

# Fame or Infamy: The Influence of Let's Plays on Independent Game Developers

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## INTRODUCTION

The use of Let's Plays as paratexts in the context of academic research has been on the rise for quite some time.<sup>1</sup> Let's Plays are a peculiar type of paratexts that can be used not only in the research regarding the player reception but also in the study of the mechanisms of offering feedback to game creators,<sup>2</sup> as well as in the research concerning the relationship between the developers of independent games and the community of players<sup>3</sup>—and, by extension, with the community of the Let's Players. Let's Plays as paratexts can be treated as an opportunity for the researcher to observe how different

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- 1 Burwell, Catherine/Miller, Thomas: "Let's Play: Exploring Literacy Practices in an Emerging Videogame Paratext," in: *E-Learning and Digital Media* 13, no. 3-4 (2016), pp. 109-125; Mukherjee, Souvik: *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015; Enevold, Jessica/MacCallum-Stewart, Esther (eds.): *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015.
  - 2 Marak, Katarzyna/Markocki, Miłosz: *Aspekty funkcjonowania gier cyfrowych we współczesnej kulturze: studia przypadków*, Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press 2016.
  - 3 Adams, Tyrone L./Smith, Stephen A.: *Electronic Tribes: The Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2008.

people play the game and what skills, strategies, and interpretations of content the players choose.<sup>4</sup> This article focuses on the fairly underacknowledged function that Let's Plays can perform in the interaction between the players and game developers, specifically indie games developers. The goal of the text is to demonstrate a peculiar interaction sometimes occurring between independent game developers and players, which scholars can observe by analyzing the distinct paratexts that are Let's Plays. The text will, in closer detail, highlight this phenomenon through case studies: two examples of communication between one particular Let's Player and two indie game developers—with two different results. Many people view Let's Plays not only as recordings of game sessions but also as “exhibitions of optimal play strategy and demonstration of extreme skill and knowledge of a particular game.”<sup>5</sup>

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT LET'S PLAYS AND INDEPENDENT GAMES

Let's Play videos are a particular example of paratextual texts<sup>6</sup> as they can serve many more different functions than purely archival ones.<sup>7</sup> Their affordances stem primarily from the characteristics of digital games as a medium. In comparison to literary texts, games, specifically independent titles, are not fixed in their nature—which means that they can permanently be changed by their developers, even after their publication. This characteristic feature of independent digital games allows for a more critical approach of their audience during the process of consuming (playing) them than in the case of other independent media (e.g., film or music). For this reason, the

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4 Newman, James: *Videogames*, London/New York: Routledge 2013; Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin/Zeiler, Xenia: “Methods for Analyzing Let's Plays: Context Analysis for Gaming Videos on YouTube,” in: *Gamevironments*, 2 (2016), pp. 100-139.

5 Flynn-Jones, E.: “Bad Romance: For the Love of ‘Bad’ Videogame”, In: Enevold, Jessica/MacCallum-Stewart, Esther (eds.), *Game Love: Essays on play and affection*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015, p. 260.

6 S. Mukherjee: *Video Games and Storytelling*, p. 113.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

nature, and sometimes also the goal, of a Let's Play can be more critical—focusing on interesting and exciting or distracting and irritating aspects of the game mechanics or the gameplay instead of on what the game is about and how one can play it. In this context, it is also worth noting that digital games scholars already highlighted the difference in playstyle when people play the game “just for fun” and when they play it critically.<sup>8</sup> These differences can naturally apply to Let's Plays, as they are recordings of people playing games. In consequence, the nature and style of the video might reflect a critical playstyle and the goal of making the video. That way, the videos of people focusing just on experiencing the game as it is will differ, sometimes dramatically, from the recordings made by people who try to make their Let's Plays more about ‘testing’ the game or even pushing the limits of a specific title.<sup>9</sup>

The creation of Let's Plays that are critical playthroughs of games is naturally more prominent in the scene of independent games as there is a real possibility of communication with game developers. It is more probable that game creators may actually watch the Let's Play video than in the case of AAA titles. However, the use and analysis of Let's Plays in academic research touch upon one more specific problem. Gathering knowledge and data by watching how other people play a game is a mediated method of research that raises questions of authenticity and normality—whether Let's Play videos can be treated as authentic experiences representative of typical or ‘regular’ players.

The games discussed in this paper are independent digital games that continue to generate widespread interest among both players and academic scholars. Some researchers will compare independent games to independent movies in the context of mainstream culture.<sup>10</sup> However, more than the ‘radical other,’ independent games tend to represent a certain kind of expansion of the developers’ (who are, after all, players) imagination and creativity. Oftentimes, the more famous or influential independent games such as *HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE* (2017), *CONTROL* (2019), or *OBSERVER*

8 Fernández-Vara, Clara: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, Routledge 2015, p. 26.

9 K. Radde-Antweiler, X. Zeiler: “Methods for Analyzing Let's Plays,” p. 100-139.

10 Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas: “Innovation NOT Opposition: The Logic of Distinction of Independent Games,” in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2 (2008), p. 5-10.

(2017) are placed in opposition to other titles of the mainstream game industry concerning inventiveness or creativity.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the more pressing issue is to focus on what constitutes actual ‘independence.’

In the context of digital games, the term ‘independent’ has been defined differently by various scholars. Many of those definitions refer to at least three aspects of ‘independence’ in developing a digital game. According to Maria Garda and Paweł Grabarczyk, the first aspect is financial independence:<sup>12</sup> In the case of independent games, the developer is also the investor, so there are no potential outside financial constraints on the creative process. The second aspect Garda and Grabarczyk list is creative independence, which is most visible in the relationship between the developer and the audience<sup>13</sup>—by not having to live up to specific expectations, the independent developer does not experience the same pressure to fulfill the hopes of the audience. The third discussed aspect is publishing<sup>14</sup>—independent game developers are also publishers of their game, so they do not have to negotiate what type of game a publishing company would prefer to publish. In many cases, independent game developers have all three types of independence or a combination of them<sup>15</sup>—e.g., they may have the creative and publishing independence but not the financial one if they finance their project by a Kickstarter campaign.

Various scholars have debated the issue of individual authorship, co-authorship, and multiplicity of authorship with regard to digital games.<sup>16</sup> However, this is not the primary focus of this text. There are numerous ways in which the players can create new content or share existing content with other

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11 Ibid.

12 Garda, Maria B./Grabarczyk, Paweł: “Is Every Indie Game Independent? Towards the Concept of Independent Game,” in: *Game Studies*, 16 (2016), <http://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/gardagrabarczyk>

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Jennings, Stephanie C.: “Co-Creation and the Distributed Authorship of Video Games,” in: Valentine, Keri D./Jensen, Lucas J. (eds.), *Examining the Evolution of Gaming and Its Impact on Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives*, Hershey, Pennsylvania: IGI Global, 2016, pp. 125-127.

players. Player-generated mods are the most popular way to achieve this.<sup>17</sup> With mods, players communicate very directly to developers what they want from their games and what the games might lack.

The characteristics of independent games discussed before illustrate how Let's Plays of independent games can be treated as a proper communication channel between players and game developers. While the game modifications (mods) can be treated as instances of meta-interactivity where "the communication between players and the developers is clear,"<sup>18</sup> Let's Plays offer the players a simple way to address the game developers directly and express their opinions, problems, and grievances with the game.

## SELECTED CASE STUDIES

This paper focuses on how Let's Play videos can shape the status of certain independent developers in the indie game community, specifically on the Steam platform. The aim is to demonstrate how Let's Play videos can—or cannot—influence the craft and work of developers of independent games as well as their status in the community of players. These points will be explored through the analysis of Let's Play videos. The selected games were created by two independent game developers working under the names of Vidas Salavejus and GDNomad. I chose these two specifically because of their initial status among indie developers publishing on Steam. At the beginning of their careers, they were both infamous as authors of highly popular but low-quality independent games.

The Let's Player selected is John Wolfe, an adult American male. He has been active on YouTube since 2011. His channel was known as "HarshlyCritical" until 2017, when Wolfe rebranded the entirety of his social media persona with his given name—"John Wolfe." Since the beginning, he has specialized in horror games, especially independent horror games. What is particularly interesting and worth mentioning about John Wolfe is the fact that he managed to maintain a constant presence on YouTube even though his channel remained strictly a Let's Play channel devoted only to one genre of games—except for few rare videos concerning events from his real-life

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17 Ibid, p. 128.

18 Ibid.

that influenced his channel in some way, e.g., a vlog explaining why he decided to change the channel's name. The longevity of his channel and the fact that he has been mostly uploading Let's Plays of horror games instead of uploading Let's Plays of the most popular games at any particular time—a common practice of many Let's Play channels meant to increase the number of views and likes on the channel—results in his audience regarding his comments as honest and his critique of the games he plays as authentic.

John Wolfe has also created and uploaded numerous Let's Play videos of GDNomad's and Vidas Salavejus' games, among them all titles that will be discussed in this text. Furthermore, despite not being a game scholar, his videos show a high level of critical thinking. Games made by GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus were also played by numerous other Let's Players, such as MrKravin, Markiplier, or CJUGames—whose videos are available on YouTube. However, I wanted to focus on one Let's Player to preserve the cohesion of narration concerning both developers. I think that choosing one Let's Player will more aptly depict how paratexts (in this case, Let's Play videos) can influence authors of the original texts (in this case, independent game developers) in their later work. Wolfe seemed particularly suitable as he openly comments on various problems of the given game during his play-throughs but turns his observations into constructive criticism at the end of his videos, in the hopes of helping the developer (in this case GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus) to make better games in the future.

Within the scope of this text, it is impossible to analyze every game made by both developers, as well as every video made on them by John Wolfe. That is why I decided to concentrate on six games, three by each developer. The main reason for selecting those specific titles is linked to John Wolfe's feedback after playing them: I chose games that Wolfe played critically and for which he offered constructive criticism afterward. Thus, the selected examples should allow recognizing changes, or lack thereof, in the quality of the developer's subsequent games, as well as change, or lack thereof, in Wolfe's opinion about GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus as game developers.

I also chose these six games because Wolfe's critique of them, in the most accurate manner, emphasizes the differences between GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus as game developers, mainly in their approach to communicate with players and Let's Player's. To be more specific, the primary distinction between GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus discussed in this paper is their

(un)willingness to listen to and take into account any negative feedback or criticism made about their games.

## The Case of Vidas Salavejus

The independent game developer Vidas Salavejus is the creator of the TIMORE series, GENTLE MOON series, A DREAM FOR AARON, NECRO IMMORTALLIS, DIA, BALAVQUR, SOLUMCESS, and several other games. In this paper, I will analyze TIMORE, TIMORE INFERNO and DIA, because they clearly illustrate the evolution of Vidas Salavejus as a game creator and developer.

The first video made by John Wolfe was *TIMORE—Repetitive Jumpscare Simulator* (2014), a Let's Play of the game TIMORE (2014). The description of the game provided by its creator Vidas Salavejus reads:

“Horror game, made with Unity 4 engine. Game is finished, but i will add more level later. It is a game where you search for keys and open doors, run away from ‘enemies’, but sometimes you could choose the wrong way and you just got to face your fate.”<sup>19</sup>

In the game, the player basically walks around a single location, going from room to room searching for keys to open various doors that block the way to further rooms. A random mannequin will spawn from time to time—an event accompanied by a loud noise that is meant to startle the player. The game mechanics are extremely basic.

TIMORE relies primarily on one trick, which was very common in low-quality, short indie horror games from that period (ca. 2013-2015): the jump scare, which is meant to create the ‘horror.’<sup>20</sup> The startling effect induced by this trick is brought about in TIMORE by unpredictable visual and auditory cues in lieu of genuinely scary events.<sup>21</sup> The main problem of TIMORE is that

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19 All the descriptions quoted in this paper are given with no changes regarding spelling or grammar. The description can also be seen in Wolfe’s video: John Wolfe: *TIMORE—Repetitive Jumpscare Simulator*, August 29, 2014; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPHKEF71384>

20 K. Marak/M. Markocki: *Aspekty funkcjonowania gier cyfrowych we współczesnej kulturze: studia przypadków*, pp. 94-116.

21 Perron, Bernard: *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study In Videoludic Horror*, New York: Bloomsbury Academy 2018, p. 115.

the startle effect induced by the mannequins is virtually the only tool used in the game to scare the player. If the developer uses only one trick repeatedly, it quickly ceases to be scary and becomes redundant and boring, and players cannot be bored and scared at the same time. The problems of the game design based on only one type of jump scare are evident and are summarized aptly in a relatively short comment by John Wolfe at the end of his Let's Play of *TIMORE*:

“What did I just play? I can't believe that. Ah. That was worse than I ever thought it could be. It's gotta be intentional. Oh my god. I need to take my headphones off, for like a year, after playing that.”<sup>22</sup>

The comment about the headphones is a direct reference to the overuse of the auditory jump scare trick. Loud sounds accompanied both the spawning and the movement of the mannequins in *TIMORE*. The tremendous difference in volume between regular diegetic sounds in the game and the extradiegetic ‘scare sound’ is very uncomfortable to the player's ears. This opinion reflects many of the players' initial ideas about Vidas Salavejus' games and his initial status as a designer of bad games. The most direct comment showing Wolfe's thoughts about the game's quality is the part concerning intentionality. It indicates that the Let's Player is more inclined to assume that a game designer would make a game bad on purpose than believe that the best intentions and skills could result in such a low-quality product.

Nonetheless, John Wolfe continued to follow the career of Vidas Salavejus. The next Let's Play recording that I will analyze is *TIMORE INFERNO—The Reddest Game of 2016*, a playthrough of *TIMORE INFERNO* (2016). On Steam, the game is advertised in the following way:

“*TIMORE INFERNO* is the 4<sup>th</sup> indie horror game in the *TIMORE* series. Strange visitors have come to a little girl's house, robbing her home and killing everyone inside... Except her. With dolls holding the anger of her loss, everyone who tries to go there and investigate what happened wind up missing. *TIMORE INFERNO* is a horror

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22 The transcripts of Wolfe's comments are left unedited in order to document his lack of words for some of the things he experienced: John Wolfe: *TIMORE—Repetitive Jumpscare Simulator*, August 29, 2014; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPHKEF7I384>

experience through the hell of a little girl's mind. The player meets a helper who gives advice on how to stay alive, but it is ultimately up to you to decide whether to take it or not."<sup>23</sup>

This game is primarily a walking simulator, in which the player explores various locations—supposedly parts of hell. The player can move to another location only by triggering scripted events, which can be achieved by performing specific actions or reaching a specific place. The game resembles the previous installments in the series in many ways—mainly the heavy use of jump scares—but also adds new mechanics. *TIMORE INFERNO* is the first game made by Vidas Salavejus in which he employed the fighting mechanic. This way, he considerably increased the possibilities of what players can do when confronted with an enemy—in the previous games, they could only run away, but in *TIMORE INFERNO* they can either run away or fight. Even if significant from the perspective of available game mechanics, this change does not influence the players' overall opinion of the game. As John Wolfe points out in his comment at the end of his Let's Play video:

"It was about twenty-five minutes long and was five bucks. Ok, uhm... I will say this—it's better than the other three. We're talking like a difference between two out of ten and four out of ten. (...) Yeah, ehh, I mean, at least it has combat in it, I guess, but not worth five dollars at all. So, I guess at this point, we can probably assume that there will be a *TIMORE 5*, and I'm guessing that they really liked the five-dollars-at-Itch.io model compared to the free-on-GameJolt model. And it's going to set a precedence for the future, unfortunately. I just want to say these games are terribly below average. Like just, I already said my piece about *TIMORE*, *NOX TIMORE*, and *TIMORE AVARITIA*. But just, there is very minimal, marginal improvement in them, I would say. I think this is the best one, as I said. But there's just so much better stuff out there, guys."<sup>24</sup>

Apart from Wolfe's general opinion about the game, this comment highlights two important aspects regarding Vidas Salavejus as an independent game

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23 Salavejus, Vidas: *TIMORE INFERNO* (June 1, 2016); [https://store.steampowered.com/app/486360/Timore\\_Inferno/?l=english](https://store.steampowered.com/app/486360/Timore_Inferno/?l=english)

24 John Wolfe: *TIMORE INFERNO—The Reddest Game of 2016*, May 30, 2016; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_ryc-5Pt9I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_ryc-5Pt9I)

designer and publisher. The first is Wolfe's acknowledgment that Vidas Salavejus' games are becoming better—even if only slightly—and he improves as a game designer. The second aspect concerns the fact that Vidas Salavejus decided to publish *TIMORE INFERNO* on a commercial platform: “There is some improvement in Vidas Salavejus' work, and *Timore Inferno* is better than any of the previous games, but the improvement is too small to justify making it a paid product.”

The last game by Vidas Salavejus that I will analyze is *DIA* (2019). The game is at its core a walking simulator, but what is most interesting about this game in the context of this text is its description on Vidas Salavejus homepage:

“*DIA* is a short free indie horror game. There is nothing scary ahead. No sudden noises. No flashing images. No one will follow you. Welcome to *DIA*. #horror.”<sup>25</sup>

This short description is proof that Vidas listens to the comments of players and Let's Players about his games, as in it, he addresses the elements most criticized—particularly the overuse of jump scares. It is also a clever, slightly ironic description of a horror game. The game itself is a very short walking simulator in which players walk around an empty town, equipped with a walkie-talkie. A female voice guides them to the town's center, where they can allegedly hide from some kind of monster roaming the streets. Once players reach the final location, they discover that they have been tricked.

The most striking proof of the influence that the Let's Player John Wolfe had on the indie developer Vidas Salavejus is at the end of the game *DIA*, where players can see a message saying: “I'm not done with you yet... John Wolfe,” repeated nine times.<sup>26</sup> This reference evidently took Wolfe by surprise, considering his reaction and his comments at the end of the first segment from the Let's Play video *7 RANDOM HORROR GAMES*, which is devoted to *DIA*:

“How does it know my name? No, actually, because... Normally for this type of thing, they would be like: ‘I'm done with you, WolfPC or John.’ ‘cause it is associated with

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25 Salavejus, Vidas: *DIA*; <https://vidas-salavejus.itch.io/dia>

26 John Wolfe: *7 RANDOM HORROR GAMES*, May 30, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kltmhI7Dvfo>

my computer, right. Interesting. Well, that was enjoyable, cool little free game, liked it a lot. Did you like it? Did you think it was a cool interesting concept for a free game? Well, guess what! It was made by the TIMORE developer! Ooooooh, you did not see that coming. HA! Not that I don't think you should. I think you should. But it is just some of you guys in the comments are really hung up on certain things. So hopefully, that opened your mind a little bit, is what I'm saying. Cool. I enjoyed it. (...) Alright, guys. Well, cool game."<sup>27</sup>

It is clear in this comment that John Wolfe has a much higher opinion of this game than any previous games developed by Vidas Salavejus. His reaction also demonstrates that Wolfe believed—maybe not at the beginning in 2014, but at least for some time—that Vidas has the potential to make good games, or at least much better games than TIMORE. Notably, when he starts playing the game, he does not introduce it as one of the Vidas Salavejus' games—he decides to reveal it only at the end of the segment.

The message at the end of the game—customized for John Wolfe (and a few other Let's Players)—is also proof that Vidas Salavejus not only watched Wolfe's Let's Plays of his games but also, as a game developer, took Wolfe's (and other Let's Players) constructive criticism to improve his work. There is no way to determine the degree to which John Wolfe's Let's Plays influenced Vidas Salavejus. The only thing that can be said for sure is that Vidas Salavejus seems to respect Wolfe's opinions about his games enough to signal to John that he can design and create better games. The message at the end of the game can also be interpreted as a sign that Vidas Salavejus treats Let's Players' critique, including John Wolfe's, as a valid reference point for the quality of his games.

In summary, the case of Vidas Salavejus' games and John Wolfe's Let's Play videos about them can be regarded as an example of paratexts influencing the creator of the original text. The fact that the latest games made by Vidas Salavejus are considered by many players and Let's Players as good quality games and that they welcome the release of his new games (such as BALAVQUR and SOLUMCESS), can serve as a testimony to the potential power of Let's Plays to influence game developers. It can also serve as an example of independent game developers transforming their initial infamy into real

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27 Ibid.

fame through hard work and improvements, thereby becoming more recognizable within the indie horror games scene.

### The Case of GDNomad

The next case I want to discuss is the independent game developer GDNomad, who made games such as *MY BONES*, *VERGE: LOST CHAPTER*, *WHITE MIRROR*, *THE LOST SOULS*, *WOODEN HOUSE*, *AUTUMN DREAM*, *DARK EGYPT*, and *ONE WISH*—all available on Steam to buy. In this paper, only *MY BONES*, *WHITE MIRROR* and *AUTUMN DREAM* will be analyzed. GDNomad—just like Vidas Salavejus—initially gained infamy as someone who creates only low-quality indie games. The first game he published on Steam was *MY BONES* (2015)—a walking simulator type of game. Its description already forebodes one of its most serious problems and one of the most criticized aspects:

“It is a short but very interesting horror, about a man who woke up in his own grave, next to his family. In the past, he was a very bad man, he is confused and cannot make a choice between good and evil. Our goal is to help the protagonist to make a choice between good and evil. Only you will be able to choose good or evil, and only you can decide his fate. The game have multiple endings, or rather two, good and bad. The ending in the game will depend on your actions.”<sup>28</sup>

The evident linguistic errors in the description are only the proverbial tip of the iceberg concerning the quality of the English translation in the notes and assets that players encounter in the game. When John Wolfe made a Let’s Play video of *MY BONES*, the problems with unintelligible English constituted the center of his criticism. At the end of the *MY BONES—Both Endings, Like Comment Subscribe* video, he has the following to say:

“Just a bad game. Like, there are lot of really obvious quality assurance issues. I mean, everything... I mean, if you are going— I assume this game was translated because if not, it’s just egregious grammar failure. But if it is, you know, if you are getting your games translated into a language you cannot speak or write well, then you should have

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28 GDNomad: *MY BONES* (August 3, 2015); [https://store.steampowered.com/app/389700/My\\_Bones/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/389700/My_Bones/)

someone do it for you. Especially if you are going to have your game for sale on Steam for two dollars. Even if it is only for two dollars. It's on sale. Like, it is a product; it should be polished and professionally made. You should pay attention to basic quality assurance. I mean, I feel like I have been saying that phrase a lot, but I mean... Just everything from the uncapitalized I's, to the misspelled words, to the typeface choices—I mean, it's all about quality assurance, and that's where the game fails. Not even to mention the fact that it is basically a key hunt with little to no story behind it. It's another thing that it would really benefit from some proofreading or proper translation or whatever the problem is with communication issues in this game. It's an incoherent story. I'm not even sure what just happened. And even if I do understand it, it might not be that compelling. You know, I mean, it's not just enough to have a well-polished game. You have to have something that's compelling, that's—you know—that's interesting. And I feel like this is kind of same, you know, type of game that we've seen over and over again. Where, you know, 'I've sinned, and now I have to suffer through my purgatorial guilt, until I can be redeemed in the end.' It's a story of redemption we have seen time and time again anyway."<sup>29</sup>

This comment clearly shows the numerous issues Wolfe sees in this game. But one prominent—that differentiates GDNomad's games from Vidas Salavejus' games—concerns the game's English. Regarding the linguistic problems, the only factual information that can be found on GDNomad is that his native language is Russian and that his English is not on a high level. Considering this, together with the evident lack of proofreading, it is no wonder that his game is challenging to play, as it is not easy to progress through the game if the players cannot follow the narrative design. The issue of language, or rather the lack of comprehensive English in the game, is the main point of Wolfe's critique of *MY BONES*. Apart from that, he also comments about the game mechanics, visual design, and narrative. In this way, his review is similar to the one about Vidas Salavejus' first game. Worthy of note is that all of Wolfe's Let's Plays of GDNomad's games, as well as Vidas Salavejus' games, have been created and uploaded within a few weeks or months of their release dates, which means Wolfe's perspective on aesthetics and design was accurate and up to date.

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29 John Wolfe: *MY BONES—Both Endings, Like Comment Subscribe*, August 5, 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPEQtII2YHM>

GDNomad published quite an impressive number of games on Steam. However, some of the problems pointed out in Wolfe's Let's Play of the first game re-appeared in other games by GDNomad. The most striking of the issues—the linguistic shortcomings—can be clearly seen in the description of a game made by him in 2016, called *WHITE MIRROR*:

“The main character is a hunter who looks for ancient relics. One day he set off to find a legendary mirror which concluded the great force and so great evil, keeping secrets of a magic artifact. You have a chance to know were is a mirror, but be careful the evil waits for you continually.”<sup>30</sup>

The game is another simple walking simulator in which the player explores various locations and once again collects notes written in incomprehensible English. Wolfe's comments at the end of the Let's Play video *WHITE MIRROR—Full Playthrough—No Sequel, Please* illustrate the most problematic aspects of GDNomad's games aptly:

“No! No, don't make a *WHITE MIRROR 2*, please. Oh, God! So, yeah, awful, but, as usual, the notes were kind of funny. But nothing will beat *MY BONES* ‘I love it all smooth.’ That is the GOAT among these three games that he made. Alright, well, the, ehm, link to download it is in the description if you are brave. Cause it is a scary game, obviously. I don't really know what to say. It's just, you know, not a good game. Like in any capacity. Not worth four dollars at all. It was like half an hour gameplay max, maximum. Anyway, yup, just depressing. Thoroughly depressing. I'm not sure if I'm gonna include this in the video when I edit it, but when I started a new story to get to that point, the game crashed on loading screens two or three different times, and I had to start all over. So, I'm not really sure why that happened, but, uhm, just, it's a buggy game. It's not that fun, even without the bugs, or well-made at all. Just really nothing good to say about it. Uhm, get a freaking proofreader if you're gonna sell your game for real money on Steam. At all—if you're gonna sell your game, the least you can do is to get a proofreader to make sure that it is not incoherent mess. Because as of right now, I have no idea what the story was about. No clue. And, you know, with all the knife switches, you know, all that stuff, it's clear it was like botched Google Translate job, at best. I don't know; I'm just sick of seeing it. It should be bare minimum for the

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30 GDNomad: *WHITE MIRROR* (January 27, 2016); [https://store.steampowered.com/app/428630/White\\_Mirror/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/428630/White_Mirror/)

game, you know, if it's going to be released in English, to have fluent English. Just, bare minimum, like bottom line.”<sup>31</sup>

In this monologue, Wolfe directly states that any text in GDNomad's games feels like it was translated by software. Wolfe's comment also highlights a very important aspect of playing digital games: for many players, understanding the game's story, the environment, and the goal of the game is a crucial part of the gaming experience. So much, so that linguistic problems overwhelmingly overshadowed Wolfe's experience of playing *WHITE MIRROR*.

The final game in this analysis is *AUTUMN DREAM* (2016). John Wolfe created and published a Let's Play video in 2016, titled “*AUTUMN DREAM*—“I Know That I Will Dead Soon,” which once again included a rather long commentary. Unsurprisingly, this game is also a walking simulator, in which the player traverses a few locations, solves simplistic puzzles, and gathers notes, yet again written in incomprehensible English. This Let's Play video is also the last about GDNomad's games that Wolfe produced to date. The following comment, which takes the form of uninterrupted, frustrated monologue at the end of the video, thoroughly explains why:

“My thoughts about this installment in the GDNomad saga? It's exactly like all the other games. It's exactly the same. You go to some random house for some reason; something happens, and you wake up in something that's entirely different from that house. And whether it's another dimension—like in *WHITE MIRROR*, or secret underground lab—like in this one, or weird prison-hospital—like in *VERGE LAST CHAPTER*, and I think also in *WOODEN HOUSE*, I can't remember. It's the same pattern every time. And then you escape. It's an anticlimactic conclusion, and you solve really rudimentary keyboard puzzles along the way, which usually involve you pressing ‘h,’ ‘j’ and ‘k’ or ‘j,’ ‘k,’ and ‘l,’ I believe. And finding keys and reading poorly written notes. It's, it's... it's the most mind-numbingly repetitive series of work I think I have ever seen. And I don't understand why there is no improvement? It's, it's... It must just be that this dev doesn't listen to any negative feedback at all. They don't care about improving. They just want to make the same game over and over again. They are just content to make the same product. I don't even know what to say anymore. I

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31 John Wolfe: *WHITE MIRROR—Full Playthrough—No Sequel, Please*, January 30, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnrhDhy1e14>

feel like I'm just repeating myself. You might... I know there are some people out there like: 'Why do you keep playing his games?' Because you guys want me to, and because it's just kind of a meme at this point. It's like a 'John meme' to play the 'My Bones guy's' new game that he pops out every three months."<sup>32</sup>

John Wolfe addresses multiple serious failings of GDNomad's games. Not only are the games objectively low-quality, but they are also similar to each other. In other words, just as Wolfe puts it, each subsequent GDNomad product is actually "the same game over and over again."<sup>33</sup> However, there is one more issue that seems to bother Wolfe. He openly expresses his disbelief in GDNomad's lack of ability to improve as an independent game developer, considering the number of games he has published on Steam. In this way, the case of GDNomad constitutes an excellent example of a developer who gained the reputation of making 'bad' games and appears to have decided that such infamy is better than no fame at all—and whose games continue to be infamous for their low quality.

### **The Significance of the Discussed Cases**

The two cases clearly show that Vidas Salavejus is listening to players' feedback proposing corrections and adjustments to his games, which means that his games become better with time. He is an example of a developer who grows and improves his skills and quality of work. In contrast, GDNomad is not listening to feedback, continues to make the same mistakes, and produces low-quality games. He is an example of a developer who does not improve.

Both developers can be regarded as two opposite ends of a spectrum of communication between independent game developers and their players. The case of Vidas Salavejus shows how a developer, when confronted with valid and constructive criticism—even if it is a bit harsh—can improve. By listening to the players' expectations and disappointments, game designers can identify the aspects of their games they should prioritize, as far as improvement is concerned. On the other hand, the case of GDNomad shows that some developers, even when offered insights into players' expectations and

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32 John Wolfe: *AUTUMN DREAM*—"I Know That I Will Dead Soon," November 11, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9xXSPHjaks>

33 Ibid.

disappointments, will still ignore them. John Wolfe’s supposition: “It must just be that this dev doesn’t listen to any negative feedback at all,”<sup>34</sup> points to the fact that Let’s Players who take the time to comment on the games they play and offer constructive criticism offer their critique as an opportunity for game developers to learn and correct specific problems of their games. However, as the case of GDNomad demonstrates, sometimes this feedback can fall on deaf ears, and developers will make the same errors in their games over and over again.

## CONCLUSION

The two cases of Vidas Salavejus and GDNomad demonstrate the potential of Let’s Play videos to influence—to a degree—the development of independent games. They also represent the two extremes of how independent game developers can react to paratextual feedback—in this case, Let’s Play videos. As the examples show, the reactions depend significantly on the individual developer and their openness to constructive criticism. Moreover, the form of the critique matters as well. A commented playthrough video allows for a direct and transparent way to validate the opinion of the Let’s Player. Both the prospective audience—the other players who may be interested in the game—and the game developers have undeniable proof that and how the Let’s Player played the game. The recording lets the player comment on a specific problem in the game right at the moment of its occurrence. Live recording—if we exclude the apparent possibility of editing before posting the video on YouTube or some other platform—lends the impression that the critique is honest and unfiltered, as it is improvised during the play session.

Analyzing only two examples of independent game developers and their interactions with one Let’s Player is an immensely narrow perspective on the whole issue of potential relations between game developers and players. Therefore, this text is intended as a starting point of a more in-depth discussion on this issue and an invitation for other scholars to further investigate this matter in their research.

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