

Banal, boring, or bad: Studying the understudied in game studies

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INTRODUCTION

Game studies researchers elevate and then scrutinize games in ways that most everyday players do not. We write about fan created full length walkthroughs (Consalvo, 2007), speedrunners who spend hours practicing their moves on a single screen (Scully-Blaker, 2014), total conversion mods (Sotamaa, 2010), and the activities of high-level guilds and raiders (Chen, 2012). Yet these are the special actors, the long tail of players: the ones with talent, time, money, and dedication, which game studies then treats as the norm.

In contrast, the majority of games (with an ending) are never played through to completion, or even very far, if they are played at all. Paul Tassi laments regarding Rockstar Games' acclaimed *Red Dead Redemption 2*, "PSN and Xbox trophy data actually puts RDR2 completion at ~20% ... a far cry from even the majority of players seeing the ending" (Tassi, 2018). While some evidence does point to outliers - Treese (2019) reports completion of *Detroit: Become Human* at 61.7% and *Marvel's Spider Man* at 50.3%, there are still large numbers of games never completed. Even worse, "about 37 percent of the roughly 781 million games registered to various Steam accounts haven't even been loaded a single time" (Orland, 2014). On mobile platforms, things are even more dire. According to Valdellon, the average app store page conversion rate for games (i.e. "how many people install an app after landing on your app store page") is 3.5%, and "most mobile apps have a 1-2% average conversion rate." (2018).

This paper embraces rather than ignores such data, examining the banal, the overlooked, the bad, and the failed in and around games. It offers an intervention for game studies, a challenge to stop ignoring the ocean of mediocre content and half-hearted players. It argues that this is exactly the content and the individuals that **are** the

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

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heart of what games and play mean for us today, and how such activities, actions, and content help us understand digital life more broadly.

THEORY AND METHODS

To do so it draws from sociological and cultural studies theories, including Henry Lefebvre and Rachel Levich's work on the everyday and the banal (Lefebvre and Levich, 1987), Meagan Morris's theorization of banality (1988) and Raymond Williams's discussions of culture as ordinary (1981). More specifically we use Bergstrom et al's concept of "digital detritus" to better understand gameplay (Bergstrom, de Castell & Jenson, 2016). Importantly, they argue that "studying 'virtual abandonment' ... provides a productive new approach to studying players that exceeds and contextualizes observation of in-game active play" (p. 2). Their work and ours also builds on ideas developed via the method of "trace ethnography." Trace ethnography considers "transaction logs, version histories, institutional records, conversation transcripts, and source code" as valuable data that can allow researchers "rich qualitative insight into the interactions of users, allowing us to retroactively reconstruct specific actions at a fine level of granularity" (Geiger and Ribes, 2011, p. 1). Our paper analyzes a variety of "digital detritus," including abandoned Twitch channels, player-created mods that were never downloaded, and a professionally created FPS map seemingly so terrible that players started a petition to have it removed from the game.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

The turnover of live streamers on Twitch is unknown, yet even a cursory look at one's favorited channels will reveal at least a few streamers that have quit, either permanently or for an extended period of time. Yet their channels remain, including other social media links, rules and 'about me' information, and sometimes VODs of their last broadcasts. By examining the remnants of their past activities (here we investigate at least 10 such channels), we can compare the activities of the 'failures' of streaming against the 'successes' that are more often studied and popularized to determine which – if any – differences there are (Johnson and Woodcock, 2018; Taylor, 2018).

Mods have been written about extensively in game studies, including how they extend the life of games and reshape them in innovative ways. But for that to happen they must be used – what about mods that never make it off the shelf? The site NexusMods lists more than 56,000 mods for *Skyrim*, with the most popular boasting millions of downloads. Yet at the end of the list, dozens of mods with zero downloads sit in obscurity. What is in these mods? Who made them? Some offer discussion postings about them, revealing some clues. We examine a dozen of the least downloaded mods to determine their content and to situate them within participatory and modding culture alongside their more downloaded peers.

Finally, first person shooters offer another window into forms of failure that are not widely examined. While there is substantial research on FPS flow and successful level design (Nacke and Lindley, 2008), failure cases are typically less deeply examined. A recent example is the 'Picadilly' map in *Call of Duty*, which is derided by players as 'The worst FPS map ever made' on Reddit and other fan sites (Moralxsupport 2019, Fail Train 2019, eyeQ#2055124 2019), even spawning a Change.org petition for its removal (Change.org, 2019). Interestingly, the 'failure' of this map has also spawned criticism by professional players, as exemplified by Nadeshot (Macintyre, 2019). By examining failure cases brought forward through a myriad of means by the player community, these can be compared and contrasted against more successful designs and traditional research examination.

CONCLUSION

These three points of entry are brief examinations of how studying abandoned streams, average failures, and unused mods can teach us more about games, their design, and their players. Too often we only examine the major successes, or occasionally a spectacular failure, while the vast middle ground goes unexplored. We argue this leaves significant gaps within our understanding of what game culture is, and how we understand what players are doing with games. The failed, the bad and the boring reveal more about how we play and understand games than the feted, and they are here examined in depth.

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