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WHAT IF WE WERE ALL NOVICES? MAKING ROOM FOR INEXPERIENCE IN A GAME STUDIES CLASSROOM

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Abstract: *Night in the Woods (NITW) was released in 2017 and has met with commercial and critical success. The low technical requirements and compelling narrative that speaks to issues directly impacting young adults makes it a compelling text to use in a university classroom. Theoretically informed by feminist game studies, in this article I report on the successes, failures, and lessons learned from using NITW as a required text across three Communication Studies courses. I argue that while the cultural baggage that surrounds games does not disappear just because we step into a classroom, the unique perspectives offered by novice players who are not yet fully enmeshed in gaming's norms and expectations offer the potential for unique insights and teachable moments. Ultimately, in this article I put forward the following provocation: how would we reimagine a university-level game studies seminar if we designed our curriculum as if all our students were first time players?*

Keywords: *Night in the Woods; non-players; inclusion; curriculum; games in the classroom; novices*

Introduction

We are at an interesting point when it comes to discussing digital games within a larger media ecosystem. No longer a subcultural leisure activity, games have exploded in mainstream popularity—so much so that in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the *New York Times* published a piece offering a crash course on online games as an appropriately social distanced leisure activity (Schiesel, 2020). This coverage is a marked difference from previous mainstream reporting on games, which could at times cross into moral panic (Dutton, Consalvo, & Harper, 2011). Over time, the definition of what constitutes a game has broadened (Juil, 2010); while games have a history of being thought as a “boys club” (Kocurek, 2015), we now recognize that games are attractive to a wider range of demographics (Chess, 2017). While concerns about the negative effects of gameplay still have traction, games have also been recast as spaces of informal yet active learning driven by participant interests (Gee, 2007; Jenkins, 2009) and entry points point into STEM fields (Anderson et al., 2018; Turner, 2014).

This shift from suspicion to optimism has led to curriculum revisions to include games in classrooms in an effort to better engage 21st century learners. However, this optimism is dampened when a critical lens is used to examine how players are introduced to gaming in the domestic sphere. Recent publications such as *Gaming Sexism* by Amanda Cote (2020) find that

while girls and women are increasingly hailed into gaming, this introduction is heavily moderated by gender-based stereotypes. Indeed, work by Alison Harvey (2015) illustrates when and how children are introduced to games in the domestic sphere remains gendered, as are many interactions observed in formal and informal learning environments (Fisher, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015; Jenson, Fisher, & de Castell, 2011; Robertson, 2012). These are just a few examples arising from feminist game studies that serve as a reminder that while play is a voluntary activity, that does not mean that gameplay is equally open to all. A concern that undergirds this article is that the cultural baggage that surrounds games does not disappear just because we step into a classroom.

In an attempt to address this concern, I draw on my ongoing research about disengagement and non-play of digital games, focusing in particular on how this has informed my experiences teaching at a large American public university. Writing from the perspective of a faculty member who has developed and taught game studies seminars that enroll students of varying levels of gaming literacy and unequal access to technology, I report on the successes, failures, and lessons learned from using a game as a required text across three university courses housed in a Communication department. While “on the ground” experience demonstrates that students vary in their technological literacy (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010; Hargittai, 2010; Jenson, Taylor, & Fisher, 2010), the myth of the “digital native” (Prensky, 2001) continues to colour public discourses surrounding students and technology, especially amongst some faculty members who make assumptions about the sorts of students will register in an elective game studies course and the technical, cultural, and gaming literacies they bring with them.

In this article I put forward the provocation: how will we reimagine a university game studies seminar if we designed our curriculum as if all our students were first time players? As a way of thinking through possible responses to this, I discuss my use of *Night in the Woods* (NITW) as a required course text for three separate classes (one graduate seminar and two upper-level undergraduate courses), and how my approach to using this game has evolved. I begin by summarizing the literature about quitting and non-participation, which in turn problematizes the folk-knowledge that playing games begins and ends with personal choice. Grounding this work within feminist games scholarship’s long documentation of the ways gaming cultures are not equally open to all, I draw attention to the fact that students will arrive to class on day one with differing levels of experience, comfort, and knowledge of games. To address this disparity, I ultimately argue that by approaching all students as if they are all first time players, it will not only create an environment for less experienced students to become comfortable with games, it will also provide students with prior experiences with games the opportunity to critically reflect on these experiences and the larger assumptions, stereotypes, and biases that might have been normalized via these previous experiences.

Players and Non-Players

For the past decade, my research has focused on understanding why some people quit playing games and why others never begin playing in the first place. I originally came to this topic by way of a different question. Early in my doctoral studies I proposed to investigate the following: how

should a games-based curriculum accommodate students who do not play games? However, when conducting a preliminary literature scan, at the time I found few explanations for non-players (both quitters and non-participants) and their lack of engagement in games. I quickly determined that before I could address any curricular questions, I would first need to understand why people leave games. To summarize the existing literature about quitting briefly, industry focused literature tends to be concerned with the topic of churn—being able to predict when a user will cancel a subscription or stop logging in to a particular game (Borbora, Srivastava, Hsu, & Williams, 2011; Kawale, Pal, & Srivastava, 2009; Liu et al., 2020)—but this remains focused on questions of *when* someone will leave, less so on *why* they leave. Nathan Dutton's (2007) thesis about players quitting the Massively Multiplayer Online Game *World of Warcraft* and their announcements of this departure on the game's message boards proved highly influential to my own research. Not only did Dutton conduct one of the early studies about quitting games, he also put forward the provocation that quitters take on the role of Johan Huizinga's (1955) spoilsport. Dutton argues that former players are much less invested in maintaining the sanctity of the magic circle and therefore more willing to speak frankly about the more negative aspects of a particular gaming community.

While quitting has since received more attention from game scholars (Bergstrom, 2019b, 2019c; Butcher, Tucker, & Young, 2020; Jiang, 2018; Mavoa, Nansen, Carter, & Gibbs, 2019), at the time I was embarking on my dissertation research I needed to find an appropriate framework to guide my approach to this topic. Despite studying in a Faculty of Education, I decided to sidestep the literature about dropping out of school such as investigations about why students leave STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) majors (Malone & Barabino, 2009; Seymour & Hewitt, 1997; Stout, Dasgupta, Hunsinger, & McManus, 2011). Formal schooling is usually mandated to a certain age. Play, on the other hand, must be entered into voluntarily. Because play and games are intimately linked, I sought out an alternative framework to guide these nascent investigations into non/participation in digital games. As a doctoral student I ultimately turned to leisure studies to provide a theoretical framework to explain non-participation in non-mandatory activities and this field has continued to be influential on my work to this day.

Leisure studies shares similarities to game studies but the two fields do not intersect as often as one might expect (Bergstrom, 2019a). Leisure studies is concerned with recreational activities such as organized sports, tourism, and other voluntary activities undertaken in one's free time. Karla A. Henderson's ongoing research on women's leisure experiences (or lack thereof) (Henderson, 1990; Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Henderson & Hickerson, 2007) provided a lens through which I could articulate why women leave gaming. Ultimately, it is not because they are no longer interested in playing, but because domestic responsibilities have subsumed their available leisure time in ways not typically experienced by their male partners and family members (Bergstrom, 2019b). Leisure studies also offered a way for me to more readily identify the hurdles that must be overcome to play games. Research surrounding constraints to leisure participation by Duane W. Crawford, Edgar L. Jackson, and Geoffrey Godbey (1991) make clear that personal interest is not enough to ensure potential participants can actually engage in a particular leisure activity. Instead of an activity being open to all, one or more intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints can exist, blocking unfettered

participation. This framework has been useful to articulate the material conditions that must be in place before someone can engage with most modern digital games. The cost of a console and buying individual games are obvious financial costs, but should a potential player wish to play online, they would also need to live in an area that has high speed internet. Subscription fees are most typically paid by credit card (which require a sufficient credit score to be issued a card) or purchasing a pre-paid game card at a local store. But the social conditions that allow for or discourage gameplay are far more difficult to articulate in such a systemic manner. For this, I turn to feminist game studies.

How Do Players Come to Games?

Because games are a leisure activity, it is assumed that people who are interested in games will play them, and those who do not find games compelling will find something else to do with their leisure time. Given that in order for something to be considered “play” it must be entered into voluntarily, this idea of choice remains exceptionally sticky. However, the reality of who is welcomed into particular games (or even gaming entirely) is far more complicated. Feminist game scholars have long critiqued the digital games industry for assuming that girls must be coaxed into gaming via specialized genres more suited to “feminine” interests (Chess, 2010; Cote, 2020; de Castell & Bryson, 1998; Flanagan, 2005). Contrary to this industry assumption, feminist game scholars have consistently argued that the choice to play is never truly unfettered and instead is shaped by a combination of larger social expectations, gender-based stereotypes, and advertising based on assumptions made by industry stakeholders about what games are of interest to some demographics and not others (Chess, 2017; de Castell & Bryson, 1998; Fisher et al., 2015; Flanagan, 2005; Harvey, 2015; Jenson & de Castell, 2010). Indeed, when women are targeted as players, the games they are offered tend to be casual or educational (Chess, 2017; Flanagan, 2005; Harvey, 2015), while competitive and/or violent games tend to be stereotypically assumed to be more attractive to male players (Burrill, 2008). Amanda Cote attributes these assumptions to inferential sexism, a modification of Stuart Hall’s inferential racism which she defines as such: “an event, policy, or argument that rests on unquestioned, naturalized assumptions that have a sexist basis” (2020, p. 86). In other cases, women are actively pushed out of gaming spaces, for example Kishonna Gray (2011, 2012, 2014) examines how Black women are harassed and linguistically profiled via Xbox voice chat, resulting in the need to create private spaces to play in peace.

Taken together, this research provides compelling evidence that games are not equally open to all. My concern as a doctoral student, and now as a faculty member, is as such: if students do not have access to digital game technology at home, will they find themselves at a disadvantage when assessed alongside their game-playing peers? Despite this concern being a driving force of my research and at the forefront of my mind, my teaching with NITW was plagued with missteps and assumptions about the technical abilities and access of my students. I now turn my attention to a sort of “post-mortem” of these teaching experiences in an attempt to open up future conversations to move towards radically inclusive teaching practices in the game studies classroom.

Night in the Woods

Night in the Woods (Infinite Fall, 2017) is described on the official website (www.nightinthewoods.com) as follows:

College dropout Mae Borowski returns home to the crumbling former mining town of Possum Springs seeking to resume her aimless former life and reconnect with the friends she left behind. But things aren't the same. Home seems different now and her friends have grown and changed. Leaves are falling and the wind is growing colder. Strange things are happening as the light fades.

And there's something in the woods.

The website goes on to explain,

NIGHT IN THE WOODS is an adventure game focused on exploration, story, and character, featuring dozens of characters to meet and lots to do across a lush, vibrant world. After a successful Kickstarter it's being made by Infinite Fall, a teamup of Alec Holowka (Aquaria), Scott Benson (Late Night Work Club), and Bethany Hockenberry.

Released in early 2017, NITW has gone on to achieve critical and financial success including winning the Seumas McNally Grand Prize and Excellence in Narrative awards at the 2018 Independent Games Festival (New, 2018). Reviewers praise the dialogue, rich story, and the game's ability to tackle tough topics in a respectful manner (Consalvo & Phelps, 2020). NITW has since become a cult favourite, with an active fan community participating in the game's associated Reddit community well into 2021.

Built using Unity and featuring stylized animation, NITW's gameplay is fairly straightforward. The 2D environment allows movement right and left (and sometimes up or down, if the terrain allows for it). The only playable character is Mae, an anthropomorphic animated cat, who moves home after dropping out of college abruptly. Mae finds herself in the dark at a deserted bus depot with a broken payphone and no way to contact her parents to remind them she was expecting them to meet her at the depot. Mae's walk home becomes an introduction to Possum Springs (the setting of the game), but also provides a brief tutorial about how to run and jump (two skills that will make exploring the terrain easier). In later updates to the game, this tutorial has become optional, reducing further barriers for novice players who may get "stuck" if their reflexes do not allow them to perfect the sequence of jumping three times quickly to trigger an extra-large jump across the screen. In terms of technical requirements to run the game, NITW is quite low; players do not require a high-end gaming PC in order to play the game. Instead, it can be played on a variety of devices: PC, Mac, and Linux as well as on Xbox, PlayStation and most recently, the Nintendo Switch. I note that an iOS port was at one time planned, but has yet to be released and the status of this port is unclear. Typically, NITW retails for around \$20 USD, but is occasionally included in Steam sales or discount bundles.

Returning to the gameplay, Possum Springs is full of Non-Player Characters (NPCs) that populate a town of boarded up storefronts and other businesses struggling to stay afloat. There is a predetermined storyline that the player must follow to ultimately complete the game which

involves solving the mystery of the “something in the woods” alluded to in the description above. Players can progress directly through the storyline, or stop to talk to many of the town’s NPCs which have dialogue that help paint the picture of the dying town. NPCs will remember if you talked to them previously and will continue to offer up dialogue further elaborating their backstories. These optional interactions with ancillary characters take a mundane action (talk to a NPC to potentially gain useful information) and turn it into an engaging narrative device. None of these interactions are required to progress the main storyline, but they add to the rich immersive environment of NITW.

Before I move on to a discussion about how I have used the game in my classes at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, I must first discuss the proverbial elephant in the room. It is not possible to discuss NITW without making mention of Alec Holowka. In late August 2019, fellow game designer Zoë Quinn accused Holowka of emotional and physical abuse. Speaking via the official NITW twitter account and the game’s Kickstarter page, the other members of the NITW team quickly announced they found the allegations credible and were severing ties with Holowka. The tweets in particular were reprinted in much of the reporting on the events as they unfolded, stating:

This week, allegations of past abuse have come to light regarding Alec Holowka, who was coder, composer, and co-designer on Night In The Woods. We take such allegations seriously as a team. As a result and after some agonizing consideration, we are cutting ties with Alec. (Knoop, 2019)

Holowka killed himself on August 31, 2019. Holowka’s suicide reignited a long running harassment campaign against Quinn (Penny, 2019) which while largely outside the scope of this article, is yet another example of the gatekeeping and toxic elements that exist in certain pockets of digital cultures. As he made up one third of the NITW creation team, Holowka was and remains intimately tied to the game. His death led to multiple conversations surrounding what to do with art made by controversial people, none of which resulted in any clear-cut or easy answers. In the weeks following his suicide and the resultant harassment campaign against Quinn, I contemplated replacing NITW with a new game, but ultimately decided to fold in discussions about authorship, ethical consumption, and “cancel culture” into the content of my third iteration of teaching with the game, which happened from January to May 2020.

Night in the Woods in a University Classroom: Three vignettes

Rather than a more traditional academic research article relying on student surveys or content analysis of submitted assignments in an attempt to assess what was “learned” by playing this game, this article takes the form of a reflection on my ongoing experiences teaching with NITW. The goal is to continue to strive towards a radically inclusive environment where both novices and experts could play the same game without advantaging one group over the other. Ultimately, my goal was (and continues to be) to create a shared media experience that would then provide the opportunity to deconstructing and discuss a game as a media text, just as an entire class would read and deconstruct a novel or a film. Prior to using NITW, I had resisted assigning games as an ongoing text because they offered up logistical problems—games require time to play, sometimes upwards of 80+ hours for games lauded for their rich, immersive narratives and

morally complex interactions (e.g. *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*)—making it difficult to engage well regarded, immersive games as a complete text in a semester. Instead, I turned to shorter games that I could demo on my laptop via a classroom projector that would offer the chance to play and talk about in a single class session such as Elizabeth LaPensée’s (2018) *Thunderbird Strike*. I had also resisted assigning games because I wanted to avoid “the technology problem”—navigating the bureaucratic maze of figuring out how to get permission to install games in a university computer lab seemed overwhelming as a new faculty member.

I was drawn to NITW first as a player, and then as an educator. When playing through NITW for the first time in mid 2017 I was struck at the richness of the narrative and the game’s frank discussions of mental illness—discussed in detail by Mia Consalvo and Andrew Phelps (2020). The game centers around Mae’s return home after dropping out of college and deals frankly with issues surrounding mental illness, economic anxiety, feeling a lack of agency, and how childhood friendships evolve (or wither) as you grow into adults. I was drawn to include NITW as a course text because Mae is close to my students’ ages and speaks frankly with other characters about the difficulty of coming of age in a world with an uncertain future, mirroring conversations I’ve had in class and in office hours.

I took other factors into consideration as I decided if I should assign NITW as a course text. These included the technical requirements (which are low, especially when compared to other games lauded for their narrative complexity), the price point (\$20, comparable to the price of a novel sold at the university bookstore), and the level of commitment required on the part of the player (websites such as www.howlongtobeat.com report that the median amount of time needed to complete the main story of NITW is about eight and a half hours). But most important was the low technical competency required on the part of the player—gameplay happens via arrow keys and the space bar. Unlike the increasingly complex console controllers that assume prior experience using console controllers in order for players to know which button controls what action that in turn leave novices frustrated (Paul, 2018), NITW when played on a computer requires very little technical know-how. Manoeuvring Mae back and forth across the screen requires only basic keyboard and mouse movements; other than some jumping puzzles and optional mini-games in the style of *Guitar Hero* and an optional dungeon crawler mini-game, quick reflexes are not particularly needed for this game. This is a game involving clicking and reading and offers an easy onboarding process for the novice player, yet still offers a narrative-rich immersive environment that demonstrates the power of storytelling via interactive media. NITW was a deeply moving story to me as a player, and I wanted to share it with my students. With these thoughts in mind, I assigned NITW as a required text for my first course.

These vignettes and their associated details are presented in chronological order. To maintain student confidentiality, I have obscured some details and compiled multiple students into personas. The object of study here is myself via reflections of my evolving approach to using NITW in my classroom and my ongoing attempts to merge research and pedagogy. Ultimately, my goal here is to not offer a set of concrete lesson plans, but instead provide a series of critical self-reflections and provocations that I use to challenge my own assumptions about the gameplay experience of my students. It is my hope that these provocations will be of use to

fellow educators who wish to disrupt the cultural scripts that inevitably follow games everywhere, including into formal learning environments.

Vignette #1: Unstructured Play in a Graduate Seminar

My first classroom experience using NITW took place in a special topics graduate seminar entitled *Games, Culture, and Society*. The class was structured as a 2.5-hour seminar on Friday afternoons. All students in the Communication MA at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa are required to take at least one seminar offered by the department, and students from other departments can be admitted at the instructor's discretion. Ultimately, I ended up with a mix of MA and PhD students who were enrolled in course out of interest, and others who enrolled in the course out of necessity. There were two personas in the class: those who had prior positive experiences with games and were excited and motivated to learn about their hobby in an academic context, and those who had a more neutral—or in some cases adversarial—relationships with gaming.

NITW was included in the course syllabus; students were made aware on the first day of class that they would be expected to purchase and play the game to completion by the midpoint of the semester. Generally, students were excited about the idea of “playing a game for class,” in particular the experienced players made clear they were looking forward to the experience. The opening assignment for the course was a “gamer biography” where I asked each student to share their previous experiences with games including what they had played, who they had played with, and their overall sentiment towards gaming as a leisure practice. The non-players used this assignment to express some unease, but were willing to trust the process and be open to this new experience.

Little technical support was required on my part. The experienced players required no assistance in locating, downloading, installing, or playing through the game. The non-players required a bit more onboarding, but a short one-on-one meeting with the student and their laptop was enough to get them started in the game. As this was a graduate class I expected the students would be able to manage their time accordingly and I did not provide an expected play schedule, but I did ask students to take notes about things they found interesting as they played. These notes were not a required assignment nor did I ask them to be submitted for my review, instead I asked students to keep a running list of what they found interesting and bring it with them on our scheduled discussion day.

When it came to the scheduled discussion, I was surprised that some of the more experienced players in the class ended up having the least to say about the game. They had approached it like the games they play in their leisure spaces. When it quickly became clear NITW wasn't like the games they more typically gravitated towards, they waited until the weekend before our discussion and attempted to speed run through in the least amount of time possible; one could not even remember the (what I would argue is quite memorable) climax of the main story arc. Other players who had an affinity for narrative-driven games were more invested in the story, and did spend as much time as their schedule allowed playing the game. What surprised me was the student who had expressed the most trepidation ended up having many positive things to say about their first gameplay experience. Indeed, this had been a watershed moment and while they

had previously expressed their feelings that games were an unproductive use of their family's leisure time, they had been motivated by NITW to use gaming as a way to bond and spend time as a family.

This experience required that I interrogate my own assumptions and remind myself that an individual's lived experiences are an essential part of reading any text—digital games included. Scott Benson has mentioned via social media that Possum Springs is based on his and Bethany Hockenberry's experiences growing up in American rust belt towns. This resonated with my own experiences, while raised in the suburbs of Toronto, Canada, my mother commuted to work in a nearby city supported by various manufacturing industries. When jobs were moved abroad, I witnessed firsthand how quickly the town changed when visiting my mother at work. As jobs left, the economy built up around them crumbled, leaving empty storefronts that I saw reflected in my first visit to Possum Springs. While out of state students described how seeing their own experiences reflected in the game encouraging them to invest further in the narrative, the students I mentioned above who sped through the game were local, which is not an area that had been heavily reliant on now absent manufacturing industries. Their pre-existing preferences for certain genre of games, combined with the lack of a direct experience with a failing industrial town, meant that the rich narrative that inspired me to bring NITW meant the game offered little foothold for them and it did not seem “worth” the effort to invest in a close reading of the text.

At the conclusion of the course I reflected on my experiences teaching with NITW and was left with the following questions:

- What assumption(s) was I making about how students would respond to this text?
- How could I better scaffold treating the game like a text, rather than slipping back into treating it like a leisure activity?

Vignette #2: Semi-structured Play in an Undergraduate Elective Course

My second classroom experience using NITW took place in a 300-level undergraduate elective, *Digital Cultures* taught in Spring 2019. Students must be declared Communication majors and have taken an introductory ICT & Policy class before being able to register in the course. A total of 36 students were enrolled in this course who roughly fell into two following personas: students who had enrolled specifically because of the subject matter, and students who had enrolled because of the instructor but were less motivated by the subject matter. I introduced the game in class, discussing how to download and install the game. As above, sitting with the students for a few minutes with their laptop was enough to get it running and minimal technical support was required on my part.

Learning from my previous experience and therefore not assuming that students had been asked in a previous class to critically engage with a long form media text, I asked students to respond to a series of prompts in their personal course blog as they progressed through the game:

1. Describe your experiences locating and installing the game. How easy was it to install the game?

2. After playing through the tutorial/introduction to the game, write a brief reflective note about how the game taught you to play it. Was it difficult/easy to learn the controls? In what ways is the game's tutorial system similar/different to other games you have played previously.
3. Now that you have played through a few interactions with other characters in the gameworld, write a brief reflection on how the game presents dialogue options to you as a player. How does this make you feel?
4. What kind of world is Possum Springs? How does the game teach you about the norms and customs of this gameworld?
5. There are many opportunities to stop and talk to Possum Springs townsfolk yet this does not always have much to do with advancing the main plot. Do you talk to them? Why or why not?
6. Now that you have finished the game, reflect on your reactions to NITW as a whole. How does this compare to other games you have played?

I also included a suggested play schedule and suggested timeline for responding to the blog posts with a firm deadline for all the posts being week 8 (of a 16 week semester). As in my previous class, I scheduled an entire class at the midpoint of the semester to debrief and discuss NITW. Overall students appreciated the blogs as a way of keeping on track, but because of the modular nature of the course (each week an activity was assigned and students would pick which ones they would submit at the end of the semester for grading), they felt it was too easy to fall behind on playing NITW and rushed to complete it before our scheduled debriefing session. Despite the two personas and their differing motivations for registering in the course, students were overall positive about the experience of playing NITW, including those who had not previously played a game before. For those students, they were more likely to describe NITW as being akin to an interactive story, and while they had initial trepidations towards being asked to play a game, some described how it took the place of their nightly Netflix watching sessions.

While in the graduate seminar everyone played the game to completion, this was not the case here. For the most part, students had been able to download, install, and finally run the game on a computer they had access to without issue. However, a student used an iPad as their primary electronic device, and to date NITW's promised iOS release has not materialized. After some negotiation, the student and I decided they would watch a Let's Play of the game (I note there are multiple options on YouTube for complete game play-through that offer no commentary, these videos are between six and a half to nine hours long). The other reason for not playing the game through to completion involved discomfort with the subject matter and recent events in their personal lives. In these instances where the subject matter was discomforting, I negotiated an alternative assignment where they were not required to play NITW any further.

After this second iteration of teaching with NITW I had addressed (at least partly) the problem of playing for play's sake, rather than playing for critique and deconstruction. The blog prompts and suggested play schedule assisted students with keeping on track. However, I was left with two further questions:

- What assumption(s) was I making in regards to the technology students have access to?

- Do students need to *play* the game to successfully achieve the course's learning objectives?

Vignette #3: Scheduled Play in an Undergraduate Elective Course

The third and final classroom experience using NITW occurred in a second iteration of *Digital Cultures* taught in Spring 2020. Rather than waiting to see if students needed an alternative means to access NITW, I decided to offer the Let's Play as an option from the start. A link was provided to the Let's Play on the syllabus, alongside the information about where the game can be purchased. Approximately one third of the class opted to watch the Let's Play rather than purchase the game. Reasons for choosing the Let's Play included wanting to save money for textbooks and expenses for other classes, and not wanting to spend money on a game that falls outside their typical interests.

As a direct result of feedback from vignette two that the blogs were helpful but a more "on rails" experience was needed to keep some students on track, I decided that in this third iteration I would have a more formalized play schedule. This time around I also replaced the blog assignment above with Edmond Chang's (2010, 2019) Play Log (PLog), which he demonstrated at a teaching workshop at the 2019 meeting of *the Society for Cinema and Media Studies*. Students were asked to submit PLogs in Weeks 5, 8, and 11. In each PLog students were asked to make five observations about each of the following categories: narrative features of the game (e.g. story, dialogue), mise en scene (e.g. music, visuals), game mechanics (e.g. user interface, rules), and cultural or social observations (e.g. What is this game saying about society?). The PLog was described to students as a tool to keep them playing while "awake" and avoid slipping into treating NITW as a leisure activity.

By having students complete PLogs it allowed me to follow along with students as they uncovered aspects of the game. One particular interesting observation is the persistence of he/him pronouns for Mae throughout some student submissions, despite the game consistently using she/her pronouns when other characters addressed or make reference to Mae. After reaching the midpoint of class #3's play through, reading their second set of PLogs and seeing the use of he across multiple student submissions I launched an impromptu class discussion about Mae's gender. Here I asked students to return to the text and provide evidence for their answer. One downside for this impromptu discussion was that the students who had been reading Mae's gender "correctly" were incredulous that she could be misread as a man, effectively shutting down what could have been an interesting discussion. Had I been more careful in my introduction of the matter, it would have been an ideal means to tie back to the feminist game studies literature reviewed above about the assumed audiences of game designers that in turn shape how (some, but not all) players come to see themselves reflected in the avatar on the screen.

Students reported keeping a PLog kept them on track, serving as a constant reminder this was to be seen as a text not a game. I did not notice obvious differences between students who used the Let's Play and students who actually played NITW in terms of the level of detail in their observations, but I did notice that students who actually played tended to be more positive about the game and felt more ownership over the experience. Offering the option of a Let's Play

provided students with the opportunity to opt out of purchasing the game. However, watching a streamer who provides constant commentary fundamentally changes the nature of NITW and removes player autonomy. Students no longer get to make the choice about how to respond to NPCs, and they don't get to decide when they explore certain areas further or go ahead with the main storyline. In my effort to make the class more inclusive, I removed the interactive nature of this interactive medium, changing students' relationship to the game in ways I am not fully aware of. However, I note this offers up an interesting potential for future research to more formally survey students about the experience of watching versus playing, as well as the potential for future experiments to determine which group better retains important narrative information in a text.

This third iteration of teaching with NITW also represented my first time teaching with the game after the allegations against Alec Holowka were made public and his subsequent suicide. I had debated back and forth about whether I should replace NITW with a different game, or discontinue teaching with games entirely. Instead, I decided to put the question back on to my students and ask their opinions directly. Near the end of the semester, after they had finished playing NITW and the last PLog had been submitted for grading, I asked students to read Scott Benson's (2019) *Medium* post "Alec" and respond to the following prompts in a freeform response:

- Has reading Scott Benson's reflection changed your opinions about Night in the Woods? Why or why not?
- If you had known about the controversy surrounding Alec Holowka, would you have still chosen to pay for this game?
- In light of the allegations made against Alec Holowka, is Night in the Woods "cancelled"?
- Is it appropriate for Dr. Bergstrom to continue to use Night in the Woods in *Digital Cultures*? Why or why not?

Overall, the majority of the students were able to separate Holowka from NITW and felt that it was a compelling game that should be kept on the syllabus for future iterations of this course. However, multiple students commented that they wish they had known about this controversy prior to beginning to play the game. While they felt they would have enjoyed the game either way, they also felt that waiting until the end of the semester was a bit too late to bring up the surrounding controversies. This results in a bit of a quandary: the allegations against Holowka are contentious and trust needs to be developed in the classroom before discussing such heavy matters. In future iterations of the course I intend to shift my schedule to have NITW be the final, culminating activity for the class. I will introduce "Alec" as a reading earlier in the semester, requesting students read it before deciding whether they will purchase NITW or watch a Let's Play on YouTube instead.

Implications for the Classroom: The Importance of Novice Perspectives

In my previous research I have argued that these taken for granted assumptions can lead to missing information when conducting research about players. In particular I described how an emphasis on what high-level MMOG play looks like initially caused a misreading of a novice

player's ability to play a MMOG. However, when the research participant's actions were re-interrogated in light of their expertise in another genre of games (First Person Shooters), it became clearer that the player was attempting to apply their FPS knowledge to a MMOG. Suddenly it became clear it was the affordances of the game that was constraining their efforts, rather than our initial assumption of a lack of skill on the part of the player (Bergstrom, Jenson, Hydromako, & de Castell, 2015). By writing this article I have attempted another critical reflection, this time on my teaching practices and my assumptions surrounding NITW and their associated missteps occurring over three instances of teaching with this game.

Throughout this article I have attempted to bridge the gap between my research and pedagogy, asking myself how this can further inform course design and teaching practices. Through writing this reflective essay, my goal has been to demonstrate how easy it is to fall into the cultural scripts surrounding gaming, even when one has the best of intentions and attempts to start from a place that consciously and intentionally disrupt these scripts. Further investigations can extend this work by focusing on the experiences of the most marginalized people in the room, and how as educators we can best serve these students when teaching about and with gaming texts.

I close with a discussion about interrogating assumptions about games, especially on the part of the instructor. If an instructor makes the decision to add games to their classroom, this is likely at least in part due to their own comfort with games. However, it is important to remember that through moving from novice to experienced, players not only gain technical skills, they become enmeshed in the culture of a specific gameworld, and this culture becomes a sort of hegemony. New players—at least for the brief moments before they too become enmeshed—are more likely to question the taken for granted norms and expectations and these questions should be encouraged in our classrooms as a counterhegemonic, disruptive force. Rather than assuming that the non-players or novices who enrol in our game studies courses need to quickly skill up to be on par with more experienced peers, I argue that being an outsider to gaming cultures provides an important vantage point. It is these voices that should be uplifted and centered as they offer the most potential for novel insights about games as texts because they have yet to internalize the arbitrary norms that more experienced players have come to take for granted.

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