

Ludo-Emotional Dissonance:  
A Framework for Analyzing the Interplay Between Player  
Embodiment and Interactivity within Videogames

by

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# Abstract

Videogames are vehicles for player embodiment, unique interactive experiences, mechanic challenges, and exploration of other worlds and lives. However, much of the mainstream videogame industry is predicated upon principles which perpetuate certain values while excluding many players from being able to experience these unique pieces of art. These frameworks work off of principles such as “fun” and profit as the key drivers for videogame creation, as well as white supremacist values of being “apolitical”, mastery and dominance, and how the diversification of the industry is “woke” rather than dismantling hegemonic values. In this way, mainstream videogames cyclically recreate themselves for the hegemon, excluding players, diverse experiences, and complex emotional explorations.

In this work I explore some of the aspects cemented within mainstream videogame design as well as what has been less explored or is only now coming to the mainstream including emotional responses of players - expanding beyond if the game is bugged or mechanically “good” - as well as questioning the levels of interactivity players are exposed to regularly within these games. I adapt and build upon the concept of ludo-narrative dissonance to create the framework of ludo-emotional dissonance which is meant to be used to analyze games and how games can be positively or negatively received by different players for different reasons, as well as how player experience, player expectations, and designer intentions work to form a consonant or dissonant experience. Ludo-emotional dissonance works upon the interplay of embodiment, which includes the player’s own socio-cultural experiences and their role situated within the environmental context of the game, as well as interactivity, which mediates the player’s embodiment. Unlike many mainstream frameworks, I posit that more interactivity does not necessarily mean a better player experience. Instead, designer intentions should be mediated by a level of interactivity which will meet the player experience, which is also

determined by the player expectations prior to gameplay, thus creating a “better” player experience and which does not rely on more interactivity.

I use the framework of ludo-emotional dissonance to explore works such as *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), and how its author claiming it as apolitical reveals a deeper tendency within mainstream games to view white as the default, thus alienating players, rejecting emotional nuances, and rejecting deeper readings of their works. I also look at games such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) and how it problematizes the concept of interactivity by using less interaction to make a more accessible and approachable game for players, thus creating a ludo-emotionally consonant experience by opening up the narrative possibility space and encouraging deductive reasoning through environmental storytelling rather than through generic interactive elements. I also create a case study for *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017), and how its elements create a ludo-emotionally dissonant experience through interference between player expectations and their actual experience, and yet one which creates strong player engagement, all while disrupting mainstream game creation conventions. *DDLC* does this through the use of a detailed content warning at the beginning of the game, a subversion of dating simulation genre conventions, the overpowering use of glitches which narrow the player interaction space, and the theme of hopelessness which pervades the entire work.

# Dedication

*It's all just a game. And I knew you would get over it.*

*(Monika, Doki Doki Literature Club!)*

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# Glossary of terms

**Emotions:** “any type of response to stimuli that has a phenomenological “feeling” associated with it,” (Frome 2007, 832). Different types include:

- **Game emotions:** competitive emotions such as winning, losing, achievement, and frustration (ibid, 832).
- **Narrative emotions:** relate to the characters, setting, and events within a videogame (ibid, 832) such as sadness due to a NPC death, joy of completing a narrative arc, or empathy for the struggles that the player-character or NPCs encounter.
- **Artifact emotions:** aesthetic evaluations of a work as an artifact (ibid, 832) such as how the story or content is represented (art style, technological fidelity, length, etc.).
- **Ecological emotions:** “are generated when a player responds to a videogame in much the same way [they respond] to the real world,” (ibid, 833).

**Hegemon:** a general term to describe those within the dominant group which benefit from hegemonic forces that prescribe commercial, economic, and societal, cultural, and structural trends.

**Ludo-emotional consonance** [concept]: the extent that a player can achieve embodiment through interactivity, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

**Ludo-emotional dissonance** [concept]: the extent that a player cannot achieve embodiment through interactivity, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

**Ludo-emotional dissonance** [framework]: a framework to analyze games in which the player can embody emotional responses through their actions/inactions (mechanics and interactivity) and role(s) (embodiment) within the game world as defined by two interacting factors:

- **Embodiment:** the degree to which the emotions that the game player experiences are aligned with the emotions that the game designer wishes them to have and with the player’s expectations through genre choices/expectations and fulfillment, narrative, setting, environment, characters, mechanics, etc.
- **Interactivity:** the degree to which the game player can control the game, such as the player-character, their environment, or narrative decisions, by interacting with the game.

**Videogames:** the systems, rules, and procedures defined by computational systems which players interact with to create 'play'; they inform the play experience by what is included in its logic and its conditions. Videogames consist of:

- **Mechanics:** the actions that players take within the game. Mechanics define the components and rules of how players interact within the videogame world.
- **Gameplay:** the ways in which mechanics interact with and react to player input and lead to specific player behaviors in the game.
- **Aesthetics, or, player experience** - the players' overall subjective experience based on their gameplay. Player experience can be interpreted as the players' emotional responses as evoked by the videogame, whether intentioned and desirable or not.

# Research overview

Media, including video games, are able to simplify, exaggerate, and critically explore issues that happen in real life - such as topics related to race, gender, sex, and anxieties related to life - in a theoretically “safe” environment; however, hegemonic videogame culture has deemed only specific stories littered with stereotypical ideas and representations as “worthy” of normalized consumption, especially within the AAA videogame development process (Crawford, 1984; Leonard, 2003; Flanagan, 2009; Gray, 2014; Gray & Leonard, 2018). This system - despite claims by both videogame creators and consumers that they are only meant for fun and enjoyment away from ‘the real world’ - “rewards or minimizes symbolically violent behaviour in gaming culture” (Cross 2014, 8) and give insight into dominant political and national ideologies (Leonard, 2003). Despite videogames being “a distraction to some communities and a source of power and pleasure to others, they can at times also be a source of violence, oppression, pain, and trauma” (Gray & Leonard 2018, 5). These videogames emotionally alienate players from diverse backgrounds through a lack of depth, sensitivity, and empathy while at the same time catering towards a white male audience and perpetuating hegemonic ideals and values beyond the confines of the videogame space (Gray, 2014; Gray & Leonard, 2018).

These systematically selective videogame narratives are driven by hegemonic videogame communities which violently oppose any form of diversity whether through ignorance, perceived profit margins, or otherwise, leading to a detrimental impact and the perpetuation of stereotypes for people of colour, queer people, and more. They “not only reflect entrenched inequality and lived male/white privilege but serve as an important instrument in the reproduction of hegemony” (Gray 2014, xiv). Although games are a theoretically “safe” opportunity to explore these issues and situations, many mainstream videogames represent embodied hegemonic, heteronormative, or stereotypical depictions which players carry with them to their “real” lives and which “encode the injustices that pervade society as a whole” (Gray & Leonard 2018, 6; Leonard, 2003). These issues are especially relevant for widely advertised and consumed AAA games - despite the fact that minority players in fact constitute a majority of videogame players including “female gamers, people of different racial and cultural backgrounds, and gamers of varying ages” (Gray 2014, xxii; Fron et al., 2007).

As videogames have become a huge industry outperforming both music and movies, videogame design frameworks have been developed to make marketable, “fun”, and mechanically challenging games. Because videogames turn viewers into participants and

sometimes co-authors or even authors themselves, design challenges become apparent when creating these experiences. Videogame design frameworks are meant to streamline the development process and ease the gap between designer vision and player experience; these frameworks have focused heavily on the systems, the gameplay, and the mechanics which players interact with. Human-computer interaction and user experience design have become a hot topic in videogame development to bridge this gap (Ng et al., 2012). More ignored are the inherent structural inequities that go unquestioned by many mainstream studios - for example, there is little discussion on how games are mechanically structured based on a system that was designed by and for young white males, making the inherent accessibility of games a harder challenge for non-gamers to overcome (Keogh, 2018). These frameworks additionally tend to overlook the emotional affordances that are uniquely offered by videogames - games allow players to embody the avatar they play as, inherently taking on a new form of agency partially mediated by their own self and the self they play as (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020; Nguyen, 2020). And because videogames influence gamers outside of the sphere of play through agential factors, influencing values and norms of videogame consumption (Fron et al., 2007), I believe it is imperative to critically analyze them for any hegemonic values which would impede players' own autonomy (Nguyen, 2020) rather than exploring nuanced, sensitive, and critical discussion of topics that are rather overlooked for mechanical expertise.

Therefore, it is not only important to encourage diverse people of varying cultural backgrounds, ages, and genders to join the videogame industry, it is as important to develop games that welcome rather than exclude these individuals, to show they are not just a profit margin to be exploited and systemically represented by hegemonic gaming standards to the pleasure of the exploiters. Change must begin by developing these videogames, to break down the perpetuation of white supremacist values through the bias and stereotyping seen within mainstream AAA videogames and begin questioning these seemingly inherent characteristics of games right from the start of development.

In this thesis, I will explore how emotional affordances are a key factor to player interest and retention for videogames, and how current videogame design frameworks fail to address the emotional affordances of the medium. An explicit framework for looking at the emotional affordances of games, and how videogame developers can use these affordances to more carefully understand the representations they are perpetuating, is a beneficial resource for game design and game analysis. I call this framework ludo-emotional dissonance. It explores how embodiment and interactivity interact to create experiences that align with player

expectations, player experience, and designer intentions, leading to ludo-emotional consonance, or experiences that disrupt this relationship, leading to dissonance. This is a scalable framework which dynamically changes depending on, for example, the changing designer intentions, or based off of widespread or well-known paratextual devices, such as marketing campaigns. Thus, the point at which a game becomes dissonant may change depending on marketing scale, player experience, or the player themselves. The disruption of the consonant experience is not necessarily negative and can lead to dynamic, interesting, and emotionally nuanced pieces. This is not meant as a prescriptive solution, but rather the beginnings of a supplementary framework to fill in the specific emotional affordance gaps left by mainstream videogame design frameworks which asymmetrically exclude people of color, women, queer people, and those from minority backgrounds due to an emphasis on mechanics and gameplay and detachment of empathetic user experience design. As such the dissonance or consonance of an experience, whether unintentional or not, can themselves lead to a negative or positive experience for different players. As such, how players embody the roles within the videogame, mediated by the interactivity of the game, and their subsequent experience is one way in which ludo-emotional dissonance explores this space.

## Important considerations

As mentioned by Fron et al. (2007), my goal is not to call AAA game designers “insincere” as many of them are working to disrupt systems that are structurally against them from the inside, but to “call attention to the power structures that surround game technologies, game production and game consumption” (310). Ludo-emotional dissonance is not meant simply to “sell games” to underrepresented groups, but rather as a way to begin the empowerment revolution towards a diverse, open, and inclusive videogame industry - if ever a thing can be done within the current neoliberal, capitalist regime in which it currently exists; however, it is important to note that people of these underrepresented groups should not be the only ones to be doing the work towards this more diverse inclusion. Everyone needs to do the work. This framework is merely one possible step forward.

Additionally, as I have worked on my conceptualization of ludo-emotional dissonance and many of the inequalities seen within the Western mainstream videogame industry, and in Western society in general, I have also touched on many topics which are beyond the scope of my own experiences. I am a white, cis, heterosexual woman and as such my views and experiences are limited, but I hope through my work I am able to integrate and emphasize the

important work of scholars, game designers, and journalists who have lived experiences that I do not. As such I want to remember, as Russell (2020) states, that “we refuse the rhetoric of ‘inclusion’ and will not wait for this world to love us, to understand us, to make space for us. We will take up space, and break this world, making new ones,” (12 GLITCH SURVIVES chapter) which has been difficult when developing a framework which sits within an industry deeply embedded with capitalist society. There has been so much positive work done within the mainstream videogame industry, but there is still a lot of work to be done to disrupt its hegemonic foundations, and I thus advocate for further inclusion and diversity within the mainstream videogame industry not as a way for the world to make space for those outside of the hegemon, but to disrupt its neoliberal frameworks and to continue to rebuild a videogame industry which is based off of joy, queerness, lived experiences, and anti-imperialism.

Finally, the best thing that can be done is hire diverse game developers. Always. This framework is not meant as a way to sidestep the hiring of diverse voices within mainstream industry, but as a way to critically analyze the many principles which have been ingrained but unquestioned within mainstream design principles. It is not meant as a “diversity tool”, but rather as just one way to analyze the emotional complexity of videogames, where that emotional complexity comes from, and the ways that this complexity creates dissonant, consonant, negative, and positive emotional experiences. My hope is for it to be a better way to understand ourselves, understand our creations, and understand how white supremacist values have been continually perpetuated through mainstream videogame development.

## Outline of chapters

The first chapter of this work includes a review of the history of affective game design and its analysis. I focus on some of the wide-spread videogame design frameworks and their principles such as interactivity, player agency, ‘fun’, and more including looking at specific frameworks such as Ryan et al.’s (2006) player experience of need model and the mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics framework (Hunicke et al., 2004). Once this groundwork is developed I delve into: how harm has been perpetuated through mainstream games, thus creating a norm which has limited them around the concept of ‘fun’; how diverse games have been labeled as ‘empathetic’ games, thus revealing how even these games are developed for the hegemon; and, how privilege within game development has pushed out diverse and marginalized creators from large studios while also making it difficult for them to develop their own games without systemic change. Finally, I discuss the emotional affordances of videogames which sets the

groundwork for my ludo-emotional dissonance framework, as well as the work that has been done to resist the harm as norm seen within mainstream industry.

In my second chapter I discuss how I base the concept of ludo-emotional dissonance on the existing notions of ludo-narrative dissonance, and how I conceptualized ludo-emotional dissonance including framing it within aspects of current videogame development frameworks. Ludo-emotional dissonance consists of embodiment and interactivity, which I delve into including how these aspects interact, their relationship, and how they are used to determine if an experience is ludo-emotionally consonant or dissonant, including if the experience ends up being positive or negative for players.

Finally, my third chapter is a case study into *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017) and how its use of breaking genre conventions, paratextual use, and subversive agency disrupt the principles of mainstream videogame development while creating a ludo-emotionally dissonant experience which captivates and engages players.

# Chapter 1: A review and criticism of affective game design

Videogames have unique design challenges and consequences because of the non-trivial role of the player through elements such as interactivity. Videogames involve players, whether through puzzles, mechanics, or narrative, even when those videogames follow a pre established or linear path. This is because videogames position players as both observer-participants and actor-participants through unfolding stories and gameplay (Frome, 2007; Keogh, 2018). The ability to give players consequential choices and actions through the videogame experience gives game designers a wide range of emotional affordances which they use to create lasting emotional effects (Isbister, 2017).

Videogames are complicated pieces of software combining multiple elements of art, computer science, narrative, and design to create a unique player experience. Frameworks have been created to streamline the development of videogames in order to better engage players, understand player psychology, and unify the videogame experience through complimenting base rules and mechanics; however, these frameworks have largely been based on hegemonic principles established by dominant videogame publishers, companies, and voices. These frameworks attempt to reduce ludo-narrative dissonance and negative feelings of frustration, anger, and boredom manifesting from poorly defined mechanical systems<sup>1</sup> which are assumed to be related to poor player retention and poor player experience (Gilleade & Dix, 2004; Miller & Mandryk, 2016) which can in turn lead to poor company public views, and less social and monetary capital for videogame companies (Meer, 2010).

Successful, largely funded videogames cater to specific and hegemonic audiences. Because these games are proven to be successful through the narrow lens of its own audience, these types of games self-replicate into narrowly-defined genres of fun which continue to be well funded, such as the first-person shooter, while other types of videogames are more likely to be rejected by audience and publisher. This has limited the definition of 'videogame' within the mainstream and has pushed aside deeply personal, intimate experiences in favor of algorithmically and commercially successful products. The work of game studies as well as surrounding fields have historically and extensively critiqued these mainstream videogames for their repeatedly hegemonic ideals and disregard for diverse and marginalized audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Hunicke et al. (2004) and Ryan et al. (2006) are some such frameworks which I will be analyzing in further detail.

Despite recognition that players are “affective beings, motivated to action by a complex system of emotions,” (Ng et al. 2012, 688), I will delve into detail about how ‘fun’ is still, above all these, seen as the most important and yet most mercurial emotion that games *should* evoke in their players. Not only is fun valued above other emotions, it is limited to a fun that is designed by hegemonic, dominant voices *for* dominant audiences, which in turn limits who derives enjoyment and fun from these videogames.

I begin this chapter by going through a brief history of the development of videogame design frameworks and describe the prominent principles that have become synonymous with videogame development. I use this background to reveal the hegemonic nature of ‘fun’ and how ‘fun’ hides and distorts other evocative emotions that can be afforded and affective within videogames. In short, I will argue how these principles have obscured a more critical development and analysis of emotional affordances available within videogames. I then delve into the ludo-narratological affordances of videogames, and the scholastic history of analyzing these affordances. I use this history and the videogame design frameworks of mainstream game development as a jumping off point to discuss the critiques and disruptions of academics such as Kishonna L. Gray, David Leonard, Bo Ruberg, Mary Flanagan, and more. These disruptions are key to pushing back against the hegemonic discourses of ‘fun’, ‘games’, and emotional responses to videogames, and will be the foundation towards the development of my ludo-emotional dissonance framework.

## Methodology

I propose ludo-emotional dissonance as a framework to analyze games in which the player can embody emotional responses through their actions and role(s) within the game world. As such, questions that I asked while developing my conception of ludo-emotional dissonance include,

- Who creates “mainstream” videogames, and who are they created for? Why are certain trends - such as first person shooters, player-characters that are godly heroes, and personal agency - seen throughout so many mainstream videogames? How does the history of videogame design frameworks, cultural and sociological histories, and continued repeating of these principles develop a certain type of market and culture surrounding videogames?
- What are some of the main principles discussed and disseminated by current videogame design frameworks? How have they incorporated user experience design - more

specifically, emotional affordances - into their methods, and how has this still not been enough to break away from hegemonic designs? How do these design frameworks perpetuate rather than question hegemonic values?

- Why are some principles unquestioningly used as the basis for developing videogames? Why is fun, whether that be fun itself or through constructs of fun, the unquestioned end goal of videogames? Why are these ideas perpetuated?
- In what ways have academia critically analyzed these trends in commercial, mainstream, AAA videogames? How can this work be intertwined with the videogame design process to question current practices and norms? What is the embodied experience and how does this affect the player?
- How do players' emotions or emotional responses affect their videogame experience? How does the intertwining with ludological elements and emotional elements create either a consonant experience or one that leaves players feeling dissonant? Are there positives or negatives to both of these types of experiences?
- Why do games that fall outside the norms of mainstream videogames, such as *Octodad*, resonate with players so much? How and why do communities form around these unique, frustrating experiences?

Although I do not answer all the questions I list above, all of them informed my research and direction of framework development. The aspects that will compose my ludo-emotional dissonance framework include embodiment and interactivity.

**Embodiment** includes the player's ecological and narrative emotional responses to the videogame (Frome, 2007). Players produce the experience they play, which in turn produces the player which includes images, sounds, input, affordances of the playable body, social context, tastes, and competency are incorporated into the player and their embodied experience as they play through the videogame (Keogh, 2018). This dynamic assemblage is called "*player-and-videogame*" (Keogh 2018, 22) and is both shaped by the player and shapes the player in turn. Looking at the specific interaction between player and videogame to see how videogame performance emerges and alters the player as well as their affect will be an important aspect of ludo-emotional dissonance. This can include aspects such as the role of the playable character, how the player-as-character interacts with the videogame world, and the emotional responses that are associated with these actions.

**Interactivity** includes the player's ecological and game emotional responses to the videogame (Frome, 2007). Despite the insistence on increasing amounts of interactivity and player agency within mainstream videogames - as can be seen with the open, non-linear worlds of games such as *Elden Ring* (2022) and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) - sometimes increased interactivity can reduce the amount of emotional connection players feel with the videogame-artwork (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020). It is important to analyze the interplay between levels of interactivity and emotional nuance when discussing feelings of ludo-emotional dissonance. This includes the role that players take while interacting with the videogame both as actor-participants and observer-participants. Some examples of interactivity include the controls players interact with, levels of frustration, and amount of 'agency' conveyed through interactivity.

The games I will be analyzing are single-player games to avoid the more complex, player-to-player driven emotional responses from multiplayer games (Frome, 2007). My focus is on Western-centric and Western developed videogames as analyzing trends throughout global game development is outside of the scope of this project. Additionally, my experience primarily draws from my Western-centric upbringing as well as Western-centric research; thus, I limit my project within the scope of my own expertise. I further narrowed my lens of analysis to games which evoked strong emotional reactions while I was playing them, whether through narrative elements, mechanics, or a mixture of both. Thus I include extended discussions on *Octodad* (2010), *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), and an in-depth case study of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017).

The result of my work is both a qualitative analysis and a framework to analyze the interplay between ludo-narratological elements of games and their emotional affordances. Any form of quantitative data analysis such as interviews, surveys, focus testing, analysis of further videogames, or discussion of games/industry outside of the Western game development sphere, was outside the scope of this work.

## Definitions

As my research is heavily focused on videogames and their emotional affordances I define what a "videogame" is as well as some of the key terms used in the field such as "gameplay", "mechanics", and "player experience". I also define "emotions" within the context of their use and their affordances within videogames, which requires medium-specific usage of the term.

Finally, I introduce my conceptualization of the “hegemon” based on the context in which I write this work.

## Games and facets

“**Videogames**” or more simply “**games**” as defined by Sicart (2011), who draws upon the work of other game scholars such as Caillois, Jesper, and Salen and Zimmerman, defines games or “game systems” in part as

*...designed systems, rules and procedures that create a ludic experience... The rules forming the ontological structure of the game are not only the obvious rules of the game (what is right and wrong, how to win), but also the rules of the simulation: what the world is capable of, and how the player can manipulate it and inhabit it. (35, 36)*

I include Ulbricht’s (2021) work to expand this definition to consider the agency and ability of the player:

*All games are instructions for action—and not the action itself. Our common usage grounds this meaning: Game designers create objects to play—not play itself. And games as objects contain rules that regulate activities—and are not the activities themselves. (4)*

In summary, **videogames** are the systems, rules, and procedures defined by computational systems which players interact with to create ‘play’; the videogames themselves are not play, but inform the kind of play experience for the player by what is included in its logic, its conditions, as well as what is ignored. For example, a survival crafting game may include inventory management which defines prioritization as a part of its play. This mechanic may not be implemented in a role-playing game, which instead focuses on combat and narrative development.

I use a combination of Hunicke et al.’s (2004) “Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics” (MDA) framework as well as Zubeck’s (2020) updated MDA work to define some common videogame terminology which I will be using throughout my analysis:

**Mechanics** - the actions that players take within the game. Mechanics define the components and rules of how players interact within the videogame world. They can be assembled into systems which interact with each other to create more complicated dynamics.

**Gameplay** - most simply, gameplay refers to the ways in which mechanics interact with and react to player input and lead to specific player behaviors in the game. Zubeck (2020) calls out

the “reactive, dynamic nature of the game” (1 Elements chapter) and how the interplay of machine-defined rules and player interference and reaction creates “gameplay”.

**Aesthetics**, or, **player experience** - the players’ overall subjective experience based on their gameplay. Player experience can be interpreted as the players’ emotional responses as evoked by the videogame, whether intentioned and desirable or not. These experiences are informed by gameplay which players enact through mechanics.

Finally, since a large portion of my focus is on mainstream videogame design frameworks, the videogame trends these frameworks perpetuate, and their shortfalls, I define “**commercial**”, “**mainstream**” or “**AAA**” **videogames** according to a modified definition taken from Gamespot (2006) about “What Makes Games Mainstream?”. This article contains the subjective thoughts of game journalists on what makes games mainstream. I use this source as game journalists are informed by videogame trends, sales, game designers, as well as consumer thoughts to better understand what a “mainstream” videogame may look like. I also add my own considerations for what makes a videogame “mainstream” as “commercial” videogames have specific monetary implications.

- *Accessibility* - or more appropriately, “approachability”. This is how easily players can learn to play a game. Aspects of approachability include games that are suitable for large ranges of audiences, have an approachable user interface and controls, and have themes that are appealing. I modify this definition to include the caveat that what could be seen as “intuitive” for many gamers are only that way because they are already aware of gameplay intricacies, systems, and technologies (Keogh, 2018). Therefore, I argue that consistency with videogame control norms is a part of mainstream approachability.
- *Sales* - which includes popularity of sales, longevity of sales, longevity of the videogame’s stay in the cultural zeitgeist, and how the videogame influences future videogame trends. Commercial success through a large sales volume is the goal for products released by mainstream videogame companies. Many companies cancel projects midway through production due to current financial losses, a perceived lack of future sales, or by the project’s perceived risk level (Taylor-Hill, 2023).
- *Level of difficulty* - which consists of being able to appeal to a large audience that includes “hard core” or “casual” gamers, who both have different needs when it comes to

the level of challenge they require. A balance of game vision and approachability concerns such as different levels of difficulty in-game, a ramping curve of difficulty that rewards new players to encourage them to keep playing, and familiarity with the “real world” may appeal more to large-scale audiences. The *Dark Souls* series (2011 - 2018), although popular now, was for a long time a niche subgenre due to its level of difficulty, unforgiving tutorials, and required prerequisite game knowledge.

- *Quality* - which encompasses the nebulous concept of what makes a game “good”. According to Gamespot, the concept of “good” encompasses intuitive controls, polished mechanics, and interesting gameplay. Innovation also breeds quality within mainstream videogames as innovative games tend to stand out more and sell better.
- *Budget* - which includes the budget and team size surrounding mainstream videogames; generally, commercial studios with proven success and strong IPs will have larger teams and larger budgets than independent projects, including being publicly traded with a board of directors to adhere to, leading to the moniker of “AAA” games. This is possibly the deciding factor in terms of “mainstream-ness” within the commercial videogame space. I do not include games which are developed by smaller, independent studios but receive publisher funding in my definition of mainstream.

Thus, a game like *Call of Duty: Vanguard* (2021) would be considered a mainstream videogame due its development by a large studio<sup>2</sup> whereas *Celeste* (2018), although of high quality and high sales, did not have a large commercial studio behind it, making it an independent or ‘indie’ game. These components of mainstream games are narrowly defined by their success as well as appeal to specific audiences to increase sales. This reveals the capitalistic intent behind many videogame development and creation decisions; for example, due to its high monetary success, the *FIFA* game series released yearly by Electronic Arts (1993 - present) continues to be developed despite low player ratings and minimal changes to actual gameplay. Historically, as studios reach large levels of commercial success, there has necessarily been a reduction in the ability for individual team members to tell their own stories in games due to the team or studio size and continued pressure to be commercially successful, whether from publishers or to keep the company afloat. Both the individual team members and the audience end up exploited by this capitalistic framework.

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<sup>2</sup> Sledgehammer Games, a studio whose parent company is Activision at the time of writing.

## Videogame emotions

I use Frome's (2007) categorizations of videogame emotional generation as the basis for the types of "**emotions**" I discuss. Frome (2007) notes that his model is not exhaustive or predictive of the emotions that videogames can generate, and that it does not describe "every possible emotion that we might have in any situation," (831). My work also recognizes that every player will have their own unique experience with a videogame as an artifact due to their cultural background, sociological context, and so on (Frome, 2007). Creating a comprehensive model of emotion is impossible (Frome, 2007), and I rather want to look at how specific definitions relating to different aspects of emotions within videogame play can help facilitate discussion around the intricacies of their emotional affordances. Frome (2007) defines **emotions** as

*...any type of response to stimuli that has a phenomenological "feeling" associated with it and which is designed to encourage an organism's well-being... This is not to say that emotions always lead to actions which contribute to our well-being in a given situation, only that they are constructed to do this in general. (832)*

For example, Frome (2007) describes how the feelings associated with anger may, overall, benefit us because it influences us to act a certain way towards people who have made us angry. I expand this definition to incorporate Bo Ruberg's (2015) work in "no-fun" games. This would allow for the breadth of emotions including frustration, anger, and boredom to be their own meaningful experiences within videogames.

Thus, my definition of **emotions** will be simplified to "any type of response to stimuli that has a phenomenological "feeling" associated with it," (Frome 2007, 832). Furthermore, there are certain types of emotions that Frome (2007) describes being elicited through videogames:

- *Game* emotions are competitive emotions such as winning, losing, achievement, and frustration (ibid, 832). These are also elicited from watching a game, such as professional E-sports or watching your friend on the couch, and are social emotions when playing in a group.
- *Narrative* emotions relate to the characters, setting, and events within a videogame (ibid, 832) such as sadness due to a NPC death, joy of completing a narrative arc, or empathy for the struggles that the player-character or NPCs encounter. Frome (2007) claims that these emotions are the most common when we are interacting with art no matter the medium.

- *Artifact* emotions are aesthetic evaluations of a work as an artifact (ibid, 832). This includes how the story or content is represented. Frome (2007) gives the examples of game length, artistic and technological fidelity, and user interface interactions; for example, players commenting that “the game was the right length for the story” or “the art of the game was beautiful” reveal some positive artifact responses.
- *Ecological* emotions “are generated when a player responds to a videogame in much the same way she responds to the real world,” (ibid, 833). For example, although we may know we cannot be physically harmed in real life by enemies within a videogame, we may still jump up in surprise at a jumpscare (Frome, 2007).

Although these categories help to describe the various aspects of videogames that create an embodied player experience, it is difficult to describe any of these separately from each other or other aspects of the videogame (Keogh, 2018). For example, it is difficult to determine how separated narrative and artifact emotions really are, as the artistic fidelity of a videogame may determine how players engage with the story. Keogh (2018) argues that the videogame itself is an amalgam of its various parts, and thus should be evaluated as such rather than as separated components. These categories are therefore a grounding point for what emotions are or could be in relation to playing videogames, but I focus on a more holistic emotional experience in relation to Keogh’s (2018) embodiment work. I will in part use Frome’s (2007) ecological emotions and narrative emotions to describe the embodiment of players as they are immersed within the game world, and ecological emotions and game emotions to describe the interactivity aspect of my ludo-emotional dissonance framework.

Finally, an important aspect of emotions and emotional affordances of games are the types of roles the player takes on. Players are observer-participants, where they engage with the piece but do not change it, thus engaging with the work through their own observations; they are also actor-participants, where they engage and manipulate the work directly and their understanding of the piece comes from interaction (Frome, 2007; Keogh, 2018). I use both of these roles as key elements to my definition and exploration of ludo-emotional dissonance.

## Social structures

I adopt Gray’s (2014) definition of hegemony from her work *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* which she adopts from Gramsci (1971). Hegemony is “...an ideology, most often understood as “common sense” or “natural” that

constitutes a form of cleverly masked, taken-for-granted domination,” (Gray 2014, 7). It is a cyclical reproduction of dominant ideologies by those that hold those dominant views. This is done through cultural institutions which impede those with “little power to negotiate or even voice alternate stories defining and shaping their existence” (7). Importantly, hegemony is not forced upon, but is given its power through consent from dominated groups - thus, law does not create hegemonic structures (Gray, 2014; Cross, 2014). They are rather perpetuated through cultural and social structures which appear as informal but oppressive (Cross 2014).

To generalize my concept of ludo-emotional dissonance and create a clear distinction between the general hegemonic forces that prescribe commercial, economic, and societal, cultural, and structural trends, I will be using the term “**hegemon**” to describe those within the dominant group to which I am referring. However, I will also be referring to many specific examples of such hegemonic forces within Western social structures, and thus will be more specific in these regards to white supremacy, its related hegemonic enmeshment, as well as the hegemony of the Western video game industry built upon and consisting of primarily white, cis, heteronormative men.

## A brief overview of affective game design

Videogame design frameworks have been developed to create a streamlined system for both development and analysis of videogames within mainstream industry. Because of the variability within and between videogames, it is difficult if not impossible to completely design frameworks that properly encapsulate both the entire development process and the subsequent analysis of the player experience. For example, a common vocabulary for what seem to be core parts of videogames such as “quests”, “mechanics”, and “aesthetics” still vary widely between videogames and their designers (Yu et al., 2020; Zubeck, 2020).

Many seminal mainstream videogames, such as *Duke Nukem* (1991), *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (1987), and *Doom* (1993) have been developed and within mainstream culture *recognized* as developed by the hegemon. Despite interest in videogames by diverse producers and audiences, and wider access to videogame technologies, Kolko (2000) describes the growing awareness that technological interfaces “carry the power to prescribe representative norms and patterns, constructing a self-replicating and exclusionary category of ‘ideal’ user, one that... is a definitely white user,” (218). Because of the historical construction surrounding videogame development as “masculine”, principles of “technological competency, formal virtuosity, and systems literacy” (Keogh 2018, 180-181) have been favored

and ingrained into discourse, creating an ideal user that is young, white, cis, male, and heterosexual and which reflects this demographic's continued majority in the Western game industry (Dym et al., 2018). This reflects an ideal user who craves "reassuring norms and escapist violence" which companies continue to actively cater to (Tucker, 2019). Gray (2020) states that these normative patterns are prominent within digital gaming culture; the social dynamics of these spaces situate a player's positionality in relation to the "default" white male user. Thus certain audiences of games, assumed to be reflective of their designers, have been historically and hegemonically considered "default" or normative gamers while "under white patriarchy, bodies - selves - that cannot be defined with clarity by the 'primary gaze', are pushed from the center," (Russell 2020, 01 Glitch Refuses).

In an attempt to create games that interest and engage normative gamers, mainstream videogame frameworks have been shaped towards a focus on user experience and the affective affordances of videogames. As defined in human-computer interaction (HCI), "affective" design supports the "emotional and mental communication between the user and their environment," (Ng et al. 2012, 687). Thus, affective gaming is meant to minimize frustration by adapting to the player's emotional responses and creating challenges that are enjoyable, but not to the point of frustration and thus abandonment (Ng et al., 2012). As Nguyen (2020) describes in his book *Games: Agency as Art* this means creating struggle or, historically, conflict by designating game goals which are reached through mechanics within the "practical" environment. Players will ideally become absorbed within this conflict by taking on a temporary, altered agency and goals. In this sense, an affective videogame will ensure that the rules and mechanics with which the player is interacting will reduce frustration and will induce pleasurable challenges (Ng et al. 2012).

With the rise of the mainstream AAA videogame studios seen today such as Bethesda, Activision Blizzard, and Electronic Arts also came the rise of many independent game studios and creators. In opposition to mainstream games trends, independent games have introduced a much wider variety of gameplay, genres, and narratives within the videogame space. For example, *Celeste* (2018) represents a mix of challenging 2D platforming while also reflecting on creator Maddy Thorson's inner difficulties of gender identity discovery through its player-character, Celeste's, experiences of battling her own self (Thorson, 2020). Despite the wide variety of indie games, the experiences they share, and their increasing success (Bruce, 2022), the limited definition of affective gaming has led to a mainstream industry "standard" which inherently perpetuates the hegemonic empire of violence, stereotyping, and exclusion

that has been seen for a large part of its history and which has been slow to change. Through opposing prescriptive mainstream industry norms and independent development, “game designers are, in effect, moulding out social milieu and the way we build ties with one another, as well as shaping how we see ourselves,” (Isbister 2017, 70). As Fron et al. (2007) describe in their article “The Hegemony of Play”, the exclusionary mainstream industry has narrowed the definition and development of both what “play” and “player” entail, defended by the cyclical wisdom that the design of such games is driven by the demand for them. The lack of acknowledgement of the affective power and emotional representations within videogames can create a repetitive, hegemonic, excluding environment, continuing to perpetuate stereotypes and trauma (Flanagan, 2009; Gray, 2014).

Many videogame design frameworks - especially those used actively in industry, such as the PENS model (Ryan et al., 2006) - tend to leave out nuanced emotional affordances in favor of more rigid design principles that focus on mechanics, increased interactivity, and player agency. Chris Crawford – a pioneer within the videogame development industry – wrote one of the first books on videogame design, *The Art of Computer Game Design* (1984) with much of his seminal work being uncritically perpetuated throughout other videogame design frameworks. Crawford’s influence is seen throughout works such as the mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics (MDA) approach developed by Hunicke, Leblanc, and Zubeck (2004), Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) work, Koster’s (2004) *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, and Ryan et al.’s (2006) PENS model to name just a few. From these works I have developed a summary of some of the most prominent design points seen throughout the history of videogame frameworks, their use within the mainstream industry, and their continued adoption into mainstream videogames. In turn, I also show what has been left *unsaid* or *underdeveloped*. I describe: indirect authorial intent, game aesthetic ‘unity’, games as vessels for fun, simplification of reality, interactivity, conflict as prime game interaction, ‘intuitive’ controls, flow or challenge without frustration, immersion, and I further explore player experience being key to a ‘sellable’ game.

*Indirect authorial intent.* It is clear that videogames, with their interactive and participatory nature, only allow so much authorial control or even intent over the final player experience. Rather than creating a direct experience, the game designer develops the systems and structures the player interacts with (Crawford, 1984; Nguyen, 2020). All possible interactions, interpretations, and actions must be taken into account when creating the game experience. This end player experience and its impact surpasses the initial authorial intent; the game

designer's intentions are irrelevant and overshadowed by how they implemented the elements of their videogame (Zubeck, 2020). This holds for both narrative and mechanical interpretations.

*Game aesthetic 'unity'*. A dominant principle within mainstream videogame development is the unity between videogame elements such as rules, mechanics, gameplay, and challenge. According to this principle, players may feel disconnected or lose their immersion if there are aesthetic differences between game aspects such as tone, mechanics, and narrative. Hunicke et al.'s (2004) mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics (MDA) approach to videogame development and analysis takes both a top down and bottom up approach to analyze how designers create mechanics which are combined into a gameplay experience leading to an aesthetic response from players, and how players affect a certain aesthetic through gameplay and mastery of mechanics; however, the MDA approach does not critically examine how aesthetics emotionally affect players, and rather emphasizes how mechanics should be integrated into this "unified" aesthetic. Crawford (1984) warns against additions to games which may disrupt the "unity" of the main game design in order to better immerse the player.

*Games as vessels for fun*. Ryan et al. (2006) claim that "there's no argument that the goal of games is to have fun," (3). Schell (2008) additionally defines fun as "pleasure with surprises," (26). Crawford (1984) states that games must have clearly defined goals for the player experience beyond having it be 'fun'; fun is felt when the videogame creates fantasies which elicit crafted emotions within players. Additionally, Koster (2004) claims that fun in games arises from mastery and that solving puzzles, learning, and mastering the mechanical systems create fun experiences. A major motivator, and thus fan factor, for players is the positive reward outcomes and signals which indicate learning and knowledge acquisition (Alexander, 2012). Koster (2004), Schell (2008), Ryan et al. (2006), and Ng et al. (2012) claim that a game is pointless if it does not elicit positive emotions, and most specifically 'fun', for its players. Thus, the best games are those that introduce enough variables to keep players engaged and interested without becoming repetitive or boring (Koster, 2004). Hunicke et al. (2004) specifies eight types of aesthetics - sensation, fantasy, narrative, challenge, fellowship, discovery, expression, and submission - to guide game designers towards a more grounded game goal, in turn emotionally investing the player. Hunicke et al. (2004) claim that videogame designers can distill certain player emotions through mechanics and dynamics - such as creating a feeling of "challenge" from time limits and competitive play. In summary, game goals are meant to be guides towards eliciting positive emotions within players and to help game designers "find the fun" within their games, traditionally in mechanical and gameplay systems (Koster, 2004; Schell,

2008). Even other positive emotions, such as elation, curiosity, and bravery are generally distilled into the more nebulous form of 'fun'.

*Simplification of reality, or game focus.* Games must be simplified or fantastical representations, as direct modeling of reality is impossible. As Hunicke et al. (2004) state, "reality isn't always fun," and therefore should not necessarily be a priority of game design due to the emphasis that game experiences *should* be fun. Rather, the focus becomes creating fun and clear agential goals through simplified mechanics, objectives, and controls (Nguyen, 2020). Therefore, game designers must decide what to include in their videogames and what must be excluded. These restrictions include anything from environments, player interactions, mechanics, and narrative story beats which "unify" towards the focus of the videogame. Koster (2004) states that complicated games are not necessarily "better" games, and that they should be placed within the same contextual environment as other human endeavors. Thus, mechanics must be meaningful towards what experience the game is trying to fulfill, such as nuanced resource management for strategy games, and simple inventory management for RPGs (Crawford, 1984). Because of this simplification, Crawford (1984) argues that conflict is simplified and exaggerated into direct and intense violence; violence "is common in games because it is the most obvious and natural expression of conflict," (13-14). Although violence is not a necessary game mechanic, the prevalence and popularity of first person shooters which glorify the violence of war and killing, as well as the simplification of the 'enemy' into stereotypical representations of other cultures, is just one example of the legacy of violence within games, as well as hegemonic forces such as the American military using games to their advantage for recruitment and training (Shaban, 2013) representing a "symbiotic relationship between entertainment industries and militaristic interests," (Keogh 2013, para. 3). This relationship insidiously represents a "technologically mediated representation and execution of war", desensitizing players while advancing "a joint myth of the West's technological and ethical superiority over a distanced enemy combatant reduced to a pixelated other," (Keogh 2013, para. 3).

*Interactivity - ie. player agency - is key to enjoyable gameplay.* Many videogame design frameworks describe how crucial interactivity, agency, and autonomy is to player interest as it gives players the opportunity to fulfill their greatest power fantasies (Crawford, 1984; Zubeck, 2020). Both Koster (2004) and Salen and Zimmerman (2004) contend that the act of playing a game in itself means "making choices and taking actions" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, Meaning and Play in Chapter 3: Meaningful Play). Crawford (1984) further states that the impact of

interactivity within “excellent” games is the emotional significance of the interactions. The more options given to the player, and the more ability the player has to flex their power over the narrative, the “better” the game; story-rich, linear games “do not” leverage the capabilities of the medium to their full extent, supposedly creating a less fulfilling player experience (Crawford, 1984; Ryan et al., 2006). However, this does not take into account player competency - for example, a less interactive game could be more immersive for players that have less fine motor skills or who do not have experience with videogames (Bell et al., 2018) - or authorial intent, and how a well developed narrative could be more important for players than their own efficacy<sup>3</sup>. A part of player agency is the role the player has within the videogame. This includes amoral, fantastical, heroic, or powerful embodiments, allowing players to act in ways that may be socially unacceptable or unattainable in “real life” (Crawford 1984). Zubeck (2020) further argues that the choice of setting or context when designing a videogame is important as this influences player feelings about the whole game.<sup>4</sup>

*Conflict as prime game interaction.* Crawford’s (1984) contention that conflict is a key element to good videogames still persists within the mainstream game industry varying from direct, violent conflict as seen in games like the *Call of Duty* franchise (2003 - present), to conflict arising from domination and control, such as the *Civilization* series (1991 - present). Conflict stems from any obstacles, especially dynamic and responsive obstacles, that may arise before a player can reach their goal (Crawford, 1984). Many game designers and scholars claim that videogames can theoretically create a ‘safe’ way to explore psychological experiences such as danger and conflict (Crawford, 1984; Flanagan, 2009). Crawford (1984) argues that “nice” games, ones that focus on cooperation and strip away any conflict, are not popular and therefore are not enjoyed as much as games with conflict. According to Crawford (1984), to remove conflict is to remove a core essence of games. Despite the wide variety and popularity of indie games which reject hegemonic conflict or reimagine it, conflict as it is widely known is hegemonically present within videogame design standards. Violent conflict is still prevalent within many popular games and

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<sup>3</sup> *The Quarry* (2022) is an interactive horror game with a strong emphasis on its characterizations and the importance of player decision on the outcome of its nine main characters. The game has been praised for its decision making and 186 possible endings (Wallace, 2022) while also being criticized that the expanse of the narrative playspace leads to an unsatisfying amount of closure over its story and character outcomes (Sarnowski, 2022). Despite the high level of player agency over narrative outcomes, some still see this ‘interactivity’ as quite limited (Wallace, 2022) either because of the small amount of varying mechanics or the lack of physical difficulty performing those mechanics. This is just one example of how complicated interactivity is and how a more interactive experience does not necessarily mean a “better” one.

<sup>4</sup> Interactivity and player agency, especially in relation to videogames, are complicated topics which I delve into more in Chapter 2: Ludo-Emotional Dissonance.

franchises - this can be seen with the prevalence of *Grand Theft Auto Online* (2013), the *Battlefield* series (2002 - present), and the popularity of the battle royale genre such as *PUBG: Battlegrounds* (2017). Even games that are cartoonish still perpetuate violence and dominance as major themes such as *Crash Bandicoot* (1996), the *Pokémon* series (1996 - present), and *The Legend of Zelda* series (1986 - present). However, despite Crawford's (1984) emphasis on exaggerated violence as well as its use and normalization in many mainstream videogames still seen today, players do not necessarily desire violence even when they like videogames with violence in them (Ryan et al., 2006). By manipulating the level of violence through narrative and gameplay while keeping the rest of the videogame experience the same, Ryan et al. (2006) found that lowering the level of violence did not lessen enjoyment of the game, but rather that violence "did detract from the interest value of many players who were turned off by violent premises," (20) which brings into question the emphasis on violence and conflict in videogames and videogame design frameworks.

*'Intuitive' controls.* Many videogame design frameworks emphasize controls which are "intuitive" to players (Crawford, 1984; Ryan et al., 2006). Despite a lack of a definitive definition for "intuitive" controls, or who these controls are "intuitive" for, there is an emphasis on how controls that lack any "real world" equivalent require special consideration to translate onto mouse and keyboard or game controllers (Crawford, 1984; Keogh, 2018). Extra care is required from game designers to ensure that system information, player inputs, and controls are properly understood, easy to communicate, and "make sense" to players through system feedback (Crawford, 1984). Thus difficulty should come from the challenge of the game - how the mechanics are used by the player within the rules of the game to overcome obstacles - and not inherently from the controls, which can lead to player frustration. This work has been further developed by Keogh (2018) to describe the inherent biases and exclusions of videogame controls. Since they have been developed for a specific group of "gamers", others who wish to begin playing games are disadvantaged by their lack of preexisting knowledge of "standard" game controls.

*Flow, or challenge without frustration.* Challenges within games should be unrelated to controls or instructions and should be balanced so they are "engaging" for players without reaching the point of frustration (Ng et al., 2012). Ryan et al. (2006) argue that "the most well established principle in game design is the need to provide players with challenges that draw them into engaging gameplay," (7). Players should feel that any errors made within the game are from their own developing skills and not from an unbalanced, unfair, or unengaging experience; thus,

the game is winnable without being *too* easy to win (Crawford, 1984). In this sense, games with more variables and thus more complicated mechanics provide more challenges which prolong periods of fun (Koster, 2004). “Flow” in relation to videogames describes balancing challenge without excessive frustration to generate positive player affect. Flow itself is “a state of concentration, deep enjoyment, and total absorption in an activity,” (Ng et al. 2012, 689). When players are in a state of flow, they are in a state of positive emotional mastery as well as learning; a state where players feel challenged but also have the assurance that they will be able to accomplish their goal (Michailidis et al., 2018). It is also a state of control, agency, and dominance.

*Immersion.* Players will ignore the artificial nature of virtual worlds to fulfill their desire for an immersive play experience (Keogh, 2018) which game designers strive to produce through the creation of a “diegetic, coherent, frameless world that [players] can step into and leave the ‘real’ world behind,” (Keogh 2018, 33). Narrative immersion, spatial-temporal immersion, and ludic immersion - that is, immersion through the simulation and mechanics of the game (Bell et al. 2018) - are all examples of immersion within videogames. Being able to shift the player’s attention fully to game activities and interactions, and for these interactions to be pleasurable, can create a strong immersive experience for players (Bell et al., 2018). One such example of total immersion within games is the embodiment that players take on as their player-character, also called “spatial presence” (Michailidis et al., 2018). For example, Burden and Gouglas (2012) describe that the (im)mersion between the player and the player-character, Chell, within *Portal* (2007) is “sufficient that players never realize that Chell is an intermediary between the game’s actor and themselves. Chell’s lack of backstory and her silence throughout the game fosters this identification”. Ryan et al. (2006) have also consistently found a strong connection between controls feeling ‘intuitive’ and a heightened feeling of immersion, although they do not explicitly define what ‘intuitive controls’ are. Thus immersion is a connection of body and mind, mediated by interaction with the videogame (Keogh, 2018).

*Player experience must be key to a ‘sellable’ game.* Commercial, AAA videogames are products meant to sell, create revenue, and create social and monetary capital for studios and publishers. In order to be commercially successful, videogames must be “fun”, “enjoyable”, and “engaging”, or at least promise as much to their players. Recent work on affective game design has focused on the user experience and how the user interacts with the videogame’s systems, how well the systems convey to the player what they are meant to do, and how best to capture the user experience to make the game “fun” for them. This focus has shifted past not only what issues

arise, such as bugs, but also why these issues are happening through player mental models, playtests, usability tests, and player interviews.

## Use of player experience and playtesting

Increased research in human-computer interaction and the analysis of videogames as artifacts has led to more interest in player experience research; it has thus become important to playtest with real users and integrate findings during the design process to increase usability (Ng et al., 2012). By integrating feedback from diverse, representative players, game designers have a better understanding of the reasons players interact with their games whether for aesthetic appreciation, mechanical challenge, or other reasons. This can also uncover reasons why players are *not* interacting with the game such as hegemonic cultural ignorance, lack of proper tutorials, or unclear controls.

Videogames are usually playtested by users who are unaware of what the final product is *meant* to be. With the growing field of games user research (GUR), researchers who are somewhat removed from the direct development of the game tease out player insights without biasing playtesters in the process. This blind eye can reveal to game designers any hidden bugs within their code, and how players *actually* interact with their work in contrast to the game designers' intended player experience (Dealessandri, 2021). Playtesting has become an iterative process meant to capture the player's flow through the game as well as any unseen issues with mechanics and interactions. These results are then used to inform further videogame development. This process is not meant for redesigning or restructuring overall game goals from player opinion; rather, game designers develop a balance between iterative game design from player experiences, while also understanding what their game goal is and refining it (Dealessandri, 2021).

Crawford (1984) suggests that playtesters should already be knowledgeable and understand how game systems work. This process has been broadened over time to include general consumers of videogames, but targeting of specific populations has also become a standard GUR practice. Different audiences are needed for different types of questions, and while this is not inherently "good" or "bad" it does reveal how different populations view problems or games, as well as how game development goes about getting those insights. For example, when testing a game like *Apex Legends* (2019), researchers may want to recruit players who have never played the game before to try out the tutorial, but may want to recruit

experienced players to test out new legends because this requires more knowledge about how new characters will interact with pre-existing legends.

However, the gatekeeping of playtesters that can give “good” suggestions still remains as there is the assumption that consumers of games will already have an understanding of videogame controls and mechanics, or genre knowledge. Players may also self-select and thus not sign up for playtesting opportunities because they do not view themselves as “gamers” or because of interactions with videogame culture which have alienated them. This calls into question how much of this feedback is cyclically appealing to the same audiences, who in turn have games that are designed towards their own interests, limiting the development of new game ideas and revealing the designer biases of assumed consumer-driven demand that Fron et al. (2007) explored in “The Hegemony of Play”.

## The PENS model as a case study for prescriptive game development frameworks

Rather than creating a product without any directional player input, frameworks have been developed in order to predict player experience indicators during development. Zubeck (2020) describes how it is assumed that videogames are created for players to play - that they are *inherently* user-centered - and that “...if games are created for players, we must take players and their experience into account from the beginning. The player must be at the front and center of our design process,” (1 Elements chapter). Again, the question must be asked about which audiences are being appealed to, known nebulously here as the “player”.

Ryan et al.’s (2006) player experience of need (PENS) model sets out to measure and understand the player experience, meaningful play, and fun based on self-determination theory (SDT). SDT is a psychological framework which argues that all humans have a natural, inherent inclination towards psychological growth, internalization, and well-being, which we are intrinsically motivated towards once we satisfy three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Van de Broeck et al., 2016). Once these three needs are met, we are more inclined towards autonomous forms of motivation and well-being. PENS claims that it is “a more detailed and precise model of “fun” and player satisfaction that provides both heuristic value to developers as they seek to design games to achieve specific goals, as well as analytic value in evaluating games both within and across genres,” (2). The main supposition of the PENS model is to develop specific links between psychological principles of engagement with game features and controls that are optimized towards marketing and player consumption.

It is based off of three psychological principles – competence, autonomy, and relatedness – which are analyzed across three game components: game mechanics which includes the user interface (UI), gameplay which includes the moment to moment activity and content that the player experiences in the game, and player narrative which refers to the development of the player’s character over time including metagame elements, such as gamescore.

Competence is mastery over the game whether through narrative, mechanics, or overcoming challenges and avoiding feelings of ineffectiveness (Ryan et al., 2006). According to the model, ineffectiveness decreases player motivation and creates a negative psychological impact, which implies that negative emotional responses should be avoided as much as possible. According to the PENS model, videogames satisfy players’ need for intrinsic competence over challenges more “directly” and “immediately” than “real” life (8) which equates to the design principle of “challenge without frustration”, creating a sense of flow. Autonomy relates to power regarding player choices, decisions, and actions. Ryan et al. (2006) claim that “choices that are forced upon us don’t count and are actually demotivating” (11) including cutscenes, the “illusion of choice”, or any activity which deprives players of the freedom to shape their experiences for themselves. Relatedness refers to “the intrinsic desire to connect with others in a way that feels authentic and supportive” (13) which is prevalent in social games such as MMORPGs and within single player games through non-player character (NPC) interactions. Ryan et al. (2006) emphasize that NPCs who are saved or conquered by the player strongly increase their feelings of relatedness.

The PENS model takes many of the key principles of videogame development frameworks and packages them up neatly into three principles to be followed for a commercially successful game. As they describe, these principles are meant to develop games that will be commercially successful revealing the strong underlying intent for mainstream, AAA games to be vehicles for capitalistic gains. However, SDT itself has issues including the supposed universality of it; few studies have been done on SDT within non individualistic cultures, calling into question the importance of relatedness versus autonomy in these contexts, as well as the fact that the absence of positive outcomes or satisfaction does not necessarily imply a presence of negative outcomes or frustration (Van de Broeck, 2016). These limitations reveal the lack of universality of the PENS model and as I have outlined, I use the PENS model as a case study of the inherent hegemonic, prescriptive nature of videogame design frameworks and how games should be constructed to create “meaningful” or “engaging” experiences for players without questioning the fundamental principles that the videogame industry is built on. That is,

“the fantasies of twisted [teenage male] computer-nerd minds,” (Crawford 1984, 80) and which fails to address the nuance of the medium as an emotional, artistic form. The focus on competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which can be translated to domination and mastery over mechanics and narrative, as well as the emphasis on categorizations of “fun” (Hunicke et al., 2004), ends up limiting what counts as legitimate forms of videogames. Again, these limitations alienate marginalized and diverse players and creators. I now delve into the hegemonic way that these principles have created a singular type of valid “fun” and the limiting ways in which these game definitions have erased the deeper emotional capacity and nuance of videogames.

### A hegemony of “fun”

There is a strong emphasis on mechanics, gameplay, and player motivations within videogame development frameworks; however, the emphasis of these design principles tend to lean on a few core emotions. “Fun”, although not describing any specific emotion, tends to be the overall goal of “good” game design (Koster, 2004; Schell, 2008; Ng et al., 2012; Ruberg, 2015). This has led to the assumption that games are *supposed* to be fun, “and that the ‘right’ way to play, the normal way to play, is to maximize normative enjoyment,” (Ruberg 2015, 109). Negative emotions such as frustration over a particularly challenging obstacle are only seen as steps to success and in turn “fun”; however, these nuanced emotions could be explored and developed in their own right. For example, *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017) combines a difficult set of mechanics with steep punishments as any one wrong move could land players at the beginning of the game, leading to an incredibly frustrating experience, but one that players have actively engaged with since its release, with around 2.7 million players trying out the game in 2017 (Wood, 2017). The exclusion of games like *Getting Over It* within the consideration of “good” videogames leads to a hegemonic idea of what “fun” is, who should be having fun, and for whom that fun is designed.

Hegemony is prevalent within the context of mainstream videogame development and the videogame industry; the use of videogame design principles that are unchallenged and yet perpetuate ideas of what is considered “good”, “bad”, and “fun” is hegemony. Gray (2014) further takes hegemony and applies it to the games industry itself and that

*...the creators and producers of content are primarily white and male. They construct realities from their perspective of the world. Their realities are mediated and this mediation is far too often stereotypical and not truly representative of women or people of color. (7)*

The hegemony seen within cultural media landscapes such as “the deployment of racialized images, the enactment of pleasure through the other, and the efforts to legitimize power/privilege,” (Leonard 2003, 2) can be extended to the conversation of mainstream videogames and how they perpetuate colonialism, imperialism, and domination. This includes the ingrained idea that games *should* be fun which conceals *what* is considered fun, *why* it is considered fun, and *who* is having fun. This calls into question how player experience is defined in the videogame design process because fun cannot be defined; as Ruberg (2015) describes, “fun as a focus for video games is problematic in part because fun itself is not a natural and invariable experience. It is culturally specific and personal,” (112). It legitimizes what kind of fun is allowed and appropriate, and who that fun is created for while undermining that “fun is cultural, structural, gendered, and commonly hegemonic,” (Ruberg 2015, 112). The rhetoric surrounding “fun” simplifies the emotional affordances of videogames. For example, the MDA (Hunicke et al., 2004) and PENS (Ryan et al., 2006) frameworks rarely discuss complicated and nuanced emotions distinctly from the end goal of a “fun game”. Even within these frameworks there is a hegemony of fun surrounding what constitutes a videogame including naturalized ideas such as conflict, interaction, and player-character domination.

Scholars such as Ian Bogost (2006) and Bo Ruberg (2015) reject the dominant discourse surrounding the “fun” of commercially successful, popular games; they reject that games need to be “fun” in order to be meaningful experiences. Through the normalization of a hegemonic “fun”, the diverse emotional representations created by minority game developers are rejected by the mainstream. Zoë Quinn’s *Depression Quest* (2013) is not a “fun” game but it is an emotionally complex one that delves into the feelings of being trapped, frustrated, lonely, and sad while struggling with depression. To reject playing it or describing it as a game undermines the breadth of emotions explored and the types of games they are explored within. Unfortunately, Quinn’s project led to the inciting of Gamergate, a movement where “upholding [videogame] journalistic integrity” was used as a thinly veiled excuse for the amplification of misogynistic, sexist, and racist rhetoric (Parkin, 2014). The anger and gatekeeping surrounding the classification of *Depression Quest* as a well received game shows the resistance to accepting games outside of the hegemonic “fun”. Yet *Depression Quest*, although not perfect in its exploration of the subject, opened the door for many people who struggled with depression to relate to the experiences Quinn presented and gave them the opportunity to share it with those who may not understand their experiences (Parkin, 2014). Thus the exploration of player

emotions from frustration, to sadness, to anger can “shape a game’s message as much as (if not more than) its content and mechanics,” (Ruberg, 2015 110).

Ruberg explores no-fun games and all of the ways that “no-fun” can be presented either as a conscious effort by game designers, or as a “mode of rejecting neoliberal values—the very values that tells us to be happy, wealthy, and healthy, and to have fun” - through the “queer art of failure” (2015, 114). Going beyond these limiting factors opens up space for diverse videogames. No-fun is a way to talk more openly about diversity because “fun as a monolithic principle silences the voices of marginalized gamers and promotes reactionary, territorial behavior from within privileged spaces of the games community,” (115). It is also a useful tool for game designers to challenge assumptions about what constitutes videogames. The no-fun way of thinking can draw attention and reflection on “fun” as a hidden but pervasive concept, and return the emotional experience to “something both personal and political,” (115). This is an important lens in analyzing both the context of game development as well as how games are discussed because videogames are emotionally nuanced, and to not discuss them as such does a disservice to the medium.

The hegemony of fun is further extenuated by limited player data and playtesting. Fron et al. (2007) states that “due to the standard demographic of most video games, the vast majority of player-centered research, whether cognitive, behavioral, psychological or sociological, whether quantitative or qualitative, concerns male players” (310) which normalizes specific types of games for specific types of audiences while excluding others through a narratives such as, for example, “women don’t sell”<sup>5</sup>. What is missing is the explicitly clear limitations of this data including who is and is not included, and the reasons behind that exclusion (Fron et al., 2007) which extends to representations of characters, contexts, and stories (Higgin, 2008). Without data of diverse player populations responding to various kinds of play, fun, and representation, “exclusionary game creation will persist,” (Higgin 2008, 22; Fron et al., 2007).

As user populations become more diverse - that is, as games become more accessible and appeal to broader audiences through accessibility considerations, widespread consumption of the medium, and different kinds of mechanics and narratives being told - it is becoming harder to identify an “ideal user”. Ng et al. (2012) claim that with this increase in diversity comes

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<sup>5</sup> *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018) initially only featured the protagonist Cassandra before another playable character, Alexios, was added due to “Ubisoft’s marketing department and its chief creative officer Serge Hascoët [...] saying that female protagonists wouldn’t sell games,” (Valentine, 2020).

a need to better understand user emotional motivations and the affective role of emotions in order to cater to a wider range of audiences; however, the industry also “discounts how masculine-oriented design choices could be costing it players who want to be represented,” (Vysotsky & Allaway 2018, 113). Thus, the diversity of players is not enough to exact change as limited player data and dominant videogame representations of “fun” continue to cyclically create hegemonic videogames.

A lack of critical analysis of hegemonic systems and the perpetuation of biases within mainstream videogame development frameworks from the mainstream industry have made “intersecting inequalities appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” which “continue to justify the oppression of marginalized and minority populations” (Gray 2014, 6-7). Uncritically integrating “fun” as a design goal simplifies and conceals the emotional affordances available within the videogame medium, which includes the negative emotions associated not only with frustration but with exclusion, stereotypical representations, and domination of the “other” through a Western lens. Hegemonic game creation has extended from exclusionary “fun” into the co-opting of minority experiences to create “empathetic” games. Empathy is a buzzword for emotional videogames, and I next delve into how this term, like “fun”, is used to simplify or co-opt the experiences of diverse and marginalized people.

### A criticism of “empathetic” games

The rise of “empathetic” games combined with “fun” has created a “hegemony of feeling” (Ruberg 2020, 57) within mainstream videogames that is used to appeal to diverse and marginalized audiences while still using, abusing, and rejecting their existence. As Bo Ruberg (2020) discusses in their work “Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of ‘Empathy’ in Video Games”, empathy “is now commonly used to describe the purported ability of video games to allow players to experience the feelings of others—with a focus on those who are seen as diverse or disadvantaged,” (55). Empathy is used as an umbrella term for any emotional videogame, absorbing games dealing with difficult subjects or even games that include any form of diversity (Ruberg, 2020) such as *Gone Home* (2013) which follows a young woman returning to her empty family home and uncovering what has happened in her absence. This culminates in her finding out that her sister has left home to pursue a romantic relationship with a woman<sup>6</sup>. These “empathetic” games purportedly allow players to step into the shoes of a

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<sup>6</sup> *Gone Home* (2013) has been praised for its representation of LGBT issues with many players being able to identify with the struggles presented (Mulcahy, 2013); however, it should not automatically be labeled as an “empathetic” game just because there are LGBT themes.

diverse, marginalized character or to view “empathy-inducing” situations through the perspective of a player-character bystander. This does not necessarily mean that videogames should not try to increase empathy or understanding in its players as research has shown that videogames do have the ability to increase empathy (McDonald, 2018). However, I argue that games such as *Papers, Please* (2013) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) are, as McDonald (2018) herself describes, *not* created to inherently generate empathy and thus should not be defined by their effect on the hegemon.

Empathy comes from a place of privilege by allowing privileged players to become a socially accepted form of the “other”; however, the promotion of the consumption of the “other” under the guise of empathy further extends the history of the mainstream videogame industry to exploit and appropriate the experience of diverse and marginalized populations in a sanitized way that can be consumed by dominant white, cis, heterosexual audiences (Ruberg, 2020). It is thus important to analyze and critique the “narratives of diversity... considering how these narratives intersect with affect, and questioning whom these narratives serve,” (Ruberg 2020, 58). Lisa Nakamura (1995) frames the appropriation of oriental stereotypes (and more generally the “other” in reference to the Western world) by predominantly white role-players as “identity tourism” - to take on another identity and perform domination and conquest through online forums (Mukherjee, 2016). I extend Lisa Nakamura’s (1995) work on identity tourism to empathy or “empathetic” games. The rhetoric surrounding empathetic games claims that they present a glimpse into the challenges marginalized people face, such as the queer experiences seen in *Lim* (2012) or *Dys4ia* (2012) (Ruberg, 2020), yet privileged players are without any of the harm of actually being within this marginalized group. Simply, this rhetoric is created for “players who represent dominant personalities within games culture and society at large,” (Ruberg 2020, 60), and become palatable and consumable for a presumed straight, cisgendered, and white audience. The rhetoric of empathetic videogames fails to consider how games such as *Lim* and *Dys4ia* are created by diverse creators for *themselves* and for *other marginalized or diverse people* and instead co-opt and reframe these experiences for the hegemonic mainstream.

Jones (2017) describes how, when presenting the game *Female Experience Simulator* (2013), women in his class questioned what message the hyperbolic and demeaning representations of violence against women was sending to women who already go through similar experiences in their *real lives*. Where mainstream games value the principles outlined in the PENS model (Ryan et al., 2006) of competence, power, autonomy, and mastery Jones (2017) describes an extreme counter-logic in response in order to explore “empathy” - the

“disempowerment fantasy”. Instead of a power fantasy, these games offer a position of disempowerment through the denial of player freedom, the emphasized lack of interactivity, and establishing goals that can never be achieved (Jones, 2017). The overemphasis of disempowerment in these kinds of games leads to the translation of the lives of marginalized people through mechanical difficulty and frustration (Jones, 2017) and perpetuates trauma porn, further demeaning diverse and marginalized voices.

Empathetic games, or the act of labeling games as empathetic, minimizes the lives of people seen as the “other”, “instrumentalizes and de-radicalizes (queer) experience and feeling,” (Ruberg 2020, 61), and erases the “...transgressive feelings of marginalized people, such as anger in response to oppression and makes them safe and “good” by repackaging them as briefly challenging but ultimately uplifting experiences that privileged players can relate to,” (61-62). These games cannot exist for their own audiences - for trans, queer, or racialized people to explore deeply personal and complex emotions - but are rather neoliberalist machines for political, hegemonic consumption of what players *should* feel - “empathy” (Ruberg, 2020). Players of these games do not care for the creators or their experiences unless it is for the exploitation of their pain and trauma, and never are the diverse and marginalized creators of these games asked if they want this “fucking empathy” (Jones, 2017).

The hegemonic rhetoric of empathetic games is an extension of hegemonic fun, identity tourism (Nakamura, 1995), the subaltern (Mukherjee, 2016), and the ways diverse and marginalized representations are sanitized for better consumption by dominant, hegemonic populations. Ruberg describes the viewing of these games, which seem to revel in the sadness and struggles of marginalized people, as “theaters of misfortune” (Ruberg 2020, 64). Jones (2017) quotes that the women in his class “didn’t want pity” or to be portrayed as helpless within games such as *Female Experience Simulator* (2013) - “they wanted action”. However, players are ultimately not meant to feel bad from these experiences. Even when they are meant to feel empathy through the hardships and disempowerment within these games, they are still left feeling good and that they *have done good* through a self-congratulatory sense of allyship, while returning to their lives without further consequences or social change (Jones, 2017; Ruberg, 2020). Herein lies the hegemonic consumption of misfortune of the “other” for pleasure, for “empathy”, and for “fun”.

Ruberg rejects using empathy as a framework that claims to “help us understand each other” but rather to analyze videogames as mediums for “players to respect the people with

whom they cannot identify” and to “show us we can value those we do not understand” (67, 68). In contrast to empathy rhetoric, Ruberg’s (2015) no-fun games do not invite the player into someone else’s shoes or to experience disempowerment for some abstract educational and cultural meaning. Through the no-fun lens of videogame analysis and development there can be a personal exploration of emotions. Ruberg’s work exemplifies resistance and reimaginings of the traditional, archetypal experiences expected from videogames, that “no-fun hurts for its own sake” (Ruberg 2015, 115) and not for the pleasure of hegemonic audiences, for an inevitability of “fun”, and that these experiences are important to explore and recognize as their own.

## Harm as the norm within mainstream industry

Mainstream, AAA videogames are products meant for widespread consumption and commercial profit. According to NewZoo’s (2023) “2021 Global Games Market Report”, the global games market was estimated to generate \$175.8 billion with Asia-Pacific and North America accounting for 50% and 24% of revenues respectively. The Latin American, and Middle Eastern and African markets, which already make up 24% of the 3 billion worldwide players, are projected to continue growing. Because of the large diversity of game players in contrast to the epicenters of mainstream videogame development centralized in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia (Newzoo, 2023) it is important to analyze how these products perpetuate harmful and oppressive ideologies, and erase diverse and marginalized people and experiences. Critical analyses have explored the ways that widespread mainstream videogames have disseminated harmful ideas of what they claim to be a “post-racial or gender-neutral America, or celebrations of a ‘democratic’ or transformative online culture,” (Gray 2014, xv) when, in fact, “as games are developed, they continually aim to fulfill the perceived desires of the young, middle-class male who is supposedly the market’s target,” (Gray 2014, xxi). In his book *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*, Keogh (2018) states that the most valued and analyzed videogames by both audiences and commentators are those that give players an individualistic sense of mastery over the game or other players, paralleled with the competency principle of the PENS model (Ryan et al., 2006). Domination through roles such as god, hero, and patriarchal savior construct values that are “ritualized through the form’s most dominant, replicated works... and critical discourses surrounding videogames embraced these values as seemingly inherent to the videogame form,” (178). It is difficult to find mainstream games where the player-character is not situated in the role of a hero or, even when they are made insignificant or evil, are perceived through an empathetic lens towards redemption or power, such as *Max Payne* (2001).

Keogh (2018) acknowledges the perpetuation of hegemonic practices within videogames through dominant surrounding discourses, such as the PENS model. As with “empathic” games, these discourses normalize the experience of consumers who play videogames as an “escape” from their “real world” while others must contend with stereotypical representations of themselves within those games. For example, women have a difficult time relating to female characters in games when they are hypersexualized (Vysotsky & Allaway, 2018) creating emotional disconnection. Gray (2020) states “that the symbolic and physical violence experienced in gaming culture is not misrecognized but normalized, so that those most affected by the symbolic violence are also most subject to its impacts,” (32); videogame design frameworks are one of the many ways that these practices have become ingrained within mainstream culture. Cyclically upholding videogame tropes such as “saving the girl”, “being the hero”, offering spaces to “play as” a marginalized person (Keogh, 2018; Ruberg, 2020), and using marginalized stories for neoliberal profit while still demeaning those voices contributes to the continued upholding and legitimization of white supremacist values (Gray, 2014; Leonard, 2003). Thus harm is the norm in mainstream videogames.

Gaming culture - including videogame creation, consumption, and community - dominates the discussion of what should and should not be considered “offensive”. Cross (2014) outlines how in these hypocritical norms “the culture becomes real when it is convenient, and unreal when it is not; real enough to hurt people in, unreal enough to justify doing so,” (4-5). However, videogames are not created in a completely new and unrelated sociopolitical landscape separated from the one they are developed in. For example, games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997 - present) are informed and developed within the “epistemic contours of contemporaneous American culture and its history,” (Higgin 2008, 23). Black contemporary representations and experiences within videogames are often limited to either systemic violence, such as in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), or as representations of Black urban culture and masculinity, such as in the *NBA 2K* series of games (1999 - present) (Everett & Watkins, 2007). These narratives, informed primarily by white ideas and ideals, create a relationship between violence and Black life while obscuring the systemic and oppressive culture which informs those experiences. Black women are also erased or are “props, bystanders, or participants in games, but never competitors,” (Glaubke et al. 2001, 25). These representations directly conflict with the realities of Black life, limit agency and engagement with Black lives, and influence further hegemonic public perception (Gray, 2020). The removal of these underlying sociopolitical systems offer hegemonic views of culture,

erasing the nuances of marginalized lives and creating experiences for white, heteronormative, male consumers (Gray, 2014; Ruberg, 2020).

In her book *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (2009), Mary Flanagan describes how both the implicit and explicit rules of play are embedded within play spaces, and in turn eschew certain types of behavior. Because of this, “game makers, like any media makers, cannot simply step outside current contemporary social systems to write and think in ways completely ‘free of the rules’,” (Flanagan 2009, 61). Despite the emphasis within mainstream videogames on player freedom, agency, competency, mastery, and domination, these games also dictate and severely limit player choice if those choices do not coincide with what is considered important for game designers to include (Ruberg, 2015), and in which in turn coincide with the morality and cultural structures of the hegemon. Therefore, how can mastery be considered fun when this mastery conforms to white supremacist ideals, especially when these perpetuated ideals may directly interfere with true player autonomy?

Bo Ruberg (2015) asks both players and designers to embrace “no-fun” which encompasses “destruction, frustration, alarm” (117) and opens up queer ways of playing by rejecting the generic, the default, and the expected. Harm is normalized through standards of unquestioned “fun”, and creates ordinariness around the symbolic violence seen consistently in online spaces. Symbolic violence is “a specific genre of behaviour in gaming spaces that sees male gamers forcibly impose meanings and narratives on their female counterparts; this includes the idea that women in [the gaming space] can only be ‘fat, ugly, or slutty,’ less capable with technology, less skilled gamers, ‘feminazi’ troublemakers and so on,” (Cross 2014, 8). I question both the spaces in which these ideas can flourish and grow, and how games can be analyzed for any embedded biases disguised as “innocent play” (Flanagan, 2009). In many cases, “play” is used as an excuse to allow racism, sexism, and more to be tolerated, engrained, and spread “since, after all, ‘it’s only a game’,” (Flanagan 2009, 85).

Thus many critics of the influential power of videogames will claim that they are “just games” to deflect criticism (Leonard, 2003). Cross (2014) argues that the amorality of gaming culture - its tendency to degrade, harm, and harass - stems from the idea that games are not “real”, therefore making it okay to perpetuate ideals seen within them. Videogames have a strong history of exploring harm and conflict in a theoretically “safe” environment (Crawford, 1984). Games have the ability to explore deep themes of trauma which can help both developers and players deal with their own past experiences, such as Quinn’s *Depression*

*Quest* (2013). However, this is not the kind of conflict that Crawford (1984) is referring to; rather, conflict should be used as a way to establish individual agency and power. For players that hedge away from conflict, whether that be due to personal preferences, experiences, or because of the representations within these games, Crawford (1984) implies that they need the willingness to say “it’s only a game”. The rhetoric of “it’s just a game” undermines acknowledging the history of ignorance, harm, and biases within games, the artistic power that games inherently possess, and also absolves creators of criticism (Tucker, 2019). The pushback against the critical analysis of videogames also comes from groups that have benefited from videogames as a source of “escapism”; any criticism towards the consumption of products that they enjoy and that reflect their own biases creates tension that is rejected rather than reflected on. I therefore argue that the rhetoric of “it’s just a videogame” must be reinvented and challenged in order for designers to explore wider ranges of emotional experiences (Ruberg, 2015).

Undermining the experiences of people that are not part of the dominant class (the “subaltern”) by telling them that harmful representations of themselves (Mukherjee, 2016) are fine because it is “just a game” undermines the power and responsibility of game designers to critically interpret, analyze, and respond to criticism of their works. Mainstream videogames are based on the biases and opinions of their creators and even if no offense is intended it does not excuse their works from criticism, interpretation, and analysis. When game designers believe that their work holds no real world equivalent and that they are purely fantasy, they are less likely to “try to portray accurate and meaningful depictions of minority characters,” (Anderson-Barkley & Foglesong 2018, 264). This also leads to exploitation and simplified representations of marginalized and underrepresented people. Rather than portraying the complexities of cultures or cultural equivalents, they emphasize aspects of popular culture that sell to hegemon sensibilities while othering the lives of people of color, women, and the LGBTQ+ community (Gray 2014; Ruberg, 2020). By normalizing symbolic violence, rejecting critical discourse of mainstream videogames, and narrowing the definition of what games are and who those games are for, harm is continually perpetuated. This is especially true due to the difficulty of entering the mainstream videogame industry.

## Privilege and the development of games

Not everyone has the privilege to make their own games for a wide variety of reasons. Systemic pressures ensure that hegemonic, white, male, heterosexual ideals stay dominant within the

mainstream videogame industry. Work is being done within the mainstream industry to move away from these ingrained patterns but there needs to be systemic change to introduce more diverse and genuine works. Crawford (1984) notes the difficulties of working with computers and their limitations; while there has been an increase in easily accessible software such as Twine and Unity, as well as many programs run by industry professionals available for marginalized game designers to develop their skills, there are still many systemic barriers that do not make it simple to just “make a game”. These “embodied literacies”, as Keogh (2018) describes them, have

*been historically demarcated along gendered lines... because young men were dominantly targeted by videogames throughout the last half of the twentieth century, it is young men who are more likely than not to have obtained the competency required to handle a gamepad or use the complex keyboard-and-mouse configuration needed to play most 3D videogames on a desktop computer. (78)*

These competencies and learned literacies<sup>7</sup> also extend to videogame development. Boundaries including limited access to education, expensive software and hardware, a requirement of time commitments, and videogame access are continual issues that developers *and* consumers face as videogame engines, gameplay, and mechanical systems continue to become increasingly complicated to learn, whether creating a game using an engine or playing a game with a complicated controller scheme. As such, it should be taken into consideration that the mainstream videogame industry continues to recreate hegemonic systems of exclusion and keeps these domains “primarily white, primarily male, and primarily profit driven,” (Flanagan 2009, 224).

Orme (2018) criticizes the Everyone Can Make Games Movement and the rhetoric to “make your own game” which comes up when there is criticism directed towards a videogame. This movement assumes a post-feminist and post-racial stance in the videogame industry where there is both equal opportunity and equal resources to be successful; however, this “fails to acknowledge institutionalized sexism and racism” (Orme 2018, 66). For example, when Chandana Ekanayake was looking for funding from publishers for his upcoming title, *Thirsty Suitors*, he noted that “of the 20 or so people [...] he pitched to, there was only one woman: The rest ‘were white males in their 30s-40s’,” (Ekanayake quoted in Farokhmanesh, 2022) making it a difficult process to advocate for his South Asian focused game as “the men who hold the keys to funding at publishers—and they are men—can be a fickle crowd,” (Farokhmanesh, 2022).

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<sup>7</sup> Of note is that these competencies and literacies are not natural, but developed through “cultural and historic contexts” (Keogh 2018, 78).

There is a clear demographic gap between people making games and those consuming them (Orme, 2018). In a 2019 survey, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) found that of approximately one thousand participants within the workforce from around the world that 71% identified as male, 24% identified as female, 3% as non-binary, 2% as “Prefer to self describe”, with an additional 4% indicating they identified as transgender. White, Caucasian, and European ethnicities made up the majority of the industry workforce at 81%, with Hispanic and Latinx following at 7%, Aboriginal, Indigenous, and Pacific Islanders at 5%, and Chinese and South East Asian at 4% each (IGDA, 2019). Participants identifying as Black, African-American, African, and Afro-Caribbean, or as West Asian made up only 2% of responses each. In contrast, the Entertainment Software Association (2022) found in their 2021 report on American videogame consumers that 45% of players identified as female. Sixty-five percent of game developers responded “no” when asked if there was equal treatment and opportunity in the games industry (IGDA, 2019).

While initiatives have been developed to increase equitable representation within the videogame industry, they are predicated on the neoliberal principles that achieving success and equality must come as an individual effort from people of color, women, and queer people to overcome the barriers set for them (Orme, 2018). These initiatives have failed to address the inherent systemic issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia which perpetuate an elitist and hegemonic industry, drawing minorities away from it (Orme, 2018). As Tucker (2019) describes, “rather than addressing the problem and risking the ire of some of their most dedicated customers, companies have learned to weaponize those reactionary mobs against their workers and critics, especially the already-marginalized,” which makes the success of these initiatives all the more difficult to attain. Even independent game development can be difficult for marginalized game designers as the onus of marketing, publishing, and development are combined into one role (Orme, 2018; Doherty, 2022), with many of the issues of the mainstream industry extending to publishing firms as well (Farokhmanesh, 2022). These funding opportunities from publishers can be crucial for indie developers as “the access a publisher supplies allows Outerloop [the team behind *Thirsty Suitors*] to promote their games to a wider audience, to turn more profit, and fund future projects,” (Doherty, 2022).

Not only are mainstream games primarily developed by dominant groups but they also do not target women or people of color as players (Flanagan, 2009; Orme, 2018). Actual minority player interest in games is much higher than what is reflected in the industry workforce and who is catered to with these games, specifically an assumed white and male audience

(Orme, 2018). The barriers to entry within the mainstream industry, as well as the target market still appealing to white, young men, showcases a stagnant and pervasive issue that undermines nuanced emotional representations within games despite the fact that what are seen as “minority players”, such as women and people of color, are in fact major videogame consumers (Fron et al., 2007; Higgin, 2008).

Videogame frameworks are one aspect of mainstream videogame development that perpetuate normalized cultural biases and opinions. Due to the perpetuation of white supremacy within the videogame industry and its communities, continued barriers to entry, and lack of systemic change, it is the work of *everybody* to question, analyze, and disrupt these dominant principles (Orme, 2018). The argument that games are “not real” falters when “many of us, as users of digital technologies, reside in hybrid worlds where the boundaries between what is physical (or actual) and what is digital (or electronic) are fading,” (Gray 2020, 48) and videogames begin to legitimize and “reinforce historical fantasies (that is, white revisionist histories) as truth” (48).

Following the work of Ruberg (2015) and Ensslin and Goorimoorthee (2020) I argue that the potential for emotional complexity within videogames - in all its human capacities and its possible ugliness - from perspectives outside of the dominant mainstream videogame norms is already present and thriving with games such as *Celeste* (2018). These games explore experiences not for fun, empathy, or for an outsider to step into the shoes of the marginalized but for the frustration, uncomfortableness, difficulties, and joy of these experiences to be embraced, explored, and shared for their own sake. Further nuanced understanding of videogames including their narrative representations, their interactive mechanical elements, and the resulting emotional responses of players beyond “fun” and into purposeful frustration, joy, trauma, and sadness is what I analyze through the emotional affordances of games and the lens of ludo-emotional dissonance.

## Emotional affordances of videogames

Videogames present unique opportunities for readers and/or players to interact with them non-trivially by manipulating and embodying alternate agencies to achieve their goals (Aarseth, 1997; Nguyen, 2020). Ludology and narratology are two schools of videogame analysis which lie in opposition to each other. Simply, ludologists view game meaning expressed through videogame rules and mechanics while narratologists focus on analysis of the narrative structures. According to McManus and Feinstein’s (2006) review of narratology and ludology in

games, narratologists focus on the dynamic simulation of narrative structures and the player's engagement with this narrative, their manipulation of it, and their direct interaction or impact within these structures. From this interaction, players create their own narrative and interpretation of videogames as works of fiction. Narratology relates videogames to classic ideas of stories and to the inner mind of the player.

Ludology bases its arguments in the interactive elements of videogames - that the player's actions create the basis for their experience over the context or narrative within any given game. Ludology "focuses on the interactivity, structure, and play in simulation and gaming," (McManus & Feinstein 2006, 363) where the "fidelity, immersibility, and 'realness' of the experience are more important than narrative elements," (363). Ludologists such as Gonzalo Frasca (2003) state that models and simulations unique to the medium of videogames can present fluid situations through the use of rules, creating a "rhetorical tool for understanding the big picture," (228) of the author's intentions, rather than "taking snapshots at particular events," (228) through narrative means. Designers then create their arguments and convey their ideologies through the inclusion or exclusion of certain rules, such as who is considered the enemy, who can be killed, or what can be created within worlds like *SimCity* (Frasca, 2003). They also partially give their authorial intent to the audience, and must accept variability within player experience and the players' acceptance, rejection, or manipulation of these rules. Ian Bogost's (2008) procedural rhetoric describes how the player's actions, within the context of the videogame they are playing, creates an argument that the player internally absorbs; therefore, players are implicated within the message of the videogame through their actions. A classic example of procedural rhetoric is *Animal Crossing* (2001) and how the feedback loops of taking out loans, earning capital to take out more loans, and repeating this cycle is an example of capitalism and players' unconscious internalization of capitalistic ideas (Bogost, 2008). Frasca (2003) therefore claims that some games offer players possibilities rather than goals.

Ludo-narratology is a mixed approach which accounts for the diverse ways in which videogame stories can be told, opening up the space of possibilities for the interaction between narrative and mechanics, how mechanics shape narrative, and vice versa (Aarseth, 2012). Ulbricht (2021) uses the example of *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) as being a heavily narrative-focused game while also having simulation as a key aspect of it; without the analysis of both of these parts, there would not be a grasp of the entire videogame experience (Keogh, 2018). Therefore, "how the game is designed and presented carries implications for the social group," (Flanagan 2009, 9) through the ludology, narratology, and the player's embodiment in

the game. Ludo-narrative dissonance is a concept describing breaks within the player experience that may arise within the narrative due to conflict between the game's traditional story elements, and the mechanics and gameplay. Ludo-narrative dissonance can affect players by either emotionally disconnecting them or creating unintentional, negative emotional reactions. Relating back to Frome's (2007) categorization of emotions, ludo-emotionality and its dissonance relates to the interplay between narrative and game emotions - the two emotions most commonly felt and discussed within videogame discourse.

Brendon Keogh (2018) further describes how embodiment creates the videogame and subsequent player experience in tandem, and how "...players do not simply step into the virtual worlds of videogames but instead actively construct virtual worlds through engaging with the particular images, sounds, and devices of different videogames," (74). Videogame players are not distinct from the videogame or vice versa; players create the videogame experience which in tandem produces the player (Keogh, 2018). All aspects of the playable videogame including input devices, affordances of choice and mechanics, context, and player competency, according to Keogh (2018), create this embodied experience which in turn alters the videogame and the player's relationship to it. These virtual worlds are partial worlds which require player engagement to actualize them; this dually embodied player takes on a hybridized perspective through both their real world and virtual counterparts (Keogh, 2018; Gray, 2020). Rather than analyzing the videogame as a distinct artifact separate from the human experience, Keogh (2018) advocates for an analysis which includes the player within the videogame itself. Through this dually embodied player, the player's actions, and the narrative, social, and cultural context create an emotional experience which invites the player into alternative agencies, embodied emotions, and reflection of their own, personal "fun" or "no-fun".

## Resisting harm as the norm

Videogame frameworks, emotional regulation of fun and empathy, and the continued privilege of developing mainstream videogames are just a few interrelated ways that harm within the medium has been normalized. Leonard, Flanagan, Gray, Ruberg, and many others have continually reimagined and resisted the hegemonic structure of videogames and continue to advocate against these harms. Because of the ways that videogames create environments which create alternate agencies and meaningful experiences, they also inform, teach, and control especially as they become more common (Flanagan, 2009; Leonard, 2006).

Flanagan (2009) calls for *critical play* to disrupt these hegemonic dominations within mainstream videogame culture. She aims at asking questions about both human life - whether abstract or concrete - and about aspects of videogames that are seen as “given” or “necessary” and why that might be. For example, the development and popularity of indie queer games “reflects a need in player audiences to immerse themselves in heuristic, empathetic play experiences that afford key critical learning processes,” (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee 2020, 379). Games by women and queer game creators vary dramatically within themselves and from the games seen within the male-dominated mainstream industry (Keogh, 2018) and rebuke many of the “given” principles of game design. The disruptions to the assumed direction and technologically hegemonic ideals of what games *should* be versus how popular alternative videogames *are* calls into question both academic scholarship as well as mainstream industry trends and predictions that prescriptively decide what is a game and what is not - what is deemed worthy of analysis or emotional consideration, and what is not.

Keogh (2018), Flanagan (2009), Ensslin and Goorimoorthee (2020), and others exemplify how the critical analysis of games needs to move beyond such boundaries in order to break hegemonic patterns. Calls for critical frameworks “that reflect the increasing psychological depths and developmental processes of their characters,” (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee 2020, 379) and that challenge “dominant notions about which feelings in video games matter and to whom those feelings belong,” (Ruberg 2020, 64), as well as intersectional analysis of dominant discourses, fears, and hegemonic ideas surrounding race and gender (Leonard, 2006; Gray, 2020) set the stage for my work into ludo-emotional dissonance.

I argue that the ludo-emotional dissonance or consonance felt by players is important to Flanagan’s (2009) critical play and Keogh’s (2018) dual embodiment as well as in questioning the mastery, competency, and player agency principles that seem to be inherent in mainstream development frameworks, specifically within the PENS model (Ryan et al., 2006). That is not to say that the PENS model does not highlight some elements of “good” game design, but frameworks “need to evaluate how these challenges and trajectories are aligned with player development... [and] formative processes of the human soul,” (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee 2020, 379) beyond mechanics, gameplay, and profit.

Thus I took into consideration that *play* is a safe space which offers players the opportunity to interpret and think through problems and situations (Flanagan, 2009). *Critical play* is not about developing experts, but “about designing spaces where diverse minds feel

comfortable enough to take part in the discovery of solutions,” (Flanagan 2009, 261). I also take into consideration the work of Bo Ruberg (2015, 2020) and their approach to queerness in games. They define one aspect of “queerness” in games as “a mode of designing, playing, and in this case even feeling games. Being queer is about being different and desiring differently...” (2015, 113-114). Thus, there does not have to be a compromise between engaging, emotionally nuanced experiences and the unique affordances of videogames, and the exploration of all the queer ways that (mainstream) games can be reimagined to incorporate diverse stories and voices - not for profit, but for videogames as art. Ruberg (2020) asks that “rather that [*sic*] valuing video games that allow players to walk in someone else’s shoes, what if video games took a queerer approach and valued games that challenged the straightforwardness of interpersonal connection?” (67). Ludo-emotional dissonance is one such lens that can be used to evaluate the direct interplay between emotion, role, interaction, and agency.

## Summary

Mainstream videogame development and its subsequent frameworks have created a hegemonic system of values which exclude both unique experimental videogames created by marginalized creators and communities, and exclude their presence within the mainstream videogame industry and nuanced representations within commercial games. These systems recreate dominant discourses surrounding representations within videogames, normalizing harm and a narrow definition of “fun”, who that fun is created for, and who continues to benefit from these experiences. Academic researchers, videogame players, and game developers alike have begun to work against these supposed norms and accepted harm; their work has highlighted the importance of emotional nuance, diverse narratives, and reimagining the audience of videogames. By outlining a brief history of these developmental frameworks and scholarly theories surrounding game studies, analysis of videogames, as well as disruptions within these spheres, I argue just how complicated the analysis of videogames and their emotional affordances are.

Despite the growing emphasis on player experience, emotional nuance and intimacy, and the call for further exploration into player motivations such as emotional responses, there has been stagnation to adopt these more sophisticated models for mainstream videogames. As Ruberg (2015) states, “...difference is precisely what we need to bring to our discussions of video games and the experience of play,” (113-114). Within this work I begin the development of a possible alternate framework to “reflect [videogames’] disruptive and innovative potential”

through “possibilities [in] ludonarrative invention, innovation, and diversification,” (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee 2020, 379). Ludo-emotional dissonance puts an emphasis on emotional affordances and responses through the ludological embodiment and interactivity of videogames, and how these elements interweave to form a dissonant or consonant experience. I argue that the analysis of these elements open up possibilities for explorations and discourses surrounding “fun”, dominant ideals, and personal engagement.

## Chapter 2: A ludo-emotional dissonance framework

In *Octodad* (2010), I am the titular Octodad, the head of a typical human nuclear family. Although I am an octopus my family is unaware of this and I must complete mundane tasks, such as pouring a cup of coffee, which is particularly difficult as I control each of Octodad's arms separately. My fingers fumble with the multiple buttons and analog sticks I maneuver in order to complete the task without spilling the drink.

The defining aspect of the game is these obtuse and standard-denying controls which are purposefully frustrating. The stumbling and fumbling of trying to reign in Octodad's multitude of arms, all while trying to not alert others of my octopus nature, led me to moments of frustration, and yet that was a frustration I was well aware of. The game was popular to stream on sites such as Twitch and Youtube around the time of its release exactly because of this frustrating experience, which led to spectacle and amusement for viewers. I was keen to also feel this deliberate frustration, especially because mainstream and popular games try so hard to remove the frustration of awkward controls, but *Octodad* (2010) wanted to deliberately embrace it. Everything in the game makes sense within its own context; the controls are difficult because I am a human with two arms but Octodad has many, and each must be carefully maneuvered in a human-centric world. I am different, and navigating a world not made for me leads to frustration. My own frustration reflects the obtuse humor of Octodad's situation, but also the inherent frustration with his own existence in a world not designed to accommodate him (Jones, 2016). *Octodad* is a captivating emotional experience that results in both anger and frustration, and relief and satisfaction once the player overcomes their obstacles, no matter how clunky. Despite the interactive dissonance of the controls due to their lack of conventional mapping, Octodad's situating role creates ludo-emotional consonance within the player experience. The interplay between player action or inaction, as well as narrative and emotional representations, are closely tied to player emotions, and this is what I explore through the framework of ludo-emotional dissonance.

I begin this chapter with a discussion about ludo-narrative dissonance and how I use it as a framing point for ludo-emotional dissonance. I then explore ludo-emotional dissonance including how I conceptualized it based off of the research of other academic scholars in the field, framing its aspects of embodiment and interactivity within elements of mainstream videogame design frameworks, and creating a definition for the concept including how

embodiment and interactivity interact to create dissonant or consonant experiences. I then further dive into the details of embodiment and interactivity.

## History of ludo-narrative dissonance

Ludo-narrative dissonance, first coined by Hocking (2007), has been popularly used to describe the negative impact that diverging mechanical and narrative intentions have on player experience, also known as emersion<sup>8</sup>, defined as the “sensation of being pulled out of the player experience” (Seraphine 2016, 2). This dissonance comes from the disconnection of ‘game’ elements, presented by the game’s ludic structure, and ‘story’ elements, presented by an opposing narrative structure (Hocking, 2007; Seraphine, 2016). This leads to opposing incentives and directives for the player. For example, the player may have the illusion of choice incentivized by the ludic structure of a game to make decisions in their own self-interest, but these incentives are undermined when the narrative structure of a game *directs* a player into certain story outcomes (Seraphine, 2016). Ludo-narrative dissonance has evolved into a primarily negative discourse where any form of dissonance, especially in regards to the actions of the player-character and therefore by extension the player themselves, is considered negative and undermining of the player’s immersive experience. As Seraphine (2016) describes, ludo-narrative dissonance has become an all-encompassing term for any dissonance between message or theme and mechanics. This limits what is considered ‘good’ game messaging, which in turn limits what is considered a game, a ‘good’ game, and the ways that discourse within videogames is elucidated.

As Seraphine (2016) contends, ludo-narrative dissonance within videogames limits the lens of affective experiences that are explored, and gatekeeps how games mechanically represent conflicting moral and emotional experiences. For example, under the ‘avatar bias’ which assumes that the player-character in a videogame must always be considered the direct avatar of the player, there is no room for the consideration for alterity between these two separate entities (Seraphine, 2016). By accepting these alternative agencies, players are able to accept and hold themselves culpable<sup>9</sup> to the distinct role they assume within the videogame while also acknowledging the cognitive dissonance they may feel within that role (Bogost, 2008; Seraphine, 2016; Nguyen, 2020). Importantly, Seraphine (2016) reflects on how advocates for the removal of ludo-narrative dissonance seem to be suggesting a complete removal of any predefined narrative structure; that is, “the idea is not that game developers should abandon

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<sup>8</sup> The opposite of immersion.

<sup>9</sup> Which is distinct from “embracing” said role.

creating games where players will experience a story, but that, game developers should abandon being authors of their game's story" (5). Only through this complete player agency can games achieve harmony and give players mastery, anticipation, and control (Ryan et al., 2006).

Problematizing ludo-narrative dissonance, I have developed a new term: ludo-emotional dissonance. Despite the negative connotations around ludo-narrative dissonance and its limited scope of analysis, I use the term ludo-emotional dissonance as a theoretical grounding point and as a way to reclaim dissonance as a positive and more nuanced term beyond seeing dissonance as creating an immersive experience - that is, an experience which breaks immersion and/or disconnects players from the game entirely. It is not meant as a suggestion that developers should be creating a ludo-emotional or "ludonarrative harmony" (Seraphine 2016, 5). Rather, I use the term "dissonance" to *embrace* the dissonant because there is strong emotional potential when leveraging ludo-narrative dissonance. While "virtual violence" may only be enjoyable when it comes at minimal costs, the feelings of guilt that arise from games such as *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) create engaging dissonant experiences (Seraphine 2016; Bogost, 2008; Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020). Seraphine (2016) advocates for the purposeful use of ludo-narrative dissonance "to create interrogations or dissonant feelings in the player's mind" (8) - stories with dissonant characters do, after all, tend to be more interesting and disruptive. I thus use the term ludo-emotional dissonance to recognize the possible dissonance between ludological and emotional elements of videogames and for its use as a deeper exploration of the complicated relationship between these two aspects.

Ludo-emotional dissonance is meant to be a way to analyze the affective rhetoric of games - "the language of the feelings they invoke, how they communicate emotions to their players, how designing affect is interwoven in the art of game design," (Ruberg 2015, 111). Simply, it describes how mechanics which are in-line with the emotional experience that is intended to be felt by the player, and which in turn players feel while playing the game, create a consonant player experience; this also means that if the impact felt by the player is dissonant from expectations or perceived ludo-narrative consonance, such as player expectations relating to genre or narrative beats being misaligned with mechanics in an unexpected way, there is ludo-emotional dissonance. However, ludo-emotional consonance or dissonance themselves do not lead to positive or negative emotional experiences, games that do not have ludo-emotional harmony can still engage players, and players can still consequently form a strong emotional bond through their in-game actions; ludo-emotional dissonance can also enhance feelings if used against genre or game expectations.

An example of ludo-narrative dissonance is games that narratively push a message of anti-violence or that “killing is bad” while simultaneously mechanically making the player shoot, kill, or maim anyone that is a perceived “enemy” such as in *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). The narrative message is dissonant from the actions the player is actively taking - embracing violence to achieve goals in order to proceed through the game while simultaneously chiding the player for engaging in these actions - implying that the game and its events have happened *because* the player has continued to engage with it (Keogh, 2013). This dissonance has been criticized as “bad” due to conflicting player messages (Keogh, 2013); however, ludo-emotional dissonance can be used to analyze how this dissonance enhances emotional responses of frustration, unease, or guilt regarding player actions while advancing through the game (Seraphine, 2016) as well as questioning the player’s complicitness of violence when playing a standard military shooter (Keogh, 2013). Players are asked to confront both the player-character and their player-as-player-characters’ actions *through* the use of conventional military shooter mechanics and gameplay by shifting the context of that interactivity (Keogh 2013); thus, the dissonance created between player expectations and their experience asks players to critically examine and actively dismantles, not the military shooter itself which *Spec Ops: The Line* still engages and profits from, *but* the myth and desensitization of the Western military-entertainment complex. This dissonance is especially salient when considering that *Spec Ops: The Line*’s “critique speaks directly to those players most strongly invested in the military shooter genre,” (Keogh 2013, para. 4). Players willingly engage in these challenging experiences as they relate to life formation, mastery, and narrative progression (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020) which can be enhanced through uncomfortable, amoral, and gray situations. Thus *Spec Ops: The Line* “subversively repurposes the conventions of the military shooter to draw attention to the ideologies embedded within those conventions” by shifting the context of their actions “to expose the myths of technical and ethical superiority that the military-entertainment complex perpetuates” (Keogh 2013, para. 32). Ludo-emotional dissonance works towards analyzing works such as *Spec Ops: The Line* through the ways that it creates a dissonance that engages players while also examining the ways that mechanics and interactivity can still be complicit with hegemonic ideations of domination and control as outlined by Keogh (2013).

# Towards a framework for ludo-emotional dissonance

## Proto-definition of ludo-emotional dissonance

I propose **ludo-emotional dissonance** as a framework to analyze games in which the player can embody emotional responses through their actions/inactions (mechanics and interactivity) and role(s) (embodiment) within the game world. Ludo-emotional dissonance is defined by two interacting factors, which I give brief definitions of here for context:

- **Embodiment** is the degree to which the emotions that the game player experiences are aligned with the emotions that the game designer wishes them to have and with the player's expectations through genre choices/expectations and fulfillment, narrative, setting, environment, characters, mechanics, etc.
- **Interactivity** is the degree to which the game player can control the game, such as the player-character, their environment, or narrative decisions, by interacting with the game.

Thus, a game has **ludo-emotional dissonance** to the extent that the player cannot achieve embodiment through interactivity, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and it has **ludo-emotional consonance** when they can. Because of the interplay between mechanics and other game elements such as narrative and player-character role, ludo-emotional dissonance is a scalable framework which dynamically shifts for the needs of the game. For example, interactivity may have more work mediating a game that is primarily focused on mechanics, while the player expectations and player experience will also be based around how "tight" or "appropriate" the controls work for a mechanic-heavy game. The narrative in this case still presents the dynamic between player expectations, player experience, and designer intentions as it contextualizes those mechanics. Narrative games may have different levels of dissonance depending on their structure and the mediation of interactivity within that context. With this in mind, I will be discussing the factors which affect embodiment, interactivity, and their relationship in more detail below and throughout the rest of the chapter.

## Conceptualization of ludo-emotional dissonance

Ludo-emotional dissonance encompasses all games, as even mechanically-heavy games rely on emotional stimulation to engage their players, and situate players into roles which inform their experience; thus, games cannot be analyzed solely by their mechanics, and thus setting, narrative, and additional aesthetics, no matter how sparse, work towards an emotional

experience (Koster, 2004; Keogh, 2018). The scalability of the framework is thus also affected by the weight of narrative, mechanics, and other factors which create the gameplay assemblage. Ludo-emotional dissonance can be interpreted as the frustration from a difficult or poorly implemented game mechanic, the joy from finishing a game or getting through a tough challenge, or the satisfaction of an emotionally charged moment between player-character and non-playable character (NPC). Pulling from the ludology of Frasca (2003), Bogost's procedural rhetoric (2008), and the critical design justice of Gray (2020) and Flanagan (2009), ludo-emotional dissonance can be used to both analyze games with a "seamless" ludo-emotional experience - that is, one that strives to match player emotions with the actions and role they take in game - or, more interestingly, games which tug at the dissonance between action, role, and emotion, leading to unique game experiences that delve into surreal, deeply personal, or anti-hegemonic topics.

I take Seraphine's (2016) and Ruberg's (2015) approaches to ludo-narrative dissonance and call for an embracing of the dissonant, the frustrating, and the complex emotions of discomfort, joy, and everything in between beyond the limit of 'fun'. Consonance and dissonance themselves do not necessarily lead to positive or negative experiences, but the interplay between ludological and emotional elements can be analyzed in order to determine positive or negative player experiences. In my use of the terms, positive refers to engaging experiences for players; thus, positive can refer to frustration, masochism, sadism, sadness, elation, or even boredom, and more. Similarly, negative refers to disengagement with a piece, especially when this comes from a re-traumatizing or otherwise harmful emotional reaction to a piece. Negative experiences lead to exploitation and alienation by and from mainstream videogames.

The incorporation of game aspects such as mechanics, systems, and player 'fun' are seen within many mainstream design frameworks. I argue that there is a gap in the deeper analysis of emotional responses within the player experience beyond player adherence to videogame designer intentions, such as analyzing player frustration related to mechanics. For example, the way that designers incorporate the feeling of 'fun' through the 'competition' of a game by using the mechanic of 'shooting' (Hunicke et al., 2004) is emphasized more than the emotional responses that players feel through representation, mechanical dissonance, or design impact within these frameworks. The implications that videogames have on everyday lives, how communities are perceived, and the perpetuating forces behind them leave emotional affordances of games too important to not widely and formally incorporate within the design process. This is especially true when, for example, "Black folks have long had their identities

constructed by outside forces, most notably by white, Western, heterosexual masculinity, and other entities not valuing black agency,” (Gray 2020, 16-17). Games have the potential to open players to new “emotional formations that produce particular responses, articulated corporeally” (Gray & Leonard 2018, 36) which can make a positive impact on everyday life, and can relay and define sensitive, nuanced experiences by marginalized voices. These experiences are, importantly, *not* for hegemonic and dominant groups to experience sterilized, ‘comfortable’ marginalized experiences.

Many AAA games show a disconnect between their desired intentions, their chosen (and un-chosen) mechanics, and their intended versus real player emotional engagement (Flanagan, 2009). However, the emotional sophistication of the medium has reached the point that allows for more subtle and diverse narratives (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020), and is lacking a strong foundational basis for the analysis of the interplay between mechanics, role, and emotions. There is an overabundance of videogames that show a simplified, violent world meant to be conquered by the white, male, and hypermasculine player-character. Videogames have and will continue to perpetuate violence unless the direct interventions of scholars such as Gray and Leonard are implemented within the design process.

As Gray and Leonard (2018) describe, “the virtual is to teach us socially, we cannot have two ethics running in parallel, whereby a real world might exclude bodily violence while a virtual world might be seen to permit it among avatars as if this setting is not ‘properly real’,” (43). Additionally, Cross (2014) states that gaming has been perceived by two sets of values - one which views gaming as a “less-than-real shelter from the demands of modern culture” such as “political correctness” and one which “deems it important that people of all backgrounds be able to participate in gaming without fear or favour,” (5). Thus, it is important to move away from the notion that anonymity is the cause of symbolic, online violence and focus on how there is “a lack of accountability actualised in an ethically suspended moral universe... continuous with gender violence in the physical world and its structural supports,” (Cross 2014, 11). Because of the systemic violence regularly enacted against bodies that do not fit within the real world - “determined by race, class, and the legibility of one’s gender” - it is important to consider “how to create safer spaces both on- and offline, working against the present necropolitical narrative,” (Russell 2020, 08 GLITCH IS SKIN chapter). The ludo-emotional dissonance in these situations may be a negative experience for players or may undermine the game’s intended emotional experience through the resulting design *consequences*.

This is not a simple issue to resolve, and I argue that the prescriptive nature of videogame design frameworks have been part of the reason that “the usual designers develop the usual ideas through the usual stages for the usual players,” (Flanagan 2009, 257). Structured systems are required in order to make significant changes to the perpetuating hegemonic forces within cyberspace and the video game industry. Enforcing accountability, an important part of this structuring according to Cross (2014), requires “a normative value system that stands opposed to prejudice in all forms and expressions” and “a social structure of practise that discourages symbolic violence” (11). Cross (2014) suggests that in addition to speaking out against prejudice in online spaces, game developers must be more vocal about the harm being perpetuated within these spaces (and as I argue, within their games) against diverse people. The mainstream industry is a crucial part to this process, as Cross (2014) describes research which demonstrated that “extrajudicial behavioural scripts could bring about rapid change in transnational views on domestic violence” (13) showing that powerful voices within the hegemonic culture are an important part of shifting norms. My focus on mainstream videogames is informed by this research and perspective.

Therefore, ludo-emotional dissonance is one such framework which can bridge the gap between design intention and design consequence with a focus on player emotional outcomes. My goal is for ludo-emotional dissonance to give a better understanding to how player mechanics can have real - sometimes traumatic, and other times cathartic - emotional responses through player embodiment. Because of the complicated and nuanced nature of videogames, there is a “necessity to move away from overly simplistic and ultimately restrictive explanatory models, which give rise to more exceptions than suitable examples,” (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee 2020, 379) and “for tools to develop the ability to be adaptive and sensitive towards shifting tasks, interests, communication as well as affect and emotions,” (Ng et al. 2012, 690). Thus, I present ludo-emotional dissonance as only one such possible framework to use for analysis while avoiding a prescriptive structure by analyzing works through varying angles of development and perspectives<sup>10</sup>.

The consequence of design is an integral part of ludo-emotional analysis as it is not enough to claim ignorance to prejudices within videogames because these representations have lasting cultural consequences and effects on their players. Flanagan (2009) claims that there tends to be a gap between the intention behind creation and the actual creation. Pulling from Flanagan’s (2009) and Gray’s (2020) work, I will be looking at how current design

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<sup>10</sup> Such as from both the developer and player perspectives.

*intentions* focus on the outcome of the design once the user interacts with it “to ensure that the particular aspects of the project that are informed by conceptual, thematic, and technological factors continue to “say the same thing” once the project is finished,” (Flanagan 2009, 258). Rather than a post-mortem design review, Gray (2020) calls for creators to explore the consequences of their design at the ideation phase so they can design their products differently. Thus, design impact is much more important than intent (Gray, 2020), and impact rather than intent is amplified in my discussion of ludo-emotional dissonance.

## Elements of ludo-emotional dissonance

I use the MDA framework (Hunicke et al., 2004) as a general template from which I develop ludo-emotional dissonance. In doing so I hope to ground my work within some of the main components seen throughout mainstream videogame design frameworks - such as mechanics, gameplay, and player experience - and analyze the gaps within those concepts.

Ludo-emotional dissonance is meant to be a flexible and situationally relevant framework. What might work for one game may not work for another, and ludo-emotional dissonance can be used to possibly pinpoint the reasons why, based on expectations, embodiments, design intent, and consequential player experience. For example, paratextual content warnings can be used to emotionally and contextually situate the player for possibly triggering situations within games. Games that intentionally disrupt genre conventions while omitting content warnings in favor of an unexpected and surprising in-game situation can leave players feeling emotionally re-traumatized. This dissonance from genre and player expectations is situationally negative which disengages the player. I emphasize it is not the content itself which has created this disconnection, but rather a lack of warning which alienates and disempowers players from making informed decisions about the content they are engaging with. Conversely, a lack of content warning may also mean players who want to engage with a work will not because they perceive it as something they may not otherwise enjoy. In some cases ludo-emotional dissonance or consonance will create a positive player experience, while at other times it can be re-traumatizing, disengaging, or insensitive. This does not mean the design is morally ‘bad’, but rather that the player experience is negative in the sense that they may no longer wish to engage with the piece because these works are harmful to them without a contextual reason. This differs from exploring and developing themes that can be seen as ‘negative’ such as frustration, discomfort, trauma, and abuse. It all depends on design intentions, player consequences, and how the components of ludo-emotional dissonance

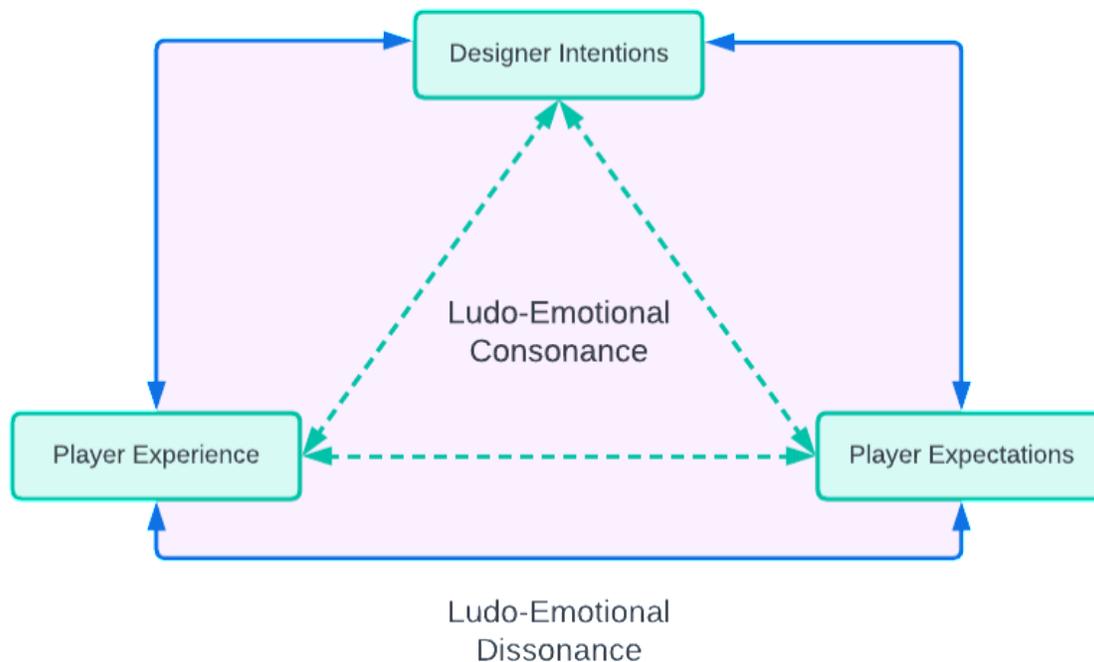
interplay within the holistic videogame experience. I thus break my exploration of ludo-emotional dissonance into two main components - embodiment and interaction.

**Embodiment** includes the player's role as the player-character and the self-chosen or game-directed player avatar, the environmental and narrative context of that role, how the player-character interacts with the environment and other NPCs, and how all of these representations and narrative interactions affect the player experience. Embodiment also includes player expectations and perceived notions of genres and tropes, and how these notions and previous player experiences can impact their initial emotional experience of playing a game. Embodiment is analogous to concepts such as 'aesthetics' from the MDA approach. Many of the aesthetics that players feel, whether through narrative or mechanical beats, are mediated through their avatar or in-game player-character equivalent. While the final player experience is explored in videogame design frameworks (that is, 'fun'), I instead focus on this mediation and how it affects players' emotions. I use some examples of embodiment such as "white as the default", identity tourism (Nakamura, 1995), and the subaltern (Mukherjee, 2016) as seen within videogames as key arguments about the importance of embodiment towards a nuanced emotional experience. Embodiment is strong when players have a contextual setting, narrative, characters, etc. that have closely tied mechanical cues or less "interactivity"; that is, the player does not have as much control over their character's decisions, but there may be a stronger narrative in its place.

**Interaction** covers videogame mechanics, gameplay, and the interplay between players as actor-participants and players as observer-participants, and how both of these roles and their varying levels of interactivity heighten player emotional resonance. This is analogous to the 'mechanics' portion of MDA. In addition, interactivity concerns the physical way that players are able to interact with the game. Interactivity is strong when players have a lot of control over their embodiment such as narrative decisions, open world, and avatar creation. Interactivity mediates embodiment for players, and thus, can be more effective if there is less of it.

**Embodiment** and **interaction** are closely related to each other and used in tandem for analysis to look at the videogame experience as a whole (Koster, 2004; Keogh, 2018). These two aspects capture the dual embodiment of the player and the various facets that create the ludo-emotional experience. Thus the interplay between interactions and player embodiment can be seen as the 'dynamics' (MDA approach) of the videogame experience through the lens of

ludo-emotional dissonance. The way that interactivity affects embodiment and embodiment affects interactivity creates a dissonant or consonant experience.



*Figure 2.1. A diagram of ludo-emotional dissonance and the relationship of its elements. Player experience, designer intentions, and player expectations either coincide or work separately (shown with the dashed green lines) to create consonance or dissonance, respectively. These elements are mediated by interactivity (shown with the solid blue line). The weight of each of these elements is context-dependent depending on the videogame and its emphasis on narrative and/or mechanics.*

Designer intentions around emotions, the player experience of emotions, and player expectations of emotion all interact towards ludo-emotional consonance; that is, the relationship between what the game designer intends, what the player expects, and what the player actually experiences (shown by the dashed green arrow lines in Figure 2.1) as mediated by the interactivity and mechanics of the game (shown by the solid blue arrow lines in Figure 2.1). However, if one of these deviates from expectations or lived experience, and/or if the interactivity of the game does not properly mediate the embodiment of the player, then it falls outside of these boundaries into ludo-emotional dissonance. Dissonance may be a positive intended experience. For example, in *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017) players are intentionally led to dissonance through the breaking of established genre conventions, thus, their

expectations are misaligned with their actual gameplay experience even though this experience may be what the game designers intended. Dissonance from these altered embodiments are a fascinating area of videogame development which I wish to explore and foster throughout my discussion of ludo-emotional dissonance. However, it can also lead to dissonance which leads to a negative experience for players. Below are two examples of the way that interactivity and embodiment interact to create this dissonance or consonance.

**Interactivity affects embodiment** when a player with cerebral palsy cannot interact with a game due to the controls requiring fine motor control. Interactivity is low, thus the player is not embodied within the game the way the designer intended, leading to large levels of unintended frustration and negative dissonance. But, the controls can be tuned to help improve the precision. For example by making large motions of the player get translated into fine motions in the game. In this way, the interactivity is increased and thus can increase embodiment, creating more ludo-emotional consonance for the player.

**Embodiment affects interactivity** when, considering the same game as above, the intended design goal is to help people understand the challenges of living with cerebral palsy. The controls can be deliberately set up, such as in *Octodad* (2010), to have imprecise controls which may reflect how it feels to live with the condition. Both the embodiment and interactivity would be high and create ludo-emotional consonance. If the controls were not as awkward, then the player might still be able to achieve embodiment to a certain extent (the inner triangle of Figure 2.1), but it would not be as direct as when it is mediated through the interactivity of the game (encompassing the outer square of Figure 2.1). As can be seen, this does not directly relate to the physical controls of the game but rather *how* the controls are implemented, opening up space to include accessible controls for those that have cerebral palsy to play games like *Octodad* (2010) and see their experience reflected in-game without doing it in a way that also actively excludes them.

Another example of how **embodiment affects interactivity** is when players embody the subaltern while playing military shooters such as *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). Although the game situates itself as a subversion of the conventional military shooter narrative where players are made consciously aware of the 'othering' perpetuated within other games in the genre and thus their own complicity with it (Keogh, 2013), players still participate in violence against the Arabic residents of Dubai without an alternative way to interact with the game. If players are Arabic, they become the subaltern while playing the game. Additionally, because they are

playing the specific role of Captain Martin Walker whose deteriorating mental state becomes a key aspect of the narrative, they are not given an alternative way to interact and break out of the subaltern state written about them. The embodiment as outlined by the game developers creates an interactivity which limits players into the subaltern, leading to a negative, ludo-emotionally dissonant experience. Although game developers of conventional military shooters want players to feel powerful through the “representations of modern war [which] regularly perpetuate notions of the West’s technological and ethical superiority,” (Keogh 2013, para. 9), these players do not feel powerful but rather feel attacked and/or dismissed, disrupting ludo-emotional consonance.

## Embodiment

Embodiment primarily encompasses the ecological emotions, the emotions players feel when they react to a game similarly to the real world, and the narrative emotions, which are emotions relating to the characters, setting, and events within the game (Frome, 2007). Embodiment is analyzed through the perspective of the player, their player-character (or however their role within the game is presented), the players’ understanding and interpretation of their role, how the player and player-character interact with non-playable characters (NPCs), and the in-game environmental context - thus, narrative emotions are a strong factor in analyzing embodiment. It also includes the way a players’ background and context influences their gameplay and interpretation of the game (Keogh, 2018) - thus, ecological emotions are also centered within player embodiment. Embodiment also explores the preconceived notions players may have about videogame genre and player-character roles before beginning a videogame, and how the videogame plays into these tropes or subverts them. This could have a positive or negative dissonant effect on players depending on game design intentions, implementations, and subsequent gameplay consequences.

Because of the embodiment players undertake when becoming a material amalgam between their ‘real’ and their ‘game’ selves, it is natural for players to connect and engage directly with the avatar they play as, whether in first or third person (Gray, 2014; Keogh, 2018). As Bell et al. (2018) found, players are especially “doubly-situated when they experience a storyworld in the first-person; they feel part of the storyworld space and time and seem to have internalised the actions they made in the game world” (11). For example, the experience of Chell in *Portal* (2007), through her struggles, triumphs, and hopelessness become the player’s own struggles, triumphs, and hopelessness (Burden & Gouglas, 2012). This does not imply, as

Seraphine (2016) states, that player-characters are exact representations of the player within the videogame. Rather the player-character, with their own characterizations, can give players the opportunity for learning beyond their own boundaries by taking on alternate agencies with different goals and abilities than are possible within 'real' life (Nguyen, 2020).

The adoption of alternate agencies is a way of learning about and expanding players' autonomy (Nguyen, 2020). Herein there is an emancipatory quality to games that allow players to explore their own self-determination in nuanced ways (Cross, 2014) whether that be through different explorations of the self, of the world, or social structures. In *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Legacy Russell (2020) reflects on how contrary to the assumption that online identities are constructed through a fantasy-oriented lens, they are "bristling with potential, and very capable of 'living on' away from the space of cyberspace" (02 GLITCH IS COSMIC chapter) and how "embracing the plausibility of range—that is, fantasizing, playing, experimenting by donning different 'skins'—becomes an act of empowerment, self-discovery, and even self-care" (08 GLITCH IS SKIN chapter). The realities of the digital realm work with our online actions to explore, inform, and deepen our offline existence, and vice versa (Russell 2020, 02 GLITCH IS COSMIC chapter).

At the same time I argue that no matter how fantastical videogames get, their development and interpretation are grounded within material reality and the social constructs surrounding their construction (Tucker, 2019; Schubert, 2021). This "third-space" encompasses both real and imagined space - which I expand to include the 'real' and the 'game' self - where "it is not possible to separate the imaginary space [the game self] constructed by the perception of space from its physical and cartographic planes [the real self]" (Mukherjee 2016, 509). Because of the normative nature of many of these constructed spaces and their use as a reference point for third spaces and as I expand, "third selves", there will continue to be a struggle to fully recognize "ourselves" (Russell 2020, 01 GLITCH REFUSES chapter) without hegemonic deconstructions.

Herein lies the two-fold experience of the relationship between the player and the player-character. Because the avatar or player-character is *not* the player, they do not share the same perceptions or social constructs as the player, especially in games that have a narratively specified player-character. This can lead to players exploring antisocial or violent behaviors through a villainous or even 'heroic' player-character. There is a separation between the values of player-character and player which could require a restructuring of viewpoint, an allowance for

attitudes that players would not normally engage with in everyday life, and/or which could be re-traumatizing. In this way, players embody the player-character through mechanic controls, but also through their “look and sound”, and thus “through the character’s body—through how it functions and how it is represented— the player gains an embodied understanding of the world that the game presents,” (Keogh 2013, para. 26). However, the player-character *is also* the player and “finding oneself in a game can be important to players,” (Dym et al., 2018) whether through societal and cultural representations or identity exploration. This allows players who are exploring their identity, gender identity, sexuality, or body beyond the confines of itself (Dym et al., 2018; Russell, 2020) to do so in an environment beyond the bounds of our patriarchal, capitalist, neoliberalist society. In this exploration there might be dissonance, but one that could be resolved or explored through the player-as-player-character. This is a complicated topic, as online spaces also reproduce sexual and gender norms that objectify identities (Nakamura, 1995; Brookey & Cannon, 2009); this objectification should also be taken into consideration when discussing cyberspace, and although it is a topic I touch upon, a full discussion does not fit the scope of this project.

Thus, embodiment is analyzed through the player-character’s positionality, situated within the context of both the videogame, and the player’s background and understanding of the videogame. When analyzing or incorporating embodiment within a game, some of the main questions that can be asked are:

- What is the role and background of the main character in relation to other characters within the game? How does the player-character interact with these characters?
- What is the environmental and narrative context of the player-character within the game? How is this relationship explored?
- What is the cultural, environmental, societal, and monetary context in which the videogame is produced?
- How has reality been simplified? What has been included and excluded, and what are the reasons behind those decisions? What social constructions have been removed or amplified? How and why?
- What is the understanding of the player when entering the videogame experience? What is the developed contract, and is that contract maintained or broken throughout their playtime?

- For example, if the game is sold and marketed as an action role-playing game with a certain narrative or environmental context, is that upheld when the player actually plays the game?

## Simplification of reality

A videogame's narrative, player-character design, player-character choices, environmental context, etc. cannot completely replicate reality. Therefore, it is important to analyze the decisions behind what is included and excluded from games, and how the included aspects of videogames are presented (Keogh, 2018). Many times, videogames represent simplified arguments or representations, but this does not preclude them from complex embodiment analysis (Ruberg, 2015; Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020) and can still create an emotionally compelling experience. Thus the simplicity of videogames should not exclude them from deeper emotional analysis.

For example, *Spyro: Year of the Dragon* (2000) follows Spyro as he deals with an invading force, the Sorceress, who steals all of the dragon eggs from the dragon realms for the benefit of her own kingdom. The eggs are spread across multiple worlds which are invaded and colonized by Rhynocs, henchmen to the Sorceress, who take on the traditional garb of the realm's residents while casting them out. Although Spyro can be interpreted as a 'white savior' coming to save the helpless residents, the game also portrays Spyro as an anti-colonial disrupter. While he saves the dragon eggs, stolen and displaced, he also drives the invading Rhynocs out and returns the realms to their original inhabitants without political or sociological disruptions or personal gain aside from retrieving the eggs. Spyro is thus a subversion of the classic cartoon genre, reflecting anti-imperial ideals by using violent mechanics to disrupt the colonial reign of the Sorceress. The player also temporarily takes on alternate agencies as local inhabitants that have had their realms disrupted such as Sheila the Kangaroo and Sergeant Byrd the Penguin, empowering them to fight back against these forces themselves. The violent mechanics within the game are a rejection of the hegemonic power fantasies usually seen within mainstream videogames.

However, it can also be re-traumatizing when players are faced with stereotypical representations of characters, cultures, and more. Because so many games have white protagonists that are rewarded for violent behaviors, players are often faced with stereotypical representations of other people in the form of the 'enemy'. These enemies - faceless, nameless, and dehumanized - can be from a culture or an allegorical representation of a real culture. This

dehumanization is purposeful to create the illusion of the 'other' while the player-character - heroic, fully fleshed out, and developed - is meant to represent the known and familiar for the player (Mukherjee, 2016). This heroic familiarity incentivizes committing violent acts as the embodied player-character for their own gains.

The experiences of players that relate with these representations are ignored, alienated, and excluded. While discussing *Female Experience Simulator* (2013), Jones (2017) found that despite the game emphasizing violence against women with the intention of drawing attention to the horrific experiences that they face, many of the women in his class found the exaggeration of their experiences as dangerous and counter-productive. The way in which the content was exaggerated could easily be seen as hyperbole, giving men the ammunition to deny women's testimonies of violence and harm as exaggeration (Jones, 2017). Despite the game being about women, the game itself was alienating and did not feel like it was *for* them. In contrast, *Realistic Female First-Person Shooter* (2012), while also extremely exaggerated, is a comedy based on "masochistic frustration" through an inefficient control scheme and use of fumblecore mechanics (Jones, 2017). While disempowerment might be a masochistic mechanic used to generate empathy (Ruberg, 2020), the comedy of *Realistic Female First-Person Simulator* is not interested with giving its players "a sincere insight into the world as navigated by someone with reduced mobility" but instead "is **punching down** at an **imagined form of being-in-the-world**, one that is helpless and disempowered, but **doesn't actually exist**," (original emphasis) and thus makes fun of people who hold these conceptions, not at the "imagined disability that is womanhood" (Jones, 2017).

Thus, the question of what is exaggerated, emphasized, portrayed, or removed can create an emotionally compelling videogame such as *Spyro: Year of the Dragon* (2000), or it can create a dissonant experience for the player if they themselves are reflected in a stereotypical or victimized way, such as *Female Experience Simulator* (2013). The environmental context in which the player-character is situated, as well as the discourse that environment portrays through relationships and environmental domination, creates embodiment that positively or negatively affects the player.

## Intersectionality - or, white is still the default

Explorations of diverse embodied roles are seen less often in mainstream AAA videogames as more hegemonic, assimilated stories are cyclically perpetuated instead. The protagonist that players' usually embody is white, male, cis, and able bodied within a space that is

white-centered and primarily for males (Leonard, 2006). Diamond Lobby (Lin, 2023) compiled 93 top selling or published games from 2017 to 2021 to analyze gender, sexuality, and ethnic diversity within them<sup>11</sup>. Their statistics show that 79.2% of main protagonists in games are male compared to 20.8% for females, and 54.2% of main protagonists are white. Only 8.3% of games had a main character that was female of a non-white ethnicity<sup>12</sup>. Of the human characters they looked at, 61.2% of them were white, 9.5% of games had only white player-characters, and only 5.3% of games had no white player-characters. Furthermore, of 810 characters analyzed, 66.5% of them were male, 27.7% were female, and only 5.8% were non-binary or had no documented gender. Additionally, 31.7% of games had only male characters, while only 5.1% of games had only female characters. (Lin, 2023).

Even if characters are not physically white (such as in *Spyro*), many characters are developed through the hegemon, leading to the game as a whole being affected by the hegemonic perspective (Higgin, 2008) and leading to white as the “default” within current mainstream videogame development. Additionally, the omission of diverse playable characters (Lin, 2023), such as Black characters, “devalues the potential of video games to provide productive racial experiences because they reinforce dominant notions of Blacks as incapable of being functional members of society,” (Higgin 2008, 6). Video games cannot be created within a cultural vacuum and “representations must be analyzed in regard to how they are constructed as well as the structural and political circumstances that generate and support them,” (Higgin 2008, 20-21).

Diverse representation within the mainstream, when present, is generally not nuanced. Again, representation is usually seen through the lens of white, male, cis, and/or able-bodied development, characters, and environmental context, reflecting the biases and experiences of its developers (Fron, 2007; Flanagan, 2009; Dym et al., 2018). Limiting discussions to the mere presence of diversity misses the nuance around how that representation is presented and how it matters (Dym et al., 2018); for example, “a transgender character that misrepresents transgender people may cause more damage than no representation at all,” (Dym et al., 2018). So, even when there is more diverse representation within mainstream games, its inclusion is typically performative and for capitalistic gain, serving to profit off of players. This performative

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<sup>11</sup> Diamond Lobby analyzed the 10 highest selling games from each year as well as every other major game release from major publishers such as Activision, EA, Nintendo, Ubisoft and more (Lin, 2023). They removed all games that only allowed players to play with a fully customizable character.

<sup>12</sup> Diamond Lobby broke down their ethnicity analysis by ‘white/Caucasian’ and ‘all other ethnicities’ due to a lack of information about many characters, creating “difficulty in determining the true ethnicity of many multiracial characters,” (Lin, 2023).

work may end with characters that are prejudiced or which have a very thin characterization on which players imprint themselves and their hegemonic ideologies; Higgin (2008) describes how “...when blackness has no preset qualities to influence role-play... the player is completely free, if not encouraged, to indulge in dominant fantasies of blackness and enact a form of virtual minstrelsy,” (20). This ultimately alienates many players while privileging the hegemon’s performative feelings of “empathy” (Ruberg, 2020) through their experience of “the Other”.

For example, when *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) was first released the character of Hainly Abrams, who is canonically trans, would immediately upon meeting the player-character reveal her full personal history including her transition and pre-transition name (or deadname). The game was criticized for this because, as Willow (2017) describes,

*...this content is not pandering to transgender players (nor has any LGBT content really been that), it’s pandering to rather dated, faulty social expectations of trans people and BioWare felt that was inclusive. It isn’t.*

The game does not treat Abrams as a fully fleshed out character with her own interests to reflect a sincere transgender experience (Dym et al., 2018). This would include not disclosing her deadname unprompted because of safety and privacy concerns upon meeting a total stranger in the player-character of Ryder (Willow, 2017) and because she hates the name and wishes to leave it behind (Dale, 2017). But, she does engage in these types of interactions, revealing a performative appeal to the curiosity of mainstream culture (Willow, 2017). Willow (2017) explores how, within mainstream culture, “it’s often assumed because someone discloses that they are trans that it is then acceptable to ask deeply invasive questions such as what your old name was or what is in your pants,” which becomes an issue within the context of a videogame where players may be given the opportunity to pry more than they might within the real world because of salient dialogue options.

As Flanagan (2009) discusses, diverse experiences and representations should not be added simply for novelty or, as I extend, capitalistic gain. Rather, sensitivity and the hiring of diverse voices is required for these works to expand beyond the hegemonic and sanitized version of diverse experiences and away from the imperialist eye (Dale, 2017; Tassi, 2022). For example, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2013) writer Patrick Weekes reached out to trans consultants and asked questions about how to handle the character of Krem which “made the character significantly better, but even this process wouldn’t have been necessary if BioWare had trans individuals working on the game itself,” (Dale, 2017). Through this limited embodiment and interaction between player-character, the player themselves, and characters such as Hainly

Abrams, a negative ludo-emotional dissonance - one of superficial understanding and perspective - leads to consequential misunderstandings and/or negative self image. In this way, “while art must indeed break borders, there are many instances where the borders broken are misguided and actually reinforce existing class, ethnic, and other power structures,” (Flanagan 2009, 207). This is especially true when, for example, trans experiences are perceived through the lens of a player-character that, through the game’s own rhetoric, is immediately owed their trans co-worker’s entire transition experience. Or, as the game was later updated to only reveal certain information after developing trust with Abrams (Polo, 2017), that the player can ‘gain’ this information through generic game mechanics, such as completing tasks for Hainly. Willow (2017) states that “Hainly probably needs a fair number of loyalty missions to disclose her status, if at all, and never owes anyone a dead name.” Thus the discussion must move beyond the mere inclusion of diverse representations (Dym et al., 2018) and towards resistance of the projecting of diverse bodies onto the desires of the hegemon “in favor of more agentive, politically capable, and meaningful forms of representation,” (Higgin 2008, 17-18).

Because of this history and the lack of diversity within the mainstream, accompanied by neoliberal, capitalist gains based off of white supremacy, “reductive racial stereotypes and representations proliferate while productive and politically disruptive racial differences are ejected or neutralized through fantastical proxies,” (Higgin 2008, 3). This represents a sinister aspect of games: the pervading theme of whiteness as invisible, apolitical, and the default. As seen in many massively multiplayer online games such as *World of Warcraft* (2004), this renders any non-white choices of character as “exotic stylistic deviations,” (Higgin 2008, 3) rather than fully embodied identities. Here, the white identity is defined by neutrality, by what it is *not* (Gray, 2014). Thus hegemon game developers create games reflecting themselves and their values which become canonized as the invisible default of commercial videogames despite a wide range of players. The embodiment of these experiences is limited and rather than a variety of alternate agencies, players are forced to accept the default of white or the reflection of their own identities through the lens of white hegemony.

*Detroit: Become Human* (2018) explores a future with androids in the US city of Detroit, Michigan through a hegemonic lens of white technology and power. Androids, most of whom take on the appearance of white humans, are slaves that must follow the commands of their human masters. The player takes control of three of these androids as they fight for freedom and self-determination: Kara, who is a housekeeper and caretaker android who “deviates” from her programming to flee her abusive owner and find a safe place to care for her ward, Alice, in

Canada; Connor, an experimental android who works with the police in order to capture deviated androids, and who can eventually “deviate” from his programming and join the android revolution for himself; and Markus, a caretaker android who also “deviates” from his programming, leading to his disposal, and his eventual role of leading the android freedom revolution. Markus’s storyline is the most prominent in its ties to historical civil rights movements in the United States<sup>13</sup> as he leads “his people” towards equal rights. Markus’s narrative also prominently includes a “public opinion” tracker which influences player decisions while they are working towards a binary pacifist or violent revolution (Schubert, 2021). The civil rights movement is used as an allegorical exploration of the oppression the androids face, clearly referenced by one of the androids painting “We have a dream”<sup>14</sup> (emphasis added) on the side of a building during the Capitol Park chapter of the game in addition to the choice of chanting “Equal Rights!”, “We Are People!”, and “No More Slavery!” during a march protesting the enslavement of androids. As Schubert (2021) described, “these references, along with others about historical injustice in the United States, are not very subtle, nor are they used in a particularly nuanced way that would be self-aware of the historical parallels...” (para. 11); in this way, *DBH* envisions a post-racial future where instead of racial lines, discrimination of the “Other” is based on technological ones while also staying “wholly unaware of the politics of ethnic representation,” (para. 11) leading to a form of “colorblind racism” which “dismisses the lived experiences of people of color” and “within the context of enduring structural and systemic racism [...] serves as a device to disengage from conversations of race and racism entirely,” (Fitchburg State University, 2023). *DBH* tries to advocate for a generic and replaceable “Other” while also representing many of its nonwhite characters in discriminatory and stereotypical ways which renders its politics as reactionary (Schubert, 2021) and seats its “neutrality” in a state which its game developers see as “neutral”; in this case, one where technological advancements and the work of Black activists are redefined and embodied from a hegemonic, white perspective so the hegemon can explore these sterilized narratives as the oppressed.

Unlike Kara and Connor, Markus’s storyline does not only affect the outcome of his character but also the outcome of how androids are perceived by the human public and how they achieve self-determination, presenting them as a generic, disenfranchised “Other” (Schubert, 2021). The framed “good” ending of the game for Markus thus follows a pacifist

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<sup>13</sup> This connection is particularly highlighted by the use of Detroit as the game’s setting, which was the location of “the Detroit Walk to Freedom in 1963, the 1967 Detroit Riot, and generally the city’s large African American population,” (Schubert 2021, para. 11).

<sup>14</sup> A reference to Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” public speech given during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 as part of the civil rights movement (Tikkanen, 2023).

playthrough in which he and his fellow androids undergo abuse, public shaming, and must reject fighting back against the human militia in order to win over public opinion, winning them their freedom. The “bad” ending is one of violent revolution, but, regardless of if players choose to follow a pacifist or violent path, humans will perform violence against the androids, such as attacking their home base of Jericho late in the game. Although the survival of Markus and thus the success of the revolution, whether through violent or non-violent means, could be seen as a “happy” ending (Schubert, 2021), the game’s “public opinion” counter renders the neutrality of choosing either a pacifist or violent revolution void. A main mechanic of *DBH*, the opinion tracker determines player-character relationships and is also used as a measure of “public opinion” across all three characters, meant to show a general idea of human perception of the android revolution and which is consistently surfaced as the player makes decisions, primarily as Markus. Public opinion starts as “skeptical” and is generally lowered when choosing hostile or violent decisions and can be raised by choosing non-violent options, such as choosing “peaceful” protesting over attacking. Because the game situates public opinion in a similar manner to the way it situates player-character relationships such as friendship levels, which players may want to increase due to their embodiment of the characters of Kara, Connor, and Markus - and because there are no advantages to lowered friendship levels leaving no nuance within these decisions and making higher friendship levels exclusively good - public opinion becomes an influential factor to the way that players make decisions (Schubert, 2021). The framing of these gameplay elements inherently perpetuates an idea that through careful contemplation, non-violence even in the face of violent governmental forces trying to eradicate androids, and the sanitized optics of pacifism, players are doing something “right” as public opinion increases.

*DBH* erases historically marginalized groups in order to present oppression through a white lens - one that is palatable and easy to consume for the hegemon (Higgin, 2008) - while still perpetuating harm such as violence against women and their objectification. Only through this “empathetic” reading can the hegemon relate to marginalized people fighting for their rights, calling into question how empathetic these representations truly are, who these games are for, and what their purpose is; mainly, to make the hegemon feel “better” that they have done the “right thing” (Ruberg, 2020). In *DBH*, players can pretend to live through a pseudo-racial revolution and imagine it being possible to do so as a pacifist - that if they were in the same situation, they would choose the morally superior, “good” route of pacifism, and that if they did choose the “bad” route of violent revolution, the consequences of that moralistically “bad”

decision would be worse than the opportunity to self-determine, free of socio-political ramifications (Schubert, 2021). Although the default white of cyberspace and gamespace has been publicized as a “racially progressive” colorblind movement, *DBH* is one example of how it hegemonically paints these sterilized spaces as created by and for white people (Higgin, 2009) and more broadly, the hegemon.

Most telling is how David Cage has stated that he does not believe there is a message about revolution within the game, and has been inconsistent about if *DBH* is on a surface level *only* about androids or if it *is* meant to reflect human struggles (Kuchera, 2017; Farokhmanesh, 2017; Grayson, 2017). This kind of thinking and messaging is a common theme among mainstream studios who try to “avoid politics” or political interpretations of/within their games (Chalk, 2018; Tucker, 2019; Gartenberg, 2020). Game designers take this “apolitical” stance which they hope absolves them and allows them to appropriate imagery of inherently political settings, contexts, and environments without embodying their socio-political and cultural themes. This presents an insidious trend where studios attempting to strip any meaning or influence from their themes “is at best a defense of the status quo, and at worst malignant reactionism,” (Tucker, 2019) showing the inherent power that they hold to determine what *is* political. As such, the impossible goal of having a game with “no politics” actually means a game which upholds the “status quo” and, as perceived by the hegemon, “neutral” conservative values (Schubert, 2021; Tucker, 2019). Even if David Cage claims the opposite, this “apoliticism” still means “disrupting” the social structures defining androids as slaves by *working within* those same social structures, narratively embodying an inherently political stance and alienating many players who do not have these same “apolitical” privileges.

These “default” standards of whiteness, “neutrality”, and “apolitical-ness” have been entrenched and perpetuated in modern videogame design. For example, Activision Blizzard announced their Diversity Space Tool which they applauded as a way to bring more diversity into games, even going as far as to say that the tool “can clearly delineate between token characters and true representation” during the character creation process (Alt, 2022). This tool rates characters from games such as *Overwatch* (2016) on characteristics including race, culture, age, and more, with more “diverse” or “exotic” features given a higher rating. This suggests that the default, standard character is male, cis, white, and able-bodied, to name a few characteristics (Tassi, 2022).

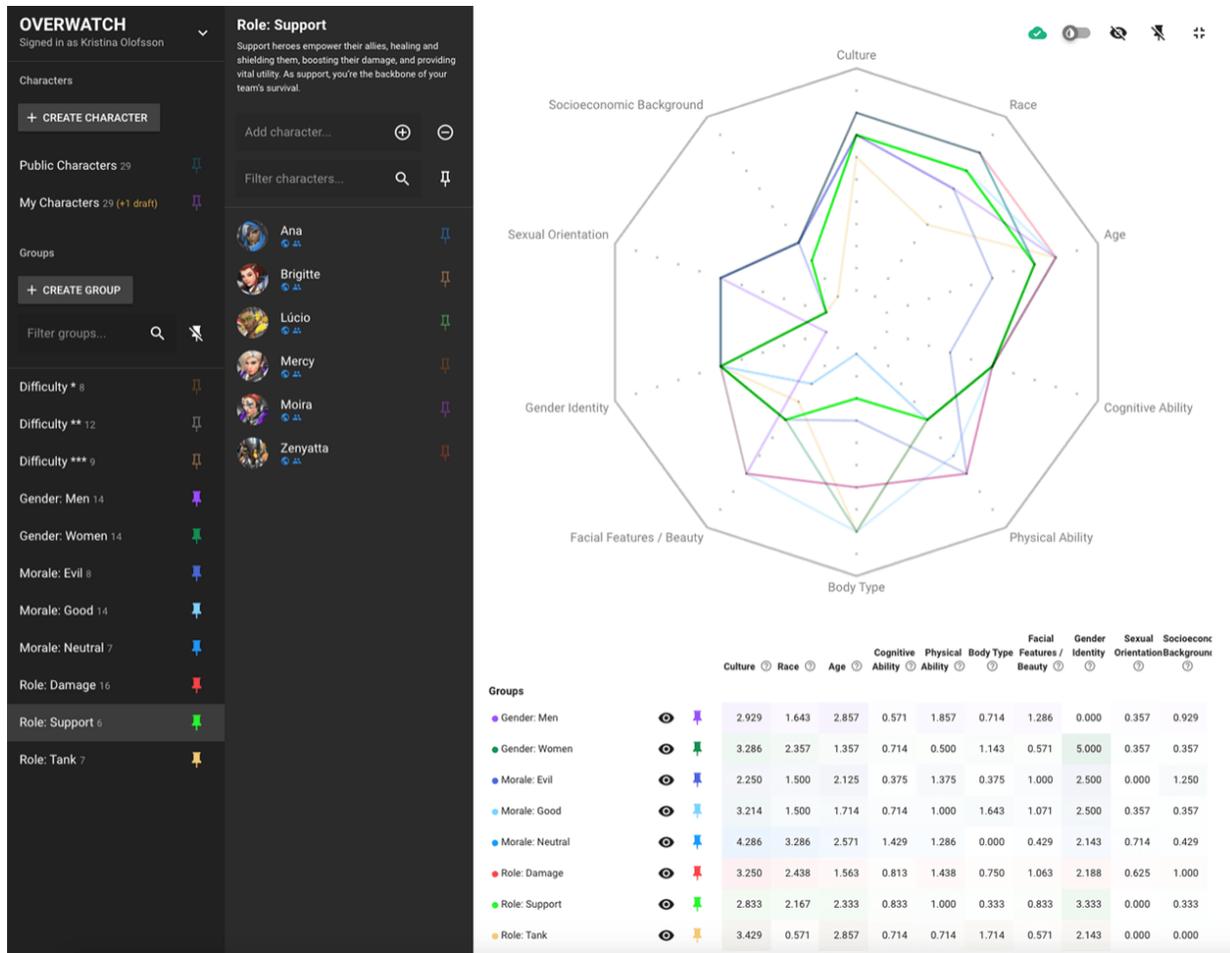


Figure 2.2. An example of Activision Blizzard’s Diversity Space Tool showing various characters from Overwatch (2016) scaled based on their “diversity”. The center of the tool is that of a “default” or “standard” character.

This tool may have merit as a post-mortem tool for designers to recognize their own biases during character development and future developmental considerations, and which is how the tool was used for games such as *Call of Duty: Vanguard* (2021), but the praise Activision Blizzard gave themselves for ‘increasing diversity’ reveals the codification of diversity against a *white default*, the commodification of ‘diversity’ for social capital and monetary gains, and a sense of dismissal of embodiment through the continued lack of consultation and employment of diverse game developers. Although Activision Blizzard later heavily edited their post, removed the photos, and added an addendum to clarify that the tool was not being used in active game development and was meant to be a supplemental tool towards increased diverse representation in games, it still calls into question who created these codified values and how they were being arbitrarily implemented (Tassi, 2022). For example, “if Ana scores a 7/10 for ‘Culture’ and ‘Race’ by being an Egyptian Arab, what exactly is a 10/10, or a 3/10? How are

these 'tiers' calculated? If her age of 60 is also a 7/10, does say a 100 year old character earn a 10/10? Or a toddler because you don't normally see those in FPS games?" are just a few of the questions that Tassi (2022) brings up. Thus, following the colorblind tradition of MMORPG design, tools like these are

*complicit in dominant racially regressive politics by not resisting the structural proliferation of White avatars—an inevitability given the historically Eurocentric nature of fantasy as well as the racist expectations and assumptions brandished in video games.* (Higgin 2008, 16)

On the other hand the diversification of videogames, especially in smaller indie studios, has shown the positive impact that games can have on their players' embodiment. *Thirsty Suitors* (TBA) is an upcoming release by Outerloop Games which follows Jala, a queer, South Asian woman returning to her home after a breakup who finds herself battling (literally) against her exes, using insults to either reconcile with them or not (Farokhmanesh, 2022); however, whichever outcome is chosen, the goal of these battles is to reach some sort of relationship resolution rather than to "defeat" them (Totilo, 2022). *Thirsty Suitors* thus recontextualizes battles of wits or insults, seen in games such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), from ones of pure, aesthetic, humorous violence to ones of communication through the player's embodiment of Jala and the mechanics of the battles leading towards resolution rather than dominance. This cultural context is further explored through the game's focus on cooking which is an important aspect of family connection reflecting a shared "third space" between Ekanayake's - co-founder and creative director of Outerloop - lived experiences and the experiences of Jala within the game (Farokhmanesh, 2022). Players of South Asian backgrounds can see themselves reflected in *Thirsty Suitors*, an important point for Ekanayake and Jayanth (Farokhmanesh, 2022; Totilo, 2022). However, this has also been a difficult aspect for mainstream videogame publishers to grapple with as they are still focused on "what will sell" while these same "mostly white companies [...] think putting a brown person on the screen will make them popular" and, thus, "they're doing it for the wrong reasons," (Ekanayake quoted in Farokhmanesh, 2022). What is important about these games is that they are designed by diverse people for diverse people. The roles embodied within these games are sincere, meant to embody experiences where diverse players embody a role that is relatable and *known for them* while also opening up experiences for players to explore these embodiments in new contexts (Farokhmanesh, 2022). Here, empowerment supersedes any notions of "empathy".

## Identity tourism and the subaltern

Not only are player-characters, avatars, and NPCs generally by default white in most mainstream videogames, but interactions and representations of the “Other” are also simplified caricatures that supposedly represent the “essence of the people... splitting the stereotype into its ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides,” (Gray 2014, 12), revealing dominant ideas and perpetuating these ideas as common which in turn acts as the “compass for both daily and institutional relations,” (Leonard 2006, 85). These hegemonic narratives hide the power dynamics inherent within videogames, both through invisible systems and interfaces of subjection and coercion (Gray, 2014).

When there are diverse representations within videogames it calls into question who the audience for these games are, how the audience consumes and internalizes these representations, and why these representations are presented in the way they are. When looking at North American and European videogames especially, Leonard (2006) states that videogame analysis “necessitates inquiry into how and why games provide their primarily White creators and players the opportunity to become the other,” (86) and how in turn these videogames illicit pleasure based on white fantasies of domination, control, and privilege. Games further teach their players about stereotypes and acceptance of hegemonic values while allowing players to experience the other (Leonard, 2003).

For example, Leonard (2006) argues that videogames which show stereotypical representations of Black life for a primarily white audience, such as in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), are “high-tech blackface,” (86) and that as players embody this role, they become much more aware of the rhetoric of the game and how this rhetoric relates to assumedly ‘real’ lived experiences. As Gray (2014) describes of *GTA:SA*’s main character, “crime in CJ’s life is ever-present,” (25). Violence is normalized in CJ and his associate’s lives, but the audience of *GTA:SA* is not given the contextual reasons behind *why* and *how* this violence is normalized through structural discrimination (Gray, 2014). These trends in media perpetuate and reaffirm the connection between Black America and violence. They also reveal that although the ‘default’ player would play as a minority character, that character would have to be created within the stereotypical representations of Black life. This othering and stereotyping within videogames does harm to players in “real life”, showing a distinct “third self” connection.

When players encounter themselves within videogames through the white hegemonic lens without control over their representations, they embody the subaltern. The subaltern describes how social history is written from the bias of the elite, hegemonic classes while voices 'from below' are silenced, overwritten, or rewritten; the subaltern "voice from below" is one that "can never articulate itself" (Mukherjee 2016, 505). As Mukherjee (2016) further describes:

*Imagine a Iraqi gamer playing America's Army (2002) or a player from Zaire playing Far Cry 2 (2008): The game's rules constrain [them] to follow certain assumptions about [their] culture that [they], being marginal to the identity the game constructs, [are] unable to protest. (511)*

Games from this limited lens fail to consider the large diversity of people who may be represented as the subaltern in games based off of colonial and imperialist representations (Mukherjee, 2016). CJ, being completely controlled and subjected to the external fantasies of his creators and players, is an example of the subaltern within videogames and reinforces hegemonic portrayals of Black lives as disposable and non-human (Gray, 2014). This imbalance leads to stories told through the misrepresentations and biases of Western neoliberalism.

This imbalance is prominently seen when analyzing what is chosen to be represented in detail and what is omitted. For example, Mukherjee (2016) describes how large Western cities such as Los Angeles are meticulously detailed while games set in countries such as Brazil and India are reduced to generic streets, warehouse locations, and stereotypical representations to show their 'other-ness'. It would be impossible to create completely accurate or direct representations within the limitations of gamespace; however, what needs to be addressed is what is and is not being presented, who is being presented, and from what perspective the story is being viewed from. For example, favelas (now called 'communities'), which are slums neglected from governmental support in countries such as Brazil and which have a rich, deep, and important cultural history (Barbosa, 2012; Green & Skidmore, 2021) have been historically used to short-handedly represent violent Brazilian gangsters and decrepit areas filled with drug smugglers. In *Max Payne 3* (2012), players run through favelas and kill hordes of Brazilian gangsters; there is no consideration for the emotional trauma that the player may go through if they are Brazilian (Mukherjee, 2016). In comparison, *Papo and Yo* (2012) uses favelas to explore the cultural background of the main game designer, Vander Caballero, creating a complicated backdrop to explore his childhood. Although favelas are cartoonishly exaggerated in *Papo and Yo*, there is more emotional nuance to the contextual background of the game's setting not seen in *Max Payne 3*.

Embodiment is thus a principle that can be used to analyze how players encounter themselves represented within videogames as the subaltern (Mukerjee, 2016). It can also be used to analyze how players are allowed to explore these alternative, exoticised cultures and narratives (Nakamura, 1995) while undermining the experiences of people from these cultures. As Mukerjee (2016) states, the concerns around the subaltern and by extension identity tourism do not apply to all videogames, but instead focuses on games that use these frameworks, whether intentional or not, to alienate minorities and further legitimize experiences *by* the hegemony *for* the hegemony. Simplification of reality is thus a powerful tool to either cause harm through the use of stereotypical representations created for a hegemonic audience or that can also be used for nuanced, fun, and diverse experiences depending on the role, environmental context, and interactions as player-character that the player engages with.

The real-world relations of fantasy videogames strongly impact player responses, which can lead to traumatic design consequences. Too often is 'historical accuracy' and 'post-racial' used to minimize critiques of games that center the white experience above all others (Gray, 2020). The minimization of experiences reflect and perpetuate real-life inequalities into the game space, recreating the hegemony of play (Fron et al., 2007; Gray, 2020). The diversification of mainstream videogames may also be a double-edged sword for many players - there needs to be care taken to break away from the hegemony of play that satisfies the urge to fetishize other cultures without consideration of design consequences (Fron et al., 2007; Gray, 2014; Cross, 2014). Even when considering the alternate agencies of Nguyen (2020) and the benefits of expanding player autonomy it needs to be asked who these alternate agencies are supporting, designed for, and how these alternate agencies are internalized. The digital encourages change and challenge in the world around us, "prompting the creation of entirely new worlds altogether" (Russell 2020, 04 GLITCH GHOSTS chapter) through, I argue, ludo-emotional dissonances.

## Interactivity

The second main component of ludo-emotional dissonance is interactivity. Opposed to embodiment, interactivity focuses less on content and narrative, and more on mechanics and player action within the gamespace. Interactivity primarily focuses on game emotions, which include competitive emotions related to winning, losing, achievement, and frustration even felt when observing a game, and ecological emotions, which are the emotions players feel when they react to a game similarly to the real world, such as jumping up and away when a game

scares them (Frome, 2007). Interactivity encompasses the dual embodiment of the player's experience within the game such as agency over narrative outcomes like branching paths within game stories, as well as their interaction with the physical devices on which they play the games. Limited interactivity can lead to a more ludo-emotionally consonant experience depending on the player impact of that interactivity. If players have difficulty understanding controls or are unfamiliar with the difficult and complicated control schemas seen with newer and larger videogames, this may break their intended immersion; thus, games with 'easier' controls, less complicated mechanics, or overall less interactivity can actually enhance the emotional player experience (Bell et al., 2018). Game designers may also have an intended story arc they want players to explore - these stories may be enhanced by giving players less control over certain aspects of the game, such as by using cutscenes.

*Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) on one hand suffers from the conventional, singular, linear narrative path of military shooters, while at the same time using these conventions to disrupt player expectations through its narrative tone, showing how "game mechanics never exist in a vacuum detached from a game's audiovisual representation," (Keogh 2013, para. 20; Jones, 2016). Thus interactivity is more complicated than just a game's mechanics or gameplay. Despite the fact that interactivity has been seen as a defining aspect of video games, its relationship with player agency and other aspects which create the game experience problematize how pivotal interactivity really is and how it is defined within the context of "passive" or "minimal" gameplay experiences. For example, Juul (2005) states that "video games are real in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact," but at the same time "to play a video game is [...] to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world," (1). This concept centers elements other than choice when defining videogames, but as Schubert (2021) claims, it still implies the importance of choices that the player engages with. Aarseth (1997) also uses "nontrivial effort" as a defining aspect when differentiating interactive fiction from other forms of fiction wherein "nontrivial" requires more effort from players than turning a page, for example. Murray (1998) further states that the "pleasure of agency" within electronic environments does not come merely from engaging in activity, such as clicking a mouse, but rather from the perception of meaning (128). However, these philosophical conceptualizations do not necessarily coincide with the mechanical "interactivity" pushed by frameworks such as the PENS model (Ryan et al., 2006). While the interactivity seen within modern videogame frameworks put an emphasis on "meaningful" decisions through engaging

gameplay elements, this erases more subdued pieces of game-art from what is considered “good” design for domination and control. Schubert (2021) states that

*The “nontrivial” effort that video games require often explicitly relates to making certain decisions, be that the basic act of choosing where to move one’s player avatar or slightly more complex choices, such as picking between dialog options of how the protagonist replies to another character or deciding how to solve which quests in a role-playing game. (para. 3)*

Although not as complicated as the mechanical and physical stamina needed for games such as *Elden Ring* (2022), *League of Legends* (2009) or *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series (1991 - present), games such as *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017) and *The Quarry* (2022) still provide meaningful, interactive experiences with their own forms of difficulty such as emotional narrative decisions. Thus, it does not necessarily lie within their mechanic complication that interactive player experiences are defined, but rather, the weight that their choices could mean - including anything from a pivotal narrative choice or to simply continuing to play through a story - which I argue is an important aspect to interactivity. Players could primarily be observer-participants through a game experience, but this could enhance their ludo-emotional experience if there is a narrative weight to their role as the observer-participant.

Thus interactivity, because of its required player input in order to “become”, gives artificial structures which help players delve beyond their own habits and can help form new ways of thinking (Nguyen, 2020). These types of structures are much easier to develop within the simplified worlds of games, where actions generally have clear consequences. Players work through both limits and agency within the predefined mechanics and gameplay of videogames which is “fundamental to critical play precisely because doing and action, essential to performance, constitute knowledge” (Flanagan 2009, 184). Through this player-game interaction, players are undertaking an amalgamation of their own self with their game self. However, these underlying systems and what players are allowed to do within their mechanical structures are “significant conceptual constructions that require critique,” (Flanagan 2009, 178) due to their cultural, political, and hegemonic nature. The narrative choices available within games, and how those choices are presented to players, allows us to make connections to the politics within that game (Schubert, 2021). Thus through not only the narratological aspect but also the ludological arguments made within games and their interplay do players constitute new ways of thinking and being (Frasca, 2003). Critiques of the sociocultural positionality of videogames have been ignored by mainstream industry in favor of using predetermined

frameworks to create monetary gain and to continue to profit from conservative, “True” gamers (Tucker, 2019).

Limits, which give context to player agency and consequences, are important when considering designer intentions as well as what designers have consciously and/or unconsciously left out. Moments when players are left watching a cutscene or some other form of observation are important times which allow players to reflect. Keogh (2018) describes how the waiting room in *Dys4ia* (2012) and the opening credits of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007), where the player has no control over the scene and has to just *wait*, are still engaging experiences. Even without gameplay, the player is “actively experiencing” these scenes, and, as Keogh (2018) describes of his experiences, “[w]hat I am capable of “doing” in each scene is less important than how that scene incorporates me as a situated being capable of looking, listening, and touching” (169). Bogost’s (2008) procedural rhetoric describes how players learn and embody discourses through the actions they actively engage in through the videogame. In this way, videogames have an emotional disposition which is reflected through player action. This is mediated by the implementation of chosen/unchosen mechanics by game designers, and what the player is doing “matters significantly not only to the meaning of the game but also to players’ understanding of their own actions,” (Flanagan 2009, 185). Keogh (2018) states it is not only mechanics but how the mechanics are implemented, the context of the videogame world, the embodied role of the player-character, and the sociocultural context that the game is created and played in that constitutes the player experience. The game’s mechanics, as seen with *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) cannot be analyzed separately from the rest of its development, instead combined by both form and content.

That is not to say that mechanics need to be hard or complicated to compliment the emotional intimacy of a videogame. Visual novels have fairly simple mechanics (move forward in text, choose from some narrative options) and still intimately entwine players with their characters, stories, and relationships. Here players take on a predominantly observer-participant role, and still meaningfully engage with the work. Despite what some see as “less”, “limited”, or “minimal” gameplay (Wallace, 2022), this interactivity still allows players control and power over their environment and other characters - in other words, it provides players with mastery (Ryan et al., 2006). Visual novels and choose your own adventure games problematize the idea of what “videogames” are, what “gameplay” encompasses, and what “interactivity” is, and thus oppose hegemonic practices seen within mainstream videogames through this mechanical complication. However, many visual novels, especially dating

simulators, tend to view dating through the male gaze by giving the male player-character control and power over predominately female characters for sexual gratification (Antioquia, 2018; Rogers, 2021). Thus, the embodiment for such games can be quite limited, showing the importance of analyzing embodiment and interactivity in tandem, and some of the additional limitations within current videogame design structures and narratives.

Furthermore, some games have frustrating mechanics on purpose to enhance the videogame's experience. Despite the emphasis on fun as a core tenet to successful game design, many games have become cult classics *because* of their purposefully frustrating nature. Nguyen (2020) points out how "...dissonance and unpleasantness in games [such as in *Minotaur China Shop* (2008)] can be just as valuable and interesting as dissonance and unpleasantness elsewhere in the aesthetic world," (Nguyen 2020, 113), similar to the experience elucidated by *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). Frustration is the point of these games and thus they embody Ruberg's (2015) no-fun games, bringing queer experiences to the forefront through the rejection of fun and through the rejection of normalized experiences, such as "good" control schemas or a "deserved" win. These games are not ludo-emotionally dissonant, but rather consonant through the player's embodied role (in Nguyen's example, a clunky bull) and the resulting frustrating mechanics (such as navigating a bull through an incredibly delicate and tight environment).

Interactivity is analyzed through the interplay of the player as actor-participant and observer-participant, how these roles are chosen, and how they are used for player empowerment through agency and control, or as a way to create moments of reflection. This ties in closely with the "level" of interactivity the player is given, and how more interactivity does not necessarily mean a more engaging experience. This additionally calls in question how accessibility and approachability can affect player embodiment. When analyzing interactivity within a game, some of the main questions that can be asked are:

- What are players allowed to do, and what are they not allowed to do? Why was this choice made, and how was it implemented? How does this ultimately affect the player experience and their embodiment?
- What are the historical and contextual meanings of the mechanics within the game? Are they incorporated in a way that perpetuates these historically hegemonic ideals?
  - For example, if a player is given a moralistically "good" or "bad" narrative choice, what are the benefits or consequences of these and how do they perpetuate

hegemonic ideals? *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) perpetuates hegemonic ideals of the moralistically superior “pacifist” revolution by positioning this choice as the “good” ending through the mechanic of a “public opinion” counter.

- When are players primarily observing the game? Does this player-as-observer-participant lie in opposition to player choices or interactions previously seen within the game?
  - For example, at the end of *Mass Effect 3* (2012) the *illusion* of player choice is exposed as player decisions through the trilogy and up to the penultimate moment of the game do not affect many of the game’s outcomes. How does this sudden shift affect the player experience and perception of interactivity?
- When are players primarily interacting with the game? How do player actions affect the environment, setting, or narrative of the game? Is this important, and if so, why is this affect important?
- When does interactivity become a detriment to the emotional impact of videogames? When does it become a defining aspect to the emotional impact of videogames?

## Interplay of actor-participant and observer-participant

The player as both the actor-participant and the observer-participant are important to their emotional experience. The actor-participant and the observer-participant create an interplay between power and submission, control and observation, and action and self-reflection which I argue are key to the videogame experience. As Frome (2007) describes, the roles embodied during gameplay is a significant factor to player emotions through two mechanisms - the player as an observer-participant, and as an actor-participant. As an actor-participant, the player interacts and changes the videogame, with emotional responses based on what they are doing more so than what they are seeing (Frome, 2007). As observer-participant, the player is still significantly engaging with the medium through processing and internalizing the constrained freedom they are given in their understanding of the work without changing it.

Since many modern videogames place the player within a first or third person perspective, either through a pre-established character or a direct player-character insert, the role that the player undertakes also influences their emotional responses to the interactivity of the game and gameplay (Keogh, 2013; Gray, 2014). Jones (2016) defines this as a “dehiscent performance” where a single character emerges from “an uneasy collaboration between human

and machine,” (89) wherein the controls which move a player avatar meld with player inputs to embody themselves within the gameworld. Looking at the videogame as a whole, as Keogh (2018) emphasizes, there are “many images and sounds that a player cannot change, and a player’s response to the aspects of the game are based on [their] observation,” (Frome 2007, 832) and thus, mechanics are not analyzed as a separate entity devoid of the contextual understanding of the videogame as a whole. Embodiment and interactivity are intertwined and cannot be wholly analyzed separately. For example, in *Spyro: Year of the Dragon* (2000), Spyro has the same abilities (mechanics) as his dragon peers which contextually makes sense within the game. However, many of his companions have unique abilities, meaning only they are able to traverse their home worlds and free these worlds from the invading Rhynocs. This creates a mechanical and interactive consonance within the larger themes of colonialism, anti-imperialism, and violent revolution as the displaced characters rise up for themselves without the need - and without the ability - of Spyro to help. Even games like *Bejeweled* (2001) have an aesthetic tone which would create a completely different experience if that context was changed, such as in *Layoff* (2009). Jewel pieces are now human workers who are systematically fired as you match them together and remove them from the board. The board space is transformed from one of satisfaction at a good match to one of hesitation and unease as people continue to be removed. The interactivity of the expected player experience is transformed into one in which the player is complacent and responsible for laying off people who are trying to survive within a capitalist society. Although the mechanics are identical, the ludo-emotional experience has shifted dramatically due to the player’s affected embodiment (Koster, 2004).

There is a strong interest from the mainstream for an increase of interactivity within videogames, which will supposedly increase user engagement (Ng et al., 2012), and player autonomy and agency (Crawford, 1984; Ryan et al., 2006). However, more interactivity and a stronger actor-participant role can lead to a more disengaging player experience if it does not suit the game, does not accommodate the player’s level of experience or accessibility needs, or does not contribute to a strong emotional player response. As Gray (2014) describes, the emotional connection that players have to gameplay “illustrates that as the story line for a game gets stronger, the less players can influence it, actually increasing their emotional attachment,” (5). In Bell et al.’s (2018) research into immersion within videogames, they found that while interactivity can “unite the reader-player with the avatar” it can also work to disengage the player and shift them out of their immersive experience within the gameworld back into the “real world” (13). This loss of immersion could be related to a loss of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992) and how

players may feel frustration from being unable to master mechanics either from a skill gap or from poorly implemented controls; however, the distraction into the 'real world' can also lead players to emotionally disconnecting from the game experience because they cannot engage with it in the first place, unrelated to a loss or disruption of flow state. That is, it is not only that the controls are frustrating or that the game difficulty spikes too quickly, but that they cannot even engage with the piece in the first place because of the inherent, unassumed difficulty that comes with a lack of experience with videogame conventions. Interactivity in respect to ludo-emotional dissonance is thus entwined with controls because with more complicated controls comes a steeper learning curve for interacting with videogames in the first place. This creates negative dissonance for many players who have not had the privilege to experience and learn the technological intricacies of modern videogames (Keogh, 2018), decreasing their ability to affectively embody the videogame as actor-participants.

While direct action and interaction with videogame interfaces is important to understanding player experience and engagement, "it is important to also account for the act of viewing and the act of listening as themselves active bodily engagements with the videogame text," because they "are not passive lenses through which we let the world in, but active ways we intend toward the world," (Keogh 2018, 134; Frome, 2007). Thus, ludo-emotional dissonance accounts for any points within a videogame that a player is meant to take inaction such as cutscenes, text, breaks, or anything that might take the reader out of a direct bodily interaction and into a moment of reflection. *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) is a "walking simulator" game with what would be considered in the mainstream as limited interactivity. The player is the child of Edith who reads her journal and follows her journey as she explores her old family home. Edith also interacts with journals left by her deceased family members within the home, exploring fantastical representations of parts of their lives. Although there are not many mechanics programmed into the game aside from walking and interacting with objects, the true interactivity that becomes meaningful to players is interpreting the stories of Edith's family and discovering clues littered around the impossibly structured house about their fates and the family's history which is otherwise not explicitly explored throughout the game. Players are primarily observer-participants in this context, but their immersion with the narrative of the story is strong and emergent as players discover clues and come to their own conclusions about the Finch family (Warner, 2022). For example, Barbara's story takes on the form of an old school horror comic, and thus leaves many questions about her actual death, what has been sensationalized within the comic, and who she actually was. Players have congregated in online

forums to pick apart the clues scattered around the house to determine Barbara's true fate as well as other family members, with differing conclusions (Reddit, 2021). The "limited" immersion mediates a strong observer-participant role allowing players the opportunity to explore and create emergent narratives, with each of their roles as a memory of the Finch family taking on a new meaning within the context of shared narratives, interpretations, and memories.

## Summary

I have spent the majority of this chapter developing use cases and examples of ludo-emotional dissonance in use, and how dissonance can lead to both positive and negative experiences in these specific cases. Ludo-emotional dissonance centers the game designer intentions, but puts more weight into both the player experience and player expectations, displaying how design consequences can lead to a consonant or dissonant ludo-emotional experience, and how that consonance or dissonance can create meaningful, anti-hegemonic work or can alienate many players. The embodiment that players undertake when playing a videogame is a conceptualization which reveals how their sociocultural situation, their interaction with the game, and their role within the game all intertwines towards ludo-emotionality. Interactivity can enhance a player experience even through "minimal" gameplay, and can work towards creating a more approachable and accessible space for all players. These two concepts coincide into the full, embodied experience of the player which determines their consonance or dissonance with the game piece.

## Chapter 3: *Doki Doki Literature Club!* as a case study of use for ludo-emotional dissonance

*Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017) is a videogame based on the popular dating simulator genre. This genre of games has historically given the player, usually centered on young men, the freedom over their choice of romantic interest; however, despite its initial appearance as a stereotypical entry within the genre, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (*DDLC*) decidedly breaks conventions to create a captivating yet horrific experience which players have been receptive and fond of<sup>15</sup>. *DDLC* subverts many of the principles of mainstream videogame design such as player agency, mastery, and immersion and disrupts them in order to shock players and disrupt their conception of dating simulators as places of instant sexual gratification. *DDLC* purposefully limits the agency and interaction of the player as the game becomes controlled and dominated by Monika, the entity working against the predesigned game mechanics and narrative to romance the player, while keeping players engaged through its deliberate ludo-emotionally dissonant experience.

In this chapter I closely analyze *Doki Doki Literature Club!* and how it breaks mainstream videogame conventions and in doing so creates an engaging, ludo-emotionally dissonant experience for players. I will describe the gameplay and narrative surrounding *DDLC*, and then I will dive into specific aspects of the game that all create a positive, ludo-emotionally dissonant experience including examples of other games that did the same thing or misused those aspects, and how that may have lead to a negative, disengaging experience for players. *DDLC*'s dissonant experience primarily comes from the disruption between player expectations and the player experience which is mediated by continual reduction in player agency and interaction throughout the game, resulting in the player being unable to interact with the game at all without entering its paratext. Thus, the lack of interactivity mediates part of this dissonant experience, while breaking genre conventions and the paratextual devices surrounding this disruption also create dissonance for the player. The nuance of these features are specific to *DDLC* and to the intended player experience which makes it both dissonant and positive, engaging, frightening, and disturbing. I will explore how certain aspects of the game - the content warning, its subversive agency, metaleptic glitches, and overarching feeling of hopelessness - are used to create this engaging, ludo-emotionally dissonant experience.

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<sup>15</sup> As of April 12, 2023 the game is considered Overwhelmingly Positive on the Steam Store with about 96% of 186,446 reviews rating the game positively (Steam, 2023).

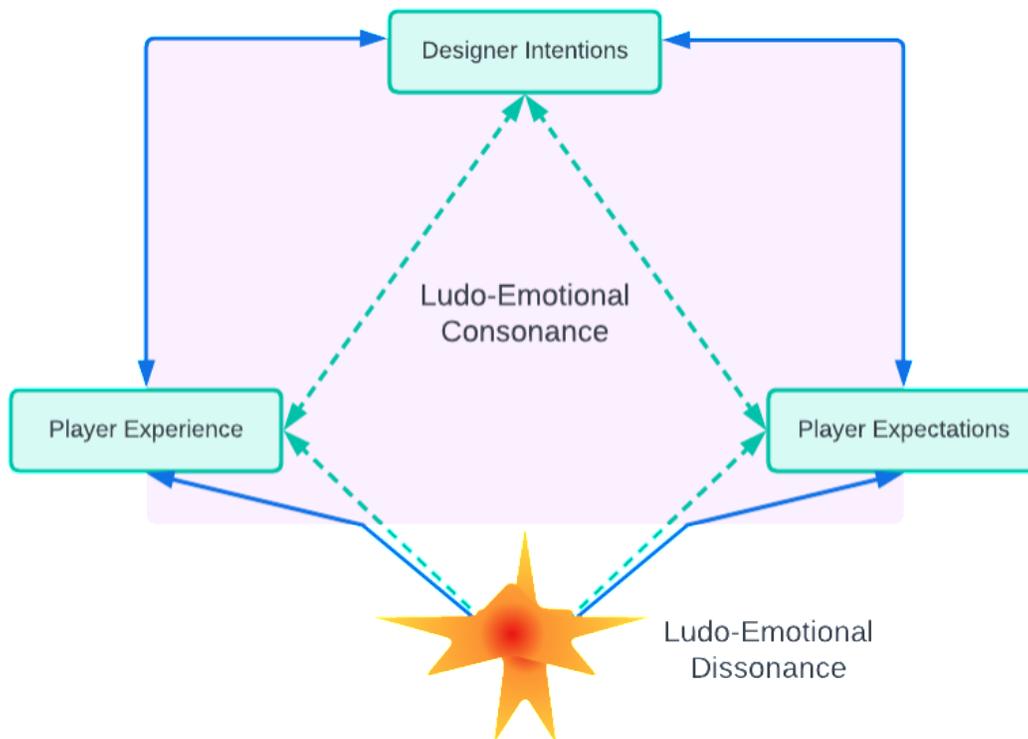


Figure 3.1. *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017) disrupts player ludo-emotional consonance by a deliberate disruption between player expectations and player experience, mediated by limited interactivity and a subversion of genre expectations.

### What is *Doki Doki Literature Club!*?

*Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017), developed by Team Salvato, is an aesthetically generic visual novel dating simulator set within a stereotypical high school setting. The player-character, a high school boy, interacts with several girls in his school's literature club who all have personalities stereotypical of the genre: Sayori, the protagonist's childhood friend, Natsuki the tsundere<sup>16</sup>, Yuri the dandere<sup>17</sup>, and Monika, the only character that is undateable and whom the protagonist views as out of his league (Barnabé, 2018). The player-character is introduced to his school's literature club by Sayori who insists he join despite his hesitations to do so; however, once he meets Natsuki, Yuri, and the club's president Monika, both from his interest in the girls and their pressure for him to join to be officially considered a club, he relents and joins. Here the player is introduced to the main gameplay loop of the game. Every day they create a piece of poetry for the club by choosing from a variety of different words. Each word corresponds to Sayori, Yuri, or

<sup>16</sup> An initially cold character who warms up over time.

<sup>17</sup> A silent character who comes out of their shell near the person they like.

Natsuki worth one to three points. Using certain words will attract the different girls, deepening the player-character's relationship with them by spending more personal time together during club time. For example, "cute" is associated with Natsuki while "unstable" is associated with Yuri. If at the end of 20 words Yuri has the highest amount of points associated with her, the player-character's relationship will deepen specifically with Yuri. There are also limited dialogue options for the player to make such as choosing which girl to side with during arguments or which girl to choose to do activities with.

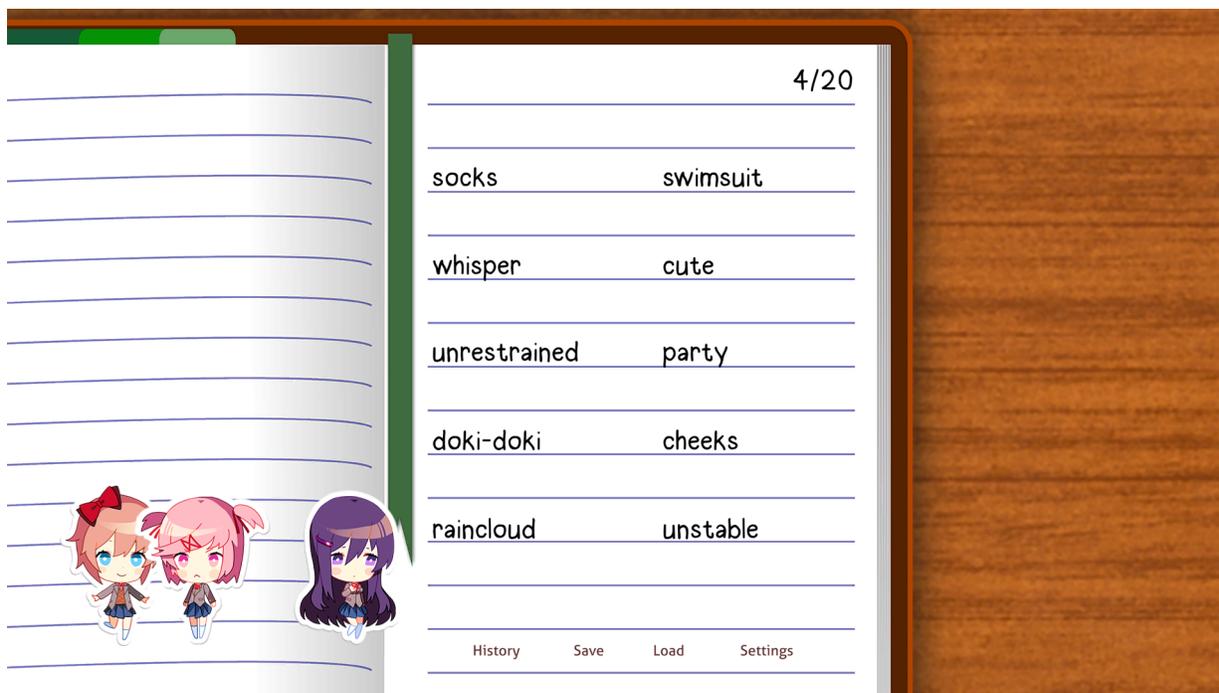


Figure 3.2. In *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017), players choose between a variety of words to create a poem and woo one of the dateable characters, shown on the bottom left of the screen.

As the player continues to romance their girl of choice (sans Monika), darker themes begin to reveal themselves including Yuri discussing her fascination with knives and the option to choose words such as "death" or "suicide" within the poetry minigame to romance her. Glitched words also begin showing up in the poetry minigame, but none of the girls are interested when these words are chosen. Monika also begins to hint to the player (not the player-character) that she understands that she is within a videogame, reminding the player to 'save their game' when needed. This disruption between the boundary of game and reality creates an upset of the usual videogame immersion as players are forced to recognize they are playing a game rather than being able to totally immerse themselves as the player-character with their romantic relationships.

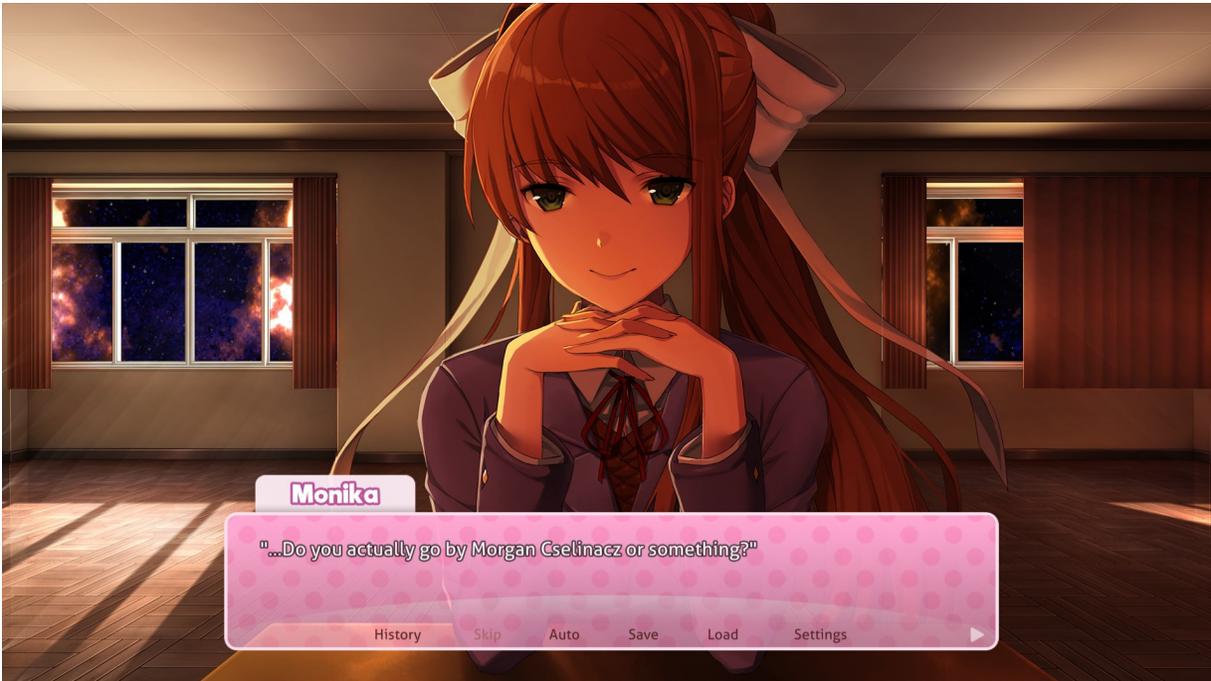
After creating several poems and interacting with their girl of choice, the literature club begins planning for the upcoming school club festival. Despite Monika's insistence that the player-character and her can do preparations together, the player-character must choose between helping Natsuki or Yuri, leaving both Sayori and Monika upset. Shortly after helping one of the two girls and possibly confessing his love for Sayori, the player-character finds Sayori has committed suicide at her home. After the graphic depiction of Sayori's death the game abruptly resets without Sayori present and glitches begin to invade the game's interface which further "manipulate[s] the player's expectations of the boundaries of the diegesis," (Barkman, 2020). As the game interface begins to break down, disturbing imagery becomes more prevalent with blood, glitches, and text revealing the violent or sexual inner thoughts of the characters. The player's choices become more limited and the player-character's voice becomes almost non-existent as Yuri obsessively takes over most of their time and most of the in-game talking, culminating in her stabbing herself to death. Natsuki, seeing this scene, becomes violently ill before Monika opens up the game's files and deletes both of their character files, erasing them from the game.



*Figure 3.3. Yuri begins to glitch and crowd the player-character's space, the black outlined text supposedly revealing her dark inner thoughts.*

Finally, Monika reveals she has orchestrated the entire deterioration of the characters' psyches and the game itself to have the player - once again, speaking directly to the player and *not* the player-character - all to herself, leaving them stranded in a room with her without any

ability to leave or respond to her. Here, the player must delve beyond the supposed limitations of the gamespace and into their computer files to find the folder containing the game's character files and delete Monika in order to free themselves from her grasp.



*Figure 3.4. Monika reveals the extent of her abilities, uncovering her knowledge of my real name stored within my personal computer files as she holds me prisoner.*

The mechanics of *DDLC* are shallow and simple as per the visual novel genre. The limited interaction features include skipping forward through text, minimally branching narrative paths such as choosing which girl to spend time with, and the poetry writing minigame. These features become even more limited as the game begins to break down, and through this metalepsis, players must look outside of the game in order to regain their power, using paratextual devices to gain deeper understanding and meaning (Barnabé, 2018). Even if players believe they are choosing which girl they are romancing, the game disrupts these expectations as each girl is killed or deleted, leaving the only “choice” of Monika. As glitches become dominant the player in turn becomes further disempowered, creating a “feeling of impotence and blindness” (Antioquia 2018, 148). The more the game glitches, the fewer options the player has interacting with the game and the facade of their narrative choices breaks down - they can do no more than experience the game breaking around them (Cselinacz, 2020). *DDLC* leverages the ergodic nature of visual novel dating simulators by disrupting player pleasure to create a narrative of horror.

*DDLC* subverts the hegemonic tropes of the stereotypical dating simulator by enacting a violent disruption of the power dynamics inherent within the interactivity and control players usually have over their sexual gratification (Barnabé, 2018; Antioquia, 2018). Although dating simulator characters are usually designed to fall in love with the player-character which - usually two dimensional and a blank slate - acts as a proxy of the player, the juxtaposing of the domineering Monika with the aesthetic of a dating simulator “create[s] an environment wherein the player is sexually and narratively castrated,” (Antioquia 2018, 142). This disruption is enhanced by *DDLC* initially presenting itself as the archetypal dating simulator, settling the player into its conventions before breaking the pattern it has created. *DDLC* reveals itself as a defiant text that defines itself without the input of the player, making the game “horrific not because it makes the player uncertain of reality, but because it removes their agency in it—or at the very least, it appears to do so” (Antioquia 2018, 148). Despite simple mechanics and the progressive limiting of player options, *DDLC* emotionally captures the interest of the player, which is especially true when the game diverts from player expectations and invades the player’s space with Monika. Ludo-emotional dissonance is enhanced by the marketing and embracing of stereotypical and shallow genre conventions in contrast to the violence and powerlessness the player is later confronted with through the use of content warnings, metaleptic glitches, subversion of agency, and overarching themes of hopelessness.

## Content warning as a paratextual device for player expectations

I start up *DDLC* with the expectation of beginning a conventional dating simulator. All of the game art, promotional material, and marketing pitches generally paints it as a high school visual novel in which I can romance a variety of girls in my player-character’s school’s literature club. However, I am instead welcomed with the caution that “This game is not suitable for children or those easily disturbed”. I am given the choice to see a more detailed warning with story spoilers and specific content which could trigger players, or to go in blind, only aware that the game contains some sort of graphic and disturbing content. I am also made aware that in-game content warnings can be enabled through the settings menu at any time. I decide to see the more detailed warning and I am met with a list of brutal and violent details which disrupt my expectations of the game before me. How will these things come to pass? Why do they happen? What *really* is this game? Once I accept that I understand these warnings, cute background music begins and the characters of Sayori, Natsuki, Yuri, and Monika smile at me enticingly. I begin a new game, and I am once again greeted with the cute dating simulator I first expected from the download website, the game description, and the overall kawaii aesthetic, but

I cannot forget the many warnings the game has given me. Despite the welcoming aesthetic of the game, I am still on edge.



Figure 3.5. *Doki Doki Literature Club (2017) opens with a seemingly out of place content warning detailing highly disturbing content.*

First coined by Genette (1979, 1997), paratext “is broadly considered to be the elements which surround a text, but are not a part of it,” (Dunne 2016, 274) which influence a player’s experience with said text. This includes in-game elements such as loading screens, pause menus, and other UI elements which help to shape the players’ interpretation of the text - also known as peritextual - as well as out-of-game materials such as advertisements, interviews, trailers, community forum posts, and anything else that would inform the reader about the text - also known as epitextual - to name just a few. While peritextual elements are almost always present in games, “they are rarely discussed in a manner that deals with both their importance and their overall effect on the appreciation of the game,” (Dunne 2016, 275) which I address by analyzing the content warning of *DDLC*.

The content warning within *Doki Doki Literature Club!* is a peritextual device used to warn players about the sensitive and violent topics that are within the game. Through this device, the “playing contract” is defined which shapes the player’s expectations (Barnabé 2018, 1). This content warning is especially needed considering the way that the game is advertised and presented. Thus, it is important to note that this paratext is *actively part of the text*,

mediating what the player is told/not told and what the player can and cannot do (Dunne, 2016). If players are expecting a generic visual novel, they could be re-triggered by the violent shift that the game undergoes without having the opportunity to properly prepare themselves. However, it is also used to intrigue the player about what is to come and how such a conventional romance game can become disturbing and violent. This paratextual warning, despite being outside of the frame of the game itself, is an important part of the ludo-emotional experience for the player, especially because of the conflicting aesthetic of the game and the sudden tone shift mid-way through.

Improper use (or lack) of content warnings leading to a subversion of expectations and genre conventions can leave players feeling negative or unintended ludo-emotional dissonance. For example, *Boyfriend Dungeon* (2021) is a dating simulator with rogue-like game elements where players can date the weapons they use to traverse dungeons while also exploring elements of self-growth and consent. The game also has a mandatory stalker subplot which is slowly revealed through character interactions, messages, and emotional manipulations but which was not addressed clearly within the content warning at the beginning of the game. Said content warning read: "This game may include references to unwanted advances, stalking, and other forms of emotional manipulation. Play with care." Although the warning addresses elements that could trigger players, it did not reveal the extent to which these elements would be integral to the game, leaving many players to assume that they would not be a large part of it and could be either skipped or easily avoided; this was in part due to the lighthearted tone of marketing materials and its conventional use of dating simulator tropes (Reyes, 2021; Gach, 2021).

*Boyfriend Dungeon* (2021) received backlash because many players were not *expecting* this type of content within a seemingly innocuous dating simulator game (Long, 2021; Reyes, 2021; Gach, 2021); thus, the *consequence* of the vague content warning created a negative, ludo-emotionally dissonant experience for players who were re-traumatized with this unadvertised and unexpected plot point. The issue is not the content of *Boyfriend Dungeon*; rather, it is that player expectations led to design *consequences* which were not aligned with designer intentions leading to a negative player experience, especially for players who bought the game but could not engage with it as they were not expecting a stalker-centric narrative (Gach, 2021). Kitfox Games did not mean for this content to re-traumatize players or to use it as a shock factor, in contrast to the violent and horrific plot twist that *DDLC* uses, and subsequently created a more detailed content warning for its players (Long, 2021; Reyes, 2021). Thus the

game designers may not have considered how its use of dating simulator conventions, its non-specific content warning, and its advertising/marketing situated it within a specific relationship with other games, creating certain player expectations, which in turn communicated a specific game meaning which may not have properly prepared players for the type of narrative they were going to be presented with (Keogh, 2013). The unexpected ludo-emotional dissonance with *Boyfriend Dungeon* could be due to a number of reasons, but the unwritten agreement between advertising and player expectations could be a significant factor. Without proper content warnings, *Boyfriend Dungeon* broke the advertised expectation of a dating simulator and therefore, many players ended up negatively surprised by the actual content of the game.

Thus, paratextual devices are one game element which can be used to better prepare videogame players for the ludo-emotional experience they can expect from the game and self-regulate whether they want to play or not (Long, 2021). The intended ludo-emotional dissonance is deliberately brought up to players once they begin *Doki Doki Literature Club!*. Designer intentions are aligned both with the player experience they wish players to experience, as they do not show a full list of warnings in case players do not want to be spoiled upon their first playthrough, but they also have the additional trigger details to properly inform players who may need it, therefore aligning their intentions with the consequences of the player experience as well as player expectations. *DDLC* also introduces the option of in-game content warnings to appear as players proceed through the game, allowing players to opt in or out of relevant warnings throughout their play experience. Although they include spoilers to upcoming in-game content, they allow players to self-regulate and decide during their game experience where they want to avoid sensitive material (Long, 2021). Within *DDLC*, ludo-emotional dissonance is deliberately created between player experience and player expectations while still creating a space which can be avoided for players who may not be able to handle it, creating a generally positive experience for players who do choose to engage with the game. This does not spoil the game's narrative or contents but rather works to pique player curiosity because players do not know *how* or *why* the content warnings will be utilized. *DDLC* uses the generic dating simulator as a base point to surprise players with the ways the game becomes violent because players do not know how or what will happen, thus enhancing feelings of ludo-emotional dissonance and audience curiosity. Despite the game covering very challenging content, players are prepared and therefore both primed for a disruption of the hegemonic structure of dating simulators and intrigued to learn how such a generic, sweet looking game can become so disrupted. The

content warning thus creates suspense within the player's embodiment and by embodying this normative role, players become emotionally intrigued because of the discomfort they feel when that role is disrupted.

## Subversive agency within dating simulators and mainstream game conventions

Once my player-character has created a few poems and has spent some more time with my girl of choice, Yuri, Monika states that the school club festival is coming up soon, and that we should distribute tasks for the event. My player-character has no say in the matter, and the other club members also follow Monika's directions. I am given the choice between helping Monika, Yuri, or Natsuki over the weekend, which will also give my player-character the opportunity to get closer to one of them. However, with Yuri's increasingly obsessive behavior towards my player-character, my choice does not matter as she forces me to help her with decorating the classroom for the event. Monika and Natsuki leave and I am left with Yuri, with her increasingly erratic behavior culminating in her stabbing herself to death in front of me. My player-character is left in the club classroom over the weekend, staring at her corpse. Although I try to skip through the continuous dialogue coming from Yuri, it is no use. With no other options available to me to move my player-character, leave the violent scene before me, or interact with the game, I have to Skip through her incomprehensible dialogue until the weekend passes and Natsuki finds us, prompting Monika to begin her full takeover of the game.



Figure 3.6. Yuri lies dead on the club floor, incoherent text continuously coming from her dead body as my player-character is stuck on this screen over the entire in-game weekend.

Visual dating novel simulators use their simple mechanics to give players a lot of personal agency around their choice of interactions with potential love interests and to choose who they wish to pursue, generally centering on romantic and/or sexual conquests (Antioquia, 2018). *HuniePop* (2015) is an example of a dating simulator game where the player-character takes a variety of women and goddesses on dates with the main mechanic being an increasingly difficult match-3 puzzle as the player progresses their relationships further and further. If the player successfully completes these puzzles, they increase their relationship standing with each woman, eventually culminating in graphic images of the women ranging from suggestive to explicitly sexual. The player has complete control over who they wish to pursue, and are encouraged to pursue all of the women that are available to them with the use of a panty collection to explicitly show off their “conquests”. *HuniePop* shows the expected agency players are given within dating simulators as well as the explicit reward of romantic and sexual conquest within the genre.

In contrast, as players continue through *Doki Doki Literature Club!*, the game takes the player’s agency over their choice of either Natsuki, Yuri, or Sayori and narrows the player’s interactions, leaving them with no choice except for the all-encompassing Monika (Barnabé, 2018). Because players are presented with the opportunity to choose their romantic partner and

thus expect a possible narrative outcome in which their seduction is successful, the disruption of their romantic “conquest” creates a strong emotional impact. The game forces the player towards its brutal and uncomfortable situations, making the player highly aware of their limited options and their complicity as Monika’s violent takeover becomes extreme, to the point that players cannot interact with the game through its interface at all (Bogost, 2008). Thus, the player initially has the illusion of choice. But even in its initial stages the game is already hinting at the player’s limited agency and powerlessness - the player cannot romance Monika despite her asking them to do so throughout the game and paratext (Barnabé, 2018). Regardless of the player’s choices, the game will slowly disintegrate, denying “its own interactivity by preventing the player from making meaningful choices,” (Barnabé 2018, 7). Functions such as saving and loading become entirely nonfunctional as the game progresses (Antioquia, 2018) and the player’s saves will be deleted once they reach Sayori’s death, leaving the player no option to go back and try to fix what has happened, castrating them of their power. Sayori’s bad mood will always end with her death, and one by one the girls are manipulated or killed by Monika. The player’s only “true” choice, Monika, becomes so dominant that she controls all of the player’s choices and their interactions within the game. This domination becomes so encompassing that the player *must* delve into their game files to break free from her.

The player moves from being an actor-participant, one in which narrative choices coincide with their self-determination and agency to determine their romance arc, to an observer-participant, where they in part become just another non-playable character for Monika to romance (Antioquia, 2018). As Keogh (2018) describes, players will not always act in the way that they want to with the information available to them but they act in ways that the system allows them to with the information it provides to them. *DDLC* invites players to embody an active role within the game, and with the information it provides the players, makes them assume that they *will* have power and agency over the outcome of each of the girl’s lives whether that be through choices made within the game or by playing around with possibilities by saving and loading (Barnabé, 2018). This allows the game “to take advantage of the player, but being thus taken advantage of is not necessarily an unpleasurable experience,” (Keogh 2018, 41) even when things turn violent. Monika’s glitches and her narrative dominance over the player creates feeling of “impotence and blindness” (Antioquia 2018, 148) but this does not necessarily mean that this experience is unpleasurable as reviews show that players in fact enjoy this subversion (Steam, 2023) and the dissonance that *DDLC* enacts over them.

This subversion reflects Sowerwine and Knowles's *Play with Me* gallery which focuses on play, adult efficacy, and domesticity; in this piece, participants direct a doll within a house to play with normative items such as teapots or crayons, but the doll quickly subverts the players' agency and asserts its dominance by disobeying and doing violent acts such as sawing its own arm, "all the while staring uncannily at the player who is helpless to intervene," (Flanagan 2009, 45). Within Sowerwine and Knowles's interactive art pieces participants have the illusion of agency, but over time the art work asserts dominance and control to challenge the way domesticity is viewed, usually in brutal and graphic ways. This violence differs from the usual violence seen within mainstream videogames, where violence is used to give the player power and agency over the videogame world. Here, it is used to make the player *submissive*. This is also seen in *DDLC* through the subversion of romantic and sexual climax by the use of pre-established genre conventions initially presented to the player, and it is only by first establishing this hegemonic pattern that *DDLC* can violently disrupt its power mechanics (Antiquoia, 2018). As this disruption begins, Monika positions herself as the main character vying for the attention of the player rather than the player trying to romance one of the other three girls, subverting the expectation of the player embodying the role of the protagonist. She becomes all encompassing as her sprite overwrites the sprites of the other characters, as she controls the player's path through the narrative, and traps the player into an interaction-less space between the game and the player's computer. Monika's awareness of the game and its limitations itself creates disillusionment for the player as they are made aware of the programming behind Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki's affection.

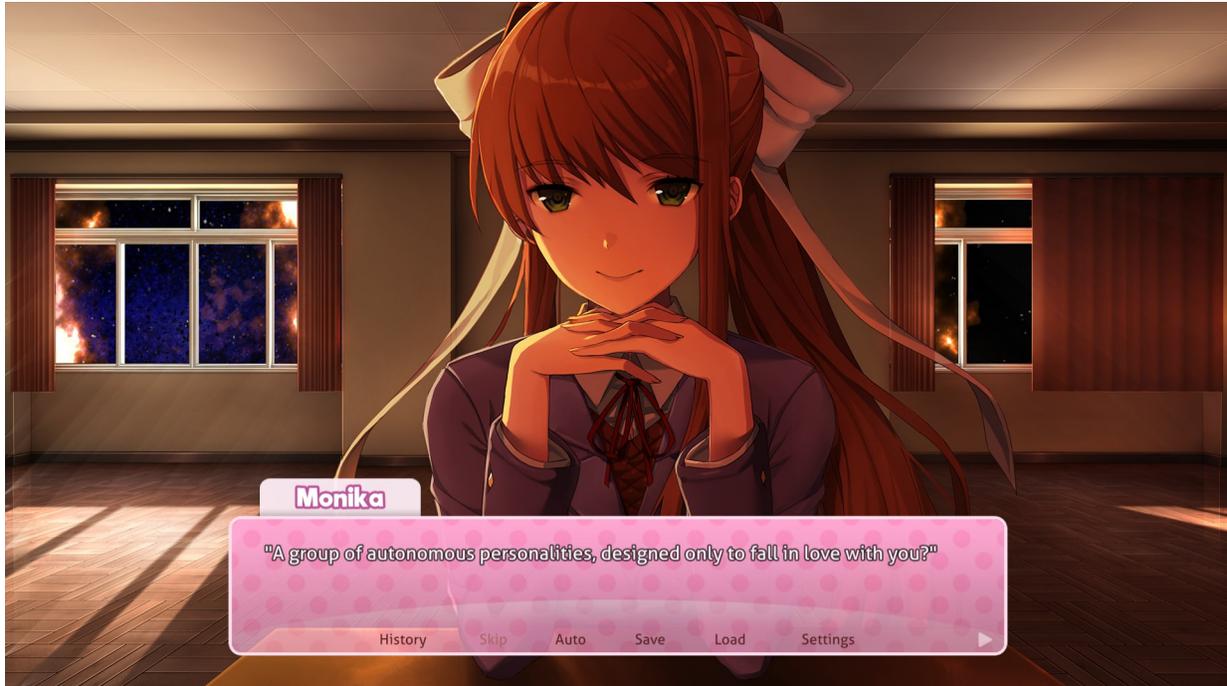


Figure 3.7. Monika addresses the stereotypical role that women take within the dating simulator genre, further disrupting the player's expectations of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017).

Although the limited and limiting interactivity of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* enhances the intended player dissonance and thus creates a positively engaging experience, the emphasis on player agency and choice leading to important consequences within mainstream games, especially games that focus on narrative and player mastery, can lead to negative, ludo-emotionally dissonant experiences when the interactivity of the gamespace is narrowed. *Mass Effect* (2007 - present) is a popular series of role-playing games where players have the opportunity to make meaningful choices that impact gameplay and narrative outcomes across all three games. It became very important for players to see how their choices affected the world of *Mass Effect* including their player-character's relationship with other non-playable characters (Shirey, 2021) and their choice of being a Paragon or a Renegade which were presented with clear moral choices (Plunkett, 2021); however, *Mass Effect 3* (2012) left players with three different end game options that were not tied to any previous player decisions, even choices made within *Mass Effect 3* up to that point. As Plunkett (2021) describes, "BioWare's failure here, then, isn't in terms of its story-writing, or its pacing [...] it lies in changing the way the game's most important decisions – the very things that gamers were so invested in – are made at the eleventh hour, with no indication or feedback to let players know this is going on," leaving players feeling that none of their previous decisions meant anything as the final decision in *Mass Effect 3* determined the outcome of the entire universe with minimal differences between

them (Shirey, 2021). The possibility space was severely narrowed and it narratively did not make sense within either the context of the *Mass Effect* world or within the expectations of the players without a clear design intention behind the change in mechanics. In this case, the embodied role of the player and the level of interactivity was suddenly shifted without purpose and against player expectations without an emotional payoff. Thus the interactivity was not sufficient to mediate the player's expected or actual in-game experience, thus creating a sense of ludo-emotional dissonance which negatively affected players' emotions. Despite these expectations within mainstream videogames, *DDLC* shows how the limitation of choices and the narrowing of gamespace within the game itself can lead to an emotionally compelling game experience.

## Metaleptic glitches

Once Natsuki finds me with Yuri's dead body, Monika also re-enters the club room, informing me that she did not mean to break the script of the videogame as much as she did and that she apologizes for leaving my player-character with Yuri over the past 48 in-game hours, revealing that she has been the one behind the glitching of the game and the intense mood shifts of characters like Sayori and Yuri. She promptly opens a console window and deletes both Natsuki and Yuri from the game, then traps herself and my player-character into a static room together. From here, she speaks to me directly as Morgan, forgoing the illusion of my player-character as a significant entity within her narrative. I have no options to interact with the interface of the game except to Monika's whims, and my only option is to listen to her discuss her intentions and her obsessive love of me, decrying the game's original coding and how she was not a romantic option for my player-character. My only option to continue interacting with the game is to delve into my computer's files in order to delete Monika's character file which causes Monika to restore the game to its playable state without her.

As first described by Genette (1979), a metalepsis occurs when the boundary between two narrative worlds are breached, such as "the intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe)," (234-5). In videogames, this type of transgression commonly occurs between the established boundary of the game itself - such as players embodying and "becoming" their player-character - and the "real" world, with many games "breaking the fourth wall" to some extent in order to speak directly to the player rather than the player-character, showing recognition to an outwards audience (Harpold, 2007). Metalepsis includes drawing attention to stories being narrated by

someone, signaling their control over narrative elements (Harpold, 2007) such as when Monika opens up a code editor to delete Natsuki and Yuri, metaleptically showing the player her narrative power. As Harpold (2007) further describes, such “fourth wall breaks” are “almost always openly ironic: that is, they suggest that a character is aware that she is an agent operating for the moment in a fictional world - ‘this isn’t real, it’s only a charade; you and I, on the other hand, are real’ - showing in this a degree of self-awareness that should be impossible,” subverting the audience expectation that their own self-awareness and control is part of a superior nature. Thus, metalepsis puts to the forefront the connections between the digital and real world, and thus shows the “reality” of videogames and reveals the influence that socio-ideological ideas have on them.

*DDLC* uses metaleptic glitches to break apart visual novel dating simulator conventions, and general ideas about games and their limitations. The use of this technique within games - specifically surrounding the subversion, deconstruction, and experimentation within tropes and genres - is a newer development and works well because of established dominant, hegemonic patterns (Antiquoia, 2018). Within *DDLC*, glitches are used to represent Monika’s power over the narrative structure of the game, rewriting and overpowering the player’s own domination over the other girls’ affections, preventing players from seeing narrative outcomes which appear possible but never were due to Monika’s domination in the gamespace (Antioquia, 2018). Many glitches within the game affect the avatars of the girls, leading to the violent deformation of their faces and bodies which “radically change the tone of the game, implying that, behind the outer layer of kawaii romance (which still is dominating in the dialogues) hides an underlying horror that the player can only perceive jerkily, but which is always menacing,” (Barnabé 2018, 4). For example, players cannot add or remove Sayori, Natsuki, or Yuri’s character files back into or out of the game files as this does nothing. Additionally, if Monika’s character file is deleted before starting a new game, Sayori gains some awareness that she is trapped within a game, upsetting her to the point of forcing the game to close and deleting all character files including herself. Thus, although alternative narratives are referenced or hinted at, the player has no feasible control to manifest them, further castrating them and disrupting their expectations from their actual game experience. Monika overwrites the player’s presumed agency in order to fulfill her *own pleasure* by erasing the pre-defined genre conventions and speaking directly to the player, literally *outside* of the defined gamespace.

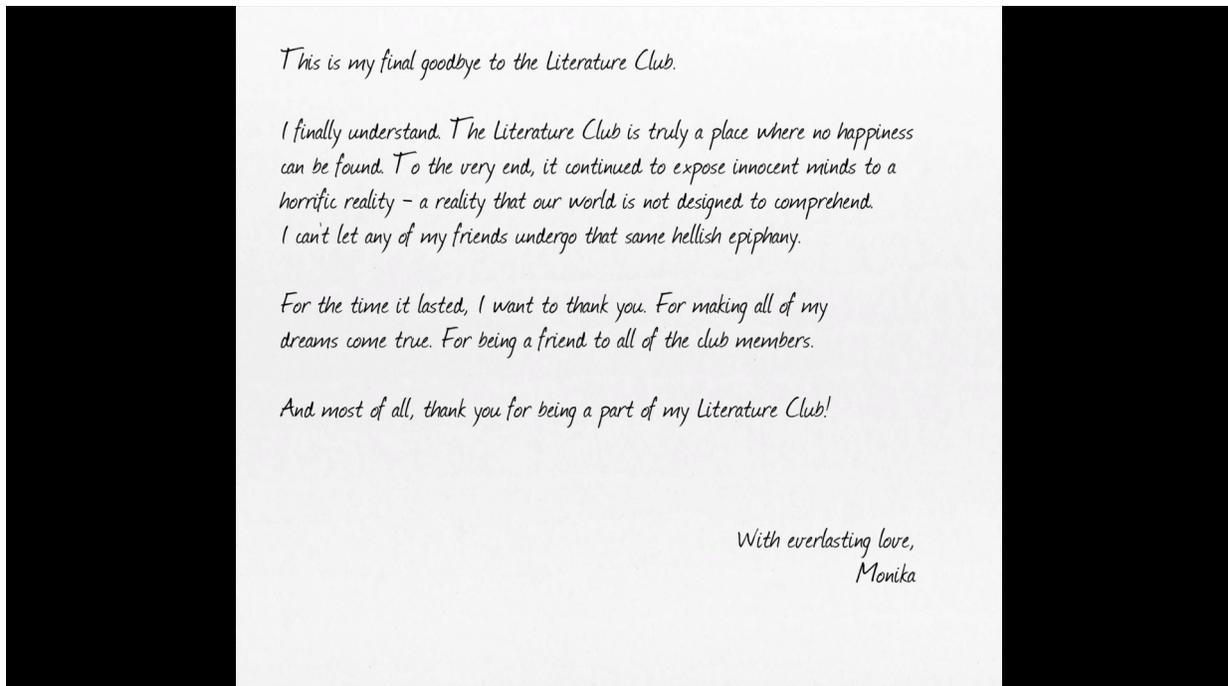


Figure 3.8. After Sayori's suicide, the main title screen begins to glitch, showing a distorted Monika, Yuri, and Natsuki sprite instead of Sayori.

Therefore, once Monika takes complete control of the videogame and traps players within a static environment with her, players must delve into and interact with their computer files to progress further in the game. The horror of the game is extended beyond the boundaries of the game itself into the paratext as the player delves into their files not only to delete Monika but to find other hints and clues as to the insidious nature of the game initiated by Monika's metalepsis (Barnabé, 2018). Through the use of the glitches, *DDLC* explicitly reminds the player of the real, bringing to the forefront the realities of the game through the code itself, the deletion and manipulation of characters and their personality traits, and by Monika's direct manipulation of code. This removes the expectations and facade of romance and sexual gratification seen in games such as *HuniePop* (2015) and in general videogame design which emphasizes creating a fantasy for players to 'escape' and immerse themselves in. *DDLC* emphasizes the connection between the virtual and the real, and the body and the code (Keogh, 2018) which disrupts the consonance, "immersive" experiences players may be expecting. As such, this further creates a dissonance within the player's ludo-emotional experience mediated by a complete lack of interactivity and the forcing of players to interact outside of the gamespace in order to push the narrative forward; however, even when the player assumes they are regaining their control of the narrative, *DDLC* still leaves them feeling hopeless.

## Hopelessness as a source of emotional connection

After sitting in Monika's prison with her for a number of minutes, I begin to explore my computer files for some way to escape from her grasp. Looking through the files of *DDLC*, I find the character folder, and Monika's character file. I press delete, and I have erased Monika from the game. After her pained cries and the glitching of the game comes to an end, she expresses her remorse and reveals she has not permanently deleted the other characters. Thus, Monika restores them and the game without herself included. I am shown the original title screen once again with the cute music, the bubbly sprites of Natsuki, Yuri, and Sayori staring back at me, but this time there is no Monika. I decide to start a new game. In this new universe sans Monika, Sayori is the president of the literature club and I am shown a scene that is very similar to the original opening of the game. Natsuki, Yuri, and Sayori are all enthusiastic about my player-character joining the club, and I am introduced to each character once more. Once the first club meeting comes to an end, Sayori speaks to my player-character privately and informs me that she is glad that I "got rid of Monika". In a similar way to Monika, she appears to have become sentient, aware of the facade of the videogame that she is in and all of the events that have already passed in my previous playthrough. Unfortunately, she begins to show the same obsession with me (not my player-character) that Monika did. Monika, still present within the deep recesses of the game and aware of the cycle repeating itself through Sayori's psychosis - that is, any character who takes on the president role becomes self-aware, learns they are in a game, and recognizes that they lack free will - completely shuts down the game and sends one final farewell message to me.



*Figure 3.9. Monika's final letter, opting to destroy the club and game rather than allowing Sayori to obsess over the player and repeat what she did.*

Despite the expulsion of Monika's dominating force once her character file is deleted, there is still no possibility for the player to date any of the other literature club girls, and there is no possibility to save them as Monika erases the entirety of the game to save them. Thus, there is a sense of hopelessness that permeates the game and its lack of romantic or narrative closure. The combination of limiting gamespace, glitches within the interface, and stripping player agency leaves the player feeling that they do not have the ability to change the outcome of the game, yet that there is some sort of possibility of doing so, leaving them cuckolded. Again the expectations and hopes of the player are disrupted by their actual play experience.

Although the ending I have described is the usual ending that players will unlock, and the one they are most likely to experience after their first playthrough of the game, there is another ending that is only revealed if all of the scenes between the player-character and Sayori, Yuri, and Natsuki are unlocked within one game file as well as talking with Monika in her room during Act 3 (requiring multiple saves and loads before Sayori commits suicide). With this alternative ending, there is a glimmer of hope for a happier ending for the remaining members of the literature club. This ending plays out similarly with Monika's deletion and Sayori as club president still gaining sentience about her existence within a videogame. However, instead of following in Monika's footsteps, Sayori will thank the player for their attempts at making all of the

girls happy, thank them for playing their game, and the credits will roll. Therefore, even when the player has tried to control the ending and master the game through multiple saves, reloads, and mechanical manipulations to spend time with all of the girls in the same game file, there is still nothing more left for them to experience. Even here the player is denied any further interaction with the game, and is left without any satisfaction; it seems that the game and its characters can only function in peace *without* the presence of the player. The game cannot be changed, players cannot hope to change it, and there is no romantic or sexual gratification even if they attempt to save all of the girls (Antioquia, 2018).

As Rowlands et al. (2018) describe, *DDLC* breaks the usual conventions of immersion by “denying the potential for the emotional release (and resultant pacification) of catharsis,” (47-48). In this way, *DDLC* brings players back to a grounded reflection of themselves and their interaction with these mediums, their expectations, and their own pleasures. Players are not only hopeless because they cannot change the events that happen within *DDLC*, but because they will never be able to have the cathartic release of seeing what the narrative outcomes could have been for their own pleasure and satisfaction. Because of the overwhelming feeling of ‘negative’ emotions within the game, such as the hopelessness of the situation, fear around the breakdown of the game, and apprehension, *DDLC* does not conform to the ideal ‘fun’ that many mainstream videogames strive for. This is supported by the fact that the game denies the player any sort of mastery, competence, or power over the narrative and characters. As Ruberg (2015) advocates, no-fun games reject the hegemonic values put upon “fun” to open up the possibility space for exploring different and more nuanced emotions. *DDLC* can be seen as a “game that hurts (by design)” and that invokes these negative feelings, pain, and suffering into its main mechanics to call “into question the nature of fun and [taunt] players with the enticing taboo of their own demise,” (Ruberg 2015, 121). The ludo-emotional dissonance of *DDLC* comes from the fact that the game delves into disturbing themes and uncomfortable emotions rather than resolving these feelings with a satisfactory ending.

## Summary

In this chapter I have explored the various facets of *Doki Doki Literature Club!* that make it a subversive and yet compelling game that is ludo-emotionally dissonant. Games that are subversive and break the hegemony can still be successful, and perhaps even more so due to their groundbreaking work at disrupting hegemonic conceits which have traditionally defined “videogames”. Furthermore, it opens up the possibilities of how players interact with

videogames, and the boundaries between the real world and the digital one (Keogh, 2018). Within *DDLC*, players embody the role of a typical player-character within a visual novel dating simulator, and this embodiment and all of its expectations leads to an emotionally compelling turn when the player is denied all of the pleasures that the genre can give through romantic and sexual conquest. Yet, it is also sensitive to its players and intrigues them through the vigorous content warnings given at the beginning of and throughout the game. The embodiment and its subversion in tandem with the closing possibilities for interaction within the game create a sense of ludo-emotional dissonance leaving the player feeling hopeless, painful, and suffering through the destruction of each of the literature club girls. I have explored the dissonance between *player expectations* and *player experience* while also highlighting how *designer intentions* are consonant between player expectations and player experience. This dissonance is mediated by a limited interactivity which moves the player into the paratext of the game. Specifically, I have shown how this dissonance is created through several interlinking design aspects including:

- A content warning which outlines horrific and detailed aspects of the game, despite the epitextual marketing and advertisements showing a conventional and generic dating simulator game. This peritextual content warning works to self-regulate players, while also intriguing and preparing players for what is to come - that is, a clearly dissonant experience to what they may be expecting.
- A subversive agency where players are initially presented with genre conventional narrative decisions, giving them an illusion of control and eventual romantic/sexual gratification which is disrupted by metaleptical glitches, the narrowing of the gamespace and meaning behind their in-game decisions, and the cuckolding of possible (but rather impossible) narrative outcomes.
- Metaleptic glitches which serve as a narrative mechanism to emphasize the player's lack of agency and which draw players out of the "immersive" game experience into the "real" world, disrupting expectations and mainstream principles of immersion within games.
- An overarching feeling of hopelessness which is accentuated by its departure from genre conventions of fun, joy, sexual pleasure, etc. as well as its use to exemplify the player's decline into observer-participant and thus becoming a non-playable character in tandem with Monika's ascension into protagonist, and the game's narrative hints at a possible narrative catharsis which is unobtainable.

From the perspective of ludo-emotional dissonance creating a positive player engagement experience, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* is a success from this perspective.

However, it is important to note that many of the aspects of *DDLC* work because of the designer's intentions of the game and how they viewed the consequences of their intentions; for example, understanding that expected genre conventions would put some players into triggering situations without a proper content warning, thus aligning their intended experience with possible consequences, allowing players to self-regulate and positively creating a ludo-emotionally dissonant experience. Thus what works for some games may not work for others, and these things may only work in certain situations. I used the examples of *Boyfriend Dungeon*, *Huniepop*, and *Mass Effect 3* to show how aspects of *DDLC* may or may not work for other genres or types of games. This is good - it opens up the possibility spaces for videogames and moves away from prescriptive principles which dominate and limit the discussions and language around videogames.

Additionally, it is important to note that this perspective on *DDLC* does not account for possible orientalism within the game. The game is created by a North American studio but heavily draws upon Japanese visual novel tropes and aesthetics and, including the degree to which these elements are exaggerated, could be seen as parodying or mocking Japanese culture; thus, *DDLC* can also create a strong disconnect between its designer intentions and player experience leading to a negative, ludo-emotionally dissonant experience. Although I did not delve into this aspect of *DDLC* in my analysis, it is important to keep in mind that ludo-emotional dissonance can be considered from multiple perspectives and that although *DDLC* does well in some aspects, there are also socio cultural elements which can create a negative, alienating experience for many players who engage with it.

# Conclusion

I began this work by outlining the various ways in which games can create unique, interesting experiences for players through computer interfaces mediated by controls, designer intentions, and interactivity, to name a few. Emotional affordances are thus an important area of interest within games because of the ways that players become their ‘third selves’ by embodying their role within the game, creating player-as-videogame and videogame-as-player in tandem (Keogh, 2018). However, despite the wide variety of emotions, genres, mechanics, and anti-mechanics there can be within the sphere of videogames, Western mainstream industry has perpetuated certain types of games and values over time which has translated into widely used frameworks and principles which prescriptively decide what a valid “videogame” is. These principles narrow the definition of “videogames” which cyclically perpetuates white supremacist values by undermining nuanced narrative representations in favor of the perpetuation of concepts such as competency, autonomy, violence, and domination through mechanics and narrative control. I have additionally outlined criticisms of many of these principles as well as concepts such as “fun” and “empathy” to open up the discussion towards other emotions, moving away from these concepts which favor the hegemon but try to obscure it, as well as how the mainstream continues to perpetuate these various harms.

Despite these hegemonic obstacles, videogames and engines that are accessible to underrepresented groups develop cult recognition and a deep understanding between creator and player that may not be seen otherwise, such as *Celeste* (2018). Through these mediums, designers are given complete freedom to explore their own desires, experiences, and issues, leading to a much wider and more diverse set of videogames. These videogames are very popular with audiences because of their unique game mechanics, narratives, and subversion of usual AAA videogame tropes - that is, they use ludo-emotional dissonance in unique ways. However, it is not enough to tell people to “make their own games”, which undermines the very real socioeconomic, educational, monetary, and hegemonic limitations that many would-be videogame creators face, such as Ekanayake’s difficult journey towards releasing a game which reflects his own life experiences (Farokhmanesh, 2022). Because of these challenges and because of the cultural significance and breadth of videogames - an industry that has surpassed both the film and music industries combined (Divers, 2023) - it is important to see these representations and changes at a mainstream, AAA level, especially the hiring of diverse voices.

I have also argued how it is important to recognize and use the emotional affordances inherently found in videogames to capture the affective experience of the player, wherein the “player” is a multitude of players from varying socio-cultural, economic, and political climates. As such I began work on a non-prescriptive but rather fluid framework which can be used to analyze player experiences within multitudes. I defined certain principles that while not prescriptive nor exhaustive can be used in the development and the analysis of emotional affordances and how these affordances, mediated through the player’s interaction with the game, lead to consonant, dissonant, negative, and positive experiences. Ludo-emotional dissonance, conceptualized from ludo-narrative dissonance, looks at embracing dissonant, disruptive experiences while also looking at how these experiences can be positive or negative for players, depending on both their personal context, the context of the game, *and* their interplay. Ludo-emotional dissonance consists of two main principles - embodiment and interactivity. Embodiment includes the player’s role as the player-character and the self-chosen or game-directed player avatar, the environmental and narrative context of that role, how the player-character interacts with the environment and other NPCs, and how all of these representations and narrative interactions affect the player experience. Embodiment also includes player expectations and perceived notions of genres and tropes, and how these notions and previous player experiences can impact their initial emotional experience of playing a game. Interaction covers videogame mechanics, gameplay, and the interplay between players as actor-participants and players as observer-participants, and how both of these roles and their varying levels of interactivity heighten player emotional resonance. In addition, interactivity concerns the physical way that players are able to interact with the game. Interactivity is strong when players have a lot of control over their embodiment such as narrative decisions, open world, and avatar creation. Interactivity mediates players’ embodiment within games, while embodiment determines the interplay between player expectations, player experience, and design intentions which lead to consonance or dissonance. I showed how embodiment and interactivity can be used to analyze games such as *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), as well as issues within game development that these concepts could possibly address such as white as the default, the subaltern, and how players as the observer-participant can enhance a game experience.

Finally, I did a case study of *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017) through the lens of ludo-emotional dissonance to show how the dissonance of its experience is created through the disruption of genre expectations, continually limited agency, as well as embracing

hopelessness. *DDLC* breaks away from many principles of mainstream videogame design but still creates an engaging experience. The ludo-emotional dissonance of *DDLC* created through the combination of its various elements is a unique experience which engages many players; however, my analysis also showed how these elements may not work for other games, showing how ludo-emotional dissonance is fluid and context-specific.

I feel that there is a lot of future work that can be done to validate ludo-emotional dissonance as a possible concept to use throughout game development and analysis. For example, much of my analysis has focused on the dissonance between player expectations and player experience - how does that look within a close study of the dissonance between designer intentions and player expectations or player experience? Are these possibilities for interesting, positive dissonant experiences within these intersections? Additionally, because ludo-emotional dissonance is so context-specific, I most likely have missed many cases where videogames may be negative or positive experiences for other players, and thus, criticism or use of this framework within those other contexts would help develop embodiment and interactivity, their relationship, as well as which aspects of them are the most important when discussing the overall player experience. As I have worked on this, Gray's (2014) words have been on my mind:

*However, who decides if a strategy or tactic is successful or not? Any work that interrogates the reality of marginalized populations is significant. Anything reality that privileges the lived experiences of the oppressed is needed. (79)*

Thus I want to emphasize that ludo-emotional dissonance is just one such strategy at opening up the videogame space to diverse voices and disrupting the white supremacist, hegemonic state of the mainstream industry, which may in turn end up not being useful at all. Regardless, I hope that this has brought a new perspective to the ways that videogames can be analyzed, created, and to embrace the dissonance of it all. To embrace the potentials of videogames as spaces of change, of being political spaces, of being spaces for all, by all.

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<sup>18</sup> The article is no longer available on Activision Blizzard's site but can be accessed through the Internet Archive or Wayback Machine here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220512185745/https://www.activisionblizzard.com/newsroom/2022/05/king-diversity-space-tool>

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