# All Your Base Are Belong To Us: Videogame culture and textual production online.

**Iain Simons**
Suppose Research
Fourth Floor
Eagle Works
Carlton Road
Nottingham
NG3 2NB
0115 985 9400
iain@suppose.co.uk

**James Newman**
Department of Media and Cultural Studies
Bath Spa University College
Newton Park
Newton St Loe
Bath
BA2 9BN
01225 875410
j.newman@bathspa.ac.uk

**ASBTRACT**
This paper examines the practices and activities of videogame fans online. In scrutinising a variety of player-produced texts including walkthroughs, fanart, theorising and FAQs, the authors seek not only to highlight the creativity and vibrancy of the participatory culture of videogame fandom but also to examine the ways in which discussion and the production of such texts are used by players to generate and communicate their identity within the community of *otaku* and modify the terms of engagement with the game. In this way, the authors seek to interrogate player-produced texts as examples of the involvement and activity of players in the construction of videogames' meaning and as a means of problematising discussions of the pleasures of gameplay.

**Keywords**
Fandom, walkthrough, videogame culture

## VIDEOGAMING AS SOLITARY PRACTICE

It has become commonplace, in both popular and academic discourse, to consider videogaming as a solitary activity. The focus on the single-player is perhaps understandable, though it surely betrays a lack of engagement with or immersion in the culture of gaming. If we take even a cursory glace at some recent titles, we find that games such as *Super Mario Sunshine*, *Final Fantasy X* or *Metal Gear Solid 2*, for example, are all apparently designed for the single player, exploring and battling alone against the enemies, obstacles and spaces of the gameworld. Certainly, the interactive potential of these games appears to be limited by the single joystick command, literally prohibiting the input of more than one player. Moreover, and demonstrated by each of the games above, what Aarseth has termed the 'man against the environment' theme in which a single character is charged with the task of saving the day and restoring the previously disrupted equilibrium is such a prominent theme in videogames [1], and indeed pervades much western narrative, that the game seems to offer no scope for the involvement of others.

The apparently solitary nature of play has been seized upon by detractors of videogames. While certain lone, private activity such as journal writing may be

valorised [2], the videogame has been positioned as an antisocial force, encouraging players to withdraw from society. As Jessen [3] has noted,

> Serious criticism is levelled at the influence of the medium on children's social relations. It is a common assumption that computer games lead to children becoming socially isolated, all in their separate rooms where they engage in a lone struggle in the artificial universes of the games. In other words, the computer destroys social relations and playing.

To their detractors, videogames are not merely solitary experiences but are seen to be isolating. As a result, they not only appeal to loners, but create them thereby giving rise to the popular conception of videogame fans as reclusive outsiders, distant and disengaged from society, both unwilling and incapable of interacting with others.

> What seems to differentiate the gamer is the absence of friends and alternative leisure opportunities; heavy gamers resort to solitary media for distraction and entertainment. Our evidence is rather limited on this point but, clearly, video games are an activity, which, like watching TV and videos, is something kids prefer to do when they have no other more social options. Family and sibling play is infrequent, mostly involves playing with brothers, and is more frequent in the occasional player groups [4]

For many commentators, it appears that videogames are imbued with a quite insidious potency. The power of videogames seems such that players are precluded from incorporating them into their lives in the moderation that it is implied could save the vulnerable from inevitable harm. In this willingness to view games as addictive and drug-like, we must note an equal and somewhat patronising unwillingness to acknowledge any sophistication in players' use of media. Jessen notes that, since their introduction in the 1980s, home computers have given rise to widespread concerns that young people would be 'seduced' by them [5]. Sherry Turkle has provided what may be the apotheosis of this stance claiming that the seductive qualities of computers and games can be found in their presentation of ordered, rule-governed and ultimately, controllable spaces that place the user or player in a central, masterful role [6]. Comparing this with the chaos and fuzziness of the 'real world', Turkle concludes that videogames attract the narcissist in adolescents and play upon the deviance of their development, though in these terms, the charge seems no more applicable to games played with computers than any others, or perhaps even other non-game representational forms.

The positioning of the videogame player as reclusive and socially inept raises important questions. Two presuppositions are important. First, are videogames really used as alternatives to social interaction? Second, do the ways videogames are actually used and played support the common-sense notion of gaming as solitary and isolating? In their study of videogame uses and gratifications, Sherry *et al* present findings that challenge these taken-for-granted assumptions

> Individuals who spend the longest hours playing were more likely to

report playing for Diversion (e.g. "I play video games when I have other things to do" and "I play video games when I am bored") and Social Interaction (e.g. "My friends and I use video games as a reason to get together"). [7]

While at least part of the pleasure of videogame play can certainly be understood in terms of its displacement of other, perhaps more mundane, activity, to consider videogames as merely providing diversion from other people is simplistic. Rather, directly contradicting the idea of the solitary player isolated from social contact Sherry *et al* encourage us to consider videogaming as highly social activity. Certainly, research conducted by Funk [8], Emes [9] and Kestenbaum & Weinstein [10] concludes that the hypothesized link between frequent videogame play, social withdrawal and isolation cannot be supported with current findings. It follows that the popular perception of the videogame player as an isolated, withdrawn loner is based as much on presupposition and anecdote than on the findings of scholarly study.

Videogame players have been quick to parody and exploit the positioning of gamers as socially inept and removed from normality. www.uncleclive.co.uk hosts a number of images including mock-up PlayStation 2 game art for 'Social contact simulator for gamers', for example. Sony, too, played upon the popular discourse in their early PlayStation TV and print advertising campaigns that presented S.A.P.S (Society Against PlayStation) as an organisation attempting to educate parents and potential purchasers to the dangers of exposure to gaming and in doing so clearly mocking and ridiculing the effects studies they would curiously come to implicitly endorse with their PS2 Emotion Engine strategies.

**FANS AS MEDIA PRODUCERS**
As both Jenkins [11] and Brooker [12] have noted, media fans are not merely consumers of media texts, no matter how avid or dedicated and considerable creativity and effort is expended on the creation of, for example, fan fiction, fan art and fan music. As such, videogames provide a focus for critical discussion, talk and textual production, thereby acting as a pivotal point in the social and cultural lives of many players. Fan websites such as www.nintendoland.com encourage the production of prose and poetry that embellishes and supports the characters and narratives of popular Nintendo game series including *Super Mario Bros*, *The Legend of Zelda* and *Metroid*. Two varieties of fan fiction ('fanfic') are available. The first follows a traditional format and centres on the embellishment and development of narrative themes introduced throughout the games, but the second is quite different. However, a subsite dedicated to the *Legend of Zelda* series also hosts a number of 'interactives'. Here, fanfics are presented as branching hypertexts. Some 'interactives' extend extant narratives, such as 'The Search for Koholint' which positions itself as the 'unofficial sequel to *Link's Awakening*' and all are highlly intertextual, often bringing together elements, actions, characters and locales from the various Zelda videogames and beyond. Yet, for all their novelty, the hypertextuality of the interactives is quite limited, and the 'interactivity' is frequently restricted to pressing the web browser's 'Back' button in order to reselect the *correct* option.

Just as with other areas of fan text production, the community judges the quality and value of contributions not only in terms of their own creativity and

invention but also in terms of their compatibility with the events, characters, situations and narratives already encoded with the 'canon'. Delineating the canon demands considerable investigation and intelligence on the part of the fan and is a matter of considerable analysis discussion boards. Interestingly, inclusion in the canon is often contingent on issues of production that are often invisible or at least not widely publicised to the player. The Sonic the Hedgehog canon, for example, does not encompass every official Sonic game release. Here, according to members on the 'Sonic the Hedgehog Area 51' board at least, it is not the presence of Sonic characters, situations or locales that define a title worthy of inclusion and, by inference, authentic and valuable, but rather it is the involvement of the originating developers Sonic Team. Responses to theorising about the Chaos Emeralds that appear throughout the Sonic series, that appeared on The Mobius Forum message board reveal much about the delineation of the canon.

> Tsk, tsk. Haven't you learned yet? Only games that Sonic Team developed count in the storyline. That is Sonic 1, Sonic CD (if you wonder why, it's because Ohshima directed it), Sonic 3, Sonic Adventure and Sonic Adventure 2.

> Also note, it was Sonic Team who had started development of Sonic R, but had left the programming duties to Traveller's Tales due to time constricitons (Yuji Naka was still producer mind you), so it "counts". In my mind, the only legitimate "non-Sonic Team" game was Sonic the Fighters. Though it was developed by AM2, Naka thought the idea was a hoot and was behind the project all the way. I don't think the same can be said about ANY other games.

> (Posted 31 March 2002)

Elsewhere in the analysis of the same issue, fans return to the 'original' sources (that is, the Japanese manuals that accompany the canonical games) for clarification thereby discarding even the official translations. Indeed there is an evident disregard for those involved in the localisation process whose lack of care in preserving the continuity and integrity of the canon as envisioned by the originators clearly aggravates fans. PR interviews indicating the age of Sonic in the various games proved particularly contentious prompting theories including time travelling so as to make the apparently incompatible ages of Sonic and the times elapsed between games marry. However, for some the source of the information rendered any apparent controversy inconsequential.

> Psh, this is a quote from a guy from Sega *Europe* ... They're even further out of the loop than SoA, and we all know how much stuff *they've* pulled out of their asses that doesn't correspond with Sonic Team. I wouldn't automatically assume this guy's words to be gospel just cuz he's on Sega's payroll. The guy who called Amy "Sally" in Sonic CD was an "official Sega person" too...

> Turner was probably exaggerating anyway. Either purposely making the difference 10 years to emphasise that it was Sonic's 10th anniversary, or just off-handedly calling him a "five-year-old" to suggest he was less mature back then, not literally five.

> Note that Sonic Jam (1997) explicitly states his age as 16. Yet according to this theory, Sonic's age changes between the three games on Jam (not to

mention he'd presumably be 11 in Sonic World?).

Nah, Sonic's always been portrayed as a teenager (even if they can't nail down the exact age...). No use changing that assumption based on an obscure quote from a PR guy in an old magazine
(Posted to The Mobius Forum, 9 April 2003)

Knowledge of and engagement with the processes of production goes deeper still than an awareness of the authorship and a, perhaps misplaced or overstated, notion of the involvement of individuals in development and design. Pre-release screenshots are scoured for indications of abandoned levels, characters or modifications of graphics. Moreover, for some more technically-savvy fans, the code of games reveals many palimpsests that may be able to shed some light on these pre-release directions. Within the released and therefore publicly available code, it is often possible to find the remnants of graphic designs that were sidelined or superseded. These are not secrets designed to be found by avid players or acolytes of the game and cannot be accessed via the game itself. Rather, these are simply materials that remain unused in the game but undeleted from the code and that may only be revealed by probing the code via PC for example. However, while the revelation of these palimpsests may represent a considerable technical achievement and is evidence of a dedication and interest in the very workings of the game not to mention an awareness of the processes of production, they do not always simply give up their heritage or neatly provide answers to fans' questions. It may be considered that this is precisely compatible with the fans' desires. The revelation of ambiguous graphic designs, for example, encourages deliberation and analysis as to what they may have been, how they might have been deployed, why they were unused. This, in turn, gives rise to a separate strand of fan writing: the 'theory'. Among fans of Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog series, fan writing may be differentiated in terms of its compatibility with and closeness to the canon. Theories that attempt to posit explanations for apparent inconsistencies in the games' narrative continuity are thus differentiated from 'fanfics' that are more fanciful and imaginative in their scope. The extract below taken from the 'Missing Sonic 2 Levels' webpage illustrates the technical savvy, inventiveness and rigorous research upon which such theories are often founded.

### Sonic 2 Time Travel Theory
So far, Sonic CD is the only Sonic game with a time travel feature. But as I recall, Sonic Team was going to put time travel into Sonic 2 too! So, they designed levels with TT in mind. Sources claim that each level was supposed to be set in a certain time period, however, that may be incorrect. I think I've found the proof Sonic 2 was going to feature a Sonic CD-type time travel (without the Past). Take a look at first five levels in Sonic 2 Beta…

I may be going too far, but- listen to the music. 01 certanly sounds like a Good Future remix of 00. And 03 sounds like a Bad Future. As for Wood Zone, it uses the same music as the *two* Metropolis Zones, but that's okay, they would remix it in a later date.

Talking about Wood Zone- its design and idea are pretty pointless; a forest with conveyor belts and hollow trees? But when you look at it differently (what a factory looked like in the past) then it makes sense.

And the hollow tree was going to be a warp tube from Metropolis- try jumping on it. You can't. You can't jump on warp pipes too! And speaking of Metropolis, why are there two Metropolis Zones? They are both Bad Future. One of them was supposed to be a Good Future, which is basicaly Bad Future with graphics changed. *Wait...something ain't right here...*I know. Wood Zone only has *two* acts, but Metropolis has *three* . This is the real proof. In Sonic CD, act three always goes on in the future. And, as far as I can think (not very far) 01 and 03 zones have act 3 too! So, depending on how you completed acts 1 and 2, act 3 was a good or bad future. [13]

**Filling the gaps**

The identification of inconsistencies in the narratives of the various texts that comprise the canon are seized upon by fans and provide an ideal focus for their creative and discursive activity. Keen not only to expose inconsistencies and thereby signal their intimate knowledge of the games, but also to explain and remedy them, fan producers go to considerable lengths. This appears in part motivated by a desire to imprint themselves upon the canon thereby becoming closer to the object of their fandom, but is also clearly directed by a desire to validate the vision of the Sonic Team and Yuji Naka in particular. To leave an inconsistency unchecked would be to admit the imperfection of the Sonic mythos. Theorising may thus be read as an attempt to maintain or restore perfection in the canon. In the example below, one fan producer attempts to justify the unexplained change in locale that occurs between two texts in the Sonic the Hedgehog canon. Specifically, the localized US conversion of *Sonic & Knuckles* (S3&K) was set on the planet 'Mobius', whereas its sequel *Sonic Adventure* (SA1) was set on Earth. Not content with merely posting a theory linking the two titles, this fan has produced their own game that allows players to explore and experience this narrative bridge.

> The plot of my fangame, "The end of the Millenium" , takes place in the time between S3&K and SA1. The just of the plotline is , In one quick boring summery, Mobius will expode at the end of the the millenium due to a 2000 year old curse from the echidnas. Tails finds out about this and they search for a planet that can sustain life, they find earth, they go there, start SA1 storyline. There a lot more to it then that but I'm not about to give away the whole plotline.
>
> (Posted to 'Sonic the Hedgehog Area 51', Feb. 8, 2002)

However, such theorizing rarely goes unchallenged and posters to the board rigorously interrogated the validity of the theory. In doing so, these fans demonstrate a remarkably thorough knowledge of the minutiae of the various Sonic titles.

> Good, except there's one problem: In the past scenes in SA you see that Angle Island was once connected to the jungle area of Mystic Ruins before it lifted into the air, so that kinda destroys the theory... =/
>
> (Posted to 'Sonic the Hedgehog Area 51', Feb. 11, 2002)

In reponse,

> I considered that. After it rises from the Mystic Ruins it floats out of

Earth and to Mobius.

It is possible - play Sonic3&Knuckles as Knuckles and beat it with all the Emeralds. If you watch carefully in the ending the Island floats up quite high, **almost** (but not quite) into space. The island is likely to have lots of energy surrounding it after it was created and that excess energy could have propelled into space and beyond.

Anyway I have found some evidence that both supports and discredits the interview. I will post it later today / tomorrow.

<div align="center">(Posted to Sonic the Hedgehog Area 51, Feb. 12, 2002)</div>

Further postings highlight the possibility of the apparent inconsistency as being a localisation issue. Here again the fans' awareness of the processes of production including translation of in- and out-game materials such as instruction manuals and backstories.

Might I point out that Naka-san is Japanese, and Sega has a way of translating things from Japanese to ENglish to suit their whims. (This isn't just Sega; any large corpration will change certain things like that) Naka may have said something different in relation to a planet name, and Sega may have simply used "Mobius" in its place.

<div align="center">(Posted to Sonic the Hedgehog Area 51, Feb. 12, 2002)</div>

**Fan art, character development and reappropriation**
Fan art takes a variety of forms and often involves relocating characters in new locales and applying different aesthetic treatments. While this is equivalent to the production of Star Trek fan art described by Jenkins, it must be noted that, given the 'virtual' nature of videogame characters, the potential for extratextual readings is limited as there is no 'real' actor with a parallel career or presence beyond this role. Similarly, this limits the videogame fan's collection of materials as there is no possibility of tracking a performer's career. However, a number of important parallels do exist in the videogame fan art displayed at 'NitendoLand.com' and that described by Jenkins. First, videogame fan art appears to provide a space in which women players can redefine characters. The re-presentation of the Super Mario series' Princess Peach as both musclebound or, most notably, as hybrid Peach-Xena Warrior Princess illustrates that fan art is one further channel through which resistance can flow. Second, like fanfic, fan art demonstrates intertextuality in its creation and encourages intertextual readings. Examples abound of assemblages of characters from various game series, or even hybridised versions of characters, crossing elements of Link with Pikachu, for example. Particularly notable is an untitled image submitted to www.nintendoland.com by Topaz that shows both Link and Mario in what is clearly Mario's 'world'. Link's caption 'Why do I have this strange feeling that I'm going to save the wrong princess' serves to neatly and ironically highlight the similarity of underlying objectives present in these two experientially different series.

Fan production also encompasses music and sites host MIDI files of painstakingly transcribed and re-performed videogame themes. Moreover, fans often remix their favourite tunes, extending them, modifying and repositioning their style and thereby melding their authorship with the original. In doing so,

the fan-musician like the fan artist or writer of fan fiction, further invests themselves in the text.

Perhaps most unexpected, however, is the production of fangames. While the user-creation of 'skins' or even levels is well-known and built into the off-the-shelf functionality of many First Person Shooters (FPS), the creation of an entire game built around, and extending, an extant franchise, is uncommon even in fandom. Will Wood's (aka The Ancient Zodiak) PC game 'The Legend of Zelda: The Grand Adventures' picks up and develops the narrative from the SNES title *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*.

> Although not an official title of the Zelda series, this fan created RPG has very much the spirit of a Zelda game. Created by The Ancient Zodiak, this game is being made for all the fans of the series to enjoy, and even take part in. A demo of this game was released in March, and along with the demo came a contest. The winner of the contest won both the admiration of having their design as the official title screen, and they got to be a character in the game. The winner of this contest was "Elvie". Another contest will open soon allowing 8 more people a chance to be in the game. This game is still in development and is estimated to release late 2002 – early 2003 [14]

**WALKTHROUGHS**

Commercially and fan-produced 'walkthroughs' further aid the player in their negotiations and dialogues with game spaces. Walkthroughs are texts outlining, in often-painstaking detail, the potentialities of the gameworld. More than commentaries on the game, walkthroughs serve at least three purposes. First, they frequently offer maps detailing the full extent of the gameworld including 'secret areas'. Second, they offer narrativised, egocentric accounts of the ways in which the player may tackle the game that present a relational space much like the pirate's treasure map (take ten paces forward, you will come to a rock, take three paces left…) that indicate the ways in which, for example, secret areas may be uncovered. Thirdly, the production of walkthroughs, as well as FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) and Glitch Lists (see below), represent a significant and visible mastery of the game and must be seen as existing at least in part to signal the position of the author as expert user. Walkthrough texts may then be seen as mechanisms by which players attempt to present the identities within the gaming community. Moreover, the discussion that they generate maintains the life and visbility of games long after they disappeared from publishers catalogues and retailers' shelves. In this way, the culture of discursive criticality and creative expansion and embellishment that surrounds, supports and emerges from walkthrough and FAQ production and use may be seen to counteract the tendency of the videogames industry to position its products as ephemeral. Where the industry and its marketers appear eager to point to the superiority of sequels and the 'next big thing' and the immediate obsolescence that new hardware and software releases engender, fan activity does much to sustain games, imbuing them with a greater degree of permanence and value. It is clear from the often extensive revision lists that typically preface fan-produced walkthrough texts that the production of such materials represents a considerable effort in time, creative and investigative energy. Even the briefest glance at the structure and layout of most walkthroughs speaks of the professionalism and seriousness with which the

task is undertaken by authors. The texts are usually split into a number of sections and invariably include explications and discussions of the backstory of the game at hand and/or its prequels (often reproduced from official documentation though perhaps with additional commentary); explanations of the available controls; reference lists of each enemy the player might encounter with their stats (including strengths, weaknesses, attack patterns, techniques for evasion or victory); reference lists of items, weapons, capabilities with associated strategic commentary.

Given the extensive work required to produce guides and walkthroughs, it will come as little surprise that the contents of the texts are carefully and jealously guarded by their authors. It follows that impassioned, often angered, diatribes and accusations clearly born of personal experience and relating to plagiarism and the elicit and uncountenanced reproduction of elements of walkthroughs by third parties in their own walkthroughs or fansites are a common sight. While plagiarism is a concern, competition is clearly a motivating factor.

> Hmmmm....I feel like updating agian!  I see CyricZ has a nice FAQ up now, more competition!  I like that!  I am determined to make this complete now!  I spotted on the message board we have two more coming to, one from flammable and one from MC Grammar, as well as Myst Erik Ery.  I better get workin'! [15]

Yet, for all this, walkthroughs are often collaborative exercises and in themselves serve to consolidate and even form alliances between fans and groups. Credits sections dutifully namecheck contributors and meticulously note the exact nature of their input whether this be guidance on a particular boss, or details on an alternative ending or conversation branch in a game. The collaborative nature is at the heart of the walkthrough. While they clearly represent labours of love for their principal authors or editors, they are usually replete with genuine requests for contributions from readers.

### Using walkthroughs

The implications of the use of walkthrough texts are considerable. Most obviously the integrity of puzzles, whether they be conceptual or spatial, must surely be undermined and the issue of cheating is clearly raised. Regrettably, space here does not permit a lengthy discussion of cheating, however, it is worth noting briefly that the application of the term is hugely problematic. The use of walkthroughs, or indeed what are frequently referred to within games themselves as 'cheat codes' or 'cheat modes' is not uniformly considered cheating among players. For some, the use of walkthroughs and their negation of puzzle-solving may defeat the object of the game (thereby revealing the variegated pleasures to be derived from a specific game). For others, the integrity of the game may be retained where walkthroughs are utilised only when the efforts of the player have been exhausted or thwarted. As such, it is important to note that, like the games to which they refer, walkthroughs are deployed in different ways by different players according to the game itself and player preferences. Moreover, it is necessary to differentiate texts such as walkthoughs or FAQs from ingame cheat modes (such as invincibility) according to their integration within the game itself. Thus, while the perhaps misnamed 'cheats' offered within the menu options of games such as Rare's *Conker's Bad Fur Day* for example, may directly interfere with the fabric or

functionality of the game, after all, a walkthrough may explain in vivid and lucid detail how a puzzle may be completed or a space traversed, the player must still perform the solution (see [17] below), their use is often not considered to represent cheating. Rather, infinite ammunition, health or the ability to walk though previously impenetrable walls, may be considered as alternate modes of play. In our study, walkthroughs, by virtue of their position 'outside' the game, are more frequently considered as material to facilitate cheating. These initial findings confirm our assertion that the complex notion of cheating in videogaming requires considerable further study. However, walkthrough authors are sensitive to this and structure their texts so as to enable flexibility of use. Sections containing 'Spoilers' that may reveal, for example, unexpected twists of the game's narrative, are often separated or at least marked out from the body of the text. Furthermore, some authors provide instructions or user guides for their walkthroughs that demonstrate how different players, operating in different contexts, with different objectives and seeking to derive different pleasures from engagement with the game might use their walkthrough.

> You still have to be aware of a few things though, so you don't get confused by the layout of this immense file.
>
> ** I think it is especially important if you have never beaten the game to not read the spoiler section. If you've never completed it then it would be in your best interest not to look at this section.
> ** If you're having trouble with anything, only look at the section that refers to what you're having trouble with. This isn't meant to be read through in one sitting (unless you're analyzing this whole document waiting for me to slip up somewhere along the line). [16]

While the variegated use of walkthroughs certainly demands further study, our initial research suggests that for many players, the walkthrough allows them to engage with the game on terms that suit their predilections and preferences. For many players, for example, the use of walkthroughs appears to signal a privileging of performance over puzzling. It must be remembered that, for many games, there is considerable latitude for success or failure even once the objective or puzzle solution is known. Even armed with the knowledge as to how to tackle a given *Super Mario Sunshine* or *Pikmin* stage, it is perfectly possible, indeed highly likely, that success will not be immediate.

However, an essential and frequently overlooked aspect of walkthroughs does not concern simple 'completion' or the subsuming of puzzling. Walkthroughs, and here their name is somewhat misleading, usually dedicate only part, and often a small part, of their pages to 'walkthroughs' per se. That is, the walkthrough (the step-by-step journey through the game) is but one of a number of sub-sections in the typical walkthrough text. Walkthroughs are written by and for players who not only wish to complete a game, but players who want to know a game. More than this, players who wish to know every conceivable aspect, feature, affordance, and indeed, glitch and inconsistency of a game. As such, walkthrough texts may be used by players who have already played through the game to 'completion' and wish to revisit and explore every last pixel of the gameworld, gather every last object, talk to every last non-playable character (NPC), experience each branch of the game narrative. In this way, walkthroughs encourage almost obsessive play and

scrutiny of the game and outline the most minute and, to the non-adept at least, apparently trivial details such as variations in NPC responses. These are documented with the same fastidiousness even though they, in many cases, do not alter the course of the game's narrative *per se*. Even where options are presented to the player that elicit different conversations yet do not alter the narrative outcome which continues irrespective of one's response to apparently binary oppositions, (ie the game may proceed in exactly the same way whether we choose to help an NPC or not), the walkthrough seeks to document and explain their operation.

**PLAYING (WITH) THE GAME**
In addition to descriptions, maps, tactics and strategies, walkthrough texts are a valuable source of player-derived rules to be overlaid onto the simulation. In this way, walkthroughs encourage the consideration of the manipulability of videogames. We are keen to explore the potential for games as material for play rather than necessarily restrictive, rule-bound structures that push gamers down prescribed paths. While we might be used to thinking about games like *The Sims* in these terms, we are perhaps less familiar with the open-endedness and flexibility of racing games like *Gran Turismo* or *Ridge Racer*, for example. While the ostensible objective may be to complete laps in as speedy a time as possible we have observed players in the field encouraging each other to try to complete the greatest number of 'doughnuts' (full 360 degree spins) along the home straight, or to drive for as far as possible the wrong way around the track avoiding oncoming traffic. Similarly, fans of *Halo* will no doubt be familiar with the dubious pleasures of triggering huge grenade-induced explosions in order to jettison the Warthog transport craft as far into the air as possible.

FAQs and walkthroughs for Nintendo's GameCube *Pikmin* illustrate the imposition of new game modes and the operation of the community of players in defining new challenges. Where the instructions encoded in the game require the player to collect the various, scattered parts of their spaceship so as to blast off home within the 30 days that the game lasts, players have sought to heighten the challenge and increase the replay value and longevity of their game by limiting the use of certain objects and capabilities in the game (for example, tackling the game without one of the three varieties of Pikmin); by focusing on attainment of high scores (rendering completion of the game insignificant or merely a given); or by restricting the time limit yet further as with the '9-day challenge'.

> First off, this is not a normal Pikmin Walkthrough. If you're looking for a guide to beat the game normally, go somewhere else. This walkthrough is to help you beat the Pikmin 9 Day Challenge, a task originally devised by SnapDragon. The task is simple; collect all 30 of Captain Olimar's rocket ship parts in a mere 9 days. Sounds impossible? Then read on... but remember, even with a strat, this is quite a task, so don't attempt it unless you've beaten the game at least once. [17]

An associated activity that similarly plays *with* the game and attempts to seek out alternative pleasures is the search for glitches. The term 'glitches' is something of a catch-all and is variously used in videogame culture to refer to audio-visual imperfections (graphics drawing incorrectly or audio breaking up), gameplay anomalies (the ability to get stuck in certain looping

sequences), or even narrative inconsistencies (continuity errors either within titles or across series). However the term is deployed within a specific group, it is common to distinguish further between 'game-threatening' and 'harmless' glitches. Where exploiting a harmless glitch might allow you to disrupt the boat graphics in Pokémon Ruby/Sapphire's Slateport City without affecting your game, more serious glitches may crash the game, overwrite your saved progress or render your saved game state unusable. The search for and exploitation of glitches, imperfections in the code or its execution, is further evidence of the willingness of some players to not only play games but play with them, and in these cases, play with at the very boundary of their operation. It confirms also the desire to explore games in immense, precise detail and to find explanations and patterns in the behaviour exhibited by the game's simulation model, even when this behaviour is aberrant and unexpected. For the avid fan, then, the videogame is not simply a static text to be read or decoded, nor is it even merely an experience to be had, a world to be and exist in, or a journey to travel. Through conversation, analysis and discussion, the game is refigured as a living, dynamic entity revealing new secrets as it is continually probed, investigated and played and capable of being probed, investigated and played in new ways as it is placed in new critical and ludic contexts.

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Note: due to the nature of the topics under discussion (modifying copyrighted game code, for example), the authors have anonymised contributions to messageboards. Postings are reproduced with the original colloquial conventions and (un)intentional spelling errors.

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