstrate their ability to play. The films, literature and games that make up the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* are decidedly solo experiences; at the time of experience there is only interaction between the audience and the material, and there is no interaction with another player or audience to make the gameplay or viewing experience possible. Therefore, players must demonstrate their ability to play the games in other ways.

We have seen how gaming capital can define players within their own communities and subcultures. These players displaying their gaming skill, can use their knowledge of the paratext that once guided production, and the stories and histories that surround it. To show another player that they have mastered an element of *Final Fantasy VII,* perhaps a difficult sequence of the game, a deep understanding of the plot and storylines of the narrative, knowledge of the game's magic system, secret areas and side quests, or even tales of the production process, can show a

> … model of play that at times looks and sounds quite unlike how we usually speak of gaming. The simple idea of "fun" is turned on its head by examples of engagement that rest on efficiency, (often painful) learning, rote and boring tasks, heavy doses of responsibility, and intensity of focus (Taylor, 2006, p. 88).

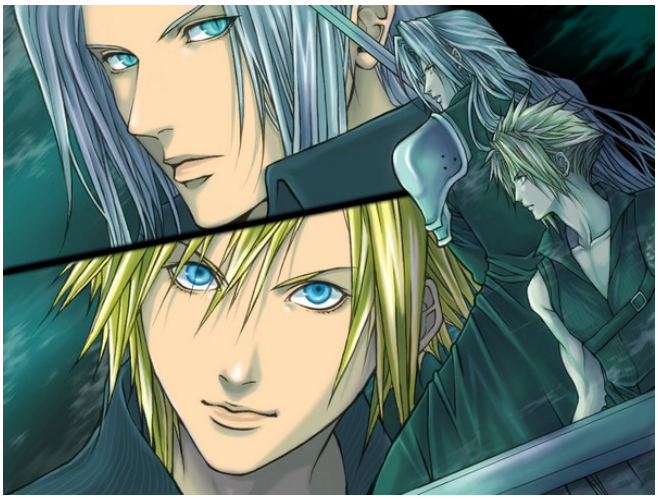

Figure 13 – Fan-made "Final Fantasy VII" artwork such as pictured above can demonstrate a player's understanding of the game and pay homage to central themes, characters or story elements.

What Taylor describes above is a notion of play that is different in its nature by virtue of its intensity. What may seem like somewhat pedestrian information to the average player of a game, such as production history notes, or anecdotes from game creators regarding their projects, is engaged with by the single-player as additional data that has the ability to create a deeper connection to the game creation process. Paratext such as production history and pre-production artwork material provides players with an insight into the text of the released game as it was before the final product.

The relationship between players and paratext changes these media from sources of inspiration for development to a form of currency. The nature of the paratext is transitory, as noted by Genette,

> …the paratext provides an airlock that helps the reader pass without too much respiratory difficulty from one world to the other, a sometimes delicate operation, especially when the second world is a fictional one. Being immutable, the text in itself is incapable of adapting to changes in its public in space and over time. The paratext—more flexible, more versatile, always transitory because transitive—is, as it were, an instrument of adaptation (1987, p. 407).

As we have seen from Gray's discussions, the notion of text and paratext is continually being redefined by both creators and audiences of content. Despite this, we must understand paratext in the context of game creators and players as spaces where players can negotiate between these various worlds. Whether it is the fictional universe of the game space, or the history of the game's production, players who engage with content empower themselves through paratext, just as Genette describes above, the paratext is always transitory by nature, and allows a player to travel to these various spaces of the game's design and history. Conversely, game developers demonstrate capital through the game itself; it is a work of artifice that generates much of the knowledge that is later used by players. Players and producers negotiate these sides of the production process through these more flexible texts, and paratext allows a player to move to spaces formerly inhabited by developers.

The designer of a game is beyond the bounds of gaming mastery as defined by players. With exposure to the game's systems and production at the ground level, they cannot be measured by the same gaming capital that players are, and thus their interaction with paratext and texts are different. The notion of a paratext as capital does not exist in this regard, and the relationship between the two for designers is similarly different. As we have seen the ways in which developers can measure their gaming capital through the production of paratext and games that the players refer to, we can understand the function of paratext as a form of capital to then embody both consumption and creation of such content.

In the age of players as co-creators, this ability to communicate playing skill through the production of media is of paramount importance. The single-player can use their intricate knowledge of paratext that they have consumed to demonstrate knowledge to other players, but also create levels, guides, walkthroughs, videos and other forms of paratextual inquiry to demonstrate their abilities in the same way as developers. As Taylor notes, power gamers'

> …reliance on social networks and their contribution to broader collective knowledge locate them as decidedly networked players. And the way they refigure popular notions about the distinction between work and fun is striking (2012, p. 91).

The mark of the gaming master can be understood as the ability to not only understand and consume paratext and their texts, but also to be able to create them and remain in context to other players, game developers and the wider culture of gaming, communicating their knowledge to all.

These players arguably turn what professionals call work into a fun and recreational activity. In the example of Yoshitaka Amano's artwork and Hironobu Sakaguchi's storylines, what the creators of *Final Fantasy* regarded as labour, i.e. interpreting designs to translate into digital forms and understanding the game world and its wider emotional themes, can be regarded as a recreational activity for the player. The narrative drives the single-player experience of these games, and the stories of the central characters are the centrepiece of the gaming experience, thus interpreting the design of the digital form is central to the process of understanding the text.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen how the game designer negotiates the relationship of paratext and players during the creation of a game. As the *Final Fantasy* series shows us, development houses can become a creative force of their own, and through development of many projects, can reach a stage of production where older "source" texts can be transformed into paratext. *Final Fantasy VII* and *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* demonstrate to us how the roles of source material and their paratext can shift, and how expectations of each are shaped by the context of the audience's experience. We should consider that the roles of paratext and source material are in constant redefinition by both players and creators. Players often use what is regarded as source text to inspire the creation of new or additional content, and using the source as the conventional game designer uses paratext during the creative process.

In the following chapter, we will look more closely at some games and paratext that players have produced, to investigate more deeply the relationship between paratextual production and gaming mastery. If we consider that the game creator transcends the usual standards by which players are held, then players acting as co-creators, in some cases even venturing out into making their own games, poses an interesting thought. In addition, we must also consider the role of the single-player in the gaming experience, where often the creation of paratext is a way in which players can continue playing far beyond the limits of the narrative.

Chapter 5

Video as Paratext

The role of a consistent narrative that is interwoven into a game's production history is but one facet of a player's relationship with gaming capital. A skillful player is knowledgeable of the game beyond its final, physical form; their game knowledge extends to points even beyond the initial conception of a particular game. Players bring a sense of embodied play (Bayliss, 2007; Taylor, 2012) that operates within, and outside, the actual gameplay. As Juul notes, "To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world and a video game is a set of rules as well a fictional world" (Juul, 2005, p. 1).

Play itself however, is fiction, the reality is that of the rules that bind players to a game. These rules could be as simple as while the game is turned on, it can be played and the game world can be manipulated. As such, players provide the fiction with context from their own experience. Players bring their embodied experiences to gameplay. They bring their memories of other games—that have both material and incorporeal dimensions—to the gameplay. Outside the actual game, there is a growing body of paratextual material that not only expands upon what it means to play (and thus what constitutes "mastery") but also into broader discourses around player professionalisation (Taylor, 2012) and spectatorship (McCrea, 2009). With the rise of UCC videos like Let's Play we see a growing paratextual assemblage for demonstrations of player mastery.

In this chapter I explore the role of key video and online media from YouTube to Let's Play (LP) videos to reflect upon the various paratextual assemblages that contribute to contemporary notions of player mastery. As I argue in this chapter, the video is a form of gaming capital that can demonstrate mastery in a retrospective context. Players can exhibit past exploits to each other in their attempts at social valuation, the video is therefore a medium which develops a player's ability to recognise value in gaming video as both an audience, and as a creator of

content. Deciding which sections to demonstrate is just as important as the ability to play through them.

To understand how players navigate these choices, I invoke the concept of participatory culture, which requires us to understand how media has changed society, and contemporary notions of media consumption and production. Jenkins notes,

> A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection to one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created) (2006, p. 3).

Participatory culture requires users to engage with participatory media, that is, media which encourages user participation such as YouTube, which will form the next section of discussion. Participatory media is distinct from participatory culture, whereby media helps to inform and contextualise the participatory culture itself. Jenkins writes of artistic expression and civic engagement, practices which require the use of social (participatory) media. These media allow social and creative connections in gaming, whereby players can expand upon gaming media engagement and interaction to develop and harness their gaming capital.

YouTube

Video content had long been shared across the Internet before the advent of YouTube, however early predecessors had never matched or mobilised content in quite the same way. Founded in 2005 and acquired by Google in 2006, YouTube has since been one of the most popular mediums to distribute and popularise online video. It began as the brainchild of three former PayPal employees, Steve Chen, Chad Hurley and Jawed Karim, who sought an easier method of distributing video to friends, family and the world. Before a service such as YouTube,

the multitude of varying codecs and video formats between systems did not allow for easy content sharing between users. YouTube's revolution was through its servers and software taking care of the conversion process.

Since its proliferation into popular culture, YouTube has become a symbol of "participatory culture". It allows users to communicate between each other and trade cultural capital. As Burgess and Green note, with participatory practices like

> … Massively Multi-player Online Games (MMOGs), YouTube illustrates the increasingly complex relations among producers and consumers in the creation of meaning, value and agency. There is no doubt it is a site of cultural and economic disruption (2009, p. 14).

The participatory culture demands that users contribute to the banks of knowledge that content builds, yet there is a constant struggle between the question of who selects appropriate content and what is ultimately shown to audiences. The constant struggle of power between producer and consumer, that which was once a one-way channel has been disrupted. Now, the consumer is able and often encouraged to send information back to their sources. Cultural capital can now be created and elevated by the audience of a text, as noted by Jenkins et al., "Web 2.0 discourse assumes that fan participation is highly generative but the business model often isolates the resulting texts from the social context which they were produced and circulated, thus devaluing notions of reciprocity'' (2013, p. 83). However, fan participation can be successful only in the right context, where the content that producers make is actively being consumed, and while material may first appear to these producers as a treasure trove of capital (cultural, monetary or otherwise) it is the interpretation of an audience which lends the text its social value.

Where games demand interaction to give life to the initial experience, video demands a user simply to watch. Where the watching of a video has arguably been a passive experience, the increase in user participation has aligned audiences closer to the production of video media, and has turned watching video into a more interactive experience. In contemporary contexts,

the actions of audiences sharing video and participating in the production, dissemination and popularising of content now generates an interactive paratextual experience.

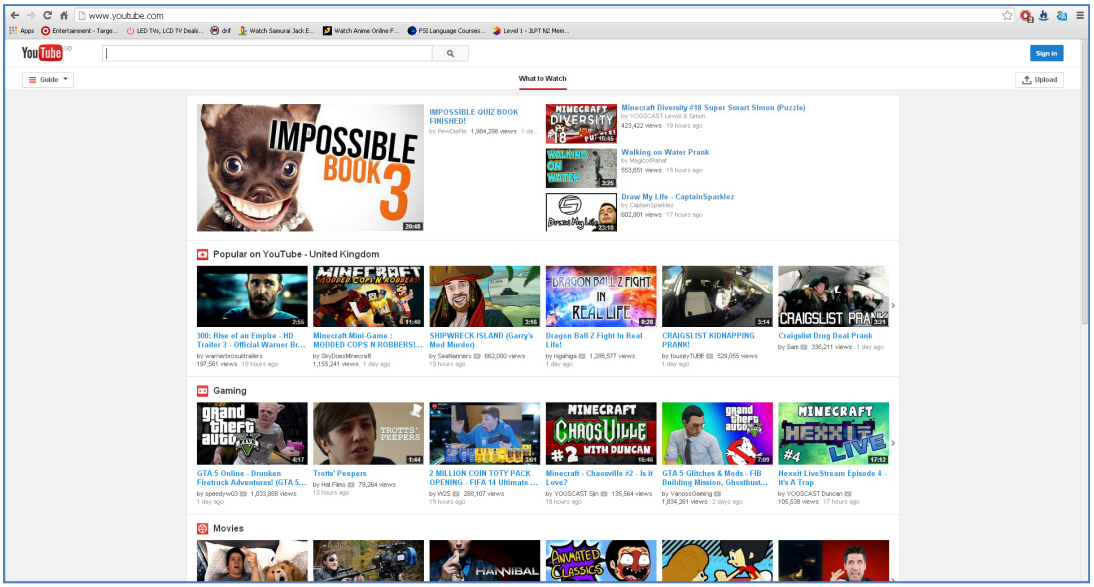

Figure 14 – YouTube allows people to share and upload video content

Games have traditionally encouraged interaction between audience members by players sharing recorded content of their play, stories shared in written or verbal form, and the expression of past experience in an attempt to raise cultural capital. With the rise of online video, the celebration of inter-audience participation has placed these audiences into territory traditionally traversed by games and its players.

Video now demands the audience member to not only watch, but also to interact and appraise content within a community. Chesher discussed the differences between the film, television and the videogame audience, “Cinema, television and the console game each have a dominant regime of vision/agency: the gaze, the glance and the glaze respectively. However, these modes are by no means exclusive to each medium” (2004, n.p.). Chesher’s study provides an ideal starting point when discussing visual media culture, and especially now as games, film and television are evermore influencing each other.

Chesher argues that games have a different relationship with their audience than the aforementioned, where game players are immersed into content through “sticky” content and a self-reflective relationship with the gaming avatar. During play, these players are drawn and held in place with content that demands a prolonged interaction, as opposed to the cinematic gaze or glance that the audience of a television program applies to content. Drawing upon the artificial distinction critiqued by Ellis in “Visible fictions” (1982) in which Ellis argues against cinema as gaze and television as glance cultures, Chesher expands,

> In the cinema, spectators are positioned as voyeurs, sitting together in a darkened public place, their gaze intently focussed on the screen. This arrangement encourages a psychological state that resembles dream or fantasy, allowing spectators to build a close libidinal identification with characters in the narrative (Chesher, 2004, n.p.).

In Chesher’s terms, the cinema offers its wide audience an opportunity to coexist with the content for a brief moment of time, the experience intense and of a dream-like quality, whereas games turn their fiction into a world of reality for the audience. The film world is over at the conclusion of the narrative; audiences emerge from the cinema as they would wake from a dream, converse to games, where fictional worlds bleed into reality. Skill, strategy and engagement continue far beyond interactions with screens. Television offers its audience a glancing look at content,

> … Viewers relate to a much smaller screen that is always present in their domestic space, so images are experienced as relatively mundane. Television offers viewers a surrogate day-to-day image of the world that casually makes them complicit in this structured way of looking... Content is segmented so that viewers can easily rejoin the narrative at any point (Chesher, 2004, n.p.).

Television represents a fractured state of interaction, where constant interruptions from our real lives break the immersion with the fictive world. Audiences of television are in a constant state of flux with their content, and require a repetitious, easy to follow experience that allows them to constantly return to content after brief periods of interaction.

In the wake of Web 2.0, and the social media revolution, we can argue that the medium of online video occupies a space of the "glaze", rather than the gaze or glance of cinema and television. Audiences of online video interact with their media differently. The proliferation of forums, rumor mills, reaction videos, and user-created content that deals solely with the fictional world of a television series keeps audiences in place beyond the initial viewing. Overall, we can see how interaction with online video has altered, to affix itself closer to a prolonged engagement, just as the videogame player is captivated beyond the world of the screen and into real life; as Chesher says, "the eyes glaze over" (2004, n.p). Fictional content today is spreading across multiple media to achieve much of the same result. Users of sites such as YouTube watch minutes of video back-to-back, and read forums and discussion boards where their eyes glaze over at the multitude of information consumed.

The glaze concept defines a prolonged consistency with content interaction. As such, I regard the movements between screens as part of the territory that comes with the overall "glaze" that gaming in Web 2.0 environments provides. As players move through screens—from game windows to YouTube videos and wiki pages—in the pursuit of gaming knowledge they are still stuck within the wider narrative of the game.

A player who puts down their controller to watch a video on the section they are currently stuck on is still fixated on the game world, and as such, I have regarded gaming interaction as one which emphasises a fixation on content across media, as opposed to the gaze and glance of cinema and television respectively. Whether at a gaze, glance or glaze. , audiences connect and interact with captivating content in any context.

Spreadable Media

Jenkins et al. note that, "as people pursue their own agendas in sharing and discussing media content, they are helping to spread the seeds—transforming commodities into gifts,

transforming texts into resources, and asserting their own expanding communication capacities" (2013 p. 292). They note that audiences and creators today have the power to disseminate media for their own cultural purposes. The seeds that are spread blur the older distinctions between forms, and as we observe the ways in which media content is blurring the boundaries between gaze, glance and glaze, we are lead ultimately towards an interactive experience that commands all three modes of viewing, regardless of what kind of media audiences are watching or interacting with.

A spreadable model assumes that the repurposing and transformation of media content adds value, allowing media content to be localised to diverse contexts of use. This notion of "spreadability" is intended as a contrast to older models of "stickiness" which emphasise centralised control over distribution and attempts to maintain a purity of message (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Through the concept of spreadable media, we can observe how Chesher's notion of the glaze can be applied to some degree to current gaming practices, and how the "spreadability" of media has changed the ways in which players interact with content. The purity of the message is ultimately localised over and over again, when a player interacts with media, they localise it to the context in which they are viewing, and as such the purity of the creator's original message can be altered. The interaction, therefore, between creators and audiences, moves closer towards the participatory model, and producers of content are in constant conversation with their audiences, as opposed to older models of distribution and consumption of media in earlier times of the Internet. Formal and informal networks alike are affected by the ways in which audiences engage with content. This chapter will focus on informal networks and how players have engaged with content as both users and producers, spreading content across gaming subculture through participatory media.

I now turn to reflecting upon how players use video production and viewership to share their own play experiences. By drawing upon Let's Play (LP) videos (which highlight a player enjoying

a game as a sort of tour guide) and "speedrunning" videos (which are made to document a player completing a game in the shortest time possible on as high a difficulty setting as the game allows)—one can observe the changing landscape of the paratextual industry in which abilities like performance entangle with playing skills.

Gaming Video:
The Origins of Let's Play Video

With the success of YouTube, home-made video walkthroughs gained increased popularity. Coupled with mobile phones with Internet capabilities that allow users to video, edit and share online almost instantaneously, the rise of performative video paratexts contributing to gaming capital has burgeoned. Once solely the domain of paratextual industries in the forms of VHS tapes to DVDs, the widespread success of the online video allowed users to begin creating their own media for other players to use and interact with. As a relatively new phenomenon, and in the context of player mastery, LP video can be understood within the wider rhetoric of gaming culture and notions of player skill.

The origins of LP are difficult to trace, however we can surmise much of their genesis in early forms of gaming video. Aside from YouTube's surge into popular culture, the relationship between gaming and video had existed in earlier times. As noted by Consalvo, two 1989 VHS tapes, *How to Score More Points on Nintendo Games* can be identified as some of the earliest forms of video strategy guides. Consalvo argues that,

> The videotape was never an ideal medium for guides, as it could not be readily searched and required additional hardware to operate. Further, as with other types of guide formats, videotapes often could not be used simultaneously while playing the game, leaving players with a less-than-ideal form of help (2007, p. 59).

These limitations, which are outlined in Consalvo's argument, are the same factors that led to the surge in YouTube's popularity as a resource for gaming information. YouTube removes

inconveniences from the task of media consumption, video today is easily searchable, requires additional hardware only in the form of a personal computing device (home computers, tablets and mobile phones, which are all a common household item in the twenty-first century) and now more than ever, audiences have the ability to multi-task their video watching with a multitude of other responsibilities.

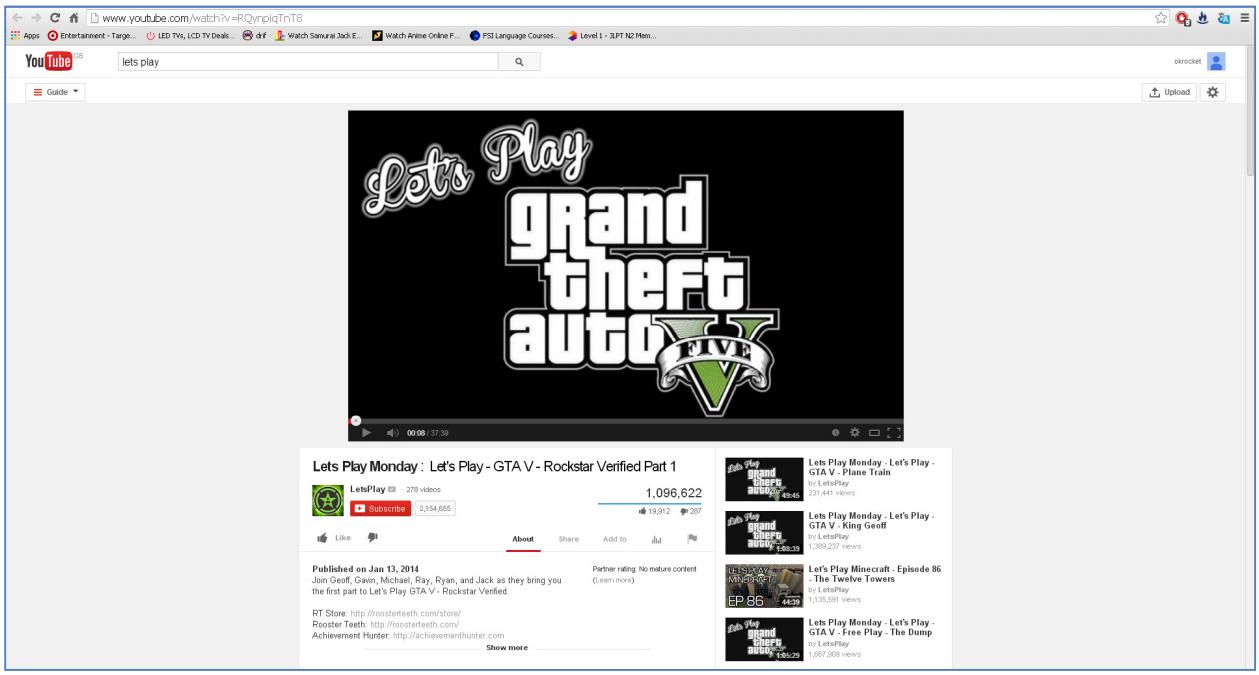

Figure 15 – Let's Play videos allow people to share their experiences online.

Following on from Consalvo's 2007 study, here we can see how the once limiting factors of video as a form of guide have been removed, and allowed the form to take precedence over many other previously popular paratextual media. In addition to these commercial paratexts (VHS and later DVD forms of gaming strategy guides) gaming video also finds beginnings within a subculture of gaming known as "speedrunning". Speedrunning is a term coined by the early modding community to describe a method of game playing whereby the player attempts to "clock", or beat the game in the shortest time possible. Speedrunning is a form of gameplay that requires a very specific set of skills, and knowledge of gaming capital that is not readily available to the casual player.

Where Consalvo has examined gaming capital through paratext over time, Miller's 2012 text, "Playing along: digital games, YouTube and virtual performance" takes an ethnographic route into the investigation of online gaming communities and their relationship with playing practice. She investigates how players transcend media forms with their consumption of popular music through games. Miller argues that "both digital media and embodied knowledge can bridge space and time, creating connections between dispersed and diverse individual human experiences" (2012, p. 4).

In understanding the implications of online media and how these players utilise their experiences to transmit knowledge, the embodiment of knowledge as gaming capital (whether visceral or textual) highlights how players transcend media forms to communicate with each other. Miller approaches playing practice from a personal perspective, highlighting how players mediate between the realms of music and gaming practices by "playing along" with each other (Miller, 2012).

If we understand gaming video as a form of embodied knowledge, then the aim of this chapter is to understand the function of the LP video within the wider context of gaming capital, and in turn the role online video has developed as a demonstration of gaming mastery. To do so, I will attempt to define a working definition of LP video, where LP video can be argued to be a gaming video medium which focuses on the actions and reactions of the player to the in-game experience, rather than any demonstrations of gaming skill, i.e. the most optimal method of beating the game, completion on high difficulty settings, and/or achievement of usually inaccessible areas of the game software. In short, LP videos highlight play, rather than skilled practice.

Speedrunning

Speedrunning originated in online communities which focused on specialising playing skills relevant to a specific game. In December 1993, ID Software's "*Doom*" was released, and in

addition to its graphical capabilities, advanced gameplay and LAN/Internet-based multi-player support, it allowed players to record their activities in the single-player campaign mode through demo files. The method of recording data in this way was not something originally promoted to players by developers, rather it was the relentless activities of fans deconstructing the game on the technical level which led to the discovery of this feature. Christina “Strunoph” Norman is generally credited with discovering the demo file recording feature upon the unveiling of her website “LMP Hall of Fame” which was dedicated to showcasing these demo files to other players.

From these humble beginnings as a user-constructed form of documentation, players began competing against each other to achieve the fastest completion times. Out of this competition grew specific metrics of success and a subset of skills unique to speedrunning a game. After the success of *Doom (1993)*, players continued this tradition with the release of *Quake (1996)*, which gave beginnings to the “Speed Demos Archive”, a site that since its inception has been dedicated to the archiving of speed demo videos for all games.

To understand how the current state of LP and gaming video more widely demonstrates a culture of mastery, we can compare how audiences use LP video with the associated rules and metrics for success that speedrunning demands of its players. Players within this community showcase their skills to one another through the form of video. Turning their gameplay practice into an archive of information, and more importantly, transforming the single-player activity of internal narrative into a spectacle, players who once enjoyed play on their own enter a community that thrives on current skill and the ability to remember past playing experience.

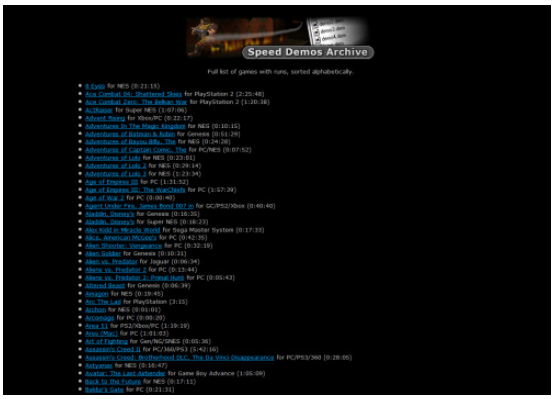

Figure 16 – The Speed Demos Archive allows players to share their extraordinary feats of skills in speedrunning

To engage with the speedrunning community of a game, players are expected to have beaten it previously, or they risk spoiling their experience. They generally require a rudimentary understanding of not only the gameplay skills required, but of the narrative structure of the game as a linear medium. This allows players to engage with the three main skill sets required of the speedrunner. First is the skill of route planning—this is where players plan ahead and practice the most efficient route possible to complete the game. Players must be familiar with the entire model of the game, to the degree that they can avoid unnecessary, time-wasting interactions. Integral to this is the second skill of speedrunning, known as sequence breaking. Sequence breaking refers to the idea that some of the goals in the sequence of a game can be navigated around and avoided entirely; breaking the traditional intended structure of gameplay the designers had created.

The ways in which the breaking of the game's traditional sequence can be attained is through the knowledge of hidden information uncovered by beating the game, or through surpassing the limitations of the game by taking advantage of technical glitches. Glitch usage forms the third necessary skill of the speedrunner, as this skill can grant a player access to areas of the game normally accessible only through playing the game in its entirety. Knowledge of glitches can erase minutes to hours of gameplay by navigating the game through paths that do not factor into the game design process. Glitches allude to limits of technology; players using these

are building capital through the knowledge of hidden information beyond the usual rules of the designed game, and displaying this to an audience.

When Harper studied the fighting game community, he remarked on the ways in which player behavior was constantly shifting, “Performance isn’t always voluntary, either; someone may embody or abandon certain acts that make up a performance based on the situation. In short, a performance can and often is shaped by context” (2010, p. 135). Players constantly evaluate their behavior in regard to external factors. The audience shapes a player’s performance, a single-player enjoying a game with no one else around will inevitably play differently to the gaming video creator recording their play for an imagined audience.

Speedrunning is a practice of mastery that requires a skilled audience. The speedrunner recognises that they are on display, and perform for not only themselves, but also the players watching. The audience is assumed to have an understanding of the game which allows them to marvel at the methods of route planning, sequence breaking and glitch usage the performing player takes in the demonstration of gaming capital. The role of audience is important, as it shapes the ways in which a performing player approaches their practice.

In the case of speedrunning, players are constantly seeking ways to strip away unnecessary elements of gameplay to achieve a demonstrable mastery of the game. This demonstration evokes a response from players watching who have traversed the same territory, although in different ways, and they are able to connect with the speedrunner in a way that differs from direct interaction. Memories of gaming areas give the actions of the speedrunner their value as gaming capital.

Let's Play (LP):

Production and Consumption of Gaming Memory

Much like the speedrunner, LP producers are performing their gaming practice to an imagined, arbitrary audience. The notion is similar to the speedrunner, in that audiences are aware and competent in some level of knowledge in the gaming territory being presented, as evident in the example below. However, there remains a line between the speedrun and LP video that demands a different appreciation for each. The speedrun is a spectacle; players are not expected to have a level of technical skill as the competent, seemingly untouchable speedrunner. For the LP video creator, audiences are able to connect their experience to similar gaming moments, whether it is a crushing defeat or a triumph against a particularly difficult portion of a game, the audiences of an LP video are assumed to understand these notions by simply being a part of gaming culture.

One of the most successful LP video producers Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg aka "PewDiePie" (with a channel which boasts 11.6 million subscribers) exemplifies how these creators interact with an imagined audience that is on the same standing as the LP producer. As Kiellberg argues, "I just want my videos to be something that hopefully lightens up someone's day. I usually keep a positive attitude in my videos and I think people are drawn to that" (Wadeson, 2013, n.p). In Kjellberg's comment we gain an insight into some of the motivation to create content such as the LP video, as an annotated form of the video walkthrough, it allows players to connect with a producer of content on an empathetic scale. LP video thrives on audience participation from its fans, where the producer serves as a spokesperson for the audience.

Through the comparisons with speedrunning we can understand the LP video as a media form that highlights the player's ability to play around within the game world. Converse to the demonstration of skill found in the aforementioned speedrunning videos, the LP creator demonstrates to their audience their personal play experiences. Inherent to the LP video experience is how it is regarded as a non-serious form of gaming entertainment, as previously

noted by Kjellberg's own admission, "something that hopefully lightens up someone's day" (Wadeson, 2013, n.p). This presents a conflict between the serious investment into gaming skill the speedrunner player and viewer undertakes, and the light-hearted, empathetic outlook of the LP creator and viewer. Juul regards the ongoing conflict that games present as,

> … a combination of rules and fiction. Rules are definite descriptions of what can and cannot be done in a game, and they provide challenges that the player must gradually learn to overcome. Fiction is ambiguous—the game can project more or less coherent fictional worlds that the player can imagine (Juul, 2005, p. 197).

For the speedrunner, their demonstration of play is bound by rules, whether by the game, or the meta-rules of the wider speedrunning community. Conversely, the LP video producer exists in a more ambiguous space, where viewers must tap into their imaginations and recollection of playing a game to empathise with the on-screen content.

Both forms of demonstration rely on the audience's own memories of skill within a game. The online gaming video requires its viewers to approach it with a pre-existing history of gaming. A player's gaming memory evokes the empathy required for LP videos to connect with their audience. It is the shared memories of the creators and viewers that allow the player to become a co-creator; they are able to transmit their experience and knowledge in ways that influence the production and creation of gaming media. Players constantly move between defined action and ambiguity,

> That the rules of a game are formally defined does not mean that the player's experience is also formally defined. The rules help create the player's informal experience. Though the fictional worlds of games are optional, subjective and not real, they play a key role in video games. The player navigates these two levels, playing video games in the half-real zone between the fiction and the rules (Juul, 2005, p. 202).

A player, who has experienced the rules of the game, can empathise with the LP video producer when they meet an unsatisfying end, additionally, the player watching a speedrun video can appreciate the skill demonstrated by the producer easily traversing a difficult section of a level. LP video presents a fiction to its viewers, despite seemingly being genuine reactions to gaming experience, LP video is carefully edited and crafted into a piece of representational media. As Harper notes of the players of games who change when surrounded by other like-minded individuals, players change their playing performance in respect to their audience,

> They are less dependent on the game itself but more on both social context and what the game allows… It's possible to play a game one takes seriously in a casual way by shifting play performance to fit the social context… contextual factors like knowing the people involved or the artificiality of the setting were more likely to adjust player behavior than the game itself. The key to social play in both scenarios is understanding that the people you are playing with are on the same page (2010, pp. 154-155).

The performance of the LP creator is shaped by their expectations of what their audience will want to see in a LP video. As an ambiguous landscape of media, much of LP video's specific qualities rely on the expectations and attitudes of the audiences who enjoy them. We can understand that the function of a LP video is to provide an empathetic experience for a player, one that connects producer and audience through cultural play, rather than the skilled rules navigation as demonstrated by speedrunning videos.

Lessons in Mastery

Historically, game studies have approached the conflict between rules-defined action and ambiguous play as the two major departing points towards a classification of games. In the aforementioned Caillois, building on the work by Huizinga in "Homo ludens" (1938), Caillois argues that there exists a spectrum of two types of game. Games of Ludus are rule-bound and often competitive types of games that present players with a direct conflict in opposition to success. This is juxtaposed with games of Paidia, which are types of games which are

ambiguous, with no ultimate goal or definition of success or failure. Just as today's media blurs the boundaries between consumption, games are not exclusively bound within each of these categories. As Juul notes,

> Callois demonstrates that categorisations need to clearly reflect their goals and presuppositions, since in actuality games are not choices *between* chance and competition or even placed on a scale between them, but rather almost all games are competitive and contain varying amounts of chance. Likewise, while Ilinx (Vertigo) is certainly a part of many physical game activities and of many video games, it is but a single example of the infinite number of different types of experiences that a game can give (Juul, 2005, p. 10)

As demonstrators of gaming mastery, the producers of LP videos display their knowledge through the humor and connection conveyed to their audience's own experiences (evoking a sense of Paidia) Conversely, the speedrunning video creator demonstrates their mastery through completion of the game in as fast a time as possible, (Ludus is evident through the definition of a final goal, i.e. to complete the game as fast as possible.) Each demonstrates navigation between the fictional and what Juul describes as "valorised" (goal-oriented) gameplay (Juul, 2005).

Examination of both forms of online video demonstrates to us how the players can shape game experiences; players can make video of a speedrun and a LP for the same game. It is no surprise that the early players of Quake pioneered their speedrunning through the accidental discovery of "rocket jumping" (a feature of the game where players use the rocket launcher weapon in tandem with the jump button to blast themselves high above the level and over obstacles). Through emergent, experimental play (i.e. Paidia), a tool to assist games of serious play (Ludus) was developed. LP and speedrunning also highlight the aforementioned Sicart's (2014) discussion of the growing importance of play and playfulness in contemporary life. Both combine play and playfulness in ways to advance an understanding of gamer capital.

The aim of this chapter has been to contextualise the advent of gaming video within the notion of demonstrating gaming mastery. Through a comparison of two forms of online video, we see two methods of gameplay that are user-defined. Although games may guide experience in a certain way that implies "that the game has been designed to be entertaining *when one pursues the goal*, and that there is no guarantee that pursuing a different goal will provide quality gameplay" (Juul, 2005 p. 200), players ultimately decide which sections or methods of play are most enjoyable, as evidenced by the speedrunning and LP communities. Players inform and educate each other about what kinds of play methods are enjoyable, and in turn develop the wider culture of education that is inextricably tied to gaming mastery.

As texts that sit outside the central practice of gaming, i.e. as paratext, the demonstrations of skill and experience function as a learning mechanism for other players, whether it is through the absorption of playing strategy in a speedrunning video, or through the ability to recognise the in-jokes and subculture of humor that LP video producers and their audiences share. Players who participate in online gaming video are mirroring the same spectrum that games as a wider medium move through. The division between rules and play has always shaped and classified games into separate areas; however both forms of gameplay are bound together through the actions of players. As we have seen, play has often led to the formation of strategies and specific skills that speedrunners use when competing in games, and conversely, the skilled knowledge that a player brings when they watch a video can inform the enjoyment of watching another play in an LP video.

Ultimately, the LP video and speedrun are representations of the ongoing conflict between players of games, playing and their practice. They highlight the role of paratext to add dimensions of innovation, adding to a game's relevance. The innovation of gaming video is the ability to communicate conflict, elicit emotion and allow audiences to experience play through passive means. Both the empathy that lies within the LP video viewing experience, and the spectatorship of a speedrun video viewing informs and instructs players in gaming mastery through the embodiment of a player's gaming capital.

Chapter 6

Difficulty and the Transmission of Mastery

In the pursuit of skill, the guiding hands of computer/videogame difficulty settings provide players with a framework to test their skills against the system. Single-player games in particular use the difficulty setting to provide players with a sense of accomplishment and progression as they make their way through the game's narrative structure. The relationship between a game's narrative and gameplay is directed by the difficulty settings, and a player's skill is continually nurtured by the trajectory of this particular game setting. Gaming difficulty encompasses the narrative, gameplay and mechanics, and social interactions beyond the game, binding them together through the interactions of the player.

Throughout this chapter, we will examine how players interact with the difficulty setting of a game from their experience with the narrative and story structure of the game, the gameplay and mechanics that are instructed and transmitted by the repetitious play that higher difficulty settings bring, and finally how players develop their skills and playing ability within the context of the single-player game. I will examine two detailed examples of single-player games, which are predominantly single-player experiences that incorporate features and opportunities for multi-player play.

Today, the single-player gamer is more often than not connected to other users, and as such the need to examine current popular single-player titles in contrast to past experiences is important. Understanding how single-player gaming increasingly incorporates a more social playing experience will allow us to understand how players pass on gaming skill through community involvement. In short, this chapter will examine how players demonstrate their mastery within a single-player game through the development of online communities and participatory cultures.

Flow and the "Idealised Player"

Although game difficulty is often mediated by the story of a game (where the narrative experience helps to contextualise the increase in challenge as the game reaches its climax) many games of skill have fostered this progressive style of single-player interaction since the developing days of computer and videogames outside narrative context. While players competed for high scores and attempted to best each other's efforts, players were in constant opposition to the game itself, attempting to end their turn at the arcade machine through increasing difficulty.

An early example of games that encouraged competition and progression through difficulty is Taito's *Space Invaders* (1978) which redefined the arcade gaming experience through both the complex technological construction of the game, and the way in which the hardware limitations of the machine facilitated its gameplay. Essentially, the computing power of the platform was too slow to handle a large number of enemies on screen, and as such, the more enemies the player destroyed, the faster the pace of play became, an early example of scaling difficulty to levels of player skill.

In the above example, skill is relative to the experience of play, and contextualising the right skills for the right moment in a game is how players navigate their playing ability during interaction. As Juul notes,

> If games are challenging, they are also challenging in a way that players often learn to surmount. To play a game is essentially a learning experience where the player acquires the skills needed to overcome the challenges of the game. In other words, players improve their skills at playing a game over time (2005, p. 95).

Juul's quote exemplifies the relationship between the player, the difficulty of a game being played, and how this correlates to their learning experience. Players get better gradually, where the more they play (whether they win or lose), they can still highlight new knowledge and

refine skills over time. Eventually, the player reaches a stage where he or she is able to overcome the current challenge and move on to more difficult stages of the game.

Figure 17 – Taito's "Space Invaders" (1978) The difficulty setting was regulated by the limits of the arcade cabinet. The less alien graphics there were to display, the faster the game moved.

This movement through the game world is defined by Juul in *Half Real* through the concept of "flow" that a player experiences in moving through ludic spaces. Juul argues, "According to the flow framework, the player will enjoy playing if the challenges match the player's abilities and thereby lead to a state of flow. If the game is too hard, the player will experience anxiety or frustration" (2009, p. 112). Here we gain a basic understanding of the player's relationship with difficulty, as Juul notes, it is scaled to the player undertaking the task, and challenges that sit outside the spectrum of a player's skill can result in either boredom or frustration.

In Juul's example, he describes what we can define as an idealised player, that is, where the flow framework is in effect, the player reacts in the ideal way to this flow, where the game creator has done their best to match challenges and the overall gaming experience to the

expected abilities of the player. Any assumption about a future player can only be an estimate at best; the idealised player is one which game creators imagine playing their game, a player who is a construction of the game creation process.

In discussions of flow, assumptions about the player, competency and challenge are always under the rhetoric of the "idealised player". Therefore, we cannot assume flow to be a concrete framework by which all games can succeed or fail, as players will react in ways that producers cannot imagine (as discussed in previous chapters) and as a result, games can fail to provide flow if their expectations of an idealised player do not match their actual audiences.

For this study, flow is a useful concept in understanding how game creators expect their players to react to the game. Flow is a useful concept not only for the prolonged experiences that are discussed within this chapter and the wider thesis, but also for the intermittent play characteristic of "casual" gaming. As noted by Juul, the framework is one which offers creators a trajectory to guide their player's activity, whether the game is fractured by the interruptions of daily life (for example a mobile game session suddenly ending due to a train stop) or whether the player can sit in front of the screen for eight hours, the framework is the same. Flow demands a player move through challenges requisite to their level of skill, and what those skills will be is defined by the game itself.

In the face of a single-player game that lacks the adaptive nature that a human opponent possesses, players whose skill reaches its limits in this kind of gaming experience require further outlets of challenge. For the player who has defeated the game on every difficulty, the next challenge for them can arguably be creating paratext to assist other players. As we will see in the following example of Smogon University, when players reach the limits of skill, they enhance their play through social interaction. Flow allows the idealised player to move through the game, as their skills grow, so too do their demands for gaming capital.

In her 2006 study of power gamers, Taylor examines how these hardcore players manage and interact with each other and the gamut of gaming knowledge and capital that is gained through play. In the context of a multi-player game Taylor identifies how these communities of skill mediate the pursuit of gaming skills with social interaction. Taylor's discussion highlights how users enrich their social experience through the mastery of their gaming capital, communicating this in various ways, such as websites, online message boards and a host of other online media, to enhance their game playing activities and extend their social network of other players beyond their local area. Through Taylor's studies, we can see how play is complicated by the social activities of players as they add and subtract value to gaming capital, and as they play through community engagement with their extended social networks.

Observable from these extended social networks is that where difficulty shapes gaming experience within the game world, players navigate their social structures through evaluation of their gaming capital, demonstrating the perceived ability of a player to navigate these challenges. Power gamers in the multi-player context demonstrate the relationship between high levels of playing ability, and the ability to create paratext (which make these skills into a tangible record),

> While the casual gamer may visit a map site on occasion or sometimes peruse a message board, power gamers regularly consult, dispute, refine and build knowledge through the more formalised mechanisms of Web sites and bulletin boards. By participating in guild sites, gaining status through contributions, and entering discussions with other players, players bond to the collective and social modes of play (Taylor, 2006, p. 84).

The quest towards mastery is mediated by a player's ability to navigate the game world in a literal sense, and the wider world of the game beyond its interaction. Participation in a specific game's subculture is just as important as possessing the skills required to play, as noted by Taylor, the response to a game's complexity is the collection of knowledge that stems from its community. Through these examples, we can observe the demonstration of mastery as communicable through paratextual means. Players can build gaming capital not only through

demonstrations of play, but also through the ability to gather information and collate it in a way that is easily transmitted to other players.

As such, the nature of difficulty is that the challenge of a game not only responds to a player's mechanical gaming skill, but also allows them to understand how to navigate gaming information. Taylor's power gamers use the vast amounts of data they absorb into creating large online databases and resources for other players. Through extrapolating Juul's notion of flow, power gamers exemplify the flow state extending beyond the play of a game, and into everyday life,

> Their [power gamers'] reliance on social networks and their contribution to broader collective knowledge locate them as decidedly networked players. The simultaneous weaving of both instrumental and social orientations is something we typically hear little about (Taylor, 2006, p. 91).

Game difficulty allows players to enter a state of "flow". The knowledge needed to navigate gaming capital that is inherent to this process shapes how these players convert their gaming memories and capital into paratext—demonstrations of mastery that can instruct knowledge hidden by challenge. In turn, this shapes social interactions with gaming communities, and how gaming capital is evaluated.

Difficulty and Paratext

Games provide players with enjoyment through their constant presentations of challenge, however the knowledge that is gained through play is not merely discarded at the end of a game session or when the player completes the game. As we have seen, paratexts are usually quantified forms of game knowledge—videos of defeating a specific boss and written guides to item locations in a game are both examples of information initially hidden from the new player, but on display for the experienced one. Arguably, the experienced player leaves a trail behind; charting unknown territory they allow newcomers to access parts of the game that are otherwise elusive.

Paratexts made by players become learning tools for their audiences. New players acquire new skills, and difficulty teaches these players how to navigate the constant challenges the game presents, instructing players through a learning process. They learn the most efficient ways of absorbing information through playing, or as Juul states, “having mastered or completed a game, the player will have expanded his or her repertoire to include the repertoire demanded by a game. This is, I think, a quite overlooked aspect of playing games, that “a game changes the player that plays it” (2005, p. 96). Gaming challenge breeds strategy and skill, where even the absence of strategy can be argued to be a strategy, and players in turn become living embodiments of gaming knowledge. As the following examples will demonstrate, at the conclusion of play, skill must be organised in such a way that it is not lost, players continue playing through paratext, and allow the transmission of their skills to others.

Through the flow model, difficulty provides games with a basic framework by which an idealised player can be led from the start of play to the finish allowing them to reach achievements and goals that would otherwise lead the game towards a non-eventual conclusion. As Juul notes, “Games are interactions between the algorithmic game rules and the human players who often enjoy themselves. Games are formal systems that provide informal experiences” (2005, p. 120). In other words, should the game follow the flow framework and the player play in the style of an idealised one, then the structure of a game consistently presents challenge, whether it is against other human opponents, the narrative world or even the limits of a player’s imagination, the game offers success and failure in somewhat measurable terms.

At its core, difficulty in games presents a conflict between winning and losing which can only be appreciated when compared a loss. Players are constantly losing far more than when they complete a task or game, i.e. when a goal is met - it is met only once. Success in this case is fleeting; players are constantly overcoming a large number of defeats to eventually succeed in one victory. Players treat difficulty as a method of “learning the hard way”, where the only key

to victory lies within the lessons gained from each crushing defeat. Players are continually being taught how to play and how to learn from their mistakes as they near completion of a game, and beyond the narrative ending, towards a mastery of the game as a whole. We can see the role that difficulty plays in not only forming skill, but also how it can help to shape expectations of play and an understanding of interactive experiences. Difficulty teaches players how to play, and how to master the game.

If there is a need for players to deposit their gaming skill after the completion of a game in the form of user-created content, then Sudnow exemplifies a player navigation of gaming skill in *Pilgrim in the Microworld*. As he recounts interactions with the game, he also recounts the social circles he encounters in his relentless pursuit of gaming knowledge,

> Two players meet, one has a few more hours of game time under his money belt, and you've got a score spread. Any two players and one's the teacher, the other a pupil: “No, don't do that, watch out for that city, you're running out of ammo, remember smart missiles, keep your eye on the ball, there, you're getting it....” You've got all the resources you'd want for guaranteeing massive social interest: the neurological and cardiovascular kick, and among the most perfect social arrangements for generating interaction (Sudnow, 1983, pp. 50-51).

In the above quote, Sudnow reflects on the ways in which skilled players pass along their knowledge to the less skilled. Even with only a few hours more of practice can gaming skill be codified into capital, and demonstrated through instruction to another player. In Sudnow’s study, much of the text follows his journey in finding gaming capital in a time preceding the Internet and social media revolution that has made communication between players today so much easier. His collection of data, drawings and screenshots of the game screens, in an effort to understand the entire game, all form a paratextual narrative of the author’s playing experience. Even the text as a whole stands as a testament to his quest for gaming skill, and codifies his ability to play through his memoirs. The paratext remains a demonstration of skill in a retrospective sense, as Consalvo notes,

> Players can accumulate various forms of gaming capital not only from playing games, but the paratextual industries that support them. And depending on a player's social circle, the capital can be quite valuable in building a reputation (2007, p. 184).

And so in Sudnow's example, the quest for mastery leads him to various social circles, from meetings with game programmers to conversations with other players, his interest building a small reputation as a hardcore player, and allowing his knowledge (i.e. gaming capital) to introduce him to game programmers, designers and other enthusiasts.

Gaming capital can be converted into paratext to create a lasting legacy, as play is non-existent once it has ceased, the recollection of memories of performance help shape gaming capital and the ways that players create and navigate gaming paratext. In Harper's "The art of war" (2010), the author considers how in the contemporary subculture of fighting game genre enthusiasts, interact in context to their shifting performances during play and social/community participation. As discussed in previous chapters, Harper's observations demonstrate that the context of a gaming situation often shapes the performance by the players, and as such, social play is just as important as the gameplay that is taking place on screen.

In understanding then how the single-player demonstrates their ability with limited social play function available during their gameplay, the paratext remains a testament to skill for these players. As Consalvo noted of the gaming capital that knowledge of cheats and easter eggs within a game brought to a player's social circles, we can understand user-created gaming paratext as recorded data that goes beyond the game's ability to chronicle player achievements and accomplishments. Whereas the recording feature of a game's save mechanism can demonstrate completion or collection of a game's features, there are areas that it cannot adequately describe—not only the location of secret features, but also the stories of discovery and accomplishment that players recollect to each other through their User created content. Game systems can record game progress, however, gaming memory is preserved through paratext.

Cultural Capital

As discussed earlier, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is instrumental in understanding how paratext functions to shape gaming culture and notions of community and social interaction between players. In the following two case studies, we will see how institutionalised and objectified capital exists in contemporary digital games and their attendant subcultures, and furthermore how players mediate embodied cultural capital within their own understanding. As outlined earlier, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital exists in three forms—embodied, objectified and institutionalised states (1986, p. 47).

Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital is useful for the following examples of paratexts, as it highlights the role of paratexts as a nexus of cultural capital and its transmission into gaming capital. As the following sections discuss, the relationship that players have with these games can change depending on what kind of capital is present within both the games and the paratext that players use and produce.

Pokémon:
Beyond the Pokémon League

To examine the relationship between difficulty of games and the mastery of their players, it is best to view this through the lens of a case study, so we can understand how players develop skill in relation to specific games. The collections of paratext that constitute a community of skill encourage players to discuss and internalise the playing process until it becomes second nature. As we have noted, challenge in games directs players towards ways of navigating gameplay methods, and paratexts become compendiums of acquired skills. As Taylor observed about power gamers and their pursuits of optimal play (in a multi-player setting), these types of players organise themselves into communities centered on playing ability. The focus of this chapter will be two games, which are initially based on a single-player narrative experience,

further enriched by multi-player features that the games incorporate for gameplay beyond the narrative.

Much academic study on the success of the *Pokémon* series has focused on its cultural implications, scholars such as Iwabuchi (2004) and Allison (2006) have commented on the series' commercial success as an overall media empire and its lasting effects towards globalisation and cultural consumption. Widely successful in generally every area of media it has entered, from television cartoons to feature film releases, trading card games, and even kitchen utensils and clothing, the game series has been the driving force behind these successes.

Beyond the story narratives of the game, gameplay at its elite levels is a highly skilled and complicated form of play. It incorporates a history of intense calculation, experimentation and user-lead discovery on the nature of the many digital avatars available, from types and weaknesses to the statistics and numerical data that all contributes to the strength of a *Pokémon*, players who progress with the game beyond its single-player structure move towards a multi-player culture of information gathering and distribution.

Whilst gaming has a history of social practice where players are contributors to a mass of subcultures, gaming capital is a highly valued commodity between players and groups of friends, regardless of the game they play. Within the context of *Pokémon*, players represent themselves through the characters they pick that make up the *Pokémon* team a player uses when playing the game. Through first playing through the narrative and single-player mode to become *Pokémon* league champion, players who move beyond this level engage with a real-world community of *Pokémon* trainers to optimise their play.

Each game's narrative structure centers on the collection of eight badges that will allow the player entry into the *Pokémon* League and eventually the ability to challenge the *Pokémon* League Champion. Each badge becomes a gateway to progressions (the difficulty curve is rationalised through these intrinsic structures) and although players can access some resources

(in a limited form) at the start of the game, they cannot proceed to the ending without these badges. For example, a player can trade with a friend for a high-level *Pokémon* at the start of their game, however, they will not be able to control it until they attain the number of badges that correspond with the level of the traded *Pokémon*. This structure of the game allows players freedom of action, but limits their ability and forces the acquisition of playing skill and internalisation of strategy within its badge system.

It is this relationship between the interactions of the single-player game and the social interactions between players that facilitate difficulty as a learning mechanism. Once players have defeated the *Pokémon* League champion they are given access to secret areas of the game, and at this stage the player can control any *Pokémon* received in a trade with another person. Beyond the single-player mode lies multi-player interaction—players are required to interact through trading with each other should they wish to complete their in-game *Pokémon* encyclopedias (Pokedex) or to battle.

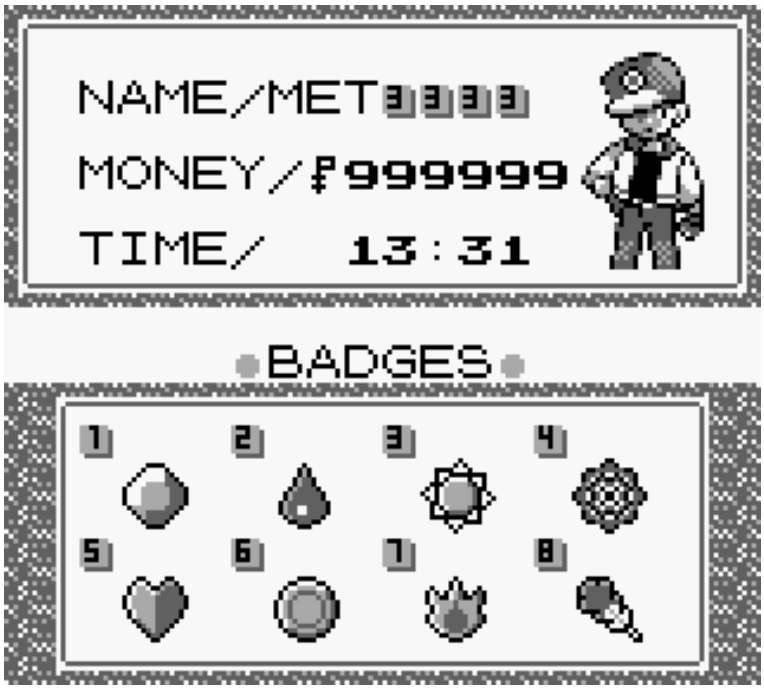

Figure 18 – The badge system in Pokemon guides players through steady scaling of the difficulty setting

As such, the game's flow delineates in such a way to allow players to enter the game world through the software, and emerge on the other side with social forms of play. Difficulty shapes the learning experiences of players and prepares them for high-level play beyond the realm of the beginner. A player may not be skillful at battling; however they may be knowledgeable about other areas of the game that can produce the same perceived value in gaming capital as players work with each other to achieve their own ends.

Smogon University:
Learning to be a Player

The resources for players of *Pokémon* are enormous, ranging from printed guides, to online encyclopedias, to even websites that focus on one or many particular parts of the game and wider franchise. The world of paratext that supports *Pokémon* consumption is refined by the game's players. One example is the website Smogon University (www.smogon.com). The entire website is devoted to competitive *Pokémon* battling and lists the entire range of optimum statistics for every *Pokémon* in the game (to the most recent incarnation at the time of writing). Enriched by discussion forums on the website, the entire database reinforces the idea that it is a place for players to learn and develop their skills as students in *Pokémon* battling, hence the usage of "University" in the title. Further illustrative of this is the mentoring program for the playing community interested in starting competitive battling. The website describes,

> Welcome to the Smogon Apprentice Program! If you are new to competitive *Pokémon*, this is the place for you to learn the ropes! We here at Smogon feel that the "one on one" learning experience afforded by our unique system provides the best possible support for any new player who is looking to improve their battling capabilities. Our instruction goes beyond the mundane "Rate My Team" thread where people make careless suggestions that come with no guarantee of being helpful. In Smogon's apprentice program, you learn from the best of the best. Smogon's experts will teach you how to build solid teams and how to wield them more effectively on the field of battle (www.smogon.com/tutor).

The community values the knowledge that seasoned players bring to their website, and uses the knowledge to instruct new players in the appropriate way. As a self-described university, the website community revolves around the processing, consumption, sharing and discovery of game knowledge. Information is gained by players from their initial exposure to the game through the single-player narrative and then tested and evaluated through interactions online.

The range of statistics and information that players have posted to this website has been collected by rigorously playing the game series over and over, refined to such a point where players are so knowledgeable that they can pass on their knowledge in the form of an online university. Players at this level have internalised the game data to such a point where they are able to give as much reliable information for players wishing to use any of the 650 *Pokémon* available for use in the game.

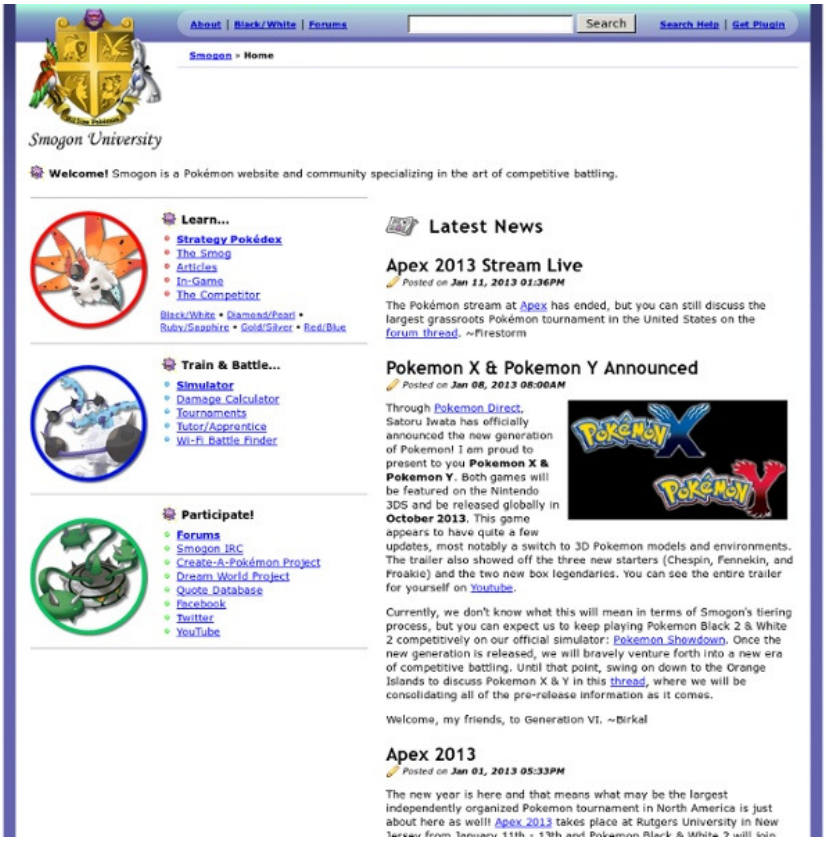

Figure 19 – Smogon University is a resource for competitive Pokémon *battling*

Through observing the ways in which difficulty shapes the playing experience beyond the main game, we can see how *Pokémon's* curve, mediated through the use of intrinsic gates through the gameplay, leads players towards an arguably scholarly understanding of the game that can be utilised beyond the single-player story and into multi-player settings of competition or collection.

The example of mastery in Smogon University users is one example of how players convert a game's vast amounts of knowledge into transmittable paratext, and as the website notes, the ultimate goal of its apprentice program is, "Integration of the apprentice into the fold of the Smogon community. Learning how to play is great, becoming a contributing member of this special site is even better" (www.smogon.com/tutor). The creations of websites such as this demonstrate mastery to other players through in-game capital, and impart a responsibility to help other players to playi the game. The game-playing experience is enriched by the actions of advanced players who provide advice for the newer ones, through easily communicable means.

Institutionalised Capital

> The *institutionalised* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 47).

In his example of educational qualification, Bourdieu draws a distinction between this form of cultural capital and other objectified capital. In the case of Smogon University, if a player interacts with this particular community and subscribes to the ruleset which Smogon have outlined as "official", then the *Pokémon* which a player uses for their play is essentially their "qualification" of being a Smogon player, and the selections of moves and in-game statistics generally reflect the same as found on Smogon University. Furthermore, adherence to metarules such as the banning of particular moves and *Pokémon* is a further example of a

player's game becoming a form of institutionalised capital. If we use the analogy of academia, for the player who graduates Smogon University, their own cartridge becomes the degree.

Smogon University represents a level of mastery brought to fruition through cooperative play, pushing the system to its limits and ultimately experimenting with the variables to achieve new playing styles. Knowing which *Pokémon* are the best and which strategy can outwit one's opponent all stem from an insatiable curiosity, one which most players when treading the road of mastery encounter. Experimenting with play is what defines a player against a simple consumer of content, or a sole creator. The ability to explore content in unique and personal ways is not only evident in this example of the collective actions of Smogon University enthusiasts, but also in other methods of playing *Pokémon.*

One such alternative method of play is called the "Nuzlocke challenge", in which a number of metarules are imposed on the game to increase difficulty and change the behaviour of players and their personal playing styles. Originally distributed over the Internet in the form of a short comic, the rules are as follows,

> The most basic Nuzlocke rules, as they were first introduced, are as follows:
>
> - Any *Pokémon* that faints is considered dead, and must be released.
> - The player may only catch the first *Pokémon* encountered in each area, and none else. If the first *Pokémon* encountered faints or flees, there are no Second Chance (sic). If the first encounter in the area is a Double Battle in dark grass, the player may choose which of the two *Pokémon* they would like to catch.
> - While not exactly a definite rule, the general consensus is that players must also nickname all of their *Pokémon*, for the sake of forming stronger emotional bonds.
> - Also not a definite rule, but the general consensus is that a black out/white out is considered to be "game over", even if there are *Pokémon* left in the PC.
> - Strongly implied, though not explicitly mentioned in the comic, is the stipulation that the player can use only *Pokémon* they have captured themselves, meaning

traded *Pokémon*, mystery gifts, etc., are prohibited. Trading and re-trading the same *Pokémon* (for the purpose of evolving a Graveler, for example) is something of a grey area, and may fall under optional rules. As of White: Hard-Mode Episode 3, it is implied that the player can accept Pokémon that are received freely from NPCs.

- Also strongly implied is a prohibition against voluntarily resetting and reloading the game when things go wrong. Being able to do so would render all of the other rules pointless (Nuzlocke challenge, n.d.).

These rules are expected to be followed on an honesty system—as the game is played in the single-player context there is no governing body or officiating third party such as Smogon University's website. The addition of implied rules from the comic demonstrates the assumed knowledge that players bring when they decide to undertake such a challenge. There is value in simply knowing how to undertake the challenge correctly and the emphasis made on both difficult gameplay, and emotionally bound play (through the use of nicknames) demonstrates the value perceived in struggling against the game.

These rules are expected to be followed on an honesty system, and in turn, the gaming capital that is derived from this style of play can only be valuable if it is earned through honest means. Cheating or not adhering to the rules nullifies the point of the challenge. Without these particular limitations, the game of the Nuzlocke challenge disappears.

Ultimately, the master player derives their skill from creative play. They experiment with games in ways that designers and developers do not foresee, in ways that an expected consumer would not normally interact with a game. Limitations encourage creativity, through the rules imposed by the constructed game world and its difficulty (i.e. metagames such as the multi-player landscape of Smogon University or self-adherence to the honesty system of the Nuzlocke Challenge) allows players to develop gaming skills in new and interesting ways.

These soft rules, self-imposed and regulated by a community, represent the institution which Bourdieu originally regarded as places of learning, in his example of educational qualifications. I draw on his terms to illustrate how a community can subscribe specific meaning to a certain object, and how the ownership of that object conveys capital. Just as a degree in the hands of a graduate represents the knowledge they have accumulated during their time studying, the *Pokémon* that a player owns represents their interaction with Smogon University or their attempts at the Nuzlocke challenge. In essence the digital representations of knowledge are evident to like-minded players.

To conclude, while a *Pokémon* cannot be described as exactly the same as a degree earned from a learning institution, the concept of institutionalised capital helps us to understand how an object can hold meaning (capital) when it is created through a process sanctioned by a set of specific rules.

Dark Souls:

Mastering Space One Step at a Time

In 2011, From Software's *Dark Souls* was released as a spiritual successor to the cult hit *Demon's Souls* (2009). The appeal of these games is their unforgiving nature, and in contrast to other games which reward cooperation and a communal mastery of the game space, these games are as Conway describes, "Agonistic to its core, the Souls series is predicated upon representational and ludic destruction; of the unskilled, the unprepared and the unaccompanied" (2012 p. 41).

They are spaces in which the player has responsibility for the skills and knowledge they bring with them into playing the game. Difficulty in these games is not presented as a force that seeks to ruin the "fun" of the playing experience; rather it is the inherent reward of overcoming great difficulty that players experience. Repetition is highlighted through the game's bloodstain mechanic, where players can watch the last moments of their gameplay before their previous death, in an attempt to highlight and draw attention to the causes of their previous failures.

Bloodstains:

Signposts to mastery

Dark Souls' bloodstain mechanic highlights to players the nature of the games difficulty, and is a shared resource when they are playing online. *Dark Souls'* gameplay allows players to connect to the online network and play through their single-player campaign with limited interaction with other players. The game follows some RPG structures, with players able to collect items and level-up their character. When a player dies, they leave behind a bloodstain, a mark in the environment that has two purposes. One, it acts as a temporary cache of in-game currency (souls) which would allow the player to progress further. Two, the bloodstain also appears in other players' own games, and they can see how and where you last perished, which is tied into the game's semi-online multi-player style. Should a player die without returning to their bloodstain, they will lose their previous progress (souls) forever. But also, in the second sense, a bloodstain converts a player's experience in playing the game into an object of value for players to utilise when assessing areas for traps and obstacles.

The learning process that this system encourages is one of trial and error on a mass scale. Players both triumph over obstacles and fall victim to them as a community, where one player can follow in the footsteps of their predecessors for a brief moment in time to observe why they failed, and learn from these mistakes. Conway notes, "the purpose games historically serve: to promote learning, experimenting and critical thinking" (2012, p. 42). The nature of *Dark Souls* allows its players to learn from each other's mistakes, and it encourages a critical mindset when assessing game action and interaction with the world. By nature of its design, the game encourages players to engage with the world in a methodical, glacial fashion, and mastery can only be gained one step at a time, through the critical and experimental nature of the gameplay and the ability to learn from one another's mistakes.

Objectified Capital

I have discussed in some detail the concept of institutionalised capital. In the previous example, much of the capital associated with particular playing styles and digital representations was defined by gaming communities (institutions). In this example, we should consider the concept of objectified cultural capital more accurately, as Bourdieu notes,

> Cultural capital, in the objectified state, has a number of properties which are defined only in the relationship with cultural capital in its embodied form. The cultural capital objectified in material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments, etc., is transmissible in its materiality. A collection of paintings, for example, can be transmitted as well as economic capital (if not better, because the capital transfer is more disguised). But what is transmissible is legal ownership and not (or not necessarily) what constitutes the precondition for specific appropriation, namely, the possession of the means of "consuming" a painting or using a machine, which, being nothing other than embodied capital, are subject to the same laws of transmission (1986, p. 50).

Key to Bourdieu's definition is transmission of capital within an object. In the example of *Dark Souls'* bloodstains, they become an object in the game which transmits one player's experience to another. The object allows a capital transfer, the bloodstain plays a video of the previous player's demise and "ownership" in this case is of the video itself becoming the property of the player who watches it. I argue that in this scenario bloodstains are an example of objectified capital as they compartmentalise and isolate a specific gaming experience within a gaming object and allow a transmission of this experience between players. The players are required to possess the means of "consuming" such capital through the embodiment of their own skills, and as such transmission can take place, thus rendering the in-game object as objectified cultural capital.

Figure 20 – "Bloodstains" allow players to engage with past mistakes that led to the death of their avatar.

As Jenkins and Squire observe in their 2002 study, games are spaces that impart knowledge through spatial and mechanical understanding. Player action is constantly met with reaction by the game design,

> If games tell stories, they do so by organising spatial features. If games stage combat, then players learn to scan their environments for competitive advantages. Game designers create immersive worlds with embedded rules and relationships among objects that enable dynamic experiences (2003, p. 1).

These dynamic experiences present players with a constant answer to any questions they may ask, where player action must be met with the designer's reaction. Difficulty is the road by which the designers guide player experiences, and it is the reaction that draws players towards the goal of the game, whether it is by beating a particular boss to impart a level of skill required for later parts of the game, or by solving a difficult puzzle which yields the ability to recognise patterns and problem-solving ability required for gameplay. The difficulty setting is designed in such a way to impart knowledge and promote action from the player. Game spaces and objects have certain affordances, a term defined by psychologist James Gibson, "affordances" in the games world are "spaces or objects embedded with potentials for actions, such as hiding and shooting at other players" (Squire & Jenkins, 2002, p. 2).

Potential for action gives areas of the game space their value during play, and a player who holds the knowledge of these areas converts this potential action into gaming capital. Players share their knowledge of positive and negative outcomes through their discussions online, and while in the game the interaction between players via voice and text chat is limited in *Dark Souls,* a thriving community exists in the online space that shares video and discussion board content all in the pursuit of overcoming the game as an object of mastery.

Preparing to Die Together

I have briefly discussed how *Dark Souls'* bloodstain mechanic is but one example of the game's mechanical methods of imparting gaming skill, and in turn how it shapes the game's overall difficulty levels for players in an effort to understand how difficulty and memory connect within *Dark Souls'* game world. Aside from the bloodstain example, the game shapes its overall difficulty setting through the combination of game mechanics in enemies and environmental hazards, and through its control interface and aesthetic presentation of the world. To players, one channel the game was marketed through was the website http://www.preparetodie.com, an obvious aside to the reality of death that awaits any player of the game. Through both the game's mechanics and aesthetic presentation, it shapes a world predicated on the expectations of players that they will have a difficult time traversing through it, and must make their way deeper into the game one step at a time.

As players attempt to master the game at this glacial pace, it becomes apparent that *Dark Souls* leads players to demonstrate their mastery through sharing their failures, whether it is in-game through bloodstains or on video channels such as YouTube, players share gaming experience through their own media channels to communicate knowledge of the game. Players can recognise not only how a player died in the game but why they died. Knowing this information provides players with a richer sense of gaming capital. Social media allows these players to interact differently to that of the relationship players have had in the past to written paratext that describes gaming strategy and skill. Consalvo notes of the written guide that,

> Strategy guides, then, extend the work done by early game magazines…[they] have picked up some of the basic functions of early magazines: teaching players how to play games, in all the ways described previously...they work to begin stratification of the player base, and players must construct for themselves how strategy guides fit—or don't—in their pursuit of gaming capital (2007, p. 44).

In her discussion, Consalvo argues that the strategy guide is a medium of instruction, that is, a teacher for players who lack an instructor. In the pursuits of gaming capital (or deeper gaming knowledge) the source must come from a place that has either traversed the same territory, such as an experienced player, or a medium which is afforded its knowledge by an intimate relationship with game production (such as the strategy guide).

In the wake of social media and participatory culture, the understanding of a student-teacher relationship for players seeking mastery is destabilised, as noted by Miller in her 2013 text, "Playing along", whereby she examines the relationships of amateur-to-amateur interactions. As Miller observes,

> These detailed examples highlight some core traits of amateur-to-amateur learning. First*, A2A destabilises teacher-student relationships*. Roles shift quickly: Students are pressed into duty as teachers, and teachers are sometimes students. Established ideas about expertise, authenticity, and authority become subject to public debate grounded in idiosyncratic individual experience. Online social media platforms also encourage people to blur the lines between their social roles; the personal and pedagogical become intertwined (2013, p. 218).

In Miller's discussion, she highlights the ways in which expertise can be contested and argued by the student, in ways that could not take place when dealing with one-sided interactions such as reading a guide. Players exhibit interaction in much the same way, through the lens of difficulty, we observe the interaction between player and game to build personal expectations and ideas of the game, and in turn a personal bank of gaming capital. This is later enforced and

coded by the interactions players have with each other, gaming capital is contested, questioned and evaluated by other players to provide a final value by which the player can be measured.

Difficulty is a guiding hand, a force by which players obtain their initial gaming capital and entry points into further interactions with community. Skill and knowledge is forged and shaped by a player's interactions with a game's difficulty, as we have seen in *Dark Souls'* example, the bloodstain mechanic serves as a constant reminder that no matter how skilled, players must expect the inevitability of death within the game, and that constant repetition is required to build a base of skill. Mastery is taught to these players through the game's difficulty, and the ability to demonstrate this mastery lies in a player's understanding of the game and whatever challenges lie ahead. The game's difficulty teaches players how to learn the optimal ways in which to beat the game through personal experience, and in turn affords players with the skill to broadcast their mastery to other players. Whether they demonstrate through paratextual media, a single-player interaction against a computer opponent, or multi-player settings that pit players against one another, the player's gaming capital is tested when it is transmitted to another player.

Conclusion

In both examples, players turn digital objects into sites of cultural capital transactions. Through the cultural capital transactions with paratexts this translates to gaming capital. While Bourdieu was writing in a pre-Internet world in which paratexts did not have the affordances that they do today in contemporary digital media scenarios, his notion of different forms of capital and its adaptation are still very relevant in helping to navigate the relationships between tastes, attitudes, skills and knowledge production. Cultural capital in a games context can be understood as gaming capital—that is, the various skills, expectations, and experiences informing gaming knowledge. In this chapter I have highlighted the importance of embodied capital as it relates to digital objects and the capital those objects embody.

> Most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment. The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of what is called culture, cultivation, *Bildung*, presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor. Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done at second hand (so that all effects of delegation are ruled out) (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 49).

Players and their communities all embody the capital of their own experiences; we can argue that when games are played, the play becomes a part of memory. Bourdieu's studies allow us to understand paratext during the point of transaction, where memories are exchanged, and how knowledge is transferred between players, communities within social settings and how it shapes their creative activities and gaming skills. Difficulty allows creators to shape what they expect gaming experiences to be, however it also allows players to shape and share their own mastery of skill, personal experiences, and interactions with their communities through the transmission of gaming capital.

Conclusion

The Art of Learning

Years later, another *Pokémo*n game had been released. This time, the way that I played the game had changed. As I matured, so did my playing style when it came to video and computer games, and with so many resources at our fingertips, my group of friends who also played it began to become interested in competitive battling. For the most part, I played against my small circle of friends, with an occasional online match, never venturing too far out of my social network. With the main game completed, each of us was able to craft and control our ideal *Pokémo*n teams. Through some user-created software that allowed us to use optimal settings for each *Pokémo*n character, we were able to focus on our strategies and conduct in battle. Our collective knowledge of the game helped to shape a new kind of experience, so we were happy to spend less time raising and trading *Pokémon* through using the user-created software to facilitate our relentless hunger for competitive battling.

The Machiavellian form of play was vastly different to the style of gameplay I had experienced earlier, though much of it would not be possible without my single-player experiences. Reaching the limits in singular play, and requiring an outlet to develop mastery of the game even further, our group's discussions of knowledge, strategy, and type-matchups had reached a tipping point. For whatever reason, we decided it was time to interact directly with each other to settle the score. We scoured the resources on the Internet, YouTube, and online forums; basically anything we could get our hands on to increase understanding of the competitive battling scene. Each of us recognised the requirements for mastery of this new metagame, and as we were relatively on a level playing field, the prospect of competition allowed us to take our practice beyond collecting every *Pokémon* and completing the main story mode.

Since that time, more *Pokémo*n games have been released, and each time it is usually a frantic race between our group of friends to see who can reach the end of the game first and focus on raising a competitive team. With Nintendo's new measures to ensure that illegitimate means

are stamped out, we begrudgingly returned to the legitimate means of raising *Pokémo*n that we experienced in our single-player activities years ago. Today, the experience unifies the lessons in skill and mastery learnt at a young age with the efficiency and development of these abilities that has come with time. Play as a whole has evolved in a constant navigation of both virtual and the real world, and the paratexts that support play within a game help to shape player relationships outside it.

Throughout this thesis I have examined the relationships that games have with user created content and how these paratexts shape gaming experiences beyond in-game interactions. Players pass on their experiences through the production of these paratexts, seeking ways to ensure that skills gained from playing games do not fade away into obscurity. In the field of games studies there is a need for in-depth discussion of how these notions of skill and mastery are required in the context of the social, creative and community of games—in sum, understanding gaming capital in an age of UCC paratexts.

Where the realm of multi-player gaming has been investigated, analysed and researched by a number of talented people, there remains a gap between this and the understanding of social play in single-player gaming. This thesis has attempted to lay a foundation of understanding specifically within this context of gaming—with the wider understanding that gameplay practice (whether in single- or multi-player form) becomes an art of learning. Where players instruct each other how to learn, and in turn are educated on the best ways to absorb the volumes of information that are brought forth through playing games.

Throughout the thesis, specifically Chapters 1, 2 and 3, it is important to contextualise paratext as an extension of this learning process, and to demonstrate how user-created content in the form of a paratext can ascribe gaming capital to a player, and how the role of the "produser" has altered perceptions of production and consumption knowledge. With a thorough understanding in both general arguments within game studies, and in the historical context of paratexts and their function in contemporary media studies, we can understand the

perspective of the gaming paratext. Paratext is not only a source of social (gaming) capital, but also a tool, which players use towards increasing their understanding of a given genre, subject or specific game.

To further investigate the notion of paratext as negotiations between players and game designers, Chapter 4 demonstrated how design history can transform into paratext, and how it can be used in a player's evaluation of gaming capital. Through paratext, players are defined as authorities on their chosen subject (i.e. a game) and can demonstrate, appreciate and measure each other's mastery on a scale of historical knowledge. Players interact with the history of a game's production in a way that allows them to gain understanding of the designer's perspective, and this history provides a value to the gaming capital that is brought forth from obtaining such knowledge. The source texts which a designer may use in production can become paratext for the "produser" in the creation of new, fan-made content.

Through understanding how context gives meaning to these paratexts, Chapter 5 gave insight into moments where a player cannot demonstrate playing skill in a live context, and how a player can use video and the ability to edit, manipulate and filter out parts that are suitable for viewing as a demonstration of skill and gaming capital. Players who are skilled in playing the game are also skilled in recognising which parts of their play holds value for other viewers, and they can effectively filter appropriate content to increase the viewer's enjoyment or awe. Whether the video focuses on the gaming skills of the speedrunner, or on the light-hearted approach of the LP video, video as a demonstration of gaming mastery allows single-player gamers to control how they demonstrate their gaming capital to other players when there is an absence of a live setting.

With an understanding of how players negotiate approaching skill from a variety of paratexts such as speedrunning and LP videos, the penultimate chapter (Chapter 6) investigated how the guiding hands of difficulty can teach players how to master game knowledge. Players use this understanding in demonstrating skill and mastery through the difficulty settings they choose to

complete games with, and transmitting mastery is done so through other players testing the knowledge a player offers. If one player's method of beating a particular boss is successful, then the gaming capital is afforded a higher value. A thorough knowledge of a game's production history, videos recorded of a player's skill, or even through the game data recording a completion rate of one hundred per cent, can be but a few examples of how players measure mastery and evaluate the difference between skilled and unskilled play.

Drawing from these detailed examples, there is further opportunity to explore the rhetoric of the single-player, and the contexts in which they sit within the wider gaming community. The studies of multi-player gaming and relationships with notions of social play are a robust topic, and as media studies as a whole shifts towards an understanding of the functions of social media in a contemporary context, it is important to continue to articulate the function that single-player games continue to serve in the field of games studies. The rise of ubiquity in Internet connection across the world has not spelled the end for the single-player game; rather, it has transformed the practice of playing them into a shared experience, across passages of distance and time that were incredibly difficult to navigate previously.

Ultimately, there is room to extend this study into empirical research, and garner response from gaming enthusiasts, designers and players to understand their perspectives on how mastery is codified and defined by these groups. In addition, notions of mastery in this context are relative to wider socio-cultural norms where the location in which the research has been undertaken, and notions of skill, play and ability may differ between geographical contexts. Players in countries with less powerful Internet infrastructure may also interact with the social and online media that has formed much of the basis of discussion in regards to paratext and gaming capital. As such, our understanding of these notions may be enriched by investigations into how technology itself affects the wider rhetoric of how gaming capital is valued between players.

To conclude, this thesis has attempted to understand the significance of game paratexts in the player experience and the acquisition of gaming capital. To address the question of how notions of mastery, creativity, sociality and community in gaming culture are sketched and defined through online and theoretical texts, I have examined a number of perspectives—the relationship between players and designers through a historical context, players and other players in the form of online media and their interactions, and finally, in the negotiations with skill that are found when players interact with a game itself.

Through these studies, it is evident that the pursuit of mastery is ultimately an exercise in learning. Players who are denoted as "masters" or highly skilled are done so through the expectations and context that other players subscribe to, and are denoted skilled by virtue of their ability to either demonstrate or pass on gaming skill and knowledge. In the context of the single-player game, a player may not have to beat a game in the fastest possible time; an understanding of the player perspective can denote a level of gameplay skill.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to lineate the current rhetoric of understanding within game studies of single- and multi-player games through notions of mastery, creativity, sociality and community in gaming culture through paratext. As authors such as Taylor have observed mastery in the multi-player setting, it is equally important to understand the actions of single-players, who produce material to support their play in just as voluminous amounts as those who play multi-player games. Consalvo's notion of gaming paratext, foregrounded in studies by Genette, and further explored by Gray, have been instrumental in our understanding of attendant gaming skill, as expressions of ability when a live opponent is lacking, and ultimately, that the paratext can function in the expression of gaming skill, to transmit ability to another party.

Once games transcend from the screen to our "real world", the stakes of players and what they deem valuable becomes increasingly apparent. Juul's studies of play theory demonstrate how players utilise their gaming knowledge outside of play, and allow us to understand how playing

skill and gaming paratext relate to one another, whether in the context of the single- or multi-player, and the ways in which players can communicate their technical/skilful, social and creative experiences during play to other players.

Players approach game consumption with an understanding that they will be changed after the experience, and endeavour to pass on their new perspectives to other players who approach the same games. Gaming mastery is an art of learning, because if mastery symbolises the end of the journey a person takes, then as we have observed, the notion of gaming capital and knowledge is in constant redefinition by the gaming community. Where players demonstrate skill in a variety of ways, from the online encyclopaedias and collections of artwork they find and produce, to the videos that highlight a passage of difficulty or incredible skill. They are guided by the initial game through its learning infrastructure of difficulty and test their knowledge in the real world.

Defining gaming capital is a matter of opinion and consensus between many parties, from players to designers, and to other audiences, where the measure of a master is not defined by the player, but by the communities that support the production and archive this knowledge gained.

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