Benefits of Including Let's Play Recordings in Close Readings of Digital Game Texts

Discussing Multiple Player Competences in Selected Game Texts

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LET'S PLAYS AS PARATEXTUAL FORMS

This paper is devoted to the unique ways Let's Play recordings contribute to generating academic knowledge about digital game texts and how they can aid analyses of particular game texts. The academic interest in Let's Plays as paratexts and their potential has been on the increase for some time.[1] Let's Plays as paratexts are usually recognized for their potential to be a source of insight into how a game can be played in terms of skill, strategy, and interpretation of content.[2] This article, however, focuses on the valuable informa-

1 Mukherjee, Souvik: *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015; Burwell, Catherine/Thomas Miller: "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; Enevold, Jessica/Esther, Stewart: *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015.

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

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tion a scholar can obtain from Let's Play recordings, which are inaccessible if the scholar relies only on the process of playing the game critically. Since Let's Plays are a peculiar type of paratexts concentrating specifically on the player experience,[3] they can supply the scholar with extensive data which might not be apparent to them during their own critical playthrough,[4] thus reducing the likelihood of potential blind spots in the subsequent analysis. The scope of this text will extend to three main cognitive player competences required by contemporary digital games and the way they can be studied through Let's Play recordings: cultural competence, linguistic competence, and metagame competence.

The common view of Let's Plays is, as Emily Flynn-Jones explains, that they tend to be in some way associated with "exhibitions of optimal play strategy and demonstration of extreme skill and knowledge of a particular game."[5] However, such a way of looking at Let's Play recordings is extremely reductive, as they are, in fact, so much more than a simple public flexing of gaming muscles. Let's Play videos are a very specific paratextual form that primarily creates "archive[s] of the experience of interacting with a text."[6] This means that apart from sharing different, subjective perspectives on game texts, Let's Plays can also be regarded as a way of distributing game texts cross-platform and for vast audiences, including those for whom the Let's Play is the only way to experience the given game text at all.[7] Let's

3 Marak, Katarzyna/Miłosz Markocki: *Aspekty funkcjonowania gier cyfrowych we współczesnej kulturze: studia przypadków*, Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press 2016.

4 Fernández-Vara, Clara: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, Routledge 2015; Bizzocchi, Jim/Joshua Tanenbaum: "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences," in: Drew Davidson (ed.), *Well Played 3.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, Pittsburgh: ETC Press 2011, pp. 289-316.

5 Flynn-Jones, Emily: "Bad Romance: For the Love of 'Bad' Video Games," in: Enevold, Jessica/Stewart, Esther (eds.), *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015, pp. 253-264; here p. 260.

6 S. Mukherjee: *Video Games and Storytelling,* p. 114.

7 De Vivo, Jamie. "The Power of Voyeurism and Let's Plays;" https://thesynergists.co.uk/media/jamie-de-vivo/the-power-of-voyeurism-and-lets-plays/

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Plays, as Catherine Burwell and Thomas Miller argue, "highlight the very process of meaning-making itself:"

> "[Let's Plays] reveal just how gamers create meaning from games. Through their oral commentary (which may be humorous, critical or instructional and may include questions, exclamations, profanity, sarcasm, feigned and real emotion, laughs, shouts, whispers and grunts) we come to understand how a player plays a game and simultaneously, what they think, know and feel about the game."[8]

In this way, the demeanor of the given content creator allows the audience—and the scholar—to develop both awareness and appreciation for an experience of the text that is, in simplest terms, not their own.

This aspect of Let's Play videos is particularly useful to scholars, whose task of analyzing a given game is extraordinarily difficult—just like with any other culture text, game texts can be experienced for the first time only once. However, because in their very design, games are not fixed as texts, they must be played multiple times—otherwise, a scholar would be incapable of deducing and studying how the given game works. In other words, not only must the scholar play the game in a specific manner, but also repeatedly. As Clara Fernández-Vara aptly notes, "playing a game for fun is different from playing it critically," since critical approach makes every action and choice significant, as they will generate different data.[9] Therefore, she elaborates, "we have to be methodical and aware of what we do while we play."[10] In this way, the sheer fact of conducting research informs the experience of the game text; a scholar conscious of their every action and decision is less likely to enjoy the game through spontaneous gameplay.

Furthermore, repeated playthroughs of one game, which are necessary when one attempts a close reading of a game, create a distance between the scholar and "the pleasures of the game," as noted by Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tannebaum.[11] This distance separates the direct gameplay experience from the game text, which now becomes merely a sum of software,

8 C. Burwell/T. Miller: "Let's Play," p. 113.

9 C. Fernández-Vara: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, Routledge 2015, p. 26.

10 Ibid.

11 J. Bizzocchi/J. Tanenbaum: "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences," p. 301.

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mechanics, and world elements. Bizzocchi and Tannebaum suggest that scholars "learn to oscillate between a position of critical distance and one of immediate pleasure,"[12] thus somehow retaining both their subjectivity and their objectivity. They must be open to the raw experience of the game without assumptions formed beforehand, while at the same time being aware of that experience and keeping track of the particulars of the game's actualization:

"On one level, the scholar enacts the play of a naïve gameplayer—one who is encountering the game as a fresh participant. This perspective is open to all nuances of the experience and ready to absorb the game without preconceptions. In Bolter and Grusin's terms, she must commit to a complete state of immediacy—unconditional surrender to the experience (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). At the same time, the scholar is—and must be—distanced from the experience. She must bring an objectivity to the observation of her own experience and faithfully remember and record a wide range of critical details. From this perspective, she plays the game in a state of hypermediation—an awareness of the fact of mediation."[13]

However, even this performance, if it were to be achieved by the scholar, still offers little insight into how an average player might feel about the game. The hypermediation interferes with experiencing the game insofar that it distorts the perspective on the actual course of gameplay and inherently differentiates game scholars from the majority of players, as Fernández-Vara notes:

"It is also easy to use oneself as reference for an 'ideal player,' even though we may not be. Ideal does not mean optimal player; rather, we look for an everyman of sorts, an abstract figure outside of cultural context and without preconceived ideas. This abstraction, although commonly used in literary studies or film criticism, is difficult to achieve. The sheer fact that we are tackling games systematically and critically sets us aside from most other players, so it is hard to consider ourselves average. Additionally, the better we get at playing a game, the more rare a player we become, since

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. p. 302.

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expert players are a minority. By being good at a game, we tackle it from a privileged point of view."[14]

And yet it is exactly that elusive normality—the quality of the common, the typical, the expected—that the game scholars pursue, even if it at times it might seem paradoxical. For instance, Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum point out that close reading traditionally "relies on the highly idiosyncratic insights of the individual theorist in order to explicate nuances of the work that might not be apparent to the average reader," and then go on to elaborate upon the necessity of basing the analysis on the experience of gameplay. However, they also propose that the scholar should engage the game text "in an authentic manner, while still generating close observations and insights," clarifying that "authentic manner" involves the scholar facing the game "as a player or a 'gamer' playing the game on its own terms."[15]

And therein lies the problem: Who would this average gamer, or player, be? Is there some specific limit of skill or knowledge beyond which that "everyman" no longer serves the purpose of an academic analysis? How can a scholar emulate so unspecified a figure? And how useful would that figure be in a reality of digital game texts played by real, flesh-and-blood players who always have *some* preconceived ideas of some sort or another. What would it, then, mean for the scholar to engage the game in an "authentic manner" and to play the game "on its own terms"? Maybe the answer lies in defining and pursuing authenticity from a different perspective—not through narrowing down the required conditions, but by multiplying contexts and viewpoints. A single scholar can generate numerous actualizations of the game text, but they cannot possibly map out all the potential actualizations, not to mention more than a single-blind playthrough experience. Combining one's own personal critical playthrough with multiple Let's Plays of one game benefits any close reading of a digital game text by providing multiple additional perspectives.

Naturally, a given Let's Play is, needless to say, not enough to form an opinion on the levels of cultural, linguistic, and metagame competence required by a game; for that, scholars need to familiarize themselves, at least

14 C. Fernández-Vara: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, p. 28.

15 J. Bizzocchi/J. Tanenbaum: "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences," p. 301.

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to a degree, with the persona of the given Let's Player in order to compensate for the potential bias. After all, the point of using Let's Plays is not to accumulate personal biases but to help distinguish biases from the elements that are contingent more on the game text than on the scholar's personal, authentic engagement with the game. As far as Let's Players who work primarily on YouTube are concerned—since they are the ones this paper is based on—there is a plethora of content creators with distinct styles and online identities. This leads some game scholars to caution bordering on cynical distrust of the credibility of the data obtained from such recordings due to obvious doubts—how can we be sure that Let's Players are sharing their real thoughts, and are not simply acting? This problem is, of course, impossible to eliminate, but it can be reduced. Choosing smaller channels (between hundreds and tens of thousands of subscribers) or channels whose upload schedule is not as strict (e.g., twice a week or even more rarely) usually results in finding more spontaneous, unscripted performance recordings. Let's Players who consistently focus on one genre, regardless of whether that genre is thematic (horror, fantasy or crime) or gameplay-related (point-and-click, first-person shooter, etc.), also tend to yield good results. Let's Players in charge of such channels seem to be more likely to follow their own authentic preferences and behavior patterns than trends or expected reactions.

PLAYER COMPETENCES

To discuss in more detail how Let's Plays can aid a scholar in their endeavor to analyze a digital game text, a brief characterization of the player competences is necessary. While there are manifold types of player competences that can be enumerated, including physical ones (such as hand-eye coordination in action games or VR games) or social ones (apparent mainly in massive multiplayer online games or in cooperation modes), this paper will focus on three cognitive types—the cultural competence, the linguistic competence, and the metagame competence. Out of the three, the significance of linguistic and cultural competence is easier to define and recognize. They can be, naturally, most easily observed in the case of games that rely on elements of language and culture to convey some feature essential to their setup.

The first competence, linguistic, involves the comprehension of all the game elements related to language. While many games, both AAA and small

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independent titles, are localized or available at least in English, the localization might be limited to subtitling the spoken dialogue, omitting other elements of the depicted world such as posters, notes or writing in the background. Therefore, even if the game offers the player subtitles, linguistic competence still plays a role in the gameplay experience. An example of this can be the 2019 remake of a free independent game MERMAID SWAMP (2013), in which a group of four friends gets lost in the mountains and is offered a place to stay by a strange old man, whose house later reveals to hold a dark secret. Both the original game and the remake feature a character named Rin Yamazaki, who is repeatedly described as being bad-mouthed, tomboyish (in a pejorative sense), and is frequently name-called as "Yama-monkey" (Yamazaru) or "Apewoman" (*yamazaru* translates both as "a wild monkey" or as "a country bumpkin"). The reason for which she is teased for her supposed rudeness does not translate readily into English in subtitles, as can be observed in particular in the scene where she first encounters Yukio Tsuchida—the old man who invites her group to stay at his place—in the forest. According to the English translation, she says the following upon meeting Tsuchida:

1. "Just an old coot… Dammit, don't freak me out! We were on a trip, but our car went kaput, so I guess we're stuck."[16]
2. "Whew, just an old coot! ...freaked me the hell out. Right, I was on a trip with my college pals, but our car went kaput, so we're kinda stuck."[17]

In both games, her original Japanese lines are exactly the same: "*Nanda, jijī ka yo... Odorokase-yagatte. Ryokōchū-dattanda-sedo, kuruma ga ugokanaku nacchimatte sa, tachi-ōjō shitenda.*"[18] The two English versions attempt to convey the issue with her demeanor, but since the impression she makes in Japanese results primarily from a very specific combination of intonation and casual verb forms, the English subtitles make her sound odd instead. The case of the remake is a little more complex since it includes voice acting, and therefore even the players who do not speak Japanese can at least form an opinion about her tone of voice. However, the Let's Plays make it clear that

16 MERMAID SWAMP (Uri 2013).

17 MERMAID SWAMP (Remake) (Uri 2019).

18 MERMAID SWAMP (Uri 2013) and MERMAID SWAMP (Remake) (Uri 2019).

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to the players familiar with the Japanese language and culture her utterance comes across as much more impolite; as soon as she says "*Nanda, jijī ka yo*" (which can be translated as "huh, an old codger"), the Japanese players are either much amused or taken aback by Rin's way of addressing the elderly man. They usually comment, even if briefly, on the fact that "this is [their] first meeting,"[19] and as such, Rin's attitude is inappropriate or imply that her way of speaking is disrespectful.[20] This kind of information would normally be inaccessible to a scholar with no knowledge of Japanese culture or language.

Cultural competence, on the other hand, concerns the player's familiarity with the given cultural framework and the ability to apply that knowledge to the gameplay process. A striking example of the significance of cultural competence in the context of the gameplay experience is the case of DETENTION (2017), a Taiwanese 2D horror side-scrolling adventure game. DETENTION follows the soul of Ray, a young girl trapped in a purgatory cycle of nightmarish shards of her former life as she is forced to face the guilt over her actions. What is of crucial importance is the fact that the game's narrative is firmly embedded in the history and culture of that specific period in Taiwan, whereas numerous features of the gameplay, such as puzzles and action sequences, revolve around elements of the local religion and mythology. As some players and reviewers noted, while it is feasible to complete the game in its entirety with neither detailed nor even superficial knowledge concerning the aforementioned aspects, there are many moments where "international players might feel out of touch with the game."[21] According to some of the reviewers, "it is unlikely that players outside of Asia will know who the Black and White Impermanence are. Even practices of significance such as food offerings, holding your breath in the presence of a ghost, and incense burning are likely to be lost in the greater audience."[22] However, in contrast to the puzzles and monster fights, where the player can simply learn how to go through the motions by trial and error or repetition, there is also the

19 [ホラー] 人魚沼♯1；https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_SXpzPe0hM

20 [人魚の呪い!?] 人魚沼 実況プレイ Part1; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaIrTvAayvk

21 *GAME REVIEW: DETENTION (SWITCH)*; https://nintendosoup.com/game-review-detention-switch/

22 Ibid.

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narrative dimension of the game, the effectiveness of which is markedly diminished if the players become too confused about key story points:[23]

"LordZagry: I'm not very sure about Ray's motivation for giving the list of books, if anyone can enlighten me, that would be appreciated.

Kiwimaster: It seems what when Ray overheard their conversation, she mistakenly thought the two teachers are in a relationship (while they're actually both part of the bookclub), and assumed that to be the reason why Mr. Chang had distanced himself from her. In order to get rid of her "rival", Ray ended up reporting the bookclub, hoping that with Yin out of the picture, Mr. Chang will return to her.

Fire.sakura: The relationship between the male teacher Chung and miss Yin is just they are secret left wing politics members or they are communist. In 1960's Taiwan, this actions need to be secret or you will be caught by some Taiwanese style 'GESTAPO' and tortured to death."[24]

This exchange adequately demonstrates the relevance of the cultural competence in the context of the gameplay experience of a player engaging with the text of DETENTION. Poor knowledge of the historical and cultural circumstances of 1960s Taiwan will hinder the enjoyment of the story due to confusion—the better the grasp of the actual nature of the book club and the significance of Ray delivering the reading list to a military officer, the greater the emotional impact of the narrative.

The last discussed type of competence—metagame competence—is the competence resulting from the accumulated metagame knowledge and the player's ability to make good use of that knowledge. Since there are numerous definitions of the terms metagame, metagaming, and metagame knowledge, ranging from simply "knowledge found outside the game"[25] to

23 Spelling and grammar as in the original posts.

24 *Ending Discussion Questions (Spoiler Alert)*; https://steamcommunity.com/app/555220/discussions/0/14451367 0977846637/

25 Stricker, Andrew et al. (eds.): *Integrating an Awareness of Selfhood and Society into Virtual Learning*, IGI Global 2017.

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"any strategy, action or method used in a game,"[26] for the purpose of this paper, let us consider metagame knowledge as a complete body of knowledge concerning game texts gathered by an individual through play experience. This experience, distilled into abstract comprehension of how game texts function, goes beyond a single game and both completes and adds to the gameplay experience even if the player is not aware of it. Such understanding of metagame knowledge is, in fact, very similar to Gary Alan Fine's concept of "frames of fantasy gaming,"[27] which Mia Consalvo also discusses in her deconstruction of the validity of the notion of the magic circle in regards to digital games[28]. In this sense, metagame knowledge can be described as the resultant product of the commonsense knowledge the player brings into the gameplay experience, their varying familiarity with the "game rules grounded in the game structure," and their knowledge of the depicted world listed by Fine.[29]

Metagame knowledge not only affects the way players play the game but also encompasses their personal preferences, associations and nostalgia concerning genres, mechanics, and aesthetics. At this point, a very simple and brief example of how the nostalgic aspect of this particular competence is reflected in the attitudes and reactions of players is the case of the game FAITH (2017), a retro MS-DOS-style game. When one looks at the feedback, it becomes clear that the reception of the game's peculiar aesthetics is fundamentally related to the given player's metagame knowledge. Familiarity with the period in which that graphic style predominated is essential for recognizing and appreciating the nostalgic homage to that era. For the players who have no emotional connection with that period, neither the game's distinct graphics style nor audio has any obvious appeal:

26 Kim, Sungwook (ed.): *Game Theory Applications in Network Design*, IGI Global 2014.

27 Fine, Gary Alan: *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, University of Chicago Press 2002, p. 194.

28 Consalvo, Mia: "There Is No Magic Circle," in: *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009), pp. 408-417.

29 G. A. Fine: *Shared Fantasy*, p. 194.

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selmiak: "the animations inbetween are cool, but the normal game graphics look very basic, reduced and ugly to me. Even on the C64 there has been a better use of color to make sweeter gfx."

Crimson Wizard: "I actually like the visuals, this is the kind of gfx style, with lack of detail, that made old games so captivating IMO. … Now, sounds is a different thing… [F]rankly, while visuals may be a good choice, the choice to replicate old-computer speaker producing voice is terrible, IMO. Very annoying and immersion breaking."[30]

On the other hand, for those players who can relate to that specific era in digital game history, the aesthetics of FAITH hold an enjoyable nostalgic value and even increase gameplay efficiency:

MicroHorrorArcade : "The graphics and movement were super nostalgic. I love the retro feel that a lot of games have been having recently, but this one just blows me away. The color scheme with important objects being different colors is a really nice touch."[31]

BENEFITS OF LET'S PLAYS: PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

To further illustrate the importance of the data obtainable from Let's Plays for a scholar attempting to analyze a specific game text, let us turn to two disparate yet distinct digital game texts: DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD: A WHIRLWIND HEIST (2015), and PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR (2019). To provide a better context for how those games challenge any of the three discussed competences, a few specific gameplay points, which usually re-focus or change the direction of the emergent actualization, will be mentioned and briefly explained. In this text, they will be referred to as refraction points, insofar that they tend to constitute gameplay points that re-focus or change the direction of the emergent

30 FAITH (C-64 style horror game); https://www.adventuregamestudio.co.uk/forums/index.php?topic=55985.0

31 "FAITH—Itch.io Edition—Comments;" https://airdorf.itch.io/faith/comments?before=76

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actualization; upon reaching such a point, the gameplay changes due to the player adjusting either pace or approach.

DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD: A WHIRLWIND HEIST

DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD is a short, humorous computer game with a fourth-wall-breaking premise. At the very beginning, the player is addressed by an unseen person called the Stage Manager and informed that they couldn't play the eponymous game because another player is already playing it—but the player can help along by carrying out various tasks "backstage." The player progresses by following the Stage Manager's instructions, who guides the avatar through a sequence of rooms such as Wildlife Preparation, Weather Control, or High Concept Miscellaneous Interactions, prompting the player to pull levers and press buttons in order to turn on lights, release the tiger so that it can chase the character of the other player, or operate the elevator. The game ends with the player finally entering the eponymous game only to be mauled by the tiger, prematurely released by the next player's character.

Despite the fact that DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD is a rather linear game, there are still many prominent refraction points that showcase the ways in which the game challenges the player's metagame and linguistic competences. The three such points selected for this paper include:

1. The Stage Manager's Explanations

They are delivered through subtitled dialogue, so all players (English-speaking, Japanese-speaking, and German-speaking, as well as French, Italian, and six other supported languages) can understand the basic premise of the game. At the beginning, the Stage Manager addresses the avatar—and the player—directly, saying:

STAGE MANAGER: "The thing is, the game you've just downloaded? Somebody is playing it right now so you can't, you can't, you can't. You can't play it. I'm really sorry. Yeah, this is… yeah, this is really inconvenient. I don't know—I don't know why this keeps happening. So, we're generally quite organized. You should come inside [the Publicity and Liaisons office]. I'll explain. … Here's the thing. The game is

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live, which makes it impossible to insert you… and also so it, it, it's just quite difficult now for you to leave."[32]

The Stage Manager's explanation and the instructions he gives allow the player to proceed with the gameplay and appreciate some of the direct humor. At this point, almost all players realize that they have been tricked by the game's trailer and the Steam store page and speculate about the development of subsequent gameplay.

2. Staff Letters and Signs

The first room the player enters, Publicity and Liaisons, is full of banners such as "WE HAVE HAD ENOUGH" or "STRIKE STRIKE STRIKE."[33] In contrast to the Stage Manager's instructions, *none* of these are subtitled despite being an essential part of the premise and environment (and, therefore, the story, as they lend meaning to the indexical storytelling). The indices make sense only in the context of the depicted world of the game. For example, on one of the desks, the player can find the following letter:

"Management,
Earlier today, I received a note on my desk that read as follows:
In the event of a fire in or around your office, please try and ignore it and continue as though it wasn't there.
I'm afraid I am unable to follow these instructions, or continue to work in this environment. I quit.
Also, Logistics Office 17 is on fire.
Juliet Busque
Logistics"[34]

If the players cannot read English, they will be unable to understand the letter's content, and they will miss the fact that the Stage Manager repeatedly downplays the importance of the strike for comedic effect. Understanding

32 DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD: A WHIRLWIND HEIST (Crows Crows Crows 2015, O: Crows Crows Crows).

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

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such indices' significance allows the players to comprehend the humorous background story accompanying the game premise; furthermore, it facilitates forming expectations and strategies. Those familiar with the English language tended to pause and examine such assets carefully and comment on them, trying to understand the details of the situation they found in the depicted world.

3. The "LASERS" Button

This asset makes an appearance during the player's first proper task, turning on the lights for the character playing the eponymous game. Although in the location there is a lever which the Stage Manager clearly indicates verbally as the one which "sets the sunset off,"[35] the player can also find a large switch labeled "LASERS," clearly set up as a temptation. Usually, at this point, the players fully understand that the situation leans towards cooperation or spite. If they do press the button, the Stage Manager reacts immediately, groaning: "Oh Christ, who walks up to a switch marked 'LASERS' and thinks 'This. This is the one for me'?"[36] Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of players who noticed the switch either purposefully chose it instead of the appropriate lever or deliberately returned to press it after setting off the sunset.

Evaluation

A significant point that needs to be emphasized in the context of Let's Play recordings of DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD is the fact that the game was developed by the same artist who created THE STANLEY PARABLE (2011/2013). In its first version, the game was a free, independent walking simulator that quickly gained popularity among many players, including Let's Players, due to its simple yet creative premise and an optimum balance between immersion and fourth-wall-breaking. The Let's Plays reveal that the Let's Players who are aware of the developer's identity tend to enter DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD with an entirely different set of (usually quite high) expectations. Furthermore, their experience with THE STANLEY PARABLE motivates them to either ignore or resist the Stage Manager's instructions intentionally and almost completely miss the game's underlying story, which

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

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concerns the staff's labor strike. In such cases, the developers' elaborate environmental storytelling is reduced to a see-through location the players want to traverse quickly.

Information obtained from Let's Play recordings reveals to the scholars attempting a close reading of DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD that metagame competence seems to be the most crucial enjoyment of the game. The linguistic competence did play a role in the experience as well, making it possible for the players to fully comprehend the back story staged by the environmental storytelling and enhancing the gratification elicited from the gameplay experience. In fact, linguistic competence is necessary to fully engage the player in the game world of DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD and allow for thorough immersion. It did very little, however, to affect their strategy or decision-making throughout gameplay, even if it was indispensable to understanding the entirety of the humorous, *playful content* prepared by the creators. Metagame competence, on the other hand, was what allowed the players to put in a humorous, *playful performance*—the intimate knowledge of game form and convention (i.e., loading screens, NPC dialog, level design, enemy spawning mechanism, or glitches) was critical for the recognition of how the game invites such performance.

PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR

The next game, whose intricate structure requires multiple player competences, is PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR (2018), a horror anthology game revolving around selected entities in Javanese folklore. The base game PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR features protagonist Jaka, a young man whose whole family has passed away, leaving behind a house he now wants to sell. The gameplay is divided into three nights during which the player is supposed to tidy up the house as much as possible, with the ability to examine and clean the environment, as well as examine objects, throw them away, and—most importantly—comment on them out loud.

That wide range of possible interactions with the elements of the virtual environment is the game's most characteristic trait. The depicted world is centered around Indonesian folklore, customs, and superstitions, which the player is not introduced to in any way but instead learns about through trial and error. The first chapter (also referred to as "Folklore") of the game

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proper, *The White Lady* (of which the third-night gameplay section was released as a demo), begins with the following ambiguous, almost generic introduction:

"Somewhere in Java, Indonesia.
A man decided to go back home to sell his family house for the money he desperately needs. The house was empty—abandoned for a year. It all looks the same, except for something he doesn't want to believe."[37]

Although the game does point to the supernatural nature of the threat in the house, nothing about the introductory text hints at the significance of respecting customs or unseen entities. Due to this beginning, the narrative design of the game, which stresses the story of the protagonist's sister, Nenden, becoming a *kuntilanak*[38], and a variety of signs of haunting in the gameplay location, PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR is usually approached by the players like any other supernatural horror game text.

There are multiple noteworthy gameplay refraction points that challenge the player's cultural and metagame competences and allow for the observation of the player's reactions and attitudes, but in this paper only three will be taken into consideration:

1. The Wedding Dress

Once Jaka enters the house and starts looking at different items, Nenden's wedding dress is one of the first objects to discover. It can be found in a chest by a standing mirror next to the storage room, along with other wedding memorabilia. Upon inspecting it, players can prompt Jaka to comment out loud with one of the three following options: "She was happy"; "Why don't

37 Spelling and grammar as in the original game text. It is worth noting that despite the imperfect translation into English, the game actually provides a translation of all almost the materials and assets, including diaries, documents, notes, book covers and pamphlets. PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR. Demo (StoryTale Studios 2018, O: StoryTale Studios)

38 According to the information provided for the players in the game, *kuntilanak* is a spirit of a woman who committed suicide, was unable to enter the heavenly realm and "haunts people due to their loneliness." PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR. Demo.

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someone throw this away?"; "Who'd wear this? Ghost?"[39] If, by that time, they do not realize that their actions inevitably fall into those two categories—respectful or disrespectful—they are unlikely to make informed decisions concerning their ensuing course of action. Naturally, if players choose to talk about a ghost, they commit a violation of taboo against the mystical and magical—*pamali*[40]—and trigger more haunting from the *kuntilanak*. Notably, the majority of players on their first playthrough tend to lean towards the option that provokes the supernatural entity ("Who'd wear this? Ghost?").

2. The Jenglot

The *jenglot* is an item that is undeniably and conspicuously culturally charged and, more importantly, immediately recognizable as such. It can be defined as anything ranging from a small fetish doll[41] to a non-human creature.[42] Even if the players are unaware of the function or significance of the *jenglot*, identifying it as a noteworthy item is well within their metagame competence due to its visually striking nature alone. The game does not allow the player to make Jaka comment on the *jenglot*, only to inspect it. Most players on their first playthrough examine the item carefully, wondering about its nature and purpose.

3. The Baby Doll

The doll catches the players' attention very quickly once they enter Nenden's room, and they tend to realize that this particular item is especially important.

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39 Ibid.

40 Handayani, Dwimi/Lufti, M. Lutfi: "Maintaining Expressions of Prohibition (pamali) as Signaling the Existence of Tengger Community's Culture," in: *Urban Studies: Border and Mobility: Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Urban Studies (ICUS 2017)* (December 8-9, 2017), Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia: Routledge 2018, p. 266.

41 J. Maberry/D. F. Kramer: *They Bite: Endless Cravings of Supernatural Predators*, New York: Citadel Press 2009, p.76.

42 Long, Nicholas J.: "Haunting Malayness: The Multicultural Uncanny in a New Indonesian Province," in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16(4) (2010), p. 874.

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This realization again tends to stem from their metagame competence, as the doll is revealed in the gameplay's final stage, i.e., once the previously inaccessible room of Nenden is unlocked. This time also, the player can say something obviously disrespectful. However, in the demo, the only options available were descriptive—"Look" and "Mock,"[43] whereas the full game offered more information: "This doll to replace her baby? Crazy!"; "She took my doll? Really?"; "Tsk, she's gone mad for her baby."[44] Some players try to avoid offending the spirit on their first playthrough, but when this action does not drive the gameplay forward, they return to mock the toy. Eventually, due to the nature of this sequence, the player must speak disrespectfully of the doll, but the majority of players are clearly aware of the fact that the consequences of that action will be adverse.

Evaluation

Let's Play recordings of PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR point to the fact that as far as that particular game is concerned, the linguistic competence seems to be of secondary importance as long as the player is fluent either in Indonesian or English. Cultural competence and metagame competence, on the other hand, are highly significant. PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR is a quite exceptional case because the game is constructed in a manner that subverts the regular approach of an experienced player; the players who play PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR for the first time naturally tend to want to inspect and interact with any and every object that catches their eye, unaware (at least initially) that exploring freely in the way they normally would—i.e., examining items, looking outside when near the window, etc.—is already interpreted by the game as a part of their strategy, since this is the very premise of the game. In this sense, *Pamali* is a remarkably non-linear game. Additionally, the Let's Plays demonstrate that both linguistic competence and metagame competence can make up for certain shortcomings in terms of cultural competence—it is clear that those players who are not fluent in English or Indonesian struggle much more with comprehension and performance. However, linguistic competence cannot make up for metagame competence—players who could understand every

43 PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR. DEMO (StoryTale Studios 2018, O: StoryTale Studios)

44 Ibid.

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word but were not familiar with the genre in a broad sense (i.e., horror fiction irrespective of medium) seemed to have a harder time following the course of events on screen. Not only did such players tend to make little effort to understand the story or situation providing structure to the gameplay, but also—as a result—they reacted more frantically to startle effects[45] (jump scares) embedded in the context of that situation. Consequently, their ability to predict the possible unfolding of the sequence of events was extremely limited, which in turn affected the process and efficiency of their decision-making.

CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED?

Speaking as a scholar, I would like to draw attention to a certain interesting fact concerning the close reading of those two particular titles. In contrast to the Let's Plays of DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD, which allowed me to focus on the overall experience of the players and the impact the game premise had on that experience, I found myself much more judgmental of the players' actions in the case of the PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR Let's Plays. My original research interests concerned horror fiction in various media, and my focus was primarily on the cultural and social context of horror themes and motifs. My PhD dissertation—which became the basis of my first published book—constituted a comparative analysis of Japanese and American horror fiction, with particular emphasis on the differences stemming from the cultural frameworks of scary narratives.[46] And while my knowledge of other Eastern Asian horror fiction is much more limited than that of Japanese, I still could not help but be critical of the players' performance as I watched numerous Let's Plays of PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR. When the players moved objects or performed actions that quite frankly were natural actions to perform (such as drumming on a bucket simply because there was an option to do so or

45 Perron, Bernard: *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror*, Bloomsbury Publishing 2018, p. 115.

46 Marak, Katarzyna: *Japanese and American Horror: A Comparative Study of Film, Fiction, Graphic Novels and Video Games*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2014.

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inspecting items because they looked mysterious or dangerous), I felt mildly annoyed with what I perceived to be their lack of basic caution and foresight. I found myself unable to un-learn what I knew about Asian horror narratives and their conventional traits or to empathize with the players who lacked such knowledge. From my perspective, the game (even its short demo) clearly signaled its premise—to the point of defining the term "taboo" for its purpose, hinting that it referred to actions or words that "should be avoided for social reasons, usually cultural ones,"[47] in English—and therefore it was difficult to justify the rashness of the players.

As far as my own gameplay experience was concerned, once it became clear that the game did not involve any chase sequences or perma-death mechanics and featured numerous non-zero-sum endings contingent upon actions of the players, I assessed the game as affording the player impressive agency, both local (since they could navigate and explore freely, and interact with almost any object inside and outside the house) and global (as every action affected the outcome of the game),[48] allowing for numerous, diverse playthroughs. To me, PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR was a game that invited tentative but thorough exploring, careful weighing of any and every action, and repeated replaying. The fact that some Let's Players tended to just click away at the available options without even comparing them first, and—even more surprisingly, at least to me—seemed fine getting whichever ending on their first try,[49] showing little to no curiosity in the what-if scenarios, perplexed me. They were, after all, players who primarily played horror games, including independent game texts. Eventually, having watched a variety of different Let's Plays, I observed that in the case of this particular game, it was the metagame competence that allowed the players to enjoy the experience to the fullest, as they tried to achieve different narrative results and comprehend the underlying story and circumstances better; as soon as they realized what the game was *not* (e.g., a simple puzzle-exploration or an

47 PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR.

48 Harrell, D. Fox: *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression*, The MIT Press 2013, p. 273.

49 This behaviour could be observed mostly with Polish, British and German Let's Players of any age and gender; the Japanese Let's Players appeared to proceed a touch more slowly and seemed more suspicious of their surroundings as they explored the environment.

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escape-the-monster game), they strived to grasp what it actually was. The Let's Plays also highlighted how the particular premise of PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR differs from other Asian horror games relying on folklore or spiritual beliefs, such as the Indonesian DREADOUT (2014), Thai HOME SWEET HOME (2017), or Taiwanese DEVOTION (2019). In the case of PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR, the knowledge of other game texts' structures and styles allowed the players with greater metagame competence to realize that they were dealing with something other than a puzzle-chase text or a walking simulator; on the other hand, the players with fragmentary or only rudimentary metagame competence appeared to be incapable of formulating any coherent strategy, which, in turn, as the Let's Plays demonstrated, resulted in disjointed, confused experiences.

Playing a game is, first and foremost, an individual experience. A researcher playing a game critically will always be defined by their own linguistic competence, cultural competence, and metagame competence. When analyzing the experience, the given game text can deliver, the way those competences affect that experience must be also taken into consideration. Due to the length of this paper, it uses only a handful of examples of game Let's Plays and discusses only a number of aspects in which those Let's Plays can aid a scholar in analyzing the given game texts. However, hopefully, even this brief overview can draw attention to the relevance of these particular paratextual forms to the game text proper in the context of academic analysis. By including Let's Plays of the analyzed game in their research, scholars can not only explore elements of the personal gameplay experience of other players but also learn about relevant cultural and linguistic limitations of the game. This information greatly enriches the process of close reading, highlighting the way a given game challenges various player competencies in order to structure the full gameplay experience and consequently results in a much more comprehensive analysis. As such, Let's Plays, as a peculiar type of paratexts that convey the player experience, can provide scholars with extensive data which might not otherwise be apparent to them during their own critical playthrough.

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