

**Let's Play with Trauma: An Autoethnographic Study of Traumatic Experience, Alienation,  
and Control in Video Games**

By

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## ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic, interdisciplinary dissertation addresses the question “how have video games helped me to survive and overcome trauma – a kind of trauma that left me feeling alienated - and how might video games help others in the same way?” Written as a dialogue between various personas, both academic and personal, the entire project explains the arguments made and acts as a demonstration of the resolution of relations of relationlessness that are characteristic of the form of alienation at the core of the project. Following an exploration of canon understandings of alienation, a relational understanding is adopted where alienation represents a relation of relationlessness between and with the self, others, and the world. The methods and methodologies used include autoethnographic memory work, Let’s Play video recordings, and digital text-mining, which are used to explore relevant memories and life experiences that address the primary research question. Social alienation is theorized in relation to the author’s diagnosis of Complex PTSD, and it is argued that the similarities between the symptoms of both conditions allow for a synthesis of the individual experiences of the author and the social experiences of alienation. The video game *Tetris* is used as a full-chapter case study to demonstrate how a game can provide the interface required for the successful appropriation of relations across time, place, and personas that is fundamental to the resolution of alienation as understood here. A more extensive review of various video games takes place in the following chapter where the author’s interactions with games from her childhood are used to outline a theory of how video games mediate trauma and alienation through the following 5 themes: (1) games as providing links through time, (2) games as tools for mediating trauma and ameliorating flashbacks, (3) games as places of navigating uncertainty and learning control, (4) games as places to develop social solidarity, and (5) games as places of identity transformation,

integration, and appropriation. Each theme represents a particular aspect of video games that leads to the concluding argument made in this project: the unique thing about video games that helped the author survive and overcome trauma is that they allow people to move away from a **lack of control over perceived certainty** toward **perceived control over relative uncertainty**. In other words, video games provide places to learn how to transform ingrained assumptions about the world, teaching the player to accept, and in many cases embrace, uncertainty. As the player accepts an uncertain world, they are able to learn, through video game play, that their actions have meaning and consequences, providing them with the agency to influence their own lives. While this does not necessarily eliminate alienation, gaining control over relative uncertainty allows for the transformation of relations required to connect people to themselves, others, and the world around them.

## PREFACE

This thesis is an original work by Sonja Sapach. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethic approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Alienation, Solidarity, and Video Games: An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Resolution of Alienation and C-PTSD through Participation in Video Game Culture.” ID: Pro00062759, June 5, 2017.

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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
PREFACE.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES OR ILLUSTRATIONS.....	x
GLOSSARY.....	xii
List of Characters/Personas.....	xii
Prologue.....	1
The Basement.....	1
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	4
Voices and Perspectives.....	4
Video Game Play and the Development and Maintenance of Social Solidarity.....	19
Research Questions.....	26
Key Themes: Meaning Exchange.....	29
Key Themes: Trauma and C-PTSD.....	31
Key Themes: Alienation.....	37
Table 1: Seeman’s (1955) Five Categories of Alienation Compared to Author’s Own Experiences with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.....	41
Key Themes: Video Game Play.....	42
Conclusion – Moving Forward.....	48
Chapter 2: Methodology.....	50
Introducing a Chapter in Two Parts.....	50
Autoethnography.....	55
Figure 1: Screenshot of a Katamari from Katamari Damacy;.....	58
Presenting my Initial Findings: Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Regina Saskatchewan, 2018.....	62
Tagging My Tears and Fears: Text-Mining the Autoethnography.....	66
My Tears and Fears: Trauma, C-PTSD, and Alienation.....	66
Autoethnography.....	70
Step One: Constructing My Life Narrative/Life-As-Text.....	73
Step Two: Data Analysis Techniques.....	78
XML Tagging.....	80

Figure 2: Example of XML tagging for a video game recording transcript using a basic RELAX NG schema with personalized tags.....	82
Python/NLTK/R .....	84
Figure 3: Full corpus stopwords frequency distribution. This figure excludes the words “the” and “and” with the goal of focusing on singular first-person pronouns. ....	86
Figure 4: Corpus frequency distribution with NLTK standard stopwords removed. ....	87
Figure 6: Pleasure category distribution comparison between blogs and video game play transcriptions. ....	91
Figure 7: Negative sentiment category distribution comparison between blogs and video game play transcriptions.....	92
Topic Modelling .....	93
Figure 7: 10-topic model created using Mallet. Note that due to a character set conversion error, some of the NLTK stopwords remain, though most were removed. ....	95
Conclusion.....	96
The Method is the Message? .....	97
Chapter 3: Alienation and C-PTSD.....	100
Chapter Description .....	100
Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Detail .....	102
A Suicide Attempt – Hopelessness and Loss of Meaning .....	113
My Friend Cheryl.....	118
Figure 9: Author’s Girl Guide Sash from childhood, photographed July 15, 2018. ....	119
Learning about Alienation in University .....	124
Alienation, A Relation of Relationlessness.....	129
Table 2: A Comparison Between a Passage from <i>Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Treating Complex PTSD</i> (Chu, 2011) and <i>Alienation: New Directions in Critical Theory</i> (Jaeggi, 2014) .....	132
Conclusion.....	133
Chapter 4: Tetris Through Time .....	135
Introduction: The Tetris Effect.....	135
Figure 10: Screenshot of the “Spirit Canyon” journey mode level from <i>Tetris Effect</i> ;.....	135
Figure 11: The seven possible tetriminos in the original colour scheme. ....	136
The Experience of Playing <i>Tetris Effect</i> : 2019.....	138
Tetris: Psychological and Physiological Effects .....	140
Tetris through Time: Alienation and Appropriation .....	145
Figure 12: New Westminster, BC and Surrey, BC. Google Maps, June 27, 2019.....	147

Figure 13: Original Gameboy Tetris Starting Screen. Image downloaded from CGMagazine, .....	152
Conclusion.....	156
CHAPTER 5: The Role of Video Games.....	159
INTRODUCTION: COVID-19, the pandemic that stopped the world.....	159
The Games .....	165
The Themes.....	172
Figure 14: Informal Social Network Visualization. Produced by Author using Gephi, June 1, 2019.	175
Games as Providing Links through time (Relations to Memories).....	177
Games as Tools for Mediating Trauma and Ameliorating Flashbacks (Active Relation of Self-Care)...	185
Games as Places of Navigating Uncertainty and Learning Control (Relations to the World Around Us)	194
Games as Places to Develop Social Solidarity (Relations to Others) .....	206
Games as Places of Identity Transformation, Integration, and Appropriation (Relations of Self-Other-World)	211
Conclusion.....	220
Chapter 6: LACK OF CONTROL OVER PERCEIVED CERTAINTY vs. PERCEIVED CONTROL OVER RELATIVE UNCERTAINTY .....	224
Introduction to the Conclusion.....	224
Lack of Control and the Inevitable.....	226
Living in an Alienating World .....	236
Wanderlust and Appropriation through Video Games.....	239
The Methodology is the Message.....	241
Lack of Control over Perceived Certainty becomes Perceived Control over Relative Uncertainty .....	244
A Necessary Reflection?.....	247
Figure 15: Morrighan the German Shepherd Puppy, Going Grey Waiting for Me to Finish My Dissertation. September 1, 2020. ....	249
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	250
Works referenced, but not directly cited.....	250
Works Directly Cited .....	250
Games Cited .....	259
TV and Movies Cited .....	262
Appendix A: Notification of Ethics Approval.....	263



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Seeman's (1955) Five Categories of Alienation Compared to Author's Own Experiences with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Table 2: A Comparison Between a Passage from *Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Treating Complex PTSD* (Chu, 2011) and *Alienation: New Directions in Critical Theory* (Jaeggi, 2014)

## LIST OF FIGURES OR ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Screenshot of a Katamari from *Katamari Damacy*;

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katamari\\_Damacy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katamari_Damacy) 28 Aug 2020.

Figure 2: Example of XML tagging for a video game recording transcript using a basic RELAX NG schema with personalized tags.

Figure 3: Full corpus stopwords frequency distribution. This figure excludes the words “the” and “and” with the goal of focusing on singular first-person pronouns.

Figure 4: Corpus frequency distribution with NLTK standard stopwords removed.

Figure 5: Pain category distribution comparison between blogs and video game play transcriptions.

Figure 6: Pleasure category distribution comparison between blogs and video game play transcriptions.

Figure 7: Negative sentiment category distribution comparison between blogs and video game play transcriptions.

Figure 8: 10-topic model created using Mallet. Note that due to a character set conversion error, some of the NLTK stopwords remain, though most were removed.

Figure 9: Author’s Girl Guide Sash from childhood, photographed July 15, 2018.

Figure 10: Screenshot of the “Spirit Canyon” journey mode level from *Tetris Effect*;  
<https://www.tetriseffect.game/> 15 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/tetriseffectgame>.

Figure 11: The seven possible tetriminos in the original colour scheme. By Damian Yerrick, uploader - own work, based on PNG version, Public Domain, 5 May, 2019,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1368672>.

Figure 12: New Westminster, BC and Surrey, BC. Google Maps, June 27, 2019.

<https://www.google.com/maps/@49.136075,-122.8712461,8823a,35y,37.98t/data=!3m1!1e3>

Figure 13: Original Gameboy Tetris Starting Screen. Image downloaded from CGMagazine, June 27, 2019. <https://www.cgmagonline.com/2015/06/09/first-six-video-game-hall-of-fame->

[titles/](https://www.cgmagonline.com/2015/06/09/first-six-video-game-hall-of-fame-titles/)

Figure 14: Informal Social Network Visualization. Produced by Author using Gephi, June 1, 2019.

Figure 15: Morrighan the German Shepherd Puppy, Going Grey Waiting for Me to Finish My Dissertation. September 1, 2020

## GLOSSARY

### List of Characters/Personas

**Baby Sonja:** The youngest persona who was the victim of the majority of the child abuse. She is filled with shame, fear, and a sense of certainty about how helpless she is in a world that is full of uncontrollable danger.

**Forestghost:** The teenager who discovered herself while hiding in the forest. She is hopeful, but still afraid and represents the first step toward gaining an identity beyond that of a total victim. She is a bit more social, a bit more in control, and a bit surer of herself than **Baby Sonja**, but has a long way to go.

**Lenoraven:** The adult who came to life following a serious concussion. She is the eager graduate student who is confident, inquisitive, kind, and empathetic. She watches and listens to people, eager to learn about social interactions and expectations. She is also careful and somewhat pessimistic.

**Professor Sapach:** The desired future persona that evolved from **Lenoraven**. She speaks using *italics* throughout the dissertation and represents the academic voice that presents an analysis of the stories and memories shared by the others.

**Sonja:** The whole sum of all of the above personas. She exists throughout the dissertation, and in the end represents the actor whose behaviours and intentions has meaning in the real world.

## Prologue

### The Basement

Surrounded by darkness, I attempt to fall asleep. I am curled up in a single bed that is not my own, my eyes squeezed shut and the pillow clenched close to my ears in an attempt to block out not only the disturbing noises from above my head but also the bad memories from the past day, week, month, and years. Despite the pillow, I can hear the rustling of plastic above me and even before I tentatively reach for the small tableside lamp, I know that the mice have returned. The ceiling above me remains unfinished, covered by a transparent plastic sheet that allows a clear view of wooden beams, pink insulation, and the fast and busy bodies of a family of mice who are likely as disturbed by what is happening upstairs as I am. Unable to tolerate the thought of the mice falling through a small hole in the plastic and landing on me as I try to sleep, I get out of bed and walk out to check on my only real friend and ally. I fumble through the dark basement and find the light switch, being careful to be as quiet as possible. The light reveals a large, German Shepherd curled up in the dirty old chair that acts as his bed and sanctuary. I sit on the arm of the chair and scratch him behind the ears. He looks up at me appreciatively, but I know that all he wants to do is sleep. I am amazed at how calm he has learned to be in a home full of unpredictability, loud noises, and ongoing abuse. Even as he drifts back to sleep, I feel safer and calmer knowing that he is here.

Despite the slight comfort that the dog has provided, I still find myself terrified, confined in this basement that reeks of pot (the room two doors down from my makeshift bedroom hides a small garden of marijuana plants) and acts as my nightly prison whenever I am forced to come here. The smell and the mice are not my major source of discomfort however, as I find the need to go to the bathroom slowly becoming increasingly urgent. There is no toilet down here, but HE says

that he means to install one in the near future. As the need to pee intensifies, my fear and uncertainty grow as I tiptoe over to the bottom of the staircase. Surrounded by wood panelling and covered in dark carpet, this one flight of stairs appears to me like a nearly unclimbable mountain that leads to almost certain death. I am literally frozen with fear at the bottom of these stairs, trying to come up with any other solution to my bathroom problem. Maybe I can go outside, through the back door, and find a bush to relieve myself behind? No, I am certain that one or both of them will hear the door open, and I don't want to face the consequences of admitting that I would rather use the bathroom like a dog than attempt to get their attention. A bucket? The laundry room sink? My brain screams NO, imagine what they might do to you if they found out! I am faced with only one option, and I slowly climb the stairs to confront the locked door that is the initial obstacle between me and the only bathroom in the house. Even over the blaring stereo, I can hear them having drunken, drug-fueled sex...well at least they aren't fighting! I softly knock at the door, knowing full well that they can't hear it. My heart is pounding, my mind is racing, and my need to go pee is reaching critical urgency. I know that I should wait for them to 'finish', but then the fighting might start again, and I theorize that they are more likely to let me run to use the bathroom if they still have 'unfinished business' to attend to. I finally knock firmly on the door and shout "Mom, I need to go pee!" I hear him swear, and she yells, "One minute." I am shaking, terrified that this interruption will earn a wrathful response from one or both of them. Fortunately, my logic proves effective; the door opens, I run to the washroom avoiding eye contact with either of them, relieve myself, and scurry back down to the basement. Mom says "Good night, I love you" and then locks the door behind me, returning to the activities that I so desperately interrupted.

I jump back into the bed that is not my own, turn off the light, and pull the blankets over my head in a weak attempt to protect myself from falling mice. Will I be woken in a few hours to a violent display where we are once again kicked out into the rain in the middle of the night, my mom covered in blood and bruises, or will I be left alone to face my nightmares? I am too tired to worry about it, and finally drift off to sleep.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Voices and Perspectives

The memory shared in the prologue above is only one of many vivid, flashback-like narratives I experience as a symptom of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD)<sup>1</sup>. This dissertation brings together many such memories and narratives in an autoethnographic exploration of the role that video games have played in my life. Specifically, it explains how video games have HELPED me to develop relationships with other people, with the world around me, and most importantly, with myself.

In writing this dissertation, I am opening myself up to you, the reader, as much as I am opening myself up...to...myself. I am inviting you to join me on a quest, a journey, to discover what made (and continues to make) video games important tools for my survival, growth, and self-discovery. This journey takes the form of a dialogic exploration, throughout which shared memories, stories, and indirect conversations are used as tools for exploring meaning.

*As I am unable to anticipate your reactions, and am therefore unable to enter into an explicit dialogue with you, I will instead present the dissertation that follows as a dialogue of sorts between 1) the variety of internal personas that I have developed following years of abuse and neglect, and 2) the academic, professorial voice who will be referred to from here on as “**Professor Sapach**”. The academic voice of **Professor Sapach** will be written using italics (as is being done here) in order to clearly differentiate between the personal, autoethnographic narratives (which will be written using plain text) and the formal, academic interpretations of those narratives. The various personas, or characters, who make up the autoethnographic voice*

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 3 for a detailed explanation of C-PTSD.



*of this project each have their own unique take on the world, as well as on the events that led to, and followed from, the development of **Sonja**'s<sup>2</sup> (my) C-PTSD.*

I do not want you to simply follow along, instead I hope that you will engage by bringing along your unique history, memories, relationships, and meanings. I will provide guidance and direction, but I will also leave some things open to interpretation. I will be presenting you with a series of narratives, memories, and academic interpretations that represent my unique perspective. It is my hope that you will consider my perspective, while bringing your own into play as we move forward.

*Autoethnography involves a somewhat paradoxical dance between the author and the reader.*

*While I invite you to join me on a journey and to bring your own perspectives, I am also writing from a place of authority as an expert in Game Studies, Digital Humanities, and Social Science methods. As I write, I bring this expertise into dialogue with my life narrative in order to guide you through this journey. In the end, autoethnography is an academic practice that, as*

*highlighted by Fleming & Fullagar (2007) “emphasises the interaction of the reader and the text as a co-production of knowledge that can effect transformations in thinking and feeling.” (241)*

*As I will discuss in later chapters (starting in Chapter 2), I have been transformed through engaging in the process of doing this project and writing this dissertation, developing new and unexpected relations of understanding to myself and my story. As **Professor Sapach**, I have come to agree with Giles and Williams (2007) who write:*

Autoethnography positions us as “real,” human beings with both strengths and weaknesses – not bastions of ivory tower perfection – and reminds us that we, along with

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<sup>2</sup> The names of the various personas will be presented in bold when they are explicitly mentioned. This is done to indicate when I want you to pay attention to who is talking or being talked about.

all human beings, function in multiple and diverse social contexts. And, each of those contexts is important and meaningful (194).

*When this project first began however, I did not fully understand what it meant to be a “real” person with a singular voice. In fact, as much as the quote above sounds harmonious and enlightened, it touches on a problem that is central to this dissertation, that is, what does it mean to be a “real human being”?*

C-PTSD makes me feel different. It makes me feel like I am in a constant state of fear. It makes me feel like I am fundamentally flawed, or broken in some way. In everything I do, there is a constant, un-named voice that wants to interrupt me and tell me that I am wrong. This voice can be most generally referred to as my shame, the part of me that will never believe that I am good or useful or knowledgeable. This particular voice is not a central character in this story and does not belong to the cast of personas that I will introduce below. You will encounter this voice regardless as it is a part of me that I cannot completely control or conquer. If you find yourself engaged in a story or memory, and are then suddenly ripped away by a voice that sounds abrupt, out-of-place, and rather normative (I often think of this voice as having a case of the “should dos”), that is the voice of my shame. I have purposefully left this voice in as it speaks to the theme of alienation that is a central part of this project.

*This dissertation explores the similarities between C-PTSD and sociological definitions of alienation. With both, there is a feeling of separation from the self, others, and the world around you. With both comes a sense of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and isolation that amplifies the ‘voice of shame’ mentioned above. I will formally define both C-PTSD and alienation in an introductory sense later in this chapter, and in a detailed way in chapter 3. In some places throughout this dissertation, I will attempt to argue that both share similar symptoms, and have*

*similar causes and effects, while allowing them to remain separate. In the end however, they both represent a lack of control and a disruption in relations that leaves a person feeling lost and, well, alien.*

*Once the connection between alienation and C-PTSD is created, I will go on to argue that video games helped me to learn how to live with, and in many ways overcome my C-PTSD by giving me spaces and tools to practice meaning-making, social interactions, and most importantly, control over the unknown. Through the use of video capture software, I recorded myself playing video games from my childhood, which allowed me to explore how these games influenced me (and continue to influence me). Chapters 4 and 5 provide examples and interpretations of a wide range of game play experiences.*

*Finally, I will make the argument that video games (and game-like activities, including this entire dissertation process) have the following alienation and C-PTSD resolving characteristics: they provide links through time and relations to memories; they are tools for mediating trauma and ameliorating flashbacks; they are places that allow for the navigation of uncertainty and learning control; they are places that allow the development of social solidarity; and they allow for the transformation, integration, and appropriation of identity and meaning.*

In the end, I will argue that video games helped me by providing safe places to learn and practice CONTROL. This form of control is difficult to describe at the start of this story and needs to be uncovered throughout our journey. In fact, I will argue that part of the power of video games is their ability to present us with journeys to follow and places to fail, as we learn to understand control.

I now want to transition to a different type of introduction. I noted above that in addition to **Professor Sapach** there are multiple personas that are coming along on this journey. Some of them (**Professor Sapach** in particular) have clear voices, and parts to play throughout, while others are generally participating in the background, providing memories, meanings, and emotions without clearly identifying themselves. Regardless, they each require an introduction at this point as they will be the source of the dialogue and memory exploration throughout this dissertation.

*As an autoethnography, this project relies heavily on a wide range of personal stories, told with the intention of drawing connections between the experiences of an individual subject (me as the author), and theories aimed at understanding and impacting the experiences of others. The use of multiple characters and voices stems largely from experiences of dissociation that are characteristic of C-PTSD. When pushed to the extreme, traumatic experiences can lead to Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) where multiple, separate personalities develop as a protective measure. The personas in this narrative have not reached the point of being official “multiple personalities”, instead they represent different life transitions and states of being. All are part of a single whole, but each has a somewhat different perspective on life.*

*These different voices are not unlike the multiple life narratives assumed in interpretive autoethnographic approaches. For example, in the book “Interpretive Autoethnography”<sup>3</sup> (2014), Norman K. Denzin explains:*

Stories within stories told to groups remind us that every life story is a multiplicity of stories that could be told. There is no single life story or self-autobiography that grasps or

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<sup>3</sup> As Professor Sapach is writing in italics, the names of books/articles will be identified using quotation marks, as opposed to italics.

covers all that a life is for a person. There are only multiple stories that can be told. Each storyteller can only tell the stories his or her biography allows to be told (55).

*As the research and planning for this dissertation unfolded, there was an increasing awareness that the autoethnographic voice in fact consisted of plural autoethnographic voices, telling multiple stories that were taking place from multiple perspectives. Denzin's statement about life consisting of a multiplicity of stories is an extremely apt description for this dissertation; multiple stories, told from multiple perspectives, evolved from a single life, with the goal of developing a complex argument about the resolution of alienation through participation in video game culture. An overarching goal of this dissertation is to answer the question: How can we cope with, understand, and develop strategies for resolving trauma and alienation in society through collective play and the use of video game culture?*

Dissociation, as a protective practice, has resulted in the development of a range of different characters throughout my life. These characters are all me, but they also have their own stories, their own origins, and their own places in my adult life. Some of them have been with me for as long as I can remember, while others have only become prevalent in the past 10 years or so. As I sit here writing my explanation, I am largely writing from the perspective of **Sonja**, the person who is the culmination of all my life experiences - the common thread that unites the various personas about to be introduced. As I work to tell you my stories, I am embracing the many different characters and giving them a voice of their own. Writing in this way will allow me to be as genuine and interpretive as possible. I should note that **Professor Sapach** is just as much a part of me as the rest of the characters, though her title is one that exists in the future and her voice is meant to act as the relatively objective, expert academic. Her existence is both real, in

that she is a part of me, and fictitious, as she has not yet earned her title. She is fighting to prove herself through the role that she plays throughout this dissertation.

*In their article “Are we afraid of our selves? Self Narrative research in leisure studies<sup>4</sup>” Audrey Giles and D J Williams (2007) summarize autoethnography as follows:*

Autoethnography, then, may be considered to be a blending of fact and fiction. It draws from multiple layers of consciousness (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and multiple identities within the self (Sparkes, 2003). Parts of the self are present during the writing process, while other parts are suppressed; and, as Richardson (2000) points out, writing is always partial and situated (190).

*Autoethnography, as the primary methodology used in this dissertation, practically demands the sort of dialogue between personas (multiple identities within the self) that will be performed throughout. Denzin (2014) tells the story of Bill, an alcoholic who is attending an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting and telling his story to the other members of the group:*

A doubling of self occurs in Bill’s story. He sees himself reflected in the stories he is telling. He becomes a second self within his story, for he is telling a story about himself. This second self is a temporal production, lodged in the past but told in the present. In this temporalizing process, multiple selves speak...these multiple selves merge, double back, laminate and build on one another, and provide the context and occasion for the production of the larger story that is told. The boundaries and borders between the multiple stories is never clear-cut, for the meaning of every given story is only given in

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the dissertation, there are places where I have chosen to include the full title of an article or book when it is technically unnecessary. In these cases, I believe that the title adds clarity, or allows for easier understanding of context – my personal opinion is that it allows the story to flow.

the difference that separates its beginnings and endings from the story that follows. As one story ends, another begins, but then the earlier story overlaps with the one that is now being told. Stories become arbitrary constructions within the larger narratives that contain the story the teller is attempting to tell (55-56).

*As with Bill's story, the stories told in this dissertation reflectively double back on themselves multiple times, developing new understandings of the meanings of specific events, objects, people, and emotions. The stories of each character merge, comment on similar events, and diverge in interpretation and reaction.*

The characters, as I introduce them, will allow you to follow my disrupted understanding of the temporality of my own life. I will provide a brief 'origin' story for each character, but each of their existences is intertwined and difficult to truly define. The stories I tell about each will claim to pin-point the exact point in my life when they came into being, when in reality they will identify the point at which I felt a change; the emergence of a new part of my identity, the development of new understandings and meanings. After all, in the end, each character is just another part of me as a whole. While I am uncertain if other people commonly name the various personas that they perform, my ability to understand myself through these different characters has allowed me to survive and grow as I observe(d) the interactions between them. They share stories and experiences and change meaning for each other as they act and react to various situations.

*The best way to think about the identities about to be introduced is to view them through a dramaturgical lens. Evoking Erving Goffman's "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1956) the characters are, in actuality, personifications of the various ways that **Sonja***

*performed her identity throughout her life. They are personas that have been developing and performing in an attempt to survive and thrive.*

Each character, every persona, has allowed me to work on developing and transforming my relationship to, and understanding of, myself, others, and the world around me. Each of them has given me what I needed at the time, providing me with ways of understanding what was happening to me.

*David Shulman, who draws from and speaks to Goffman in his book “The Presentation of Self in Contemporary Social Life” (2017), notes that:*

Audiences must have the basic interpretive competence to understand what an actor is doing in context...that competence involves a capacity to judge and the right background knowledge to make judgements accurately (7).

***Sonja’s** experiences with childhood trauma, and the resulting symptoms of C-PTSD, prevented her from developing the basic interpretive competence to judge her own performances and identity. It was through the creation and development of the following characters that she was able to gradually gather the tools needed not only to perform successfully for others, but also for herself. **Sonja** was the audience who watched the performances of the characters as they interacted with and in the world.*

**Sonja** is the foundation, the core, of all the other characters. I have identified her as a separate character up to this point in order to setup the introduction to the others. I am **Sonja** to family, friends, colleagues, future students, and anyone who recognizes/acknowledges my physical, biological, historical presence. As I write, I am usually writing in the first person from the point of view of **Sonja**. I am the physical body that was born into this world. I am the one who



experiences and works to overcome C-PTSD. I am the alienated individual who has a deficient relationship with myself, with other people, and with the world around me. This alienation will be the topic of Chapter 3, so for now I will simply say that I am subject of this autoethnography. I have a story, but my story is difficult to piece together without the other characters due to the above-mentioned multiplicity of stories and identities.

**Baby Sonja** is the abused child, the slave to her mother, the one who described HIS<sup>5</sup> basement in the prologue. She is the fearful, dissociated, sometimes suicidal one. She is the one who hates holidays (especially Christmas and Mother's Day). She is the one who picks her skin and rips out her own toenails in order to feel something. When I think about her, I feel both afraid and mournful. She represents loss, not just of my childhood, but of any point in my life where my shame, fear, and sense of worthlessness left me empty and alone. When I am performing her persona, it is never by choice. She never learned how to be safe or secure or attached to anyone. When life becomes overwhelmingly stressful or lonely, she often makes an appearance, encouraging me to dissociate, hide, and protect myself at all cost. I can picture her in my mind, a shy, quiet, frightened young girl with blond hair and blue eyes. She is inquisitive, and playful. She loves to read, and to play out elaborate fantasies either in her head, or with her toys (as long as she is alone and somewhere temporarily safe.) She is highly empathetic and does her best to keep everyone around her happy and peaceful. She desperately wants friendship, love, praise, and human connection, but feels alone and unworthy of the attention of others. When people do show her love and friendship, she doesn't understand how to accept it and return it. She feels safer when she is alone, hiding in the shadows, free to engage in imaginary friendships in fantasy

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<sup>5</sup> The use of a capitalized pronoun in this context allows me to refer to my mother's abusive boyfriend without having to write his name. In my mind, he holds enough power to justify a grandiose use of a pronoun.

worlds. Physical affection baffles her as she has learned to fear being touched; she freezes in panic whenever a family member attempts to hug her or kiss her on the cheek. I personally cringe at the mere mention of her name, as it was a pet-name used by her mother who would often call it out in a playful (what I considered to be a condescending) tone of voice.

*Conducting research and writing from the perspective of **Baby Sonja** has proven to be challenging. As this is an autoethnography, **Sonja** is the human “subject” (participant) of her own research. Accordingly, Ethics clearance has been applied for, approved, and maintained through the University of Alberta (see Appendix A). The ethics clearance works to serve two main purposes. The first goal is to protect the privacy and safety of the other people who are a part of this story. Any names, identifying information, or relationships that I directly mention have either been altered, or remain vague enough to protect their privacy. **Sonja’s** father passed away many years ago, so there is no concern about causing him any harm through this research. **Sonja’s** mother is mentioned out of necessity to maintain the integrity and validity of the narrative. Any parts of this dissertation that are released publicly will be altered as required in order to ensure the protection of her identity and well-being.*

The second purpose of the ethics clearance is to protect myself from any harm as a participant. **Baby Sonja** is the one experiencing the highest risk through this dissertation and is therefore the one receiving the most care and delicate treatment. As I work with and through her, I have taken important self-care steps including continued care by mental health professionals, and an explicit internal agreement that if my C-PTSD symptoms flare up too much as a result of the research or writing, I stop and take the necessary steps to reduce them. As much as I want to protect her and avoid triggering painful memories, her experiences and stories are a vital part of the argument that I am making in this dissertation. Giving her a voice and a place in the story has, to my

surprise, proven to be quite helpful as a form of empowerment, something that I will speak to more in later chapters.

**Forestghost** was born on a rainy day in Surrey, BC. She awoke under the cover of a great evergreen tree (which shielded her from the rain and kept her safe from all of the people around her) with a book in her hand and a smile on her face. Not a bright, happy smile, but a content one, a peaceful one. She closed the book in her hands because it suddenly became unimportant. She turned her face up to the sky and felt the occasional cool raindrop slip through the tree branches and tickle her skin. She watched in silence as random strangers strolled past on the forest path unaware of her presence, unaware of her sudden creation. She was created out of necessity, to protect **Baby Sonja** who was becoming a teenager and needed a stronger sense of identity in order to survive secondary school (grades 8-12 in BC at the time). **Forestghost** grew out of a need for peaceful isolation, anonymity, and a need to fight my increasing anxiety and depression. She started as a feeling of brief safety, an unnamed but somewhat powerful persona. I gave her the name **Forestghost** when I was starting to use the internet and needed to create a username for various chat programs including ICQ.<sup>6</sup> “Forest” to represent her love of trees and walking through nature, and “ghost” to represent her desire for powerful anonymity. She has had such a profound influence on my life that I have a tattoo honouring her on my left wrist; two Chinese characters surrounded by cherry blossom branches. The characters are ones that I looked up in a Chinese-English dictionary and are meant to stand for forest and ghost. I have had one native Mandarin Chinese speaker comment on it, stating that I am missing a tree from the first character which apparently means “grove” instead of forest. To me, it doesn’t matter

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<sup>6</sup> A chat program that was my main source of online social networking in the 1990’s (when I had dial-up internet and a computer sitting on the dining room table).

that much, the symbol is the important thing. She taught **Baby Sonja** how to meditate, how to enjoy the scent of the rain-soaked forest (both in reality, and through the use of incense, candles and essential oils), and how to escape her feelings of fear and confinement by going for long nature hikes. She taught **Baby Sonja** how to be at peace in a turbulent world.

Beyond acting as a mentor and saviour for **Baby Sonja**, **Forestghost** was the persona through which I acted out most of my teenage life. When I was bullied and ridiculed in school, she motivated me to stand up for myself and to ignore the childish actions of others. I joined the Royal Canadian Air Cadets when I was 12-13 years old and it was **Forestghost** who embraced the leadership, teamwork, and public speaking skills that I learned as I worked my way up through the ranks. She thrived in survival training, drill instruction, and organizational techniques and was able to earn the trust and respect of her fellow cadets. When I was 16, I was unexpectedly awarded the Royal Canadian Legion Cadet Medal of Excellence, an honour that **Forestghost** accepted with pride, despite the fear, shame, and disbelief felt by **Baby-Sonja**. Air Cadets was also where I met my first boyfriend and it was **Forestghost** who initiated a message exchange on ICQ resulting in our first date. I brought him to the place in the woods where **Forestghost** was born and we shared our first kiss on that spot.

When I think about **Forestghost**, I feel comforted and peaceful. While she is a confident, brave leader when compared to **Baby Sonja**, she is still relatively shy, quiet, and insecure. She prefers to be alone, limiting her social interactions to either spending time with an individual close friend in person, or playing video games with unseen others online. She is no longer my primary digital persona, though she held the title for many years. As a teenager and young adult, I would name every avatar and game character either “Forestghost” or “Ghost” (depending on the allowable number of letters). I picture her not as the physical embodiment of my nerdy, awkward

teenage self, but instead as a fantasy creature of sorts. I visualize her as a tall, half-elf with long flowing green hair. She is covered with decorative, nature themed tattoos and mythically symbolic jewelry. She is often surrounded by a pack of wolves, with a flock (also known as an ‘unkindness’) of ravens flying overhead. She is beautiful, graceful, magical and inquisitive.

Evoking the persona of **Forestghost** is unfortunately somewhat difficult for me these days as the next character I will introduce ultimately took her place, evolving from her in a way, during my late-20’s.

**Lenoraven** was born from an accident, and a traumatic time in life. My husband at the time was serving in Afghanistan and I was working, exercising, and dealing with all of the other things that life threw at me. I worked in community service and was helping a client. We were going to Tim Hortons, and I had to get something out of my trunk. I reached in and a gust of wind blew the trunk lid right into my forehead. I saw stars but continued on. I met my boss inside of the coffee shop and instantly knew something was wrong. There was blood on my head, and I kept stuttering and couldn’t keep my thoughts straight. After work, I went to the hospital and the doctor told me I had a concussion. They gave me an interesting test, asking me to spell “earth” backwards, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t do it. My vision was blurred and full of sparkles, my head hurt, and most severe was my anxiety. I could not stop shaking and fidgeting, and I could not return to work. This is how I ended up on Workers Compensation due to post-concussive syndrome. I was stuck at home, unless I was being poked and prodded at some doctor’s office, and constantly feeling the shame of not working due to an invisible injury.

*World of Warcraft (WoW)* (2004) became a huge part of my life when my husband left, even more so when I was injured and off work. I needed social interaction, a sense of accomplishment, a feeling like I wasn’t a waste of life, and *WoW* was central in my social life.

Before the concussion, I was playing the game through an avatar named “Forestghost”.

Following the concussion, I decided to create a new character, a new experience to help me heal and recover. In the game, players are unable to have two characters with the same name in the same realm, so I needed to come up with a new name. As a fan of Edgar Allen Poe’s poem *The Raven*, I chose the name **Lenoraven** as a unique combination of the name (The Raven) and the subject of the poem (the lost Lenore).

**Lenoraven** was with me when I was rejected from graduate school after my first attempt. She was with me as I fought to recover my life and achieve new goals. I eventually wrote my MA thesis on *WoW* and **Lenoraven** became an important part of my life. She was not only my *WoW* ‘main’ character, she was the co-author of my thesis, my research assistant, and ultimately my academic gamer identity. **Lenoraven** is kind, smart, adventurous, and social. She excels in difficult situations. She learned how to interact with others through *WoW*. She was, and continues to be, channelled through me whenever I write a paper (particularly video game related) and is with me now as I write this dissertation. **Lenoraven** was the perfect choice to represent the next evolution of my identity, even though I didn’t know it at the time.

**Lenoraven** retains all of the best parts of **Forestghost** but remains a unique persona. She is confident, inquisitive, kind, and empathetic. She watches and listens to people, eager to learn about social interactions and expectations. She is also careful and somewhat pessimistic. She is the part of me that began dressing in black and dying my hair black in order to take on a mysterious, goth sort of look. I picture her as a visual combination of Elvira (Mistress of the Dark) and Morticia (from *The Addams Family*). She is adventurous, sensual, daring, and willing to take risks. She has been the driving force behind my academic achievements and ambitions.

Her confidence and drive act as a sort of bridge between the quiet ambitions of **Forestghost** and the current development of **Professor Sapach**.

**Professor Sapach** has yet to come into her own. She is not an actual professor, but represents an identity ‘goal’, a desired end-state that is seemingly within my reach. I have only really noticed her development in the past few years. In some ways, she represents a placeholder, a way to describe the rather odd position that I find myself in. She is a public speaker, a teacher, a confident independent woman. She takes pride in her work, passionately desires a career in academia, and does her best to move forward and advance. When I picture her in my head, I see a reflection of myself in the mirror. I suppose that after all of these years, and the many personas that I have lived through and performed as, it makes sense that I feel as if I am merging into a single, empowered identity. **Professor Sapach** gives me a lens through which to view my own history and experiences, and an outlet through which I can share my journey, in the form of this autoethnography. She has not ‘‘taken over’’ however, as I still experience states where **Baby Sonja**, **Forestghost**, and/or **Lenoraven** reign supreme.

Each of these characters, each of these personas and performances, are an integral part of **Sonja**, of me. The stories that they tell, and the experiences that they share, all represent the multiple identities, and multiple layers of consciousness that form this autoethnography and are foundational to exploring the role of video game play in the midst of alienation and trauma.

### Video Game Play and the Development and Maintenance of Social Solidarity

As I introduced **Lenoraven** above, I briefly mentioned her role as ‘‘research assistant’’ for my MA thesis titled *The WoW Factor: The Development of Social Solidarity in Azeroth*. The thesis set the foundational blocks for this dissertation, and I want to take the time to present a brief summary before proceeding.

Games, specifically video games, have been a driving force in my ability to cope with and overcome personal trauma. The stories I share throughout this dissertation will often talk about how video game play and video game culture allowed me to cope with the social and psychological damage caused by neglect (an example of which was described in the prologue above), physical and emotional abuse, and bullying. My MA thesis was less direct, only using my personal experiences as an inspirational starting point. Personal experiences, and observations of others, led me to hypothesize that shared play in virtual worlds results in the development and maintenance of social solidarity which I define(d) as: the creation and reinforcement of an unspoken agreement amongst members of a group, about the most orderly and predictable ways to live together, act together, and 'be' together, based on a shared morality requiring mutual trust and respect. This hypothesis and definition developed from a rather lengthy theory review process that **Professor Sapach** and **Lenoraven** attempt to summarize in the following paragraphs. Note that these concepts remain important for this dissertation as they point to the relationship between solidarity, alienation, and the importance of “role play.”

*In his book “Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture” (1938), Johan Huizinga argues that play is at the root of the development of all civilizations. He laments that as civilizations become increasingly complex and advanced, play becomes secondary. People become smothered with reason and logic resulting in the loss of the important play elements of our cultural foundation and development. Huizinga’s argument acted as a starting point for the development of an argument that attempted to draw a connection between play and classical social theories involving the development of community and the reinforcement/maintenance/mediation of social solidarity.*



The first step was to define what I meant by social solidarity, so I began with Émile Durkheim who in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933) describes the development of social solidarity through the expression of a collective consciousness, which he defines as “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average members of the same society.” (38) Durkheim argues that part of the social (something which transcends, and extends beyond, any one individual person) is a generally unspoken, shared set of values and beliefs that everyone (who is a member of that society) shares. It is more complicated than this simple summary, but it is the idea on which I based the foundation of social solidarity on as I moved forward. I then brought in Georg Simmel who, in various essays that appear in the collection *On Individuality and Social Forms* (1971), argues that members of any society need to feel that they have a place, a role to play. A key part of solidarity, I concluded, was that people not only needed to have a role to play but also needed to trust that others would satisfy their own various roles. This form of trust is not necessarily a trust between two individuals, but instead a general sense of trust in the roles themselves. This form of trust requires a grander sense of connection to the social whole, what Simmel means when he states that the whole “must be grasped as a unity, as a metaphysical organism in which each psyche is a vital element, exchangeable with no other, but presupposing all others and their interaction in its own life (287).”

*Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis (from “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”, 1959) provided the final theoretical piece of the puzzle, through an explanation of how and why people play their roles in a convincing way based on a generally unspoken agreement about the definition of the situation that they are in. Solidarity, based on the theories mentioned above, requires, develops, and maintains shared general beliefs, the existence of roles (and the trust*

*that strangers will fulfill their roles), and a relatively unspoken agreement about how to perform various roles in various situations.*

Having defined solidarity, I then moved to an analysis of how shared play develops and maintains social solidarity in a manner very similar to how Durkheim states that a ritualized celebration of the sacred invigorates the collective consciousness in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915). To explain my understanding of ‘the sacred’, I combined Durkheim’s (1915) classic dichotomy of the sacred and the profane with Georges Bataille’s dialectic interpretation of the two concepts (drawn from *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1986), and *Theory of Religion* (1989)).

*Durkheim clearly highlights the fact that sacred ‘things’<sup>7</sup> are held in special regard, worthy of protection, when viewed through a collective social lens. Bataille argues that the sacred and the profane exist in a fluid, dynamic relationship and that sacred ‘things’ cannot be explained using logic or reasoning, they are socially created and understood ‘things’ that stand outside, but exist in a relationship with, profane reason. Both Bataille and Durkheim state that it is the ritualized celebration of the sacred, during a break or move away from profane life, that binds people together into a community (develops solidarity).*

*The question became, how can we tell when the break from profane life happens? Victor Turner (1969, 1982) provides a theoretical foundation for answering this question through his description of the liminal process which allows members of a group to transition into a state of statuslessness – a flattening of hierarchies that removes the restrictions normally placed on them*

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<sup>7</sup> The word things is in quotes here as the sacred can be applied to any ‘thing’, be it a symbol, action, object, etc. Whatever the ‘thing’ is, it only requires that a social group has deemed it unique, separate from the profane, worthy of passionate collective celebration – think of the Stanley Cup as an example, it is only special because a social group has collectively decided to give it meaning beyond the objective fact that it is a large, shiny, metal goblet.

*in the structured, profane world. According to Bataille, it is a state of statuslessness that allows for the free and passionate transgression of a taboo, ultimately allowing the experience of the sacred to be socially, morally acceptable among the participants*<sup>8</sup>. Durkheim (in “*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*”) works to remind us that although a celebration of the sacred represents a move away from profane life, there are still “rules of conduct which prescribe how a man [sic] should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects (41).” It is these rules, or rituals as Durkheim calls them, that allow for the control of the sacred; they are the socially created, rule-based actions that develop out of beliefs surrounding sacred ‘things’. Rituals guide the process of liminality, keeping things ‘moral’ and allowing for the participants to freely experience the solidarity creating collective effervescence. Ultimately, a break from the profane requires a socially agreed upon set of rules (rituals) that allow group members to celebrate the sacred freely in a ‘space’<sup>9</sup> that is safe from the limits of the profane, structured ‘real world’.

To summarize, solidarity (as I have defined above) is developed and maintained through the ritual guided, collective celebration of sacred ‘things’. This is where video game playing finally makes an appearance.

*Huizinga (1938) provides a definition of play out of which six specific characteristics can be extracted. First, play must be voluntary, forced activities cannot be classified as play actions. Second, play involves stepping out of ordinary or ‘real’ life, it is a break or distraction from our*

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<sup>8</sup> I can dress up in a scary costume and attempt to illicit a frightened reaction from young children during Halloween, but not randomly for my own amusement in mid-July.

<sup>9</sup> The word space is in quotes here as it refers to what Durkheim calls the sacred space, and what I consider to be a non-physical, sacred space into which one must enter in order to actively engage in the ritual. I deconstructed and reconstructed the game studies concept of the ‘magic circle’ in my argument, but for the sake of time and space, I will avoid rehashing the analysis here.

*everyday lives. Third, play is limited, it has a distinct beginning and ending, is played out in a specific 'space' and, once complete, remains only in our memory. Fourth, play demands order, it requires rules and fairness. Fifth, play involves the formation of social groups, it involves a connection between the participants; it is a form of social action. Sixth, play involves secrecy, it requires a certain level of trust within the group in order to maintain an 'in-group' feeling of unity and uniqueness.*

*After conducting a comparison between the various theories around solidarity creation, rituals, the sacred, and play (drawing additionally from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) and Gregory Bateson (1972)), I came to the following conclusion: Play is an 'ideal social form'<sup>10</sup> that encompasses all of the characteristics of the 'social fact' presented by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.*

*The sacred represents a break from reality, a voluntary step out of real life, away from the profane. The celebration of the sacred, the shared break from reality, represents a legitimate end in itself. Stepping (figuratively) into the sacred space involves a transition into a state of statuslessness, in which there is the freedom to transcend profane roles and to enjoy pure interactions<sup>11</sup> with others. Stepping into the sacred space (or magic circle<sup>12</sup>) represents an agreement to follow a ritualized set of rules and limitations. It represents a shared understanding of the order that must be maintained during the step away from reality. This*

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<sup>10</sup> This is taken from Simmel who argues that we can only define things in their purest forms, while in reality, nothing fits perfectly into any defined category – there will always be something that makes an individual person or object slightly different from the theoretical ideal form.

<sup>11</sup> Simmel's idea of sociability.

<sup>12</sup> This is considered a dangerous term to bring up in game studies, however I make use of it in order to highlight the fact that I am talking about video game play – beginning the game and actively immersing oneself into playing the game is the figurative step into the sacred space.

*shared understanding leads to the development of trust and mutual respect, which allows for both the creation and maintenance of social solidarity.*

The results of my thesis research supported my hypothesis and indicated that it was through shared understandings about the importance and meaning of 'sacred things', and how to behave collectively in their presence<sup>13</sup>, that players were able to interact and work together successfully through a typically unspoken respect for, and trust of, one another. My research was, however, limited, not only to one game, but to the in-game world itself<sup>14</sup>.

One significant unanswered question that I was left with at the end of the thesis was whether this type of solidarity extended beyond the boundaries of *Azeroth*. Allow me to put this question into context. As I write this, I am sitting in my home office, surrounded by posters illustrating various maps, characters, and symbols from an assortment of video games. I have also collected, and surrounded my office with, toys and other symbolic objects that depict characters and objects from games, and other forms of popular culture. It is also common for me to wear t-shirts decorated with video game symbols and 'nerdy' pop culture references. If solidarity is created and maintained through shared understandings about sacred things, then does the presence of game symbols, characters, and narrative references, outside of the scope of the individual game world, reinforce and potentially amplify the type of solidarity described in my thesis? How does video game culture allow for the creation of real-world relationships with others, the types of relationships that are not a means to an end, but an end in themselves?

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13 In other words, the socially agreed upon rules and rituals that guide behaviour in the presence of the sacred things..

14 It is important to note here that my research took place in *Azeroth*, the setting of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. There is apprehension in the game studies community about researchers utilizing findings from a single game to talk about all games as a collective. I acknowledge that my MA research can only officially be applicable to *World of Warcraft* players.

My interest in social connections as developed through shared video game play, and participation in video game culture, stems from the sheer power that video games had (and still have) in helping me to not only survive abuse, but to understand other people when I felt completely lost and alone. The theories and questions explored in my MA thesis only skimmed the surface of a much deeper set of questions which form the foundational core of this dissertation.

### Research Questions

*Increasingly complex questions emerged upon completion of “The WoW Factor” including: How does wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with a licenced video game symbol, an obvious product of capitalism, allow a person to feel less alienated, and more connected to others who are trying just as hard to deal with the violence, pain, and isolation of a traumatized existence? How does solidarity develop despite the apparent contradiction of using the products of alienated labour to reduce alienation? **Sonja’s** understanding of trauma and alienation was not well developed upon completion of “The WoW Factor”, and one of the secondary goals of this dissertation has been to unpack and explore these questions.*

Working from the position of a person who has been helped through personal trauma by shared video game play, my primary goal for this dissertation is to demonstrate how video game play has the potential to mediate the resolution of 'alienation' (a term which will be unpacked in great detail later on) on a micro and macro-sociological level. Drawing from *The WoW Factor*, this resolution stems from the opportunity to ‘try things out’ through video game play. These things include sharing rituals and rules, developing social meanings around shared symbols, and playfully interacting both within, and beyond, the boundaries of the games themselves. More generally, playing video games has allowed me to develop meaningful, reflexive relationships with myself, and others. I have learned, through the process of developing, researching, and

writing this dissertation, that there are many more complex themes at play here. I will introduce these themes in the next section.

It is important to note that I am not proposing that games alone can 'save the world'<sup>15</sup>, and I am not suggesting that everything can or should be turned into a game. I do not want to create a prototype or working model that people should attempt to emulate or explicitly follow. What I focus on is a theoretical examination of games, and shared spaces of gaming, that bring people together, cross barriers, promote social solidarity, and provide mediation strategies for coping with alienation. To do this, I have conducted an autoethnographic study that utilizes my own experiences with trauma, alienation, and C-PTSD to examine gaming places, practices, objects, and cultures, and visa versa: I use my own experiences playing video games to explore trauma, C-PTSD, and alienation.

*There are four key questions that were originally intended to drive the formal process of data gathering and analysis throughout this project:*

- 1) How is social solidarity developed and maintained through shared play and shared symbolic experiences around video games and virtual worlds?*
- 2) Is there something unique about the way that video game play allows for the mediation of the resolution of alienation?*

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<sup>15</sup> This is a (simplified version of a) claim that researchers like Jane McGonigal (2011) are making. I do not accept the idea that the world will be a better place is if everything is made into a game as I believe that there is an important, fluid relationship between dialectical dichotomies like 'work' and 'play' (life and death, pleasure and pain, etc.).

- 3) *How does collective play in virtual worlds work to resolve the problem of alienation – from self, from others, from labour, and from the products of labour (and/or resolve the deficient relation one has to oneself, the world, and others)?*
- 4) *How can we cope with, understand, and develop strategies for resolving trauma and alienation in society through collective play and the use of video game culture?*

*These questions were outlined during the initial stages of project development, before the method of autoethnography was settled on. From a formal, academic perspective, these questions are the ones that my research was originally designed to explore.*

I developed the four questions above with an empirical, logical, scientific dissertation in mind. They are good questions, and ones that I do explore in later chapters. The autoethnographic process however, ended up transforming the project as I worked through each main step – the candidacy proposal, conducting ‘formalized’ autoethnographic research, analyzing the data that was gathered, and writing the initial chapters. I came to discover that while my underlying goals and questions remained the same, the answers to each question did not stand alone, in isolation. Ultimately, the questions all boil down to the following simply worded, yet extremely complex question:

**How have video games helped me to survive and overcome trauma – a kind of trauma that left me feeling alienated? How might video games help others in the same way?**

*The remainder of this chapter will focus on introducing the key themes required to answer the above question. “Meaning Exchange”, “Trauma and C-PTSD”, “Alienation”, and “Video Games”, will each be introduced in turn, as these are the themes that have stood out as vitally important to understanding the process of answering the above simple, yet complex, question.*



*These introductions are written with the goal of providing you with a basic understanding, before moving into detailed explanations in the chapters that follow. In order to allow the autoethnographic voice to develop as it wants to, the following section is written with the intention of providing a vocabulary. Each theme allows for a cohesive dialogue between the academic **Professor Sapach**, and the other personas. Ideally, you will observe a dialectical evolution of dialogue between the various voices as they work to answer the questions driving this dissertation.*

### Key Themes: Meaning Exchange

Not two minutes before sitting down to write this, I played two hands of the video game *Hearthstone* (2014) against a player who called themselves “Chipotlaway”. On the surface, that name is fairly nonsensical, but to me it has meaning. I am smiling and feeling a connection to that unknown other person who I will (most likely) never meet in real life. The name is a reference to a *South Park* (1997 – present) episode called “Dead Celebrities” in which one of the main characters, Eric Cartman talks about his love of a fictional product, called Chipotlaway, designed to remove unsightly bloodstains from one’s underwear caused by eating food at the real-life restaurant chain *Chipotle Mexican Grill*. I can actually hear the fictional *South Park* advertisement for Chipotlaway vividly in my head. I am remembering watching that particular episode with my husband at the time, sharing laughter over the gross nonsense. I lost both of the hands of *Hearthstone* that I played against the avatar Chipotlaway. While losing, I was cursing them out in my head, via the sarcastic voice of Eric Cartman from *South Park*. I have been sitting alone, in the safe space of my office all day. Despite being alone physically however, I made a connection (albeit one-sided) with someone today via a simple video game that I play daily on my phone during coffee breaks.

*Much of this dissertation is about the intended and unintended exchange of symbols and meaning through the medium of the video game. More than that, it is about the social power of shared play. The experience described above is an excellent example of what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls “Convergence Culture” which describes how content flows across and between multiple media platforms and industries, and through the behaviour of consumers who have access to a plethora of media entertainment experiences. In the book “Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide” Jenkins writes,*

Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives (3-4).

*The key takeaway from the above quote is that people make sense of their everyday lives through the exchange of constructed, media driven, personal mythologies. This is not to say that media consumption is the ONLY way that we develop our unique set of meanings. Symbolic Interactionism, as described by social constructionist Herbert Blumer (1969), argues that the sum of all social interactions drives the development of meaning, which, in turn, channels the subsequent actions of people toward things based on the meanings that those things have for them.*

I realize that the other *Hearthstone* player’s understanding of their avatar name likely did not change due to our in-game interaction, which only consisted of playing the game without the opportunity to chat with each other. For me however, the word *Chipotleway* has changed. It has not only become a resource through which I can make sense of a very particular situation in my life, but it now holds meaning in relation to *Hearthstone*, and to the process of writing this

dissertation. The word is fundamentally nonsense, but as a “signifier” or specific word that represents a particular sign (in this case a fictional product from *South Park*), the “signified” mental concept has taken on new meaning due to the interaction that occurred during the game. I now interpret the word in multiple ways and have given it meaning beyond what was originally presented to me by the writer of *South Park*.

*The terms “signifier” and “signified” were written in italics above to highlight their academic significance. I have used the contemporary version of these words drawn from Chandler (2017) to highlight the arbitrary relationship between the word and the meaning as a relationship that is subject to interpretation and transformation. This understanding of the fluid relationship between the signifier and the signified becomes important when turning to the discussion of the resolution of alienation, which as will be defined below, involves the integration and transformation of new experiences and meanings. The Chipotlaway example is here to demonstrate how video games can mediate the transformation of meaning.*

### Key Themes: Trauma and C-PTSD

I have spent a great deal of my life, as both a child and an adult, dealing with trauma - my own trauma, and the trauma experienced by others. The story presented in the prologue talked about HIS basement. I use the word “HIS” presented in capital letters in order to represent the deity-like power that he had over me and my mother. HE was not the first source of my trauma, but HE entered my life when I was transitioning from elementary school into secondary school (from grade 7 to grade 8). I was already extremely damaged due to the actions and inactions of my mother, and once I entered grade 8, the other children picked up on my ‘weirdness’ and I became a target of bullying. I was constantly afraid of the explosive and unpredictable anger of my mother. I was even more afraid of being trapped in HIS house, where he grew illegal drugs, used

massive amounts of drugs and alcohol with my mother, and where he would fly into fits of unpredictable rage which typically resulted in him beating my mother, and throwing us both out into the cold rain in the middle of the night, leaving me to attempt to care for my mom as we found a way home. I had begun to develop Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at a very young age, and it was pushed to the extreme with the introduction of HIM, and the bullying by my peers. I explain the symptoms of C-PTSD in much greater detail in Chapter 3, but for now I will let **Professor Sapach** provide you with an academic explanation.

*C-PTSD is not a formal “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5<sup>th</sup> Edition” (DSM-5) diagnosis, however the World Health Organization has included C-PTSD in the 11<sup>th</sup> Edition of the International Classification of Diseases for Mortality and Morbidity (ICD-11).*

*The ICD-11 provides the following description of the disorder:*

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Complex PTSD) is a disorder that may develop following exposure to an event or series of events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature, most commonly prolonged or repetitive events from which escape is difficult or impossible (e.g., torture, slavery, genocide campaigns, prolonged domestic violence, repeated childhood sexual or physical abuse). All diagnostic requirements for PTSD are met. In addition, Complex PTSD is characterized by severe and persistent 1) problems in affect regulation; 2) beliefs about oneself as diminished, defeated or worthless, accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt or failure related to the traumatic event; and 3) difficulties in sustaining relationships and in feeling close to others. These symptoms

cause significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning.<sup>16</sup>

*More detailed explanations, provided by Judith Herman (1992) and James Chu (2011) are presented in Chapter 3. The ICD-11 description above acts as a good foundational starting point for understanding the depth of damage caused by **Sonja's** prolonged exposure to neglect, physical abuse, confinement, emotional abuse, and general inability to escape traumatic situations. In addition to the symptoms of PTSD, which include nightmares, flashbacks, and severe anxiety, C-PTSD adds a layer of alienation-like symptoms; ingrained feelings of isolation, meaninglessness, powerlessness, normlessness, and self-estrangement.*

The point here is that trauma is not simply something I have experienced, it is what shaped my life. The first 20 years or so of my life were spent in a perpetual state of “fight or flight”, intense feelings of fear resulting from repetitive and prolonged traumatic events. In order to understand the autoethnographic story that will unfold throughout this dissertation, you need to understand that my perception of the world has developed through the lens of trauma. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use trauma as a storytelling tool, as a lens through which to develop theory and challenge normative assumptions. I am by no means however, the first person to conduct academic study through the lens of trauma.

*Ron Eyerman (2013), for example, analyzes three significant social theory texts<sup>17</sup> to examine and illustrate how personal trauma can impact the development and representation of social theory.*

*He notes that,*

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<sup>16</sup> <https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/585833559> last accessed March 28, 2019

<sup>17</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, and Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

Trauma study reveals a previously uncharted world to the observer and thus in a tragic way creates an opportunity to see what would otherwise remain deeply hidden. In this sense, trauma at the individual level resembles crisis at the societal level (42).

*His exploration of the three social theory texts through the lens of trauma exposes underlying themes that reflect on the theorists' own personal traumatic experiences, and how those experiences contributed to some of the key works in the social sciences canon. Eyerman concludes his analysis with the following key statement:*

Reading social theory as an expression of trauma means looking through the text for underlying ruptures...which disrupt the flow of argumentation and which help account for any sudden breaks, lapses and absences. Reading social theory in light of trauma theory is to find meaning in what might otherwise look like exaggeration, fragmentation or obvious inconsistency (50).

*Ultimately, Eyerman highlights the often unacknowledged power that personal trauma can have on the development of broader social theory. The autoethnographic methodology of this dissertation does much of what Eyerman describes, with the goal of finding and expressing meaning through the lens of trauma.*

What has, in the past, seemed like 'regular' life to me, is full of exaggeration, fragmentation, and obvious inconsistencies. I have difficulties remembering the temporal order of things.

Throughout this dissertation, you may find inconsistencies in my storytelling, depending on the character that is telling the story. I say above that HE entered my life between grade 7 and grade 8, but in all honesty, that timeline changes in my mind quite frequently. I remember being young enough to lack control over when I was able to leave the apartment freely, so I was not yet a

teenager. At the same time, I remember walking to HIS place from my secondary school, at an age where I began to feel a sense of rebellion and slight independence. I was working my first job because I remember having money to buy dog treats for the German Shepherd ‘Sesu’ who was introduced in the prologue. The point is, I am asking you to read this dissertation with Eyerman’s method in mind. The ruptures, disruptions, and inconsistencies in my narrative are all left intact and open for analysis, not only for you the reader, but in order to allow the thoughts and dialogue of my personas to flow naturally. I mentioned at the start of this chapter that an unnamed voice that represents my shame makes the occasional unwelcome appearance. I have engaged with this shame by both acknowledging it, and leaving it alone. The stories and memories you read are written as they happen in my head. I experience ruptures in thought, inconsistent emotions, and the invasion of the voice of shame all the time.

*The reading of texts through the lens of trauma is similarly utilized in literary studies. Geoffrey Hartman (1995) like Eyerman, seeks unpredictability and ruptures in literature. The following quote by Hartman is particularly poetic and relevant:*

But I share with trauma studies a concern for the absences of intermittences in speech (or of conscious knowledge in speech); for the obliquity or residual muteness of “flowers of speech” and other euphemic modes; for the uncanny role of accidents; for the “ghosting” of the subject; for the connection of voice and identity; for interpretation as a feast not a fast; and for literature as a testimonial act that transmits knowledge in a form that is not scientific and does not coincide with either a totally realistic (as if that were possible) or analytic form of representation (552).

*Trauma creates ruptures in lived experience, in meaning development, and in identity formation. It is these ruptures, more so than the trauma in and of itself, that have guided the research, data analysis, and autoethnographic writing of this dissertation.*

An unintentional, but not unexpected finding from my data analysis (the process of which will be discussed in the next chapter) is that one of the most frequent words I use is “um”. Um is a hesitation word, an absence of speech, a lapse in coherence. I use the word so frequently that it feels unconscious to me.

*In fact, the word “um” is one of many verbal fillers that people use to fill pauses. Michael Erard, a linguist and author, wrote a book on the subject in 2008 called “Um...: Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean” where he explores a wide range of lapses and absences, including the word um. To him, um is an active filler word that indicates thinking and learning and contemplation.*

The word um, for me, represents my shame, my anxiety, my self-estrangement, and my feeling of meaninglessness. I am not good enough to be confident in what I am saying. I am not powerful enough to speak without hesitation. I am afraid that what I say is going to cause another traumatic event in the form of bullying or abuse.

*Hartman mentions the connection of voice and identity. Hesitation in **Sonja**’s voice reflects hesitation in her identity. Trauma has created an identity of hesitation and uncertainty. Trauma has alienated **Sonja** from her own voice. An introduction to this form of alienation is presented in the following section.*



## Key Themes: Alienation

Immediately, I have to say that alienation is a vast topic with a plethora of literature, perspectives, and debates. I will be dedicating a significant part of Chapter 3 to a discussion of alienation and the theories that I align with, so please take what I say here as a simplified introduction to the concept. I have hinted at how alienated my C-PTSD has left me feeling throughout this chapter. **Professor Sapach** stated above that trauma has alienated me from my own voice. She also noted above that in addition to the standard symptoms of PTSD, C-PTSD produces symptoms that leave me feeling self-estranged, isolated, powerless, meaningless, and normless.

*Powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement are the five 'alternative' meanings of alienation outlined by Melvin Seeman (1959) during his attempt to define alienation based on a close reading of the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim<sup>18</sup>. To summarize briefly, Karl Marx describes alienation as a move away from the 'species essence', a process that is driven by capitalism and class conflict. Alienation, for Marx, happens through estrangement from the self, from labour, from the products of labour, and from others. Max Weber's version of alienation involves rationalization and bureaucracy, which, in a brief summary means that legal rationalization replaces morals, values, and the ability to challenge authority with logic and a blind allegiance to political rules. Émile Durkheim describes alienation as a loss of social direction and uncertainty about moral beliefs, which he called anomie (Seeman, 1959). The precise similarities and differences of each theory do not*

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<sup>18</sup> For Marx see *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1964) and *The German Ideology* (1845). For Weber see *The Economy and Society* (1921). For Durkheim see *Suicide* (1897).

*need to be outlined here, however it is important to note that the similarities have led to a diverse, sometimes confusing sociological understanding of the concept of alienation.*

When I delve into my own understanding of alienation (my particular alignment with existing literature), I will not only talk about Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, but also feminist interpretations of alienation, and the theorist that I align most closely to, Rahel Jaeggi (2014).

Before returning to Seeman, a brief introduction to Jaeggi seems in order. I want to introduce her here in order to clarify how she differentiates herself from Marx, Weber, and Durkheim as well as to set the stage for my focus on her description of alienation throughout the rest of the dissertation.

*Jaeggi describes alienation as a form of relation, specifically: “Alienation describes not the absence but the quality of a relation. Formulated paradoxically, alienation is a relation of relationlessness.” (893). Jaeggi’s reconstruction is a push against the argument that alienation can be resolved by regaining ‘species essence’ a process which fundamentally attempts to put all of humanity into a specific, universal ‘natural state’ (something done by Marx). Instead, Jaeggi argues that the resolution of alienation is a relation of appropriation, a process of regaining and reworking the relations between the self and the self, the self and the social world, and the self and the material world. To clarify, Jaeggi states,*

*An alienated relation is a deficient relation one has to oneself, to the world, and to others. Indifference, instrumentalization, reification, absurdity, artificiality, isolation, meaninglessness, impotence – all these ways of characterizing the relations in question are forms of this deficiency. A distinctive feature of the concept of alienation is that it refers not only to powerlessness and a lack of freedom but also to a characteristic impoverishment of the relation to the self and the world (489).*

*Exploring the resolution of alienation, for Jaeggi, does not involve a concrete description of the exact form of an unalienated life (in terms of happiness or goodness for example) but instead involves asking how an individual life is carried out and how the self is appropriated “...that is, a way of establishing relations to oneself and to the relationships in which one lives (relationships that condition or shape who one is).” (1038-1039) Alienation for Jaeggi is not about being trapped in a bureaucratic iron cage (as per Weber), or about a general lack of societal norms (as per Durkheim), instead it is about a loss of control. She states that,*

My claim is that we can become alien to ourselves, or our lives alien to us, when processes that take on a dynamic of their own or conditions of rigidification hinder us in understanding ourselves as agents in what we do (as the “subjects” of our actions and our lives.) This structure differs from straightforward coercion or manipulation (1393).

*For Jaeggi, and for me throughout this dissertation, the resolution of alienation involves gaining control, whether we had it before or not, over our relations. She does not believe that this control was necessarily taken away from us (as is suggested by Marx and Weber). Instead, she states that there are “a multitude of causes” (1712) that cannot be summarized in any relevant and exhaustive way. The problem of alienation is not a problem of the cause or source, but a question of how to learn to understand ourselves as active agents of change in our own lives.*

My original affective affiliation toward the concept of alienation developed when I was first learning about it during an introductory social theory course. More than any other sociological concept, alienation left me with a feeling of familiarity, of understanding. At the time, I couldn't explain why I felt such a connection, and no one theorist stood out as presenting the “right” version. I just knew that the whole idea of alienation in general felt comfortable, like something I had experienced intimately my entire life. When I found Seeman's five meanings of alienation, I

was able to draw semi-formal connections between my C-PTSD symptoms and each of his meanings. I developed Table 1 as a way of demonstrating how my symptoms are similar to each of the five meanings. Column 1 provides a brief description of each meaning of alienation, and column 2 lists the symptoms of C-PTSD that I experience as subjectively similar to each of Seeman’s meanings. It is important to note that I list my symptoms informally, as I experience them. These are not drawn from a specific definition or description of C-PTSD, but are based on my own feelings and experiences. The purpose of this table is to illustrate the connection I feel to alienation as described by Seeman, which, generally represents the type of alienation I was introduced to when I first encountered it.

Table 1: Comparing Alienation to C-PTSD

<b>Seeman’s Meanings of Alienation (1955)</b>  <b>From: <i>On the Meaning of Alienation</i></b>	<b>Personal Experiences with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD)</b>
<b>Powerlessness</b> (“... <i>the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcement, he seeks.</i> ”) (p. 784)	Generalized Anxiety, Social Anxiety, Inability to Self-Regulate Emotions, Lack of a Sense of Control, Dissociation (feeling powerless over my own body and actions).
<b>Meaninglessness</b> (“... <i>the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe – when the individual’s minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met...a</i>	Lack of a System of Meanings, Hopelessness, Distorted Understanding of Time, Difficulty Making Appropriate Social Choices, Dissociation

<p><i>low expectancy that satisfactory prediction about future behavior can be made.</i>”) (p. 786)</p>	<p>(feeling separated from commonly understood social meanings).</p>
<p><b>Normlessness</b> (“...a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals.”) (p. 788)</p>	<p>Altered Perceptions of Social Norms, Rationalization of Traumatic Events, Dissociation (feeling separated from social norms).</p>
<p><b>Isolation</b> (“...assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society.”) (p. 789)</p>	<p>Social Anxiety, Sense of Worthlessness, Withdrawal from Social Support, Dissociation (feeling no reward from achievements that others praise me for, distant from my own experiences).</p>
<p><b>Self-Estrangement</b> (“...the degree of dependence of the given behavior upon anticipated future rewards...the inability of the individual to find self-rewarding activities that engage him.”) (p. 790)</p>	<p>Confused Identity, Dissociation (feeling like there are no rewards, only more pain, separation from pleasure), Numbed Emotions, Distance from Experiences, Feeling Ungrounded.</p>

Table 1: Seeman’s (1955) Five Categories of Alienation Compared to Author’s Own Experiences with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

*Seeman’s five meanings are only being presented as an initial way of viewing the connection that exists between sociological conceptions of alienation and C-PTSD. As noted above, later chapters will discuss various other forms of alienation in more detail, while drawing closer connections to C-PTSD symptoms. This will be done with the goal of arguing that the ways in*

*which participation in video game culture allow **Sonja** to mediate and overcome her C-PTSD can theoretically extend to describe methods of mediating and resolving alienation.*

I need to pop in and interrupt here from the uncertain perspective of **Lenoraven**. Throughout this project, I spend a significant amount of time and effort trying to cleverly explain why I think you should be convinced that alienation and C-PTSD are related. In fact, Chapter 3 is dedicated to it. As I have listened to **Professor Sapach** trying to create a formal connection, I understand that she wants to be "scientific", and I think it is important that she continues to try. At the same time, I think the point is that alienation and C-PTSD symptoms, as I experience them, and as outlined in Table 1, share a lot of similarities that often make them feel indistinguishable from one another for me. They are not the same thing, but then again, with the already complex descriptions of alienation presented above, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what alienation is to begin with. Adopting Jaeggi's understanding is largely a result of a feeling of connection that I have – an understanding of what it feels like to exist in a relation of relationlessness. For some people this connection between C-PTSD and alienation will be less obvious, and it is those people that **Professor Sapach** is trying to convince. I think that the most important thing to keep in mind is that this dissertation argues that video games are helpful tools with unique characteristics that allow me to deal with an enmeshed conception of C-PTSD and alienation. I am arguing that video games and video game play can be helpful for resolving the symptoms or characteristics of both alienation and C-PTSD as I introduced them above.

#### Key Themes: Video Game Play

As the title of this dissertation explicitly states, I am interested in video games, video game play, and video game culture as a whole. At the most basic level, games, especially video games, have played a central role in my survival and development. My earliest 'safe' childhood memory

involves playing *Super Mario Bros* for the first time on my brand new *Nintendo Entertainment System*. Video games not only provided escape from the real world, but provided me with social, intellectual, and emotional support. Games like *Tetris*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and *Super Mario Bros 3*, provided me with a feeling of control, of power, of value. I could do something that gave me a sense of accomplishment, something that left me with good memories of adventures and overcoming obstacles. These games also provided me with the cultural capital (Pierre Bourdieu, 1979) I needed to begin to relate to other people.

With video games, **Baby Sonja** could pick up a game controller and beat *Super Mario Bros 3* (a very popular and highly regarded game) using various tricks and shortcuts that she had learned combined with the skill she developed through many hours of practice. When playing in an arcade, a social situation that was still terrifying, but made slightly more tolerable due to the presence of games that she could immerse herself in, she could play *Tetris* with such skill that people would stand behind her and watch as she manipulated the colourful blocks into the right places. She had a collection of gaming magazines that she could bring to school to share and discuss with friends. One of my closest friends was someone who was also abused and faced trauma. We were outcasts together, but we were able to share a bond through video games.

*This is a good place to interject to address the elephant in the room. For many people, video games represent exclusionary, misogynistic spaces that breed bullying, hate, and can lead to violent behaviour in real life. As a member, currently President, of the Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA), I have heard stories, and have witnessed attacks on women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ2+ individuals by people who call themselves 'gamers.'* When I speak positively of video games and video game culture, I am in no way trying to ignore or minimize the discrimination and violence that happens. As this is an autoethnographic study however, I am relying on my

*personal experiences and memories as my sources of data and I cannot say that I have personally experienced discrimination or violence related to my participation in video game culture. There is a plethora of reasons that this may be the case, but it is not my intention to explore them here. There are many amazing scholars conducting research and telling stories<sup>19</sup> and I believe that they should be heard. My story is a different one though, and perhaps an important part of this dissertation is to bring forward stories of positive experiences around identifying as a woman gamer. Again, this is not my focus, but I am mentioning it here to emphasize that I am not only aware of, but often engaged with such stories and the people who share them.*

The types, and amount, of trauma that I experienced from a young age, up through my teenage years, severely impacted the development of my personality, sense of self, connection with the world around me, feeling of purpose, and social skills. I was confused, scared, distrustful, and lacked the ability to understand and relate to myself or to those around me. Video games were, and continue to be, a driving force in my survival, in my development, in my ability to find meaning in things, and in my ability to relate to others. The assumption that underlies this project is that video games have the potential to contribute to successful coping strategies for not only individual, but collective trauma. I think of video games, not just as video games, but as spaces of collective play; as tools that aid in the development of shared meanings about sacred<sup>20</sup> things; as places that allow for the communication and expression of unconscious desires; as narratives that foster meaning and a sense of purpose; as sites where work and production have tangible, meaningful, useful results; and as laboratories where players can experiment with

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<sup>19</sup> Instead of citing one or two specific scholars, I will instead note here that the journals “*Loading...The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*” and “*Game Studies*” are both filled with excellent work and examples.

<sup>20</sup> In the Durkheimian sense discussed above.



different identities, practice various types of social interaction, and even experience different versions of potential utopias.

*Turning formally to game studies now, it is important to point out that this dissertation is not unique in its attempt to describe how video game play can lead to stronger social connections and the development of community. A powerful example of this can be seen in Celia Pearce's (2009) book Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds. Pearce follows a community of players as they are evicted from an online game world that ceased to exist and demonstrates their solidarity and resistance as they reform their 'society' in a new virtual world. Mark Chen (2009) describes the development and maintenance of trust and a coherent group identity through cooperative completion of challenging group battles in World of Warcraft. The edited collection Multiplayer: The Social Aspects of Digital Gaming (Thorsten Quandt & Sonja Kröger, 2014) takes a largely media and communication studies perspective to explore social aspects of digital gaming, social interactions in digital worlds, online gaming, co-located and console gaming, and the risks and challenges of social gaming. Social interactions and community development in video games is a well-researched field of study that continues to grow. This dissertation does not directly study interactions and community in the way the above mentioned authors do, though it is important to think of the personas and their interactions as a form of community building (reducing alienation) that acknowledges and parallels the above mentioned research.*

*For the sake of being thorough, one more game studies book that should be mentioned here is Jane McGonigal's (2011) Reality is Broken: Why Games Make us Better and How They Can Change the World which quite successfully argues that collective play can be used to motivate and bring people together. McGonigal focuses on collaborative games, particularly alternative*

*reality games where digital games are blended with real life goals. As a game designer, she presents an argument in favour of the gamification of real life where, for example, families can play collaborative games where they earn achievement badges for completing household chores like taking out the garbage. That being said, it is also a book that strongly argues for the complete gamification of daily life in a way that is widely critiqued by many game scholars. On the surface, it would appear that this dissertation is on the same theoretical page as McGonigal, particularly in relation to my argument that gaming can develop and maintain social solidarity, however this dissertation is not focused on the gamification of real life. My focus is on how games can help people practice and work through various thoughts, interactions, and behaviours which can then be extended into real life. I do not think the world should be a video game, instead I believe that we can use video games to safely practice and learn techniques for overcoming trauma and alienation in real life.*

To put it succinctly, I am not arguing that games themselves are what bring people together, but that video games provide environments and opportunities that allow us to collectively celebrate sacred things beyond the plethora of limitations that are presented by real life. I am not arguing that games alone can change the world, but that video games allow us to explore and understand micro-sociological interactions, the development of socially constructed rules, and the collective effervescence that is characteristic of the ritualized celebration of sacred things. Participation in video game culture gave me cultural capital, it gave me friendship, it gave me power and confidence, and it gave me a sense of control while living in an uncontrollable state of trauma. More than anything, games also gave me meaning.

*One more note about Jane McGonigal is important to introduce here. She is also interested in the ways that games are able to help people avoid and overcome PTSD. In an article posted on her website<sup>21</sup> she asks people to share the following coping technique with others:*

If you experience or witness a trauma, play a pattern-matching videogame such as Tetris or Candy Crush Saga as soon as possible, ideally within the first twenty-four hours after the event. Play the game for at least 10 minutes. It may help to play the game immediately before going to sleep that same night (n.p.).

*This is extremely relevant advice for the purposes of this dissertation. It is supported by research conducted at Oxford University<sup>22</sup> and will be touched on again in greater detail in Chapter 4 which focuses largely on the game Tetris.*

I must insist that I am not focused on exploring how games may or may not be used to ‘treat’ PTSD. However, it is interesting to see how McGonigal’s coping technique aligns with my own memories of games as helpful tools for surviving trauma. *Tetris* was, and still continues to be, a game that I am frequently drawn to. I find a peaceful appeal to games like *Candy Crush Saga*. Perhaps it is due to the ability of these kinds of game to set my mind at ease when I am triggered by memories of my own trauma.

*Ultimately, this dissertation explores how video game playing, as a collective social practice, mediates the transformation of subjectivity from “isolated, alienated victim” to “empowered, collective agent” who belongs, via video game playing and participation in video game culture, to a historically available, cultural-political space. Throughout this autoethnographic narrative I explore how video games as objects, video game playing as an individual and social practice,*

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<sup>21</sup> <http://janemcgonigal.com/2014/03/27/help-prevent-ptsd/> last accessed October 26 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in the article.

*and video game culture more generally, have provided the various versions of **Sonja** with her own feelings of agency, belonging, meaning, and identity.*

### Conclusion – Moving Forward

Now that we have a shared vocabulary and basic understanding to start from, I can begin the process of telling you my story while responding to the research questions presented above. My ultimate goal is to answer the simple yet complex question: How have video games helped me to survive and overcome trauma – a kind of trauma that left me feeling alienated? How might video games help others in the same way? I will talk about meaning creation, the connection between alienation and C-PTSD, video game play and video game culture, and my personal experiences with all of these things. I will share traumatic experiences, and good experiences. I will attempt to put my life into words, sharing my memories, making myself vulnerable. In the next chapter, I am going to talk about the methodology of autoethnography. I am also going to talk about feminist memory work, the importance of stories, and the power of narratives.

*The methodology chapter that follows describes the formalized method of data gathering that occurred during this project. Using the Let's Play format of recording video game play and player reactions, resulted in a corpus of textual data that has been analyzed using both subjective close reading, and digital distant reading/text-mining. These techniques will be described in detail through the formal medium of a published academic article. As the analysis of the text is somewhat secondary to the autoethnographic narrative, the methods and results of my formal analysis will be presented in a way that is designed to provide formal academic context to you as you read forward.*

I want to end this introductory chapter by leaving you a key insight that I will elaborate on throughout the rest of the dissertation. Two phrases have raced around my mind for close to a

year now, and I believe that they hold the key to understanding what it is about video games that make them stand out from other activities when mediating and resolving my symptoms:

## Lack of Control Over Perceived Certainty

Vs

## Perceived Control Over Relative Uncertainty

As a child, I felt as though I had a complete lack of agency and control over anything that would happen to me. It was a certainty that I would be abused, that dangerous things would happen, and that I could do nothing to change them. To me, pain, suffering, and fear were inevitable and it was this inevitability that largely contributed to how my C-PTSD developed and appeared. Video games taught me how to gain a semblance of control over the strange, exciting, unknown worlds I was exploring. When I turned on a game for the first time, I never knew what to expect (uncertainty), but I quickly learned to trust the fact that I could fail or lose, and then simply try again. No one would yell at me or hit me or lock me away if I let Mario fall off a cliff. I could simply start again and learn to avoid that cliff. Video games gave me a chance to be in control when real life never did.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

Um yeah, you know it's hard, you schedule time to record, it's really hard to get in the mood when you're just not in the mood um which is an interesting methodological point which is something I can remember for the future is that this is not always just an instant go, but I don't think any sort of research is really, I mean, you have an off day in the field doing an ethnography it's going to be difficult. – **Lenoraven**, while recording a Let's Play of the game *The Three*

*Stooges* - Jan 19, 2017

### Introducing a Chapter in Two Parts

I need to write a chapter that talks about how I went about remembering my life. This, in and of itself is problematic thanks to a missing sense of temporal order in my life due to C-PTSD. I will spend more time on the specific memory challenges I face due to C-PTSD in Chapter 3, but I think it is important to start with the HOW rather than the WHY. In Chapter one I introduced the fact that this dissertation uses an autoethnographic methodological approach. I grappled with the idea of having the methodology chapter as the third chapter, and the C-PTSD/alienation chapter as the second chapter, but the order that you are now reading this in has won. To be honest, either order would have worked, but in the end I decided to talk about how I approached the challenging task of gathering the elements of the story before moving further ahead with telling the rest of the story. This is my story to tell and every choice I make is a part of the story. As noted in the introduction, it is also your story to read, so feel free to choose the order you see fit – this is simply the path I have chosen.

*The methodological choices made throughout this process have become interwoven with the gathering and interpretation of the data. A methodology is a set of methods and tools tied to a set of assumptions used to conduct research and I can formally say that I have embraced a mixed methodology consisting of methods drawn from autoethnography (which assumes an epistemological perspective as per Ellis (2004)) and digital text analysis (also assuming an epistemological standpoint around the gathering and analysis of knowledge). As this project developed however, I found myself fundamentally stuck on this chapter and explanation. What began as a “formal” research project with clearly outlined hypotheses and research questions, evolved into something that was increasingly difficult to grasp. I, as **Professor Sapach**, have been at odds with **Lenoraven** for over two years about the best way to present this chapter.*

As **Lenoraven**, I want to maintain the narrative, storytelling flow of the autoethnography that reflects my (sometimes chaotic) thought patterns and ways of remembering. This dissertation has taken me on a journey that I never anticipated. Reliving memories, telling stories, and discovering insights about myself has followed a long and twisted road with many forks along the way. The process of developing, researching, data collection, and writing this dissertation has taken on autoethnographic meaning of its own. This experience has fundamentally changed me and has played a role in mediating my C-PTSD.

In a strange way, the process of writing a dissertation is game-like<sup>23</sup> in many ways. I have a specific end goal: to obtain my PhD. I have a formal set of rules to follow within the set boundaries of the university and academia. I have some control over the rules as I choose the various parameters of the game; the type of dissertation to write, the methods, the questions, etc.

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<sup>23</sup> From a Game Studies perspective, I am not presenting a formal definition of a game here. I am choosing to make a playful analogy here, not setting out a specific definition of a game. I am taking general ideas about game structure from Salen & Zimmerman (2003) *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*.

There are many side quests to distract me along the way including teaching, publishing, short research assistant and teaching assistant jobs, and ‘real life’. I can make progress with the dissertation, only to hit an obstacle that requires me to either backtrack or figure out an alternative way forward. As much as I control the majority of the process, I am still limited by the “magic circle” of the boundaries. I have a vague idea about what lies ahead, and yet I face uncertainty around every corner. Not to mention, the game is largely “pay-to-win” in that I need to pay tuition to continue to move forward, though I am generally sticking to a skill-based approach in that I am not hiring editors or proof-readers or data-analysts to give me a leg-up. The last line is somewhat of a joke, but you get the point. The dissertation process has taught me a new level of control and new strategies for understanding myself and my role in the world.

*My original vision for this chapter involved clearly defining each chosen method, justifying it, and then presenting concrete, objective results based on my analyses. As my research into methodological approaches progressed, I came across the concept of a “repositioned GTM” or repositioned grounded theory method outlined by Bryant & Charmaz (2007). The explanation of the repositioned GTM presented me with a new lens through which to reinterpret what I initially imagined as a dichotomous relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. It presents a balance, or rather, a mutually beneficial relationship between realist and interpretivist conceptions of grounded theory<sup>24</sup> as the following quote explains:*

This GTM builds on the fluid, interactive, and emergent research process of its originators but seeks to recognize partial knowledge, multiple perspectives, diverse positions, uncertainties, and variation in both empirical experience and its theoretical

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<sup>24</sup> To avoid an overly complicated rehashing of the history of grounded theory, I am treating grounded theory in its most fundamental form – inductively developing theory from data as opposed to gathering data in order to deductively respond to formal hypotheses.



rendering. It is realist to the extent that the researcher strives to represent the studied phenomena as faithfully as possible, representing the ‘realities’ of those in the studied situation in all their diversity and complexity...it is interpretivist in acknowledging that to have a view at all means conceptualizing it. Data are always conceptualized in some way...a repositioned GTM bridges defined realities and interpretations of them...it brings the social scientist into analysis as *an* interpreter of the scene, not as the ultimate authority (51-52).

*This project as a whole has been centred around representing the uncertainties that are my autoethnographic data as faithfully as possible. I always acknowledged the fact that I was not definitively solving problems or presenting an unbiased “cure” for alienation or C-PTSD. I did, however, incorporate what I thought of as an objective set of tools into my data analysis with the goal of “legitimizing<sup>25</sup>” my research. The Digital Humanities centred methods of XML tagging, text-mining, and topic modelling were intended as means of obtaining an objective interpretation of my autoethnographic data. What I learned was, as the above quote states, that data is “always conceptualized in some way.” The way that I gathered, organized, and chose the tools for analyzing my data developed from my own expectations and lived experiences of my own memories.*

I came to realize that I needed to embrace the uncertainty and subjectivity in my methodology. The process of writing an autoethnography is a process of self-discovery with the goal of telling a useful story. I have decided that the best way to present the various methods that I used, is to tell you the story of my methodological journey as I experienced it.

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<sup>25</sup> This is in quotes to acknowledge that my views have changed – my research is creative and uses alternative methods, but is no less legitimate because of it.

*The story begins with a description of the autoethnographic method as I understood it before I began gathering my data. From there, I will talk about the challenges associated with analysis by talking about a conference where I presented my initial results. From that conference presentation came a peer-reviewed, published article that I will present in full. The paper describes my formal methodology in a single voice that is an amalgamation of **Professor Sapach** and **Lenoraven**.*

The paper also summarizes various parts of this dissertation in a pointed, concise way. I am choosing to leave these summary points in the paper despite, or perhaps because of, the minor points of repetition that may allow you to interpret any breaks, lapses, or absences that you may notice. The fact that the paper was written as a methods paper for an audience primarily comprised of Digital Humanists led me to employ some slightly different explanations and some alternative descriptions of my trauma.<sup>26</sup>

*Following the formal paper, I will conclude this chapter with a discussion about how the results presented in the paper, combined with the process of writing the paper using a single voice, unexpectedly enhanced my understanding of the resolution of alienation through Jaeggi's (2014) process of appropriation. The paper itself will present a clear, formal description of the methods, analyses, and results of this dissertation. The paper as an object in a larger narrative will serve as a demonstration of how the dissertation, as a process, worked to mediate the alienation-like symptoms of C-PTSD that I will describe in greater detail in the next chapter.*

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<sup>26</sup> The alternative descriptions of my trauma also stem from the fact that the article is open source and publicly available. In order to protect my mom and other family members, I avoided describing specific harms.

## Autoethnography

*Like any other new-to-me concept that I encounter, I began writing about autoethnography as though it was a concept I had to explain from scratch. Without blinking an eye, I can use words like “quantitative analysis”, and “ethnography” without feeling the need to explain how I learned the concept, its etymology, and its location in the history of a discipline. This comfort with certain words and concepts comes from a growing level of expertise, and a confidence in the expertise of others. When I first encountered autoethnography, I was fascinated by the prospect of formally examining my own life experiences in order to present an academically valid theory. Even more fascinating was the fact that autoethnography has been described by Ellis (2004) as a “fusion between social science and literature (669).” This single descriptive sentence convinced me of the applicability of the methodology to this project, as I am working to complete an interdisciplinary PhD in Sociology and Digital Humanities - a degree that represents a fusion between social sciences and a text-centric field.*

My sociological side is highly motivated by the development of theories that can be tested scientifically through the use of traditional qualitative and quantitative methods. My digital humanities side is fascinated by both the computer mediated exploration of narratives through distant reading, and the analysis of video games as mediums of interpersonal interactions and expressions. With my own life experience lying at the center of my dissertation, the autoethnographic approach has been the perfect method for an interdisciplinary examination of my own ‘life-as-text’.

*Ellis (2004) breaks down the description of autoethnography into three equally important parts. The first part, “auto” refers to the idea that the content, or the data, of the project is collected from the self. The researcher acts as the informant and the data is drawn from self-reflective*

*observations. The second part, “graphy” involves the methods of data collection, which typically involve journaling and memory work in various forms. The third part, “ethnos” refers to the interpretation of the content that was gathered throughout the research process. The interpretation depends on the form that the collected data takes (as with any data analysis method). Ellis emphasizes the importance of all three aspects of autoethnography to highlight the academic rigour that the methodological approach requires.*

Over the past few years, I have reviewed an increasing number of conference abstracts that claim to utilize an autoethnographic methodology. The **Professor Sapach** part of me is very adamant about emphasizing that an autoethnography requires well documented data gathering techniques and a concrete set of methods for analyzing the data. Personal stories and memory work are entirely valid ways of sharing experiences in an academic environment and I am always eager to support such work. My scholarly opinion however, is that to call something an autoethnography requires a specific formality that is well summarized in the way that Ellis (2004) breaks it down above.

*The reason I raise the issue of autoethnography as a specific type of methodology that examines the self, is because this dissertation evolved to include what can be described as memory work. In Living a Feminist Life, Sara Ahmed (2017) provides the following explanation that convinced me that I was engaged in memory work that borrowed significantly from feminist perspectives:*

Feminist work is often memory work. We work to remember what sometimes we wish would or could just recede. While thinking about what it means to live a feminist life, I have been remembering; trying to put the pieces together. I have been putting a sponge to the past. When I think of my method, I think of a sponge: a material that can absorb things. We hold it out and wait to see what gets mopped up. It is not that memory work is

necessarily about recalling what has been forgotten: rather, you allow a memory to become distinct, to acquire a certain crispness or even clarity; you can gather memories like things, so they become more than half glimpsed, so that we can see a fuller picture; so you can make sense of how different experiences connect (22).

*Putting a “sponge to the past” and seeing what gets mopped up is a remarkable analogy to how I felt while working through this dissertation. Even now, as I think about the hundreds of hours I have spent working with my past, I am engaging in the work of trying to provide crisp explanations of how I got to the point of a completed dissertation.*

I have a video game analogy to bring up here, though it requires a brief explanation. In 2004, Namco released a game called *Katamari Damacy*, which is about how the ‘King of All Cosmos’ got drunk and destroyed all of the stars in the universe. Everything was destroyed with the exception of Earth, so the king sends his 5cm tall son, the Prince, to Earth with a ball called a Katamari. The Katamari allows anything that is smaller than it to stick to it, which results in it becoming bigger, similar to how a snowball can be made bigger by rolling it through more snow. In the game, the Prince visits various parts of Earth, with Katamari balls of differing sizes, and rolls stuff up so that the King can create new stars from them. When I say ‘stuff’, I mean random stuff. Figure 1 provides a visual example:



Figure 1: Screenshot of a Katamari from Katamari Damacy;

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katamari\\_Damacy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katamari_Damacy) 28 Aug 2020.

*The image in Figure 1 shows a relatively large Katamari that has just rolled up a street light, as noted in the bottom left corner. For size comparison, a house is shown to the left of the ball that itself contains cows, powerlines, fences, and a range of other items. When playing the game, it is initially challenging to pick things up with the small Katamari. Often times you will roll into something that is slightly larger and will bounce off without attaching it. When Ahmed (2017) says that “you can gather memories like things, so they become more than half glimpsed, so that we can see a fuller picture; so you can make sense of how different experiences connect” (22), the image of a Katamari comes to mind. Gathering data for this dissertation has been like rolling a Katamari ball through all of the ‘stuff’ that makes up my life narrative. Smaller memories connect to slightly bigger memories, which then connect to larger, detailed memories. There was*

*not a sense of cohesion or flow as I gathered my data, it was more of an organized attempt to corral as many memory “things” as possible in order to make larger memories more visible.*

*My data gathering methods, as described in the article below, were organized and planned in advance. I worked to closely follow Ellis’ (2004) autoethnographic methodology by formally planning the study of myself, through specific data gathering techniques, using specific data analysis methods. The organized chaos of the Katamari is a suitable analogy, because, like the King, I too had specific tools (like Katamari balls), and specific methods (rolling up items in specific locations or with dedicated themes) for reconstructing my memories (stars). In fact, I ended up with a text corpus (combining video transcription text and journal entry text) of 138,252 words – a rather large Katamari!*

*To put into better context the reason for gathering the amount of data that I did, I want to point to two quotes from Giles & Williams (2007) who present a good argument in favour of using self-narrative research in leisure studies. They draw on Ellis and other autoethnographic researchers to clearly describe the process of actually writing an autoethnography. First they state that:*

Autoethnography, then, may be considered to be a blending of fact and fiction. It draws from multiple layers of consciousness (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and multiple identities within the self (Sparkes, 2003). Parts of the self are present during the writing process, while other parts are suppressed; and, as Richardson (2000) points out, writing is always partial and situated (190).

*As a result of the dissociation that I experience, which often suppresses almost all of what I would consider to be my ‘self’, I have used the large amount of data that I gathered to ground*

*myself and to open myself up to experiencing and reading my own 'multiple layers of consciousness.'* Additionally, Giles & Williams state that,

Within their writing, researchers must provide sufficient social context, move forward and backward in time, and inward and outward regarding the deeply personal and the social (Ellis, 1999). Authors must include sufficient details and use literary devices and techniques such as puns, metaphors, aphorisms, unusual phrasings, microcosms, while withholding interpretations in key places to draw the reader into the story (Richardson, 2000) (191).

*My dissociation leads to a tendency to over-interpret everything (including myself). The data gathered through the various techniques I describe in the article has allowed me to situate my life-as-text temporally, socially, and situationally.*

I want to talk about one more issue with autoethnography that I have struggled with. When I began planning my dissertation, I was adamant about contributing a scientifically sound, formal research study. As the idea of an autoethnography became central in my mind, I consistently worried about how to maintain my academic objectivity (something, as noted in the above discussion of grounded theory, that is not as concrete as I had originally thought). I knew that my trauma would leave me in an extremely sensitive, and 'subjective' position that might not be taken seriously. As I have advanced and gained skills in the dissertation 'game' I have learned to think far more flexibly about the issue. At the time however, it was a serious concern for me. I came to discover, quite beneficially, that I was not the first person who was concerned about the impact of trauma on autoethnography.



*Tamas (2009) grapples with the use of traumatic experiences as a basis for autoethnographic research in her article Writing and Righting Trauma: Troubling the Autoethnographic Voice. She argues that scholars are bound by norms that limit their ability to perform self-narratives that produce both knowledge and empathy. I have taken this article to heart and have acknowledged my own anticipated challenges with first separating, and then combining, my 'life-as-text' and my critical, academic, 'scientific' self. Tamas' argument is one of the primary reasons that I originally planned to incorporate what I initially considered to be an 'objective' digital text analysis into my methodology. She agrees that there is value in autoethnographic research stating that "as a feminist postmodern researcher, I am committed to such passionate, reflexive scholarship," (1) while asking how we might write ourselves differently in order to more effectively produce knowledge.*

My desire to "write myself" in a way that could effectively produce knowledge led to my decision to adopt various Digital Humanities methods to analyze my data. I want to move forward now and tell you the story of how I learned to embrace the fact that my dissertation was evolving from a relatively straightforward examination of mediating C-PTSD and alienation through participation in video game culture (which is 'obviously' just straightforward), into a commentary on the research process as much as the content. A sandwich of sorts seemed to form. The methodology that I originally planned did move forward and I did do the data collection and analysis (bottom slice of bread). The meat of the dissertation, regarding video games and alienation, remains the central argument and focus. The process of following the methodology and working through the dissertation process, actually contributed to my autoethnographic data and became a part of the overall story (top slice of bread).

Presenting my Initial Findings: Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Regina  
Saskatchewan, 2018

The Canadian Society for Digital Humanities (CSDH/SCHN) is an academic association that I have been a member of since 2015. It is an organization that has always felt like the perfect balance between relaxed sociability and academic rigor. When the call for papers was announced for the meeting to be held during Congress in 2018, I spend a lot of time deciding whether I was ready to present my incomplete findings to a professional, skilled, expert audience. I had myself convinced that whatever I presented, no matter how complete, it would be seen as amateur at best. The old C-PTSD feelings of shame and hopelessness rearing their ugly heads. On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the deadline for proposal submissions was extended to January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018<sup>27</sup> which gave me more time to see how far I could actually get with my data analysis.

Christmas came and left and the new year began. I remember being highly motivated to get things done. I had separated from my husband at the end of October (2017) and had moved back to Edmonton to teach and finish my dissertation. Things were challenging, but I was excited. It was a new year and a new beginning and I had a solid plan laid out to submit the CSDH proposal, as well as a proposal to the Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA) where I have presented a paper every year since 2012. And then...BAM, a fall on the ice stopped me in my tracks.

The fall happened on the evening of January 6<sup>th</sup>. I was rushing from the back door entrance to my basement apartment to the front yard to meet a pizza delivery person. As I went to round the corner, I hit a patch of ice and my legs flew out from under me and I landed with a shocked thud

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<sup>27</sup> The CFP with the extended deadline can be found here: <https://csdh-schn.org/csdh-schn-cfp-gathering-diversities/> last accessed Aug 29, 2020.

right on my ass. I did not think much of it, picked myself up, got my pizza, and went about my business. When I woke up in excruciating pain the next morning, I knew something was wrong. Clumsiness and minor hypochondriasis are (according to a psychologist in my past) commonly found in victims of child abuse, and I have learned not to run to a doctor every time something minor happens. This fall, for some reason, felt different. I was in pain, had a hard time focusing, and generally felt off. To make a long story short, it turns out I had ruptured a large cyst on my left ovary, rupturing my ovary itself at the same time. I required emergency surgery after spending a full day waiting in the waiting room of the emergency room on January 7<sup>th</sup>. The surgery was on January 8<sup>th</sup> and I was a guilty mess. I was supposed to start teaching a class immediately. I had the CSDH and CGSA abstracts due. I was beside myself with shame, and terrified of the consequences of my accident. I was sent home on January 9<sup>th</sup> (I think) with pain medication, a note from the surgeon about being unable to teach for a week, and almost no social connections in Edmonton. I had a friend who was able to take my dog to a kennel so I could recover, but otherwise, I was alone, in pain, and afraid.

The recovery took longer than a week. I had amazing colleagues help me with my course, and had my first taste of online teaching by recording two lectures from home. I also wrote the two conference proposals while I was trying to recover. From what I remember, I was granted an extension by both organizations. I was extremely worried when I finally submitted the CSDH abstract as I was convinced that I had not done enough to justify acceptance.

*In the end, both paper proposals were accepted. The game studies paper was on trauma and games, and I felt well prepared presenting it. The CSDH paper was the one that I was worried about. I fretted and fussed over every small detail of my presentation. I knew that I could not simply present the incomplete results I had prepared without a deeper discussion around why*

*they currently felt incomplete. My talk was less about actual results, and more about the process. I outlined what I had originally hoped to accomplish with my data analysis. I talked about the challenges I faced when attempting to complete XML tagging. I talked about the problem with stopwords, and ended up asking more questions than anything else. Even as I was setting up my slides in front of a room of experts, I was not quite sure of what I was talking about. I had my numbers, my words, and my topics. I had an outline. I had notes to myself on my script that told me to “keep it short” and “don’t ramble”. I made my presentation, answered some questions, and then sat down relieved. I did not think it was an excellent presentation, but I was able to talk about everything in my script, and stayed within my time limit.*

I remember finishing the session and then everyone went outside to have pizza in the centre plaza. It was a beautiful sunny day, the grass was green, and everyone was talking and laughing. To my surprise, people kept approaching me and telling me how well I did, and how interesting they thought my work was. I was somewhat baffled, but it was great to reconnect with many people that I hadn’t seen in a few years. I enjoyed the chatter, and tried to listen to everyone and learn as much as I could by bouncing from group to group. I remember becoming quite socially overwhelmed and I snuck away for a cigarette a few times. I remember having some important discussions with people. I also remember the strangest thing, someone important approached me and asked if I would be attending the annual general meeting (AGM). I had planned on it (it was occurring right after our pizza lunch) so I said that I was. That “someone important” then informed me that there had been a discussion and a vote, and that my paper had been chosen to win an award – the *CSDH/SCHN Ian Lancashire Award for Graduate Student Promise*. I was genuinely shocked.

*The moment I was told that I was receiving an award for my work, the meaning of my methods and results changed. A large portion of my paper was about challenges and conflicts I had faced when deciding how to analyze my data. I had expressed uncertainty around some conventional understandings, like the use of stopwords in context, and the usefulness of topic modelling. I was being rewarded not for presenting inconclusive findings, but for my analysis of the methods themselves and how they worked, and didn't work, with autoethnographic data. It was in this moment that I realized that my dissertation had grown to include an challenging analysis of various methods in relation to autoethnography. The methodology had become a part of the autoethnographic data. The process of doing the autoethnography had become an important part of the autoethnography.*

*What follows is the body of the article that has been published in the journal Digital Studies/Le champ numérique. I have cited the journal version of the article in the bibliography (Sapach, 2020). In order to differentiate the voice of the article as different from the rest of the dissertation, I have changed the font to "Calibri" as opposed to "Times New Roman". I have also chosen to acknowledge that the article contains edits, and minor errors, that are in the fully published version. I am not fixing them here in order to preserve the original article.*

## **Tagging My Tears and Fears: Text-Mining the Autoethnography**

### My Tears and Fears: Trauma, C-PTSD, and Alienation

Before I begin tackling the digital methods of XML tagging, text-mining, and topic modelling, I need to start with an introduction to the life that will be examined in this paper, mine. I have experienced a great deal of trauma in my life! Immediately, this statement is wrought with difficulties. How does one describe the experience of trauma? How is trauma defined? How is it quantified? Trauma can be physical, as occurs through an injury. I have personally experienced 7 concussions, 2 emergency surgeries, and countless cuts and bruises. Trauma can be social, as described by Alexander (2012) who developed a sociological model of trauma that emphasizes its collective nature and cultural transmission. Trauma can be a discourse that explores issues around collective memory, bearing witness, politics and power, and shattered narratives, as explored by Laub and Hamburger (2017).

Having formally researched trauma since 2014, I continue to struggle to define trauma in a way that can be neatly summarized in an introductory paragraph such as this. In reality, such a feat would be impossible. Trauma can be physical, emotional, sexual, social, political, cultural, shared or individual. It can appear in one or all of these forms depending on who is telling the story. Whomever I choose to cite, I acknowledge that I am doing an injustice to the field of trauma studies as a whole. I have therefore chosen to conduct an autoethnographic project that focuses on my own subjective experiences of trauma. My research explores my “life-as-text”, also referred to as “life narrative” by Smith and Watson (2010), in order to develop grounded theories connecting a relational theory of alienation, developed by Jaeggi (2014) and discussed below, to my personal struggles with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-

PTSD). My research is primarily exploratory though it is guided by an informal hypothesis that techniques for the mediation and resolution of alienation may be found in the ways that I have mediated and partially resolved my own C-PTSD.

In order to ethically protect the people in my life, I am choosing to refrain from specific descriptions of traumatic incidents in this paper. Instead, I will draw your attention to the *CDC – Kaiser Permanent Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study* conducted between 1995 and 1997. The study involved conducting a survey regarding childhood abuse and neglect, the results of which were then connected to health, risk behaviour, and disease in adulthood (Felitti, et al, 1998). Important for our purposes is the continued research that has been conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as academic researchers (Waite, 2019), utilizing adapted versions of the original ACE questionnaire. These studies reinforce the validity of the ACE questions in measuring the impact of adverse childhood experiences.

In a 2010 report, for example, Bynum et al administered an 11-question version of the ACE questionnaire to 26, 299 adults across five states. The 11 questions covered incidences of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse as well as the relationship status of parents, substance abuse by parents, exposure to mentally ill household members, and witnessing domestic violence, all before the respondent turned 18 years old. The study found that 40.6% of respondents received an ACE score of 0, 22.4% a score of 1, 13.1% a score of 2, 8.8% a score of 3, 6.5% a score of 4, and 8.7% a score of 5 or more. The higher the ACE score, the more exposure the individual had to a diverse range of adverse childhood experiences, which correlates to higher incidences of health, risk behaviour, and disease in adulthood. After taking a self-report, 10

question version of the ACE questionnaire which can be found on the news site ACESTooHigh (Stevens, n.d.), my ACE score is 8. When considering the severity of my own score, please note that my primary reason for mentioning it here is to concretize the intensity and diversity of trauma that I faced growing up. It is the duration and intensity of this trauma that led to my diagnosis of C-PTSD.

As the name suggests Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has left me suffering with long-term symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as flashbacks, nightmares, a heightened startle reflex, and memory difficulties related to the traumatic events. The addition of the word “complex” describes the often difficult to articulate core psychological changes that occurred as a result of long-term exposure to trauma. The following description of people who suffer from C-PTSD is the one that hits closest to home for me:

Severe and long-standing trauma introduces a profound destabilization in the day-to-day existence of many victims...They have symptoms that alter their perceptions of their environment, disrupt their cognitive functioning, *and interfere with a sense of continuity in their lives* [emphasis added] ...They experience self-hate and self loathing and feel little kinship with other human beings. They long for a sense of human connection but are profoundly alone, regarding other people with great mistrust and suspicion. They want to feel understood but cannot even begin to find the words to communicate with others about their most formative experiences. (Chu 2011, 18)

Destabilization is the most difficult thing to deal with in my life. I have spent my entire life attempting to find a stable footing, a foundation upon which I could build a “normal” life. I have



lived, and continue to live, with constant feelings of unpredictability, chaos, and lack of control. Even now, as a PhD candidate at the age of 39, I continue to search for stability. Ultimately, I understand that I may never find the foundation that I am lacking, and I am learning to embrace my destabilization as a part of who I am. I have also learned to identify and accept my fairly consistent sense of dissociation which can be best described as a feeling of being on the outside looking in.

While the destabilization leaves me feeling out of control, dissociation leaves me feeling distant, separated, and alienated. Chu (2011) describes pathological dissociation as a discontinuous sense of identity resulting from disconnected state changes. Everyone experiences a wide range of state changes daily as they transition between various social roles (that of worker, parent, friend, etc.) While people usually experience these state changes as fluid, unconscious transitions between various parts of a stable identity, dissociation causes me to experience these state changes as a disruptive and uncomfortable process requiring a lot of conscious effort. I am left feeling alienated, somehow separated from myself as I constantly work to adapt to my social and physical environments.

Due to the fact that I often describe my own symptoms as alienating, I am exploring the connection between my own experiences with trauma and C-PTSD, and social experiences of trauma and alienation. While there are a multitude of definitions and theories about alienation throughout the literature, I am focused on the definition provided by Jaeggi (2014) who, after careful consideration of the history of alienation theory, concludes that alienation can ultimately be defined as a “relation of relationlessness.” (893) Jaeggi clarifies this definition as follows:

If, as I have claimed, alienation is a relation of relationlessness rather than a mere absence of a relation, then giving an account of this relation will be especially complicated: as clear as it is, on the one hand, that we are somehow antecedently connected to ourselves, it is, for precisely this reason, just as unclear how it is possible for this connection to break down...The thesis, then, is that a relation to oneself is a relation that can be disturbed in various ways. And in this relation, too, we find...we are alienated from something that is simultaneously our own and alien, we are involved in relations in which we alienate ourselves, we are in a certain sense at once perpetrator and victim. (Jaeggi 2014, 1352)

Jaeggi's conception of alienation is that it is about deficient relations, as opposed to non-existent ones. Alienation from the self, from others, and from the environment, is not a lack of a relation to these things, but an explicit relation that is characterized by an inability to relate. The resolution of alienation, for Jaeggi, involves appropriation: regaining and reworking the relations between the self and the self, the self and the social world, and the self and the material world. To me, C-PTSD also represents a relation of relationlessness, to my inner child, to my memories, and to my daily experiences, through dissociation and destabilization.

### Autoethnography

Before moving into the discussion of tagging and text-mining my above outlined tears and fears, as promised in the title of this paper, I want to briefly outline why I felt compelled to add digital text analysis methods to a methodology that is, at its core, subjective and personal. My own experiences with trauma, which have resulted in consistent feelings of destabilization and dissociation, have severely disturbed the relations that I have with myself in many ways.

Conducting my autoethnographic research has, as a result, been simultaneously highly therapeutic, in that it has allowed me to take control over the fear of my memories, and extremely difficult, in that I often struggle to solidify specific memories into articulable narratives. As a research methodology, autoethnography, perhaps more than any other, requires an explicit recognition of the deep subjectivity involved. Giles and Williams (2007) note that the method is a blending of fact and fiction that draws from multiple layers of consciousness and is always partial and situated. Denzin (2014) discusses the multiple layers of narratives that must be acknowledged in autoethnography:

Stories within stories told to groups remind us that every life story is a multiplicity of stories that could be told. There is no single life story or self-autobiography that grasps or covers all that a life is for a person. There are only multiple stories that can be told. Each storyteller can only tell the stories his or her biography allows to be told. (Denzin 2014, 55)

Attempting to reconstruct and tell my own biography through the lens of C-PTSD introduces an additional layer to the already layered stories of my life. Dissociation disrupts my memory of events, people, places, and temporalities. The goal of my research is to draw a connection between my C-PTSD and the relation of relationlessness that is alienation, but it is the inherently alienating nature of my trauma that stands in my way. When I recall an event and attempt to write it down, I consistently have to fight against my immediate emotional reactions of fear and shame, as well as my memory of events as clouded by dissociation. I have multiple stories to tell, but have a difficult time situating myself within them.

Fortunately, research has been done, and theories developed, that led me to understand that my trauma may not be “standing in my way” at all. Eyerman (2013) argues that a close reading of the trauma behind social and political theory can reveal a hidden world of meaning through an acknowledgment of “sudden breaks, lapses and absences.” (Eyerman 2013, 50) This has led me to realize that in order to honestly and accurately develop social theory through my own subjective lens, I need to acknowledge my own breaks, lapses, and absences which have become a significant part of my “life-as-text” due to dissociation and destabilization. Hartman (1995) also seeks unpredictability and ruptures in literature as noted in the following particularly poetic and relevant quote:

But I share with trauma studies a concern for the absences of intermittences in speech (or of conscious knowledge in speech); for the obliquity or residual muteness of “flowers of speech” and other euphemic modes; for the uncanny role of accidents; for the “ghosting” of the subject; for the connection of voice and identity; for interpretation as a feast not a fast; and for literature as a testimonial act that transmits knowledge in a form that is not scientific and does not coincide with either a totally realistic (as if that was possible) or analytic form of representation. (Hartman 1995, 552)

Trauma creates ruptures in lived experience, in meaning development, and in identity formation. My biography contains more intermittences, accidents, breaks, lapses, absences, and self-ghosting than it does coherent narrative. Acknowledging this led me to realize that I would be doing an injustice to my autoethnographic research if I did not somehow incorporate the parts of my biography that seemed inaccessible to me. This is where the XML tagging, text mining, and topic modelling came into play.

In order to find that which seemed inaccessible in my biography, I needed to come up with a way to both expose, and then analyze, that which remained lost in my dissociation and destabilization. I came up with a two-step process. Step two involved the macroanalysis techniques just mentioned. As Jockers (2013) states: "...the macroanalytical approach reveals details about texts that are, practically speaking, unavailable to close readers of the texts." (Jockers 2013, 26) I understood that due to my C-PTSD and traumatic relationship with my life narrative, I would likely dissociate from acknowledging certain themes and patterns during qualitative coding (microanalysis). I wanted to see if text mining and topic modelling would reveal themes and patterns, breaks, lapses, and absences, about my biography that I would consciously or unconsciously avoid when approaching my "life-as-text". Before I could conduct an analysis, I needed something to analyze. Step one therefore involved expanding my data gathering beyond the limits of writing directly from memory. I will explain step one in more detail below before describing the results of step two.

### Step One: Constructing My Life Narrative/Life-As-Text

This is a good place to note that I completed an application for ethics approval from the University of Alberta research ethics office and was granted approval on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017<sup>28</sup>. Although it may seem harmful to refer to myself as a participant or object of study, I felt compelled to write out an ethics application as a form of contract between myself as a "researcher" and myself as a "participant" in order to reinforce the fact that I took all of the necessary steps to ensure my psychological safety. These steps include(d): continuing to attend

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<sup>28</sup> See Appendix A for Notification of Ethics Approval

therapy, continuing to take my medication, and agreeing to remain in control of what I disclosed. The last step was the most important as I had/have to maintain a balance between what is useful to include/analyze, and what is doing more harm than good. Additionally, I am highly aware of the need to protect the people in my life who may be harmed by what I publish: the ethics contract covered this as well.

As I began to gather data, I employed three different techniques in order to allow myself to piece together my life narrative. As Smith and Watson (2010) note:

Both memoir and autobiography are encompassed in the term *life writing*. We understand *life narrative*, by contrast, as a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital. (Smith and Watson 2010, 4)

First, I wrote digital journal entries (private blogs) that reflected on: life events that occurred during my research, for example returning to my home town for my grandmother's funeral; nightmares and night terrors that I had; analyses of activities I engaged in (video game playing was a large part of it as you will see below) and academic literature I read; and random childhood memories. The blogs resulted in an informally organized narrative that allowed me to examine the development of my thoughts and theories as the project evolved. I did not write the entries at predictable intervals, but instead wrote whenever inspiration or need struck. I wrote a total of 35 official journal entries which amounted to a total of 38,214 words.

The second technique that I used was intended as more of a "traditional" ethnographic method. I carried a notebook with me, basically everywhere that I went, which allowed me to

take field notes. I was able to record observations of events, thoughts, symbols, places, and social interactions as they occurred. I actively noted important details such as time, date, location, and my emotional state of mind in an attempt to discover my own breaks, lapses, and absences in daily life. While the journal writing allowed me to interpret and elaborate on various thoughts and experiences, the field notes provided me with context during episodes of dissociation or ongoing traumatic triggers. One common symptom of C-PTSD is memory problems due to dissociation. The field notes reminded me of where I was, who I was around, and what I was doing in order to compliment the blogs, and to guide my autoethnographic writing.

Context is highly important for an autoethnographic project, as noted by Giles and Williams (2007) who argue that authors must “provide sufficient social context, move forward and backward in time, and inward and outward regarding the deeply personal and the social.” (191) I therefore used my field notes to clarify and add content to my journal entries. For example, my grandmother died during my data gathering and I attended her funeral, which also involved visiting my father’s grave for the first time since his passing in 2004. I was flooded with intense and overwhelming emotions and experiences from my childhood. My family left me alone as I stood in the rain, crying, and talking to my father’s headstone. I talked to him about many things, including how much I missed playing games with him. Later that afternoon, I took some brief field notes about gaming with my father and how much of an impact the activity had on my life. Those notes were then incorporated into a set of journal entries that centered around how playing video games with my father, uncles, and cousins, made me “feel human” and “safe” when I was younger. The notes provided me with access to deeply personal emotions

and reactions that might not have made it into my “life-as-text” otherwise. I chose not to include the field notes in an analyzable corpus of text as all important contextual and textual information was reproduced in my blogs. Instead, I have used the notes during the qualitative analysis of my blogs, and the overall analysis of my data, to aid with the narrative flow of my autoethnography as a whole.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I utilized web cameras and game-play recording software to create a series of videos documenting my reactions during video game play. I refer to this method of data gathering as the “let’s play” which is a term that describes a player recording their own reactions and commentary while playing a video game (Sapach 2018). Let’s plays are extremely popular online and have wide audiences on both YouTube and Twitch. I have personally invested hundreds of hours into watching let’s plays by some popular YouTube stars like Jacksepticeye (Wikipedia 2018) and Markiplier (Wikipedia 2018). I am therefore very familiar with the technique, descriptions of hardware setups, and ability for the process to capture unique, unexpected, and often entertaining reactions to video game play. Unlike the traditional let’s play, I chose not to publish my videos online due to the sensitive and deeply personal nature of much of the content.

At this point, I should explain why I only recorded myself playing video games. My earliest childhood memory involves playing a video game. The vast majority of my positive social, and individual, experiences during the first 16 or so years of my life involved playing video games. My autoethnographic project is part of my larger dissertation that also argues that video games, and video game culture, have unique characteristics that helped me to mediate and partially resolve my C-PTSD. I feel comfortable playing video games. I feel more open to



experiencing emotion when playing video games. I also find that my memory is highly connected to visual and spatial cues. I chose to record myself playing video games from throughout my childhood with the hope that I would be able to trigger memories through not only the visual and spatial feedback from the game, but also through hearing the music and sound effects, and physically holding game controllers and performing actions as I did during my childhood. Interestingly, there is research that argues for the benefits of video game play in relation to PTSD, specifically around the game “Tetris.” (Holmes et al, 2009; McGonigal, 2015) I will not get into it here<sup>29</sup>, but I highly recommend it for anyone interested in how games can help prevent harmful flashbacks.

Returning to Jaeggi (2014), the resolution of alienation comes through a process of successful appropriation. In order to develop/repair relations of relationlessness with the self, appropriation needs to be an active and involving process of integration and transformation of meaning and experiences. Recording myself playing video games allowed me to record the active process of exposing myself to triggering memories while utilizing the benefits of the games for both memory work, and appropriation work. My goal was to observe myself during moments of trauma recollection and trauma mediation through game play. This self-observation through a medium different from written text allowed for a more detailed creation of my life narrative.

In total, I recorded 39 videos that are included in my dataset. I actually recorded many more videos, however they either focused entirely on my hardware setup and acted as test videos, or

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<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 4 for a detailed explanation.

I chose to exclude them due to their content as per my ethics agreement with myself. I only ended up excluding one video due to traumatic content, but I did make note of the fact that I was silent and nearly catatonic for over 75% of the video. I later blogged about the experience in order to preserve the trigger that led to the extreme dissociation. There are a total of 24 hours and 34 minutes of video that I eventually transcribed manually, resulting in a 100,038-word corpus of analyzable video data.

There is a speculative question that lies at the heart of this project, namely, how can collective play and participation in video game culture help us cope with, understand, and in some ways overcome, trauma and alienation? When gathering data, I actively kept this question in the back of my mind. A large part of my dataset, therefore, is comprised of descriptive personal narratives exploring how video games and video game culture impacted my experiences with trauma and coping with my C-PTSD. I intentionally triggered memories and emotional reactions related to game play experiences, game culture related symbols, and social interactions around video game culture. An unexpected result of recording the let's plays was the amount of current, real life trauma that I described. Many of the videos blended childhood memories with things I was experiencing and feeling as the project progressed. This has resulted in an extremely personal corpus of data that not only explores my childhood trauma, but also provides important insights into how video games, and my academic study of them, currently works to mediate my C-PTSD symptoms.

### Step Two: Data Analysis Techniques

One aspect of my data analysis involved a qualitative open and axial coding of all blogs, field notes, and let's play video transcriptions. I conducted this coding before running any digital text

analysis in order to determine what themes and patterns I could derive from the data. As an exploratory study based in grounded theory, this coding was highly personal and relatively informal. A detailed analysis of my findings is not appropriate for this paper, however I will say that the process was an emotional and often triggering one. For example, each time I read the name of a particular person who caused me a lot of harm, I noticed myself skimming through the section as quickly as possible. My reaction to reading my own recollection of my trauma was often dissociation in the form of avoidance. This difficulty, which I did mediate through controlling the amount of time I would allow myself to read each session (no more than 30 minutes) reinforced my anticipated need for an alternative method of analysis.

I should note here that my video transcriptions are somewhat unorthodox. I chose to manually transcribe each video as opposed to using a speech-to-text program as I wanted to do a detailed content analysis. Having said that, I also decided against following formal multimedia/video content analysis techniques such as those found in Ohm, 2016 and Krippendorff, 2019. My reason for this choice primarily involves the highly intimate nature of the process. As an exploratory study, I did not want to overwhelm the process with formalized annotation techniques. I ended up watching each video 3 times. The first time, I took brief notes about the general content and themes and my overall demeanor. The second time I meticulously typed out each word I spoke, including words like “um” which ended up being my most frequently used word. During this second viewing, I also made notes related to mumbling and stuttering by using three asterisks followed by the description followed by three more asterisks, for example: “um um I am talking \*\*\*mumble\*\*\* I th think \*\*\*stutter\*\*\*.” I wanted to have a clear way of making note of my breaks and verbal intermittences while being able to

quickly identify them during qualitative coding. The third viewing involved me taking note of emotional reactions, long pauses in speech, and obvious signs of dissociation. For the pauses, I made side notes about how long I sat in silence for. For the emotions and dissociation, I coded them as I perceived them which is another reason that I did not follow any formal guidelines. My C-PTSD alters how I express emotions in various situations. A single tear can represent anger while a smile can represent shame. As an intimately subjective process, I felt that using my own transcription techniques would provide me with the best information to accurately transcribe my life narrative into my “life-as-text” for digital analysis.

### XML Tagging

As this is a paper about an exploratory project aimed at developing grounded theory, it is important to address the things that both worked, and did not work, in allowing me to find the patterns and themes that qualitative coding missed. XML tagging is one of the things that did not work for me...as it was intended to work. Admittedly a novice in this area, my original plan did not include XML tagging as an option. During a discussion with one of my dissertation supervisors, we began contemplating the best ways to organize my life narrative into a cohesive, easy to navigate, format. He suggested that I incorporate structured, hierarchical metadata into my corpus through the use of XML. Having worked with HTML previously, I did not anticipate a problem with the learning process.

I installed *Oxygen XML Editor 19.1*, and began researching the best way to tag my transcripts and blogs. I read through the book *XML Pocket Reference 3<sup>rd</sup> ed* (St Laurent and Fitzgerald, 2005) and discovered that *RELAX NG* seemed to be the appropriate schema to utilize due to its simplicity and flexibility. I began by following a simple hierarchy, including the use of a <head>

element which contained the date of the entry as well as the time of recording and video game information for video transcriptions (see Figure 2). I then grouped paragraphs thematically. For video recordings, I used the category “setup” when I was talking about recording issues, “description” when I was talking about the video game being played, “memory” when I was talking about memories, “methodology” when I was breaking the fourth wall and talking about the process of recording as a research method, and “interpretation” when I brought up academic theory or insights about my experience replaying the game. Figure 2 displays the general hierarchy and the header tag.

```
1 <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
2
3 <?xml-model href="schema.rng" type="application/xml" schematypens="http://relaxng.org/ns/structure/1.0"?>
4 <transcription game="the adventure of link">
5
6 <head>
7
8 <date when="2017-02-15">
9 <year>2017</year>
10 <month>02</month>
11 <day>15</day>
12 </date>
13
14 <time>
15 <hour>12</hour>
16 <minute>04</minute>
17 </time>
18
19 <biblgame>
20 <game name="the adventure of link">Zelda 2: The Adventure of Link</game>
21 <developer>Nintendo Co. Ltd.</developer>
22 <publisher>Nintendo Co. Ltd.</publisher>
23 <releasedate>1987-01-14</releasedate>
24 <platform>NES</platform>
25 </biblgame>
26
27 </head>
28
29 <body>
30
31 <p category="setup">
32 Ok so I have commentary on, it seems to pick up the same in game sound as before. This is <game name="the ad
33 </p>
34
```

Figure 2: Example of XML tagging for a video game recording transcript using a basic RELAX NG schema with personalized tags.

As I worked through each transcript and blog, I began adding tags to people, pets, games, and places. I also began tagging actions like sighing, reactions like laughing, pauses, stutters, and emotions. I attempted to categorize each emotion as either positive or negative in anticipation of conducting a sentiment analysis. I began to realize, the more I drifted away from a formal schema and into categorizing each word as I interpreted it, that I was second guessing my tags. Many of my “emotion” tags, for example, `<emotion type=”negative”>dissociation</emotion>`, were actually descriptions of C-PTSD symptoms. My tagging began to emulate my qualitative open coding in that I found myself searching for themes and patterns where I should have been focused on providing simple metadata.

After spending countless hours tagging, and re-tagging documents, I made the decision to stop after only completing work on 29 out of 73 files. I was getting lost in attempting to categorize my life narrative. The process itself was very insightful as it allowed me to explicitly acknowledge my breaks, lapses, and absences through the tagging of pauses and stutters. It allowed me to visualize the connections between my pauses, stutters, games, people, and emotional (symptomatic) states. XML tagging brought me face-to-face with things that I might otherwise ignore or shut-out due to my C-PTSD. Ultimately, the process became more harmful than beneficial in that I was “forcing” myself to attempt to categorize my symptoms as emotional responses. In my lived experience, the primary emotion I can genuinely identify is fear. I do feel things like love, happiness, sadness, and anger, but they are more often than not accompanied by some sense of fear, or shame. My trauma created this confusion of emotions,

and I have learned to live with and navigate them. When conducting XML tagging, I was asking myself to pick an emotion, and concretize it as either positive or negative. I eventually acknowledged that I was incapable of doing it, so I stopped.

Before moving on, I would be doing a disservice to this article if I did not mention the following research. My focus on attempting to categorize my emotions using XML as a precursor to potential sentiment analysis stemmed from work that has been done on utilizing text-analysis and sentiment analysis to identify PTSD related information for the purposes of identifying potential PTSD sufferers. Kagan, Rossini, and Sapounas (2013) gathered PTSD data from two distinct corpora: "(1) clinical documentation describing all aspects of the psycho-physiological disorder and (2) forum discussions authored by individuals suffering from the disorder or their friends and family." (Kagan, Rossini, and Sapounas 2013, 24) They then had experts score the documents providing a human annotation training set on which the software was trained, after which they determined:

The results of processing validation data sets (distinct from the training set mentioned above) through the software demonstrated the high accuracy of the automated analysis results are closer to those of the psychologists. The agreement between the automated analysis results and those of human experts ranged between high 70 and high 80% - a very good result for any text analytics study, and an excellent one for a project investigating something as complicated as psychological signals. (Kagan, Rossini, and Sapounas 2013, 81)

They then moved to user testing with a small set of users and further demonstrated that text analysis of structured questionnaires through automated algorithms could provide a fairly accurate indicator of the presence of PTSD.

I was inspired by the research, and had hoped to find indicators of C-PTSD through an analysis of my own “life-as-text.” Not in a formally scientific way as the above study did: my project is not a formal scientific study. What I had hoped was that there would be patterns to my emotions that might provide more insight into my own symptoms. As I noted however, as I began confounding my symptoms with emotions, I realized that the “complex” part of C-PTSD is thus named for a reason. I still find the above study fascinating, and will pursue extension of the results to C-PTSD in the future.

### Python/NLTK/R

I originally began my descriptive analysis using the *Python* NLTK library but I gradually transitioned over to *R* largely due to the fact that I was required to learn and work with *R* for an unrelated project. I will first describe the interesting issue around the use of stopwords I encountered while analyzing word frequencies using *Python* followed by a discussion about dictionary/sentiment analysis conducted using *R*.

My initial descriptive analysis using *Python* provided one significant question that gave me a lot to think about. How do I deal with the issue of stopwords in my “life-as-text?” This question stemmed from the above discussed XML tagging and qualitative coding. I realized that as an exploratory autoethnography, my goal was to understand my corpus in relation to how I experienced my life, my trauma, and my alienation. With the understanding that standard



practice is to exclude stopwords from natural language processing (Bird, Klein, and Loper, 2009), I cleaned my corpus accordingly. Upon running my word frequency analysis, I realized that the word “I” was excluded as it is one of the stopwords in the NLTK library. As I was analyzing a first-person life narrative, I was dissatisfied with the exclusion of such an important word, so I reran the analysis on a version of the corpus with the majority of the stopwords reincorporated. I made the choice to exclude the words “the” and “and” as I was not particularly interested in exploring their frequency and had found no significant patterns of their usage in my qualitative analysis. Again, as an exploratory study, I was fundamentally playing with my data to see what would happen. Figure 3 shows the frequency distribution of the reintroduced stopwords only as I was interested in understanding how often “I”, and other singular first-person pronouns, actually appeared.

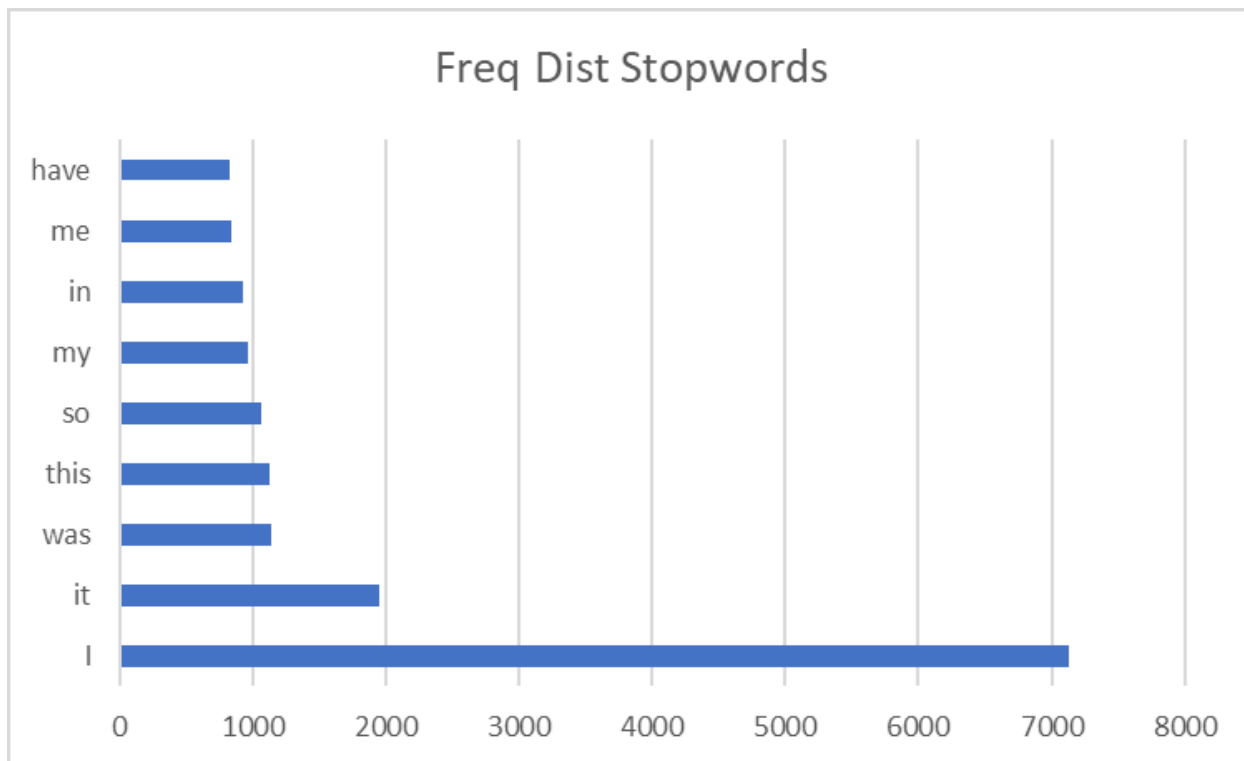


Figure 3: Full corpus stopwords frequency distribution. This figure excludes the words “the” and “and” with the goal of focusing on singular first-person pronouns.

The fact that the word “I” appears 7,129 out of 128,252 times is not overly surprising. And yet, for an autoethnography, I actually expected the word “I” to occur more than 5% of the time, as I not only spoke in the first person during my videos, but wrote in the first person in my journal entries. In order to compare my results to another autoethnography out of curiosity, I used *Voyant Tools* ([voyant-tools.org](http://voyant-tools.org)) to quickly analyze the appearance of the word “I” in the autoethnographic PhD dissertation of a colleague (Vossen, 2018). The document contained 111,216 words, 1499 (1.35%) of which were “I”. While a more formal analysis containing a significant number of samples would provide a stronger comparison, it would seem that at 5.56% of my word count, the word “I” does say something important that needs to be investigated further. I hypothesize that it has to do with the emotional intensity of many of my blog and video entries. I refer to my needs, my shame, and my trauma frequently. Recording the videos provided me with an outlet to say what was on my mind in what I perceived to be a safe environment engaged in the safe activity of video game play.

Figure 4 on the other hand shows a frequency distribution with all of the standard NLTK library stopwords removed.

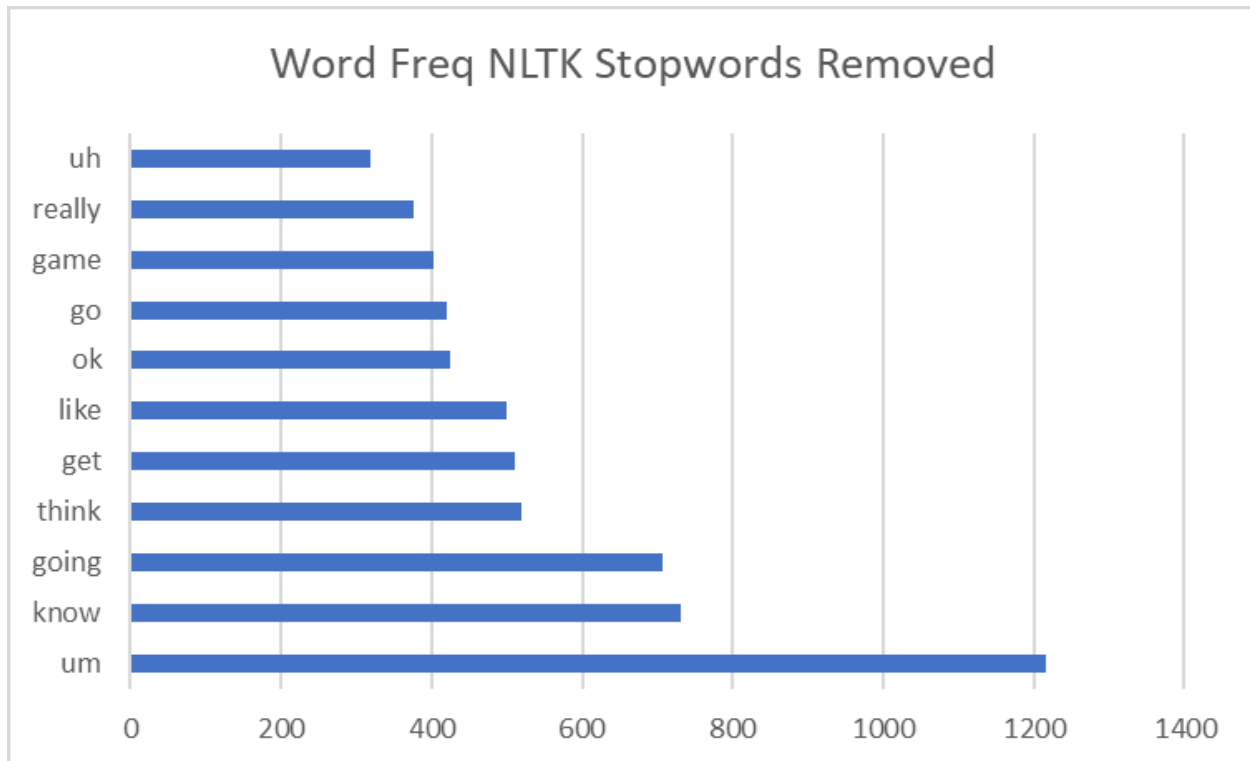


Figure 4: Corpus frequency distribution with NLTK standard stopwords removed.

How much more or less do these words tell me about my “life-as-text” with the singular first-person pronouns removed? Out of context, the most frequent words make no obviously decipherable sense. With the exception of the word “game”, none of the other words necessarily speak to the focus of my dissertation. There are no particularly traumatic, emotional, or alienation-related words and the most frequent word isn’t really much of a word at all. That being said, I have stated above that a driving force behind my use of computer mediated text analysis was to seek out and acknowledge the breaks, lapses, and absences in my “life-as-text.” Put into context, my XML tagging and qualitative coding indicated that the word “um” most often occurred before a significant pause, right around the time that I seem to begin experiencing some sort of emotion or connection to my trauma. These significant pauses are usually accompanied by a switch to an intense focus on whichever game I happen to be playing.

XML tagging also seemed to suggest that I often switch to talking about in-game events after my “um’s” and long pauses, indicating that I am using the game to re-focus and remove myself from the traumatic feelings associated with recollection. I am fascinated by the discovery of a pattern of behaviour that I was not consciously aware of prior to this research. My use of the word “um” as an indicator that I am becoming emotionally uncomfortable or unsafe is a result worthy of deeper analysis in my autoethnography.

Moving away from word frequencies, I was curious about the appearance of categories of words as found in the *Harvard IV-4* and associated dictionaries (2020). Using *R*, I once again cleaned my corpus of data and divided it into two sections: blogs and games (representing my journal entries and video recording transcriptions respectively). I then wrote basic code that would take one of the dictionaries which I had downloaded into a simple .txt format and run what basically represented a sentiment analysis, comparing the dictionary to my corpus and providing me with a mean score indicated the frequency with which words in the category appeared in each section of my corpus. The following code, for example, analyzes the pain category in comparison to my corpus:

```
#pain wordslist

# -> 254 words indicating suffering, lack of confidence, or commitment.

lexicon.pain <- scan('pain.txt', what='character', comment.char = ';')

pain <- lapply(bag, function(x) {sum(!is.na(match(x, lexicon.pain))}))

painscore <- unlist(pain)
```

```
mean(painscore)
```

I ran this process using 17 of the dictionaries that I felt were most relevant to my research.

Again, as an exploratory project, I did this to see if I could find anything that stood out. I created boxplot visualizations in order to better understand the differences between my blogs and video transcripts for each of the dictionaries and three stood out to me. The first and second were the pain and pleasure categories. Figure 5 shows the side-by-side boxplots demonstrating the frequency with which I used words related to pain in my blogs and video transcripts and Figure 6 does the same with the pleasure category.

### Pain Score by Entry Type

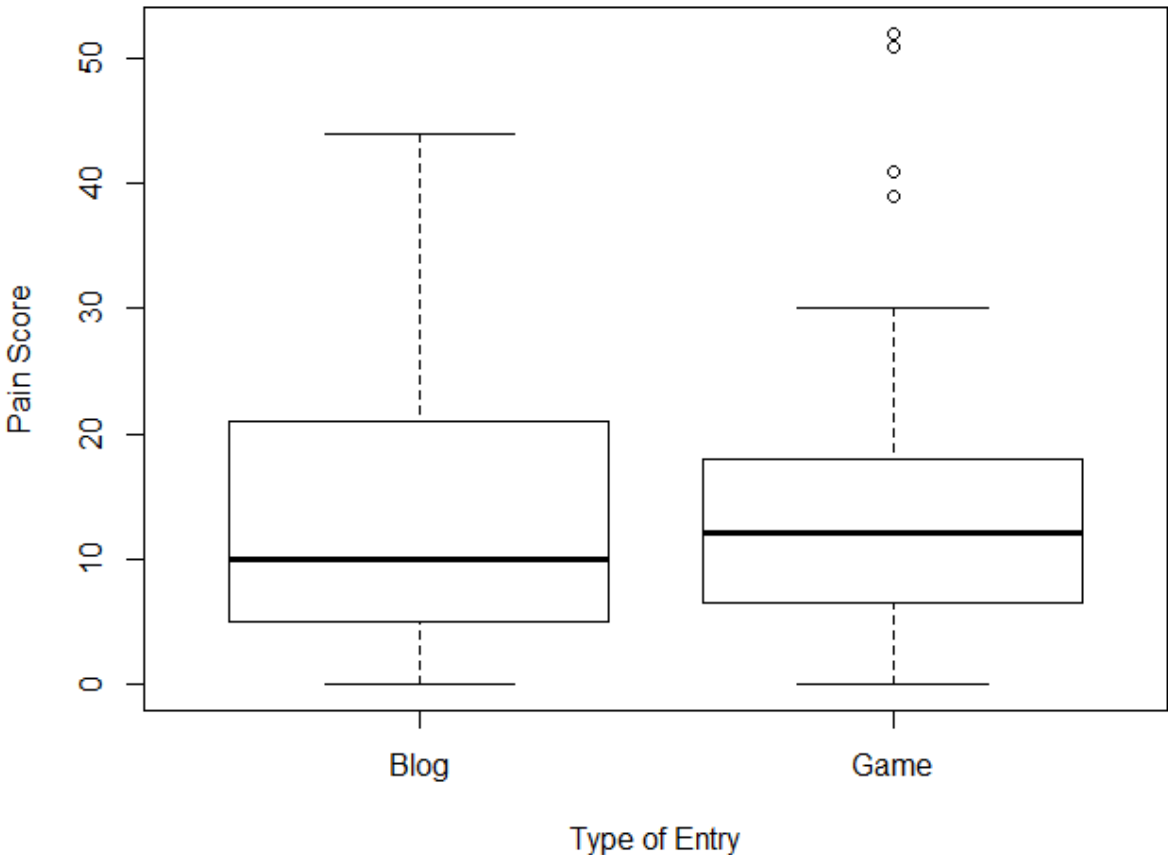


Figure 5: Pain category distribution comparison between blogs and video game play transcriptions.

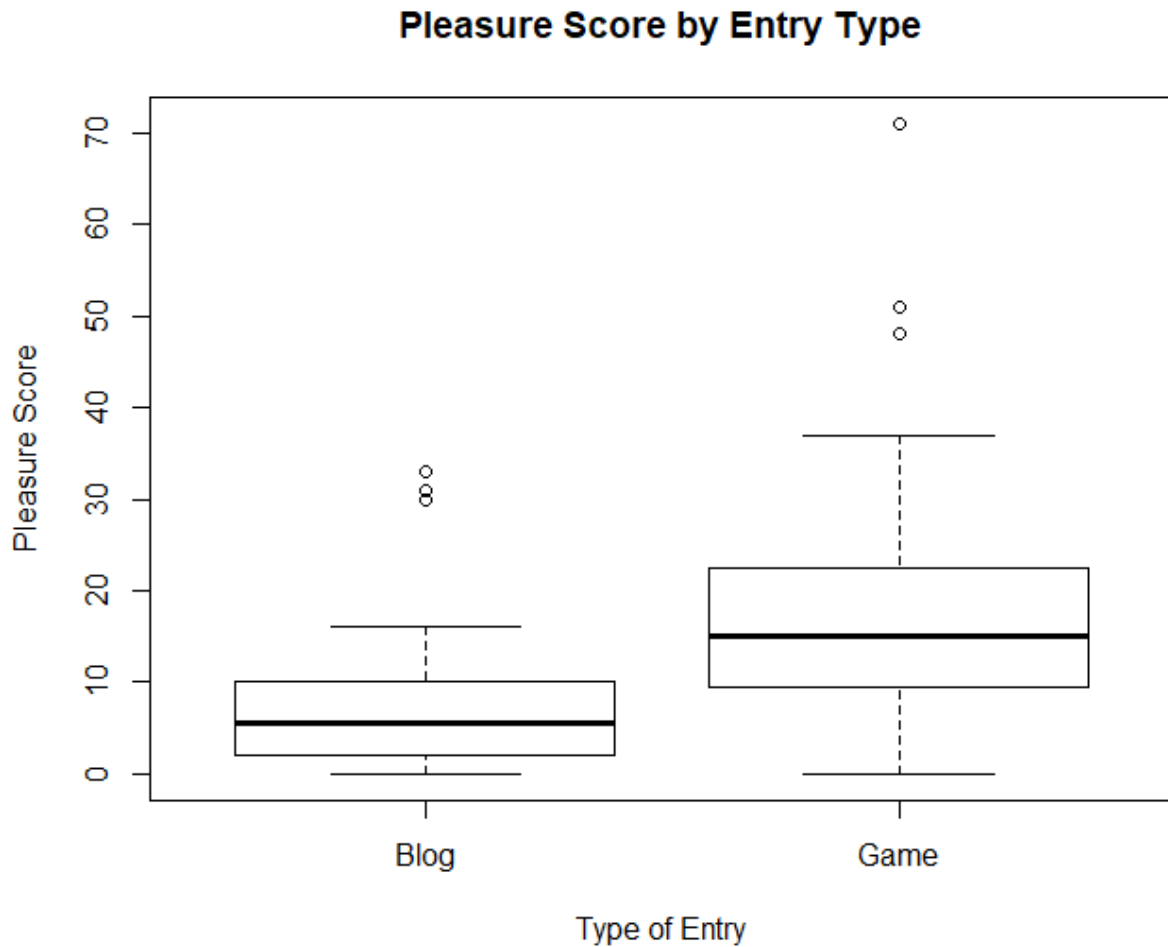


Figure 6: Pleasure category distribution comparison between blogs and video game play transcriptions.

On the surface, it makes sense that my game playing was more highly associated with the pleasure category while, with the exception of a few outliers, the blogs were more highly associated with pain. In fact, out of all 17 dictionaries, pain is the only category that had a mean score so close between the blogs and the video recordings.

The third category that stood out was the one related to negativity shown in Figure 7.

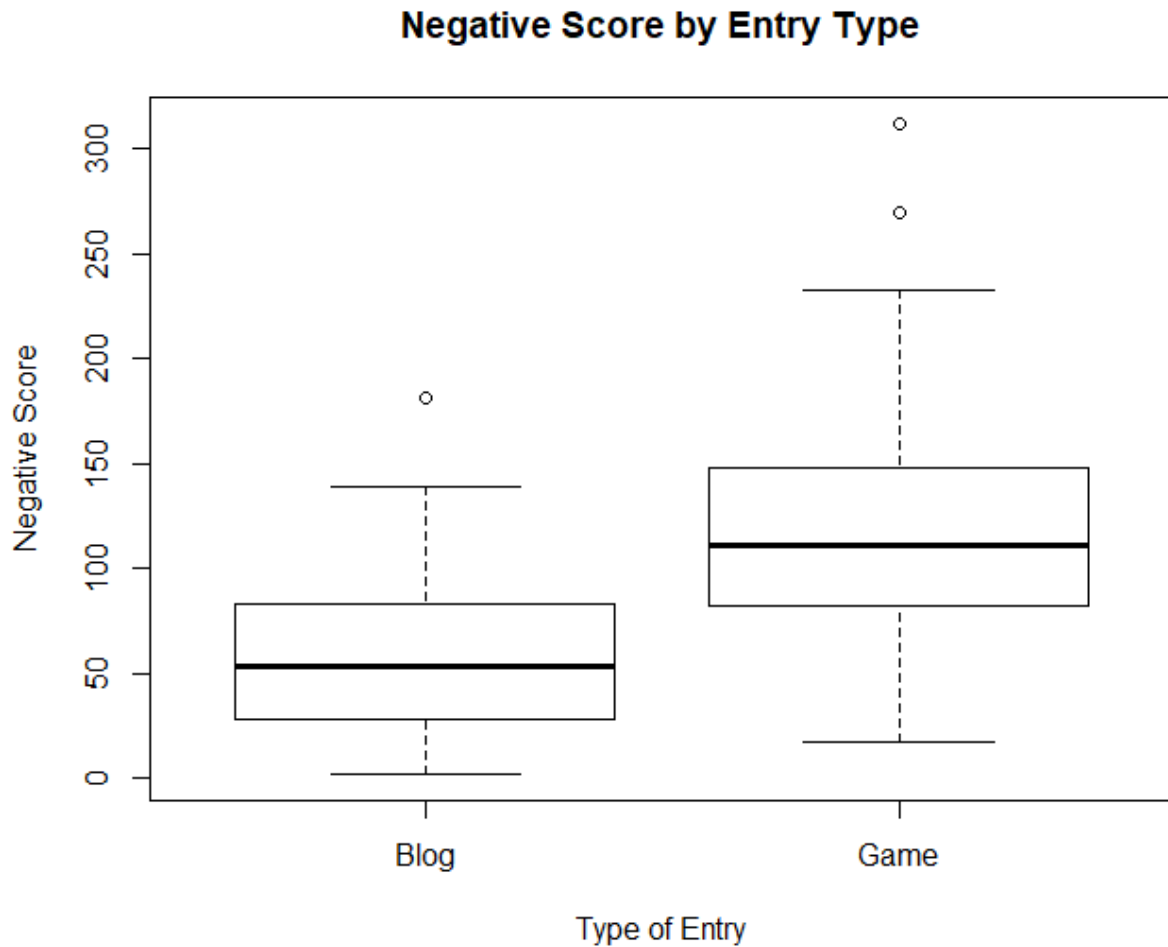


Figure 7: Negative sentiment category distribution comparison between blogs and video game play transcriptions.

When thinking about trauma and C-PTSD, I expected myself to talk more about painful experiences during my unedited video recordings, particularly when triggered by playing games from childhood. On the other hand, I expected my video transcriptions to contain fewer negative words than my blogs as the majority of my blogs focused on negative experiences.

At this point, I hope you are asking yourself what the point of this analysis was, especially considering that I could have cleaned things up by removing extreme outliers. Why the boxplots



and the vague categories and explanations? For me, it was primarily about the therapeutic nature of the results. Throughout this discussion I have used the word “expected”. I expected the word “I” to appear more frequently. I expected more mentions of pain during video game play. These expectations speak to the complex part of my C-PTSD and to the relation of relationlessness I have with myself. I tend to see myself through lenses that are not necessarily accurate. Taking the time to visualize my use of different categories of words allowed me to understand that I do, for example, express pleasure during pleasurable activities. That I do have pleasurable memories related to gaming during a traumatic childhood. That I can articulate pain through the written word when I am going through tough times like my grandmother’s funeral. More than anything, this project has shown me that there is therapeutic value to taking the time to examine traumatic experiences through both micro and macro lenses. The computer, acting as a mediator, presenting me with perspectives of my life narrative that I would otherwise miss or ignore. This leads me to a discussion of my final analysis technique, topic modelling.

### Topic Modelling

I decided to run topic modelling on my “life-as-text” primarily based on the following description by Jockers (2013):

Aside from the researcher’s somewhat arbitrary setting of the number of topics to be “discovered,” the entire process is done in an unsupervised fashion. “Unsupervised” means that the machine does not know in advance what themes to look for. With no human input into what constitutes a theme, a motif, a topic, the model collects distributions of co-occurring words and then returns them in a manner that allows us to

examine, assess, interpret, and intuit what they all have in common, that is, their shared “theme.” (Jockers 2013, 123)

I wanted an unsupervised, unguided perspective on the themes that might be found in my life narrative. In the previously mentioned analysis techniques I controlled the code, the visualizations, and the selection of dictionaries. I wanted to try to obtain a digital analysis of my “life-as-text” with the least amount of interference from me as possible, and topic modelling seemed like the best fit based on my skillset.

Using *Mallet* I ran an initial set of topic models, 10, 20, and 50, on the complete corpus of all of my transcribed videos and blogs. I did remove the standard NLTK stopwords, though you may notice some of them in Figure 8, as I struggled to correctly remove the punctuation due to novice mistakes around character sets. For example, the word “don’t” is included, but it actually read “don” in the output. I left it in however, as it carries certain contextual meaning related to negativity. The unintentional inclusion of the words “I’ll” and “I’ve” also reinforce the importance of singular first-person pronouns in my corpus.

weight	Topics
0.624	don't mom feel things life back people fear make time thing afraid didn't feeling fact scared head good understand
0.55	um don't game uh sigh good yeah I've thing back lot things play sort I'll stuff guess video talk
0.291	remember games memories game video dad time playing play memory room mom didn't house played christmas brent wasn't kid
0.283	brent dog work feel morrighan edmonton sleep pain puppy candidacy house sleeping worried hearthstone writing sesu ago training supposed
0.2	alienation pain trauma relation life people social research ways real culture write theory dissociation experiences enjoy alienated identity states
0.183	day birthday mom guilt dad mother feel gift shame year email call didn't mario christmas child safe made situation
0.137	light road back feel room follow hmmm find tinder story sanity accident dreams creepy door interesting car missing photos
0.11	dad family shame grandma pain john aunt real funeral dream felt remember died left sort part odd women donna
0.088	mumble good computer guys yeah I'll yay alright ah brent played quest die character kill dragon war fun playing
0.08	world truth people post fact science sonja real gonna play facts comfort passion identity social important sort emotion fantasy

Figure 7: 10-topic model created using Mallet. Note that due to a character set conversion error, some of the NLTK stopwords remain, though most were removed.

There are two “outliers” in this example that stand out like sore thumbs to me. The 7<sup>th</sup> one, “light, road, back, feel, room, follow, hmmm, find, tinder, story, sanity, accident, dreams, creepy, door, interesting, car, missing, photos” speaks to my combined playthroughs of the games *Trauma* and *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. Most of the words describe in-game objects and activities. The 10<sup>th</sup> one, “world, truth, people, post, facts, science, sonja, real, gonna, play, facts, comfort, passion, identity, social, important, sort, emotion, fantasy” comes from a single video that I recorded as part of another project. I have included the transcription of the video in my corpus as it does contain important autoethnographic points and was technically recorded while playing a game during my data collection timeline.

The remaining 8 topics are very interesting in that they make sense to me. Each topic reminds me of a specific aspect of my life. I see myself in my data. I see myself in ways that I cannot otherwise put into words. The topics provide an odd sense of stability in a seemingly chaotic assortment of words. To be honest, the actual statistical significance of each topic is relatively unimportant to me. How I use the topics is largely related to storytelling. As I pieced together my autoethnographic narrative and connect my “life-as-text” to various themes and theories, the topic models have helped me group things together that I would otherwise have a difficult time accessing and connecting due to dissociation and the emotional attachment I have to my data. These topics encouraged me to acknowledge my ingrained tears, fears, guilt, shame, and isolation. I have been able to access and examine things that have remained hidden due to my C-PTSD. It is through the computer mediated analysis of my data that I have been able to step

back from my emotional attachment and ingrained assumptions, and view the data through a somewhat logical, orderly lens: a lens temporarily cleared of the fog of trauma. The topic modelling in particular has allowed me to step back from my dissociation and destabilization, to view my experiences as connected parts of a larger whole.

### Conclusion

My “life-as-text” is more than just the corpus of words that I have gathered. It is a series of interconnected narratives, experiences, and emotions. My relation to my “life-as-text” can be seen as a deficient one, an alienated one. My life narrative comes from me, it is me, and yet I feel separated from it in many ways. My C-PTSD makes me afraid of my own story. My acceptance of my own destabilization and dissociation makes the process of writing an autoethnography a monumental undertaking. I have found, as described above, that the addition of digital text analysis to my autoethnographic process has allowed me to regain and rework my relationship to myself and my narrative. By allowing me to step back and view my “life-as-text” through a somewhat objective lens, methods like topic modelling are aiding in the process of appropriation that Jaeggi (2014) argues is so central to the resolution of alienation. Recall that appropriation needs to be an active and involving process of integration and transformation of meaning and experiences. Analyzing my life narrative using digital methods has allowed me to take an active role in first understanding, and then transforming the meaning of my trauma.

Shining a light on my breaks, lapses, and absences has allowed me to better understand myself despite my C-PTSD and related dissociation. Writing the autoethnography, which in some ways is more of an autobiography, has fostered the mediation of my own alienation. By allowing me

to embrace and examine my “tears and fears” through an unsupervised and, in some ways impartial, digital lens, text-mining has provided me with a foundation upon which the reconstruction and acceptance of a haunting and painful past is possible.

### The Method is the Message?

Just as I was afraid and uncertain when initially presenting the ideas from the article above at CSDH in 2018, I am afraid and uncertain about how the published article will be received by the community. I have chosen this side quest in my dissertation game, to put my work out for formal publication. I retained control of the process the entire way, freely choosing to submit the initial draft, and agreeing to revise and edit multiple times. At any point I could have backed out, but I am excited about the unknown. I am proud of the work I have done and I am ready to hear what people think. Will anyone read it? Will anyone cite it? Will anyone care? I don't know, and while the unknown is scary, I am confident in my contribution. I am ready to respond to critics. I am ready to be challenged on my choice to share such a personal piece of work. I feel like I am in control.

*Aside from the interesting findings around the word “um”, and the accurate results of the topic modelling, this article demonstrates the methodological exploration (wandering) that I undertook during this dissertation. I developed a great deal of insight from the process of figuring out how to gather, code, and interpret my data. The process itself represents the coming together of two distinct voices. Initially ‘forced’ to work together, **Professor Sapach** and **Lenoraven** joined forces to collectively present this research. Recall that **Lenoraven** is the persona that acted as my MA thesis research assistant and who, for a long time, lived on the edge of trauma and academic life, acting as a bridge between the teenage **Forestghost** and the PhD persona of **Professor Sapach**. Each persona had to give up something in the process.*

*Lenoraven, who also spoke for **Forestghost** and **Baby Sonja**, gave up the freedom to tell certain stories. Their experiences were summarized in a rather formal, distant way through the ACE scale. I had to give up the strict formality with which I wanted to present the findings. The autoethnographic nature of this project, as a whole, transformed my relationship with myself (to the point that during a read-through, one of my supervisors questioned my use of **Professor Sapach** in this section).*

Unravelling the Katamari ball of memories has been a challenging process. It becomes even more challenging when every time I move the ball to uncover some ‘stuff’, it seems to pick up more, new ‘stuff’ in the process. Images of Sisyphus<sup>30</sup> form in my head as I try to “cut off” my autoethnographic narrative. I have a goal, submitting this dissertation and graduating. I am following a methodology that has me telling a story, that needs to have an ending, or at least a temporary stopping point.

*I chose to include the article in this chapter as a way of demonstrating the process of gathering and interpreting my data. More than that, I included the article as a published piece because it represents a transformed relation within myself (between **Professor Sapach** and **Lenoraven**) and a transformed relation between myself and the outside world. Publishing this article has formally opened up my methodological choices to public scrutiny. My inclusion of my ACE trauma score publicly acknowledges the abuse and trauma I experienced. I have shared my methodological journey, and doing so has transformed and integrated the meaning of my dissertation research to myself and to those who may read it in the future. The peer-reviewed publication of my methods is a stopping point, though it is not the whole story. Chapter 5 contains excerpts from my let’s*

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<sup>30</sup> Sisyphus is character in ancient Greek mythology who was forced to roll a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down once it neared the top, for eternity. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sisyphus>

*play transcripts. The excerpts will be organized according to a series of important themes that will lead to my conclusions in Chapter 6. In this chapter I have presented my chosen methodology and methods, discussed my analysis, and shared some results. The story of my data and results does not end with this chapter, but a detailed explanation of HOW I did things does end here. I intend to clarify the WHY in Chapters 3 and 4. The choices I made, and the actions I took, were driven by my experiences with C-PTSD and my exploration of the mediation of alienation. Chapter 3 discusses memories, alienation, and C-PTSD in greater detail, elaborating on the importance of the transformed relationship between my personas as a result of my methodological choices and actions. My life narrative will not end once I submit this dissertation, though it has been fundamentally transformed by the process itself.*

### Chapter 3: Alienation and C-PTSD

I had a discussion with my mom yesterday that hit me pretty hard. She said that I was not social, not caring, and too self centered. It triggered a lot of shame in me and I felt quite guilty. But I have been thinking about it, and there are so many responses that I can give to help myself feel better. I have been an overly empathetic person my whole life, always trying to put others ahead of me. Always worrying about trying to impress other people, making them feel good at any cost. I had no confidence, and being empathetic was a major defense mechanism. As I work through this autoethnography, perhaps I am learning to be too selfish? Too focused on my internal processes? Too focused on trying to be mentally healthy? Or maybe I am finally in a place where I stand up for what I truly want. – **Baby Sonja & Lenoraven**, December 16, 2018

#### Chapter Description

*In Chapter 1 I introduced C-PTSD using the following ICD-11 (11<sup>th</sup> edition of the International Classification of Diseases for Mortality and Morbidity) description:*

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Complex PTSD) is a disorder that may develop following exposure to an event or series of events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature, most commonly prolonged or repetitive events from which escape is difficult or impossible (e.g., torture, slavery, genocide campaigns, prolonged domestic violence, repeated childhood sexual or physical abuse). All diagnostic requirements for PTSD are met. In addition, Complex PTSD is characterized by severe and persistent 1) problems in affect regulation; 2) beliefs about oneself as diminished, defeated or worthless, accompanied by feelings of shame, guilt or failure related to the traumatic event; and 3) difficulties in sustaining relationships and in feeling close to



others. These symptoms cause significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning.<sup>31</sup>

*The above description is useful and accurate, however there are multiple descriptions of the disorder that I will explore in this chapter. The goal of this chapter is to satisfy the following set of goals: clearly define and describe C-PTSD, clearly define and describe alienation, and explain the relationships between the two. Recall that the guiding question throughout this dissertation is that video games helped me to survive and overcome trauma – a kind of trauma that left me feeling alienated – can video games help others in the same way, and if so, how? In order to successfully argue that my personal experiences with video games and C-PTSD extend to the mediation of alienation in other people, I must convince you that the two concepts share a similar mechanism of action with similar symptoms to cope with. While I will not argue that they are one and the same, I will argue that video game play impacts specific issues/symptoms/challenges that are equally important to C-PTSD and alienation.*

*Both C-PTSD and alienation have multiple definitions and varied perspectives on causes and treatments or solutions. For each, I will present a variety of descriptions from different researchers/theorists, outlining key points about possible solutions, before settling on my chosen favourites.*

I should interject from a **Baby Sonja** perspective. There really is no ‘favourite’ definition of C-PTSD for me to arrive at here. Each set of symptoms will be presented and I will highlight the ways that they invade my life.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/585833559> last accessed March 28, 2019

*To be fair, the C-PTSD overview will be presented as more of a tour of different versions, all of which I find to be valid. This will stand in contrast to my outline of alienation which will talk about some foundational theories and then settle on the theory that I think is the most useful today.*

### Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Detail

*A good place to start is with Judith Herman's (1992) 7 diagnostic categories of C-PTSD from the book Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. Herman can be viewed as one of the 'founders' of C-PTSD as a formal concept. In Trauma and Recovery, trauma is divided into two types with type-I representing single-incident traumas (characteristically associated with traditional PTSD) and type-II representing repeated and/or complex traumas. As I noted in Chapter 1, there is not a formal DSM-5 diagnosis of C-PTSD available, but Herman argued that type-II traumas resulted in a different, more complex set of symptoms when compared to PTSD resulting from type-I traumas. These 7 categories are proposed by Herman as a potential American Psychological Association categorization of symptoms for diagnosing C-PTSD. The categories and associated symptoms are as follows:*

1. A history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period (months to years).
2. Alterations in affect regulation including:
  - a. Self-injury
  - b. Persistent dysphoria
  - c. Explosive or extremely inhibited anger

- d. Chronic suicidal preoccupation
  - e. Compulsive or extremely inhibited sexuality
3. Alterations in consciousness including:
- a. Amnesia or hypermnesia for traumatic events
  - b. Transient dissociative episodes
  - c. Depersonalization/derealisation
  - d. Reliving experiences either in the form of intrusive PTSD symptoms or ruminative preoccupation
4. Alterations in self-perception including:
- a. Shame, guilt, and self-blame
  - b. Sense of helplessness or paralysis of initiative
  - c. Sense of defilement or stigma
  - d. Sense of complete difference from others (may include specialness, utter otherness, belief no other person can understand, or non-human identity)
5. Alterations in perception of perpetrator including:
- a. Preoccupation with relationship with perpetrator
  - b. Idealization or paradoxical gratitude
  - c. Unrealistic attribution of total power to perpetrator
  - d. Sense of special or supernatural relationship

- e. Acceptance of belief system or rationalization of perpetrator
6. Alterations in relations with others including:
- a. Isolation and withdrawal
  - b. Disruption in intimate relationships
  - c. Repeated search for a rescuer
  - d. Persistent distrust
  - e. Repeated failures of self-protection
7. Alterations in systems of meaning including:
- a. Loss of sustaining faith
  - b. Sense of hopelessness and despair (1992, 120-121)

*According to Herman,*

Naming the syndrome of complex post-traumatic stress disorder represents an essential step toward granting those who have endured prolonged exploitation a measure of the recognition they deserve. It is an attempt to find a language that is at once faithful to the traditions of accurate psychological observation and to the moral demands of traumatized people. It is an attempt to learn from survivors, who understand, more profoundly than any investigator, the effects of captivity (122).

It is always difficult for me to look at my life listed as a series of symptoms like the one above. I acknowledge how helpful my diagnosis has been in helping me work through my mental health issues, but it is also scary and sad. All of these things that I didn't have to experience if someone

had helped me, if I had a ‘normal’ life. This is me, in list form. Categorized accurately in a way that I could never clearly articulate.

*It is possible that I find alienation fascinating for a similar reason in that it provides a name, or series of categorized symptoms, that allows me to understand feeling somehow different. I will be turning to alienation soon, but I invite you to keep the idea of alienation (as introduced in Chapter 1) in your mind as you read through the remaining section on C-PTSD.*

4(a) is particularly relevant to my experience “Alterations in self-perception including: Shame, guilt, and self-blame.” What does shame mean? Shame is the looming sense of feeling like I am not worthy. Worthy of what you might ask? Worthy, of being. Shame is the ever-present notion that I am not good enough, even worse, that I am bad, wrong, harmful. As **Baby Sonja**, I learned at a very early age that I was a burden, a problem. I was something that stood in the way of happiness, of success, of fun, and of financial well-being. I knew, with 100% certainty, that the world would be better off without me. I knew, that I was nothing but trouble for my mother, who frequently reminded me of all of the things that I did wrong. I knew that my father would be a happier, healthier man if he had never met my mother and fathered me. I knew that my family saw me as an unfortunate accident, someone to be pitied, and seen as infrequently as possible. I knew, as the first to arrive every morning, and the last to leave every evening, that I was just a burden on the poor daycare staff who tried their best to care for me while placating my unpredictable mother. No matter how “good” I tried to be, no matter how well behaved and obedient I was, in my mind, everyone saw me as unworthy.

I grew up in what could be considered either a lower middle-class, or upper lower-class environment. My parents did not have a lot of money to spare. From my perspective, they spent what they needed to on necessities, and spent the rest on alcohol. My mom and dad separated

when I was less than a year old and though there was never a formal divorce, the set-up was very much like that of a divorced family. I lived with my mom during the week and went to visit my dad every second weekend. My dad paid child support to my mom and there were constant arguments between them about who had to buy what for me. I always had food, clothing, shoes, toys, and books. My mother sent me to daycare when she was at work and I was always ‘technically’ well cared for. Surface images can be deceiving though. Examining my childhood from a dramaturgical perspective, as traditionally outlined by Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), my parents put on a relatively convincing front stage performance, but what occurred in the back stage was a very different story.

*In the 2011 book Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Treating Complex PTSD and Dissociative Disorders, James A. Chu provides an in-depth introduction to the development and symptoms of C-PTSD. In the introduction, Chu states that the book:*

...is about the treatment of adults who have grown up bearing the scars of severe and chronic child abuse. These persons cannot simply just go on with their lives; this kind of abuse cannot be forgotten, disregarded, or left behind, and it continues to have profound effects in almost every domain of their existence. Severe and long-standing trauma introduces a profound destabilization in the day-to-day existence of many victims. They feel unpredictably assaulted by unwanted thoughts, feelings, and reminders of abuse. They are tormented by chronic anxiety, disturbed sleep, and irritability. They have symptoms that alter their perceptions of their environment, disrupt their cognitive functioning, and interfere with a sense of continuity in their lives. They are subject to powerful impulses, many of which are destructive to themselves or others. They have explosive emotions that they cannot always control. They experience self-hate and self-

loathing and *feel little kinship with other human beings. They long for a sense of human connection but are profoundly alone, regarding other people with great mistrust and suspicion.* They want to feel understood but cannot even begin to find the words to communicate with others about their most formative experiences. They wish for comfort and security but find themselves caught up in a world of struggle, hostility, disappointment, and abandonment that recapitulates their early lives [*italics added for emphasis*] (18).

*In Chapter 1, I mentioned that I have spent much of my life experiencing and dealing with trauma. My earliest memories involve vague affective states of what I can only describe as fear and shame. There was a lot of yelling, a lot of unpredictability, and a lot of emptiness. My scars are primarily emotional in that much of the abuse that I experienced centered around making me feel guilty for even existing. There was also physical abuse, being grabbed roughly by the wrist and thrown into a corner in some cases and being spanked with a brush in other cases. The physical abuse toward me is not what lies at the center of my “unwanted thoughts, feelings, and reminders of abuse.” Instead I am haunted by memories of screaming in the night, terrified, banging my head against the wall because I felt so profoundly useless, irritating, and alone.*

I remember sitting in a corner, crying, nursing the wrist that had been so brutally grabbed, wondering what I did to trigger such a powerful outburst of anger from my mother. I was crying because I was confused and scared, and I was being punished for crying. I don't remember how old I was, young enough to fit in the child seat of a grocery cart as that's where the incident began, at the grocery store in Metrotown mall. Mom hated that mall, but it had the grocery store with the best deals, and it was directly on the route of the relatively new Skytrain. Due to a disrupted sense of continuity in my life, I have a difficult time pairing exact memories to exact

periods of time. As I attempt to recall this incident, I checked Wikipedia for the history of both the Skytrain and Metrotown. The New Westminster Skytrain station opened in 1985, and Metrotown opened in 1986, so I was very likely around 6 years old at the time of this particular incident.

Mom would pick me up from daycare after work in order to bring me along grocery shopping. I was always scared when she picked me up because I never knew what kind of mood she would be in. She was predictably unpredictable in that I was often faced with her anger and frustration. From my perspective, she was mean to everyone we encountered, from Daycare staff, to taxi drivers, to random people in the mall. More importantly, I always felt as though she was angry at me for being such a ‘pain in the ass.’ I was a disruption, I was expensive, I required too much attention. It was pure fatigue that had led to the crying for which I was ultimately punished that day. She wouldn’t let me nap with the other children at daycare as she wanted me exhausted and tired during the evenings. Being constantly afraid is draining, and on that day, mom was exuding a powerful aura of anger. I remember trying to keep up with her in the mall. I don’t remember the actual grocery shopping, but she later told me that I started crying and having a fit at some point in the store. The rest of the trip involved me crying out of fear and fatigue, and her threatening me with the usual “if you don’t stop crying, I will give you something to cry about.” We got home, she threw down the groceries, grabbed me by the wrist, lifted me up, spanked me, and threw me in the corner. That wasn’t the end of her wrath however, as I remember her storming around the apartment, yelling at me as I sat there trying to stop crying. She laughs at this story now because it ended with me falling asleep with my head in the corner. She recalls the event as if it was a cute story, where she put me in ‘time-out’ for having a tantrum. She even tells the story with regret, wishing that she had only realized how tired I was. I never share my



version of the story with her, as I know that it would only lead to an argument, and to me experiencing more guilt and shame.

*From an objective 'outside' perspective, as I read the story above, it sounds like an event that could occur in any 'normal' household. A stressed parent, an exhausted child, a tantrum in public culminating in a slightly forceful time-out in the corner. Does the memory stand out in my mind because of the trauma of the experience, or simply because mom has repeated her version of the story to me many times over the years? The answer is frankly irrelevant as the point of the story is not to draw your attention to specific traumatic moments in my childhood, but instead to return to Chu's statement that people with C-PTSD "wish for comfort and security but find themselves caught up in a world of struggle, hostility, disappointment, and abandonment that recapitulates their early lives." Being punished for being tired felt like abandonment to me. A 'time-out' should be exactly that, a time where I could quietly sit in the corner and think about what I had done while I calmed down. Instead, the punishment and attacks continued as I sat there crying, holding myself, trying to comfort and protect myself. The unpredictable nature of my mother's angry outbursts forced me to constantly remain in 'fight-or-flight' mode. I was always guarding myself, attempting to control the world around me by behaving, doing well in school, and tip-toeing around my mom as if she was a bomb ready to explode at any unpredictable moment. I could not form a safe and comforting relationship with her because I was always afraid. I could not form a confident and comforting relationship with myself, because I grew up learning that I was the cause of all the anger. I now know that I was not the direct cause of the anger, but that knowledge does not retroactively protect **Baby Sonja** who always felt that she was inherently bad or wrong somehow. The point is that as Chu states "severe and long-standing trauma introduces a profound destabilization in the day-to-day existence of many*

victims.” (18) As **Baby Sonja** I lived in a state of almost constant, fearful, affective arousal that left me feeling profoundly destabilized.

Before continuing with *Chu*, I want to point out the mention of “fight or flight” from the story above. In a powerful book called *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, Pete Walker (2013) talks about the existence of four different “F-types.”

Traumatized children often over-gravitate to one of these response patterns to survive, and as time passes these four modes become elaborated into entrenched defensive structures that are similar to narcissistic [fight], obsessive/compulsive [flight], dissociative [freeze] or codependent [fawn] defenses (n.p.).

*Walker, who experienced complex trauma and describes his process of discovery and recovery in the book, describes C-PTSD as an attachment disorder. The f-types listed are not only developed as a way of avoiding danger, according to Walker, but also as techniques for attempting to maintain or create some form of attachment.*

Personally, I present as two different versions of hybrids when considering the four f’s. As **Baby Sonja**, I fall into the “flight/freeze” mix, which is interestingly described by Walker<sup>32</sup> as “the computer addict who workaholically focuses for long periods of time and then drifts off dissociatively into computer games.”

*This is a key point in that I accept the basic premise of Walker’s four f’s, but do not think that he did a good job of moving past description into explanation. The fact that **Baby Sonja** freezes and then escapes into the safe playground of the video game, says something about the ‘thing’ that*

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<sup>32</sup> From his blog website: [http://pete-walker.com/fourFs\\_TraumaTypologyComplexPTSD.htm](http://pete-walker.com/fourFs_TraumaTypologyComplexPTSD.htm)

*video games can provide to trauma victims – control, which will be elaborated on over the final 3 chapters.*

As **Forestghost**, and sometimes **Lenoraven**, I am more closely related to the fawn/freeze type.

This type is described by Walker as someone “who numbingly surrenders herself to scapegoating or to a narcissist’s need to have a target for his rageaholic releases.” I have to note here that I strongly dislike the wording that Walker uses here, as it is gendered, and creates a victim narrative that describes passive yielding. I include it here as an example of a poor description, of an accurate framework.

*When in a fawn/freeze frame of mind, there is a need to please and accept others no matter what (fawn) while being unable to escape dangerous situations (freeze). It is this hybrid type that I began taking on the role of the healer during roleplaying games.*

For example, when I began playing *World of Warcraft*, I was asked to select a character type, and I chose the Priest class (despite classifying myself as a strict atheist in real life). In the game, the Priest is arguably the best class for providing help and aid (support) to other players as they have the strongest healing magic spells. They can be difficult to play, and players open themselves up to a lot of ridicule if they attempt to join groups without mastering the healing spells first, but I love the class. When playing multi-player games, I will almost always choose a support or healing class/character over one that does a lot of damage/killing.

*The important thing to take away from this description of the four f’s is that there is a relational aspect to them. They represent forms of relating to the self and to others. In reality, they function in ways that typically discourage relating, or encourage relating in dangerous, harmful ways.*

*This becomes important below when I return to a discussion of Rahel Jaeggi (2014) introduce*

*briefly in Chapter 1 as the alienation theorist I most closely subscribe to. To Jaeggi, alienation is a relation of relationlessness, and Walker's f types are all about maladaptive, learned responses to a lack of secure attachment in childhood.*

*Returning to Chu (2011), I want to present one more list describing symptoms of C-PTSD:*

In complex PTSD and DESNOS<sup>33</sup>, changes and harm occurs in fundamental alterations in multiple domains of psychological functioning:

Alterations in emotional regulation and impulse control, such as persistent sadness, explosive or inhibited anger, self-destructive thoughts and behavior, suicidal preoccupation, and risk-taking behaviours.

Alterations in consciousness, such as forgetting or reliving traumatic events, or having episodes in which one feels detached from one's mental processes or body.

Alterations in self-perceptions, such as helplessness, defectiveness, shame, guilt, stigma, or a sense of being different from others.

Alterations in perceptions of the perpetrator, such as attributing total power to the perpetrator or becoming preoccupied with the relationship to the perpetrator including revenge fantasies.

Alterations in relations with others, such as isolation, distrust, being revictimized, victimizing others, or searching for a rescuer.

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<sup>33</sup> Disorders of extreme stress, not otherwise specified

Alterations in somatic experience, such as chronic pain, conversion, or cardiac, gastrointestinal, neurologic, or sexual symptoms.

Alterations in one's system of meanings, such as a loss of sustaining faith, or a sense of hopelessness and despair (1057).

*As with the list presented by Herman at the start of this section, Chu's alterations are all things that I can relate to, and have felt (continue to feel). I would specifically like to draw your attention to the last alteration that describes hopelessness and despair. In order to transition to a discussion about alienation, I am going to present a story about a suicide attempt that, in retrospect, was linked to all of the symptoms and descriptions of C-PTSD presented above in some way or another. An alteration in a system of meaning had me convinced that my life had no meaning beyond shame and suffering.*

#### A Suicide Attempt – Hopelessness and Loss of Meaning

I remember a particular incident that highlights the culmination of my shame. I was living on Ash St. with my mother. I was in grade 8 I believe, and **Baby Sonja** was still my dominant persona. At school I faced constant bullying, continuously teased and threatened to the point where I would run out of classrooms (if the teacher had happened to step out for some reason or another) crying and trembling with fear and shame. I remember a night that was like many others. Mom was out at the bar again leaving me home alone, dreading her inevitable angry return. Sometimes, when it got particularly late, I would call the bar to check on her, scared that she might be dead.

*An interesting symptom of C-PTSD involves “alterations in perception of [the] perpetrator” (Herman 1997, 122) including an unusually strong bond and idealized image of them.*

My mom had total power over me, and I had justified her abuse not as abuse, but as a valid response to my inherent badness. So I worried about her, feared for her life, and constantly strived to please her. When I felt she was in danger, I needed to check on her, hence calling the bar when too many hours had passed. This evening was different though. I can't recall exactly what made it different, perhaps a fight with my friend Cheryl (who I will talk about below), or a less than ideal grade at school. The important thing is that I had reached a breaking point.

I remember pacing around the dark living room, thoughts raging through my head. "Why am I even alive? No one cares about me. The world would be better off without me in it. There is no point!" We lived on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the apartment building and I kept looking out the window, calculating what would happen if I jumped. I had developed a fascination with forensic pathology at that point in my life, spending hours in the library reading about how to interpret murder scenes, what happened to the body after experiencing various forms of trauma, and how much damage the human body could take. I knew, from my research, that I could easily survive the jump if I landed on my feet. I would shatter my legs, and likely my back, but I would survive. That wouldn't do, as I had learned from previous experience that sustaining injuries only led to wrathful responses from my mother.

For example, when I was about 5 or 6, I was playing outside at daycare. I fell and broke my nose on some stairs -- an innocent accident that led the daycare staff to call my mother at work. She arrived, angry, yelling at me and grabbing me by the arm, dragging me to the taxi. She was angry that she had to leave work early and lose pay because of my accident. We didn't even go to the hospital, and my severely deviated septum is evidence of that to this day. My nose stopped bleeding, but my mother's anger lasted far longer. Another time, I ended up having to have surgery on my baby finger after cutting it while carving a pumpkin at my friend Wesley's house.

Mom arrived before we went to the hospital, seething with anger toward Wesley's mother for being so irresponsible, and toward me for being so clumsy. It wasn't until after the surgery, when I was recovering from the anesthetic, sick to my stomach, that mom showed some tenderness. Perhaps the fear of losing me during surgery cleared her head, or perhaps they didn't serve alcohol at the hospital, which resulted in her sobering up enough to understand the severity of the situation. These incidents, and many others like them, taught me that if I jumped off of that 5<sup>th</sup> story ledge incorrectly and survived, my suffering would extend far beyond the pain and immobility caused by shattered legs and a broken back.

Back to the living room. I was pacing, crying, and calculating my jump. I knew that I would have to dive out of the window head first for the quickest, and most guaranteed death. My father would be sad and I really didn't want to hurt him, but I just couldn't take it anymore. The unending fear and shame overwhelmed me. I walked over to the window and opened it, putting one foot out onto the narrow ledge, sitting on the window sill. It would be quick, and painless, if I did it correctly. I could do it. That would teach them all; the bullies, my mother, the family who ignored my situation. Like jumping into a swimming pool from a diving board, I just had to put my head down, close my eyes, and jump. I was ready. The fear and pain, the shame, it would all be gone.

Suddenly, the phone started ringing. I froze, knowing that it would be my mom calling to check on me. She hated it when I let the phone ring too long, and would be angry if I let the answering machine get it. Of course, that wouldn't matter if I just went through with the jump. But instinct took over and I found myself climbing back through the window and running toward the phone. I answered it, shaking and out of breath. I honestly don't remember who it was, but it wasn't my mom...a telemarketer perhaps, someone of little consequence at the time. My shame, my fear of

punishment, my NEED to please the perpetrator of my abuse, overruled my desire to die.

Answering that phone saved my life, and today, I am thankful to whoever it was that called me at that exact moment. **Baby Sonja**, on the other hand, was not thankful. I broke down crying beside the table that held the phone. I knew that I had been bad. The act of stepping part way onto that ledge reinforced my shame. Although I was there completely alone, I was certain that mom would find out about the suicide ‘attempt’. My desire for death as an escape from the pain was bad, selfish, immoral, but more than anything, it would have angered my mom. I wasn’t worthy of life, but had no right to desire death – my life was not my own.

*When asked how I orient myself as a Sociologist, my go-to answer has traditionally been that I am a Durkheimian. The theorists that I have tended to align with include Durkheim, Goffman, Blumer, and Simmel. I would now define myself more generally as a cultural sociologist with a focus on rituals, dramaturgy, and symbolic interactionism. Even so, through the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I am becoming more resistant to such classifications due to the influence of feminist theorists, specifically Sara Ahmed whose book Living a Feminist Life (2017) I am listening to on audiobook these days. That being said, I cannot leave my narrative of a suicide attempt behind without discussing Durkheim’s **Suicide** (1897). Before proceeding, I acknowledge that a reliance on classical theory can only take us so far: Society changes, culture changes, meanings change, and Sociology as a discipline evolves and grows. My use of Durkheim here is meant to act as an initial stepping stone toward deeper arguments about the connection between my experiences and alienation.*

*On the surface, my experience with suicide as described above, appears to be Egoistic in that it stemmed from an individualized desire to escape the pain of my own existence. I have never been a religious person, so I did not have a transcendent purpose beyond the life I was living. I*



*mentioned not only child abuse, but also bullying. I had very few friends, and very weak social connections. My social skills were almost non-existent.*

I have always tried to emulate other people, to fit in. The abuse and neglect, and the resulting shame, left **Baby Sonja** feeling, and acting, ‘weird’ around others. I would walk through the halls of my elementary school or secondary school, head always down, eyes always staring at the floor. I hated eye contact and I couldn’t stand the small talk that so many others seemed to constantly engage in. While other children laughed and played, I hid in corners with my nose buried in a book. To this day, when I walk by a group of people standing around and laughing, I KNOW that they are laughing at me. My hair, my clothes, something I had said in class, or some unknown secret that they share about me – all possible reasons for their laughter. I saw that other girls were playing with Barbie dolls, giggling and gossiping during recess, reading novels, and giving each other makeovers and dancing during sleepovers and parties. I was playing with action figures, hiding under trees during recess talking to myself, reading my favourite Stephen King novel *Misery* (1987) over and over again, and rushing to my father’s house on the weekends to play video games, actively avoiding sleepovers and parties. I was so shy, so filled with shame, and so worried about what my mother would think, that I had no choice but to be as invisible as possible. **Baby Sonja** did make a few friends, like Cheryl who I will return to later, but they were just as damaged and abused as I was.

*Despite being a child, and a female (both considered by Durkheim’s study to be less susceptible to egoistic suicide), I could not tolerate the separation from society, and the isolation that I felt from others. That being said, I also experienced a great deal of anomie, defined by Durkheim (1951) as a lack of guiding norms and of regulation. My mother felt like the whole world to me, the ultimate power, holding a deity-like status in my mind. My feelings of anomie represented an*

*unresolved relationship to the social control that she had over me. I noted above that I was alone at home, scared, bullied, and fed up with life, while she was out at the bar. I had seen other families, functional families. I knew that my home-life was abnormal; an anomic micro-institution in which I was imprisoned. I was struggling against the norms and meanings of my daily life, while living in a home that seemed to struggle against the norms and meanings of society.*

*To reiterate a statement made above by Chu (2011) people with C-PTSD “...experience self-hate and self-loathing and feel little kinship with other human beings. They long for a sense of human connection but are profoundly alone, regarding other people with great mistrust and suspicion.” (18) Egoistically, my suicide attempt was due to my self-hatred and lack of kinship. Anomically, my suicide attempt was due to a lack of connection to social norms (to “normality” so to speak). Durkheim (1951) specifically notes that egoism and anomie, as factors of suicide, have a particular affinity for one another (288).*

### My Friend Cheryl

I met my friend Cheryl while we were both in Girl Guides. We would meet once a week in a church and occasionally go on camping trips during the weekend. As **Baby Sonja** I knew that mom had dumped me there in order to get some freedom and peace. I worked hard to impress the Unit Guiders (the leaders responsible for teaching us). I always worked diligently to impress and earn the respect of authority figures (*Fawn-type behaviour*). Always the teacher’s pet, always first in line, following directions exactly, memorizing important information, being the ideal student, child, Girl Guide. Before I talk more about Cheryl, I looked up the various badges from my old sash out of curiosity and nostalgia.



Figure 9: Author’s Girl Guide Sash from childhood, photographed July 15, 2018.

Based on the years reported by the *Canadian Guiding Badges and Insignia Resource* (2014) my badges and pins, pictured in Figure 9, span from 1987 to 1992 (age 6 – 11). The rose badge was our patrol emblem. The rest, starting from the top right are as follows: Peace, Endangered Species, Collecting, Child Care, Hostess, “Thanks” Community Service, Exploring my Outdoor Environment, Baking, Computer Skills, Creative Crafts, and Canadian Guiding. I also found 7 additional “challenge” badges and a “Super Cookie Seller” badge that I never sewed onto my sash for some reason. Of note here is the primarily individualized nature of most of my badges. I honestly don’t remember what I ended up doing to earn each badge (though I have a vague

memory of baking muffins). The only memories that stick out for me from my time at Girl Guides are the ones related to camping. Camping was an adventure, a chance to live a different life. Safe campgrounds with safe adults and safe games that brought the girls together. I say “the girls” because I only remember one person, one friend, from that time – Cheryl.

I don't remember exactly why or how we became friends. It was probably partially due to the fact that we went to the same elementary school. The main reason, however, is that I believe we could sense the “something wrong” in each other. Cheryl responded to her abusive home life through rebellion. She would tell me stories, during our sleepovers, of climbing out of her attic bedroom window to go have sex with different boys. She wore provocative clothing, listened to loud music, yelled profanities at her mother, brother, sister, and step-father, and basically didn't seem to give a shit. It was all so exhilarating to **Baby Sonja**. Cheryl had figured out things like make-up and dancing, and did her best to try to share her knowledge without forcing anything on me. We would laugh, play taboo games (like house, where she was the “husband” and I was the “wife”), and generally have a naughty, fun time.

We aged out of Girl Guides at the same time and she convinced me to join Air Cadets with her in order to allow her to get closer to a boy that she had a crush on. She quit Cadets after a few months, too many rules. I ended up staying for 7 years. We remained friends until we were around 14 or 15, when her rebellious behaviour finally became too much for me. I remember a sleepover at her new home in Coquitlam (her family left New Westminster when we were 13). Her parents and siblings weren't home and she wanted me to meet some of her new friends. We ended up in a bedroom, with two guys who were snorting cocaine. Neither of us partook, but it was terrifying to me. The guys, much older than us, started getting angry and we had to run away. I didn't see Cheryl much after that and have been unable to find her as an adult.

The thing about Cheryl was her apparent strength and willingness to stand up against her abusers. **Baby Sonja** could never stand up to her mom the way Cheryl stood up to hers. Cheryl gave me strength, hope, and a sense of power through her rebellion, and her desire to include me in her shenanigans. We confided in each other, about the abuse, the different ways that we would be hit and punished. On occasion, her step-father would drag her into his bedroom and close the door while I was there. I could hear her crying and screaming through the door. I couldn't help her. When it was over, we would go upstairs to the attic, turn on some loud punk music, and just be there with each other. Interestingly, there is a video game called *Life is Strange* (2015) about the relationship between two young women. One, timid and shy, the other rebellious and strong. The game tells the story of their powerful friendship and their ability to help each other through traumatic times. I didn't make the connection until writing this passage about Cheryl. I cried many times throughout that game, and it was likely due to how closely it reflected my own relationship with Cheryl. She didn't let the abuse transform her into a frozen ball of shame like mine did. I know now that the harm she experienced, while expressed differently than mine, was just as severe (if not more so). At the time however, **Baby Sonja** found a hero in Cheryl. So alike in our experiences, so different in our reactions.

Cheryl represented socially unapproved behaviours. She appeared confident, willing to fight for what she wanted, and powerful enough to stand up for herself. She also took a path that I was unwilling to take. My mom was the singular, deity-like figure in my life, as mentioned above. When I said that my life had no transcendent purpose, I was not being completely accurate. The rules, criticisms, and expectations laid down by my mother acted as a religion of sorts. While my mother drank, slept around, and neglected and abused me, she also tried to instill certain values in me. No drinking, no drugs, no sex. Get good grades, go to university, succeed. Maintain a

clean and orderly house, brush my teeth, take care of myself. Be happier, smile more, stay skinny. She recited societal expectations around what it meant to be a “good girl” while breaking all of those same expectations herself.

*Returning again to my discussion of anomie, I want to draw attention to one of Seeman’s (1955) categories of alienation – normlessness, about which he says:*

Those who employ the anomie version of alienation are chiefly concerned with the elaboration of the “means” emphasis in society – for example, the loss of commonly held standards and consequent individualism, or the development of instrumental, manipulative attitudes...the anomic situation, from the individual point of view, may be defined as one in which there is a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviours are required to achieve given goals (787-788).

I had goals, beyond the instinctual ones around survival, though they were often quite vague. I wanted to be a forensic pathologist (after first considering careers as a veterinarian and baker). I wanted a boyfriend. I wanted to keep my father safe and happy, oblivious to the abuse I was experiencing. I wanted to escape. I excelled at camping and wilderness survival activities, both in Girl Guides and Air Cadets, because I wanted to know how to survive if I ran away.

Ultimately, however, I wanted to survive the pain. I wanted the fear to go away. I wanted the screaming to stop. I wanted to fall asleep at night without first curling into the fetal position and quietly sobbing so as not to alert, and incur the subsequent wrath, of my mother.

I was too scared to call the police or child protective services. Even if I did, I was convinced that they would side with my mother, who was just trying to keep my inherent badness under control.

I couldn’t tell my father; it would hurt him too much. I couldn’t run away because I would be

found and returned home to face my punishment. I couldn't kill my mother; I wasn't violent or immoral enough<sup>34</sup>. Every path toward obtaining my ultimate goal of making the pain stop was blocked. I was stuck.

*Following the quote from Seeman above, I genuinely felt that the only "means" that could be used to obtain my goals were unacceptable, socially unapproved. Cheryl was able to run away from home on several occasions. She was able to tell her mom to "fuck off" while walking out the door. She knew full well that she would be punished when she returned, but she did it anyway. I couldn't do what Cheryl did. I was already separated from society enough so the risk of engaging in socially unapproved behaviours was too high. Suicide, then, seemed like the only option. My suicide "attempt" appears to be evidence of my anomic alienation when viewed through a sociological theory lens of Durkheim via Seeman.*

*From a psychological perspective, my suicidal preoccupation was a symptom of my C-PTSD. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, My C-PTSD is a different version of alienation. The symptoms are similar, though the underlying causes and effects are different. In order to draw a clearer connection, I first want to talk about how I learned about alienation, and the journey to learning about Jaeggi's (2014) version.*

There is tension here, and I want there to be tension here. **Professor Sapach** is trying desperately to differentiate and then compare or 'make similar' formal definitions of sociological alienation and complex post traumatic stress disorder. Her efforts, while not in vain, are coming across as struggles. Ultimately, the relationship between the two is all about perspective and a choice of definition. Sitting back as **Forestghost**, thinking about the suicide attempt and my relationship

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<sup>34</sup> As a child, I genuinely considered this as an option – which I am having a difficult time admitting to 'out loud'. I am writing it though to demonstrate how truly desperate I felt.

with Cheryl, I just know that I felt isolated, scared, different, hopeless, desperate, and worthless. Each of these feelings can be used to describe an individual who is traumatized, or to describe the more general social symptoms of alienation.

### Learning about Alienation in University

From the first time I learned about the term Alienation in an Introduction to Social Theory graduate classroom, I found myself drawn to the concept. Not necessarily in an academic way, but in a curiously personal way. The idea of being distant from myself, from others, and from my own actions in the world was compelling and just made sense to me. The problem was that I did not relate fully to the causes, and the descriptions, being given to me in class and the readings. I found that I could relate to the feelings, the symptoms, but I simply did not feel the direct connection to capitalism and bureaucracy that my intro theory class was teaching. I first encountered the term during the first semester of my MA in Social and Political Thought. At the time, I was so worried about whether or not I could perform, understand, and achieve, that I really didn't give much thought to my bond with the concept of Alienation.

*Recall, in Chapter 1, I described alienation much as I learned it during that first semester course. I introduced Seeman's (1955) attempt to define alienation based on a close reading of the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim<sup>35</sup>. I will summarize the three perspectives before discussing Seeman's interpretation in relation to C-PTSD in greater detail.*

*I first learned about Karl Marx's version of alienation by reading the essay "Alienated Labour" in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (1964). Generally, alienation in labour occurs because in market capitalist relations of production, the worker, or wage earner, has*

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<sup>35</sup> For Marx see *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1964) and *The German Ideology* (1845). For Weber see *Economy and Society* (1921). For Durkheim see *Suicide* (1897).



*practically no control over the production process, the material results, and their labour in general. The worker predictably produces the same thing over and over again, acting as a cog in a machine, unable to change or grow or express themselves through the products of their labour. For Marx, this meant a loss of 'human essence' and an alienated relationship with not only labour and the products of labour, but with the worker and themselves, and the worker and others. The solution, for Marx involves the active re-taking of the means of production from those who control it and the rise of communism. Marx viewed "Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man." (1964, 296) Granted, Marx's discussion of alienation is far more complex than the above simplification, but for our purposes, a simple historical description suffices.*

*Following Sociological canon, I also learned about Max Weber's version of alienation in that introductory course. To summarize, Weber (Economy and Society, 1921) conceptualizes the dialectic co-existence of *Gesellschaft* (a rational, impersonal society) and *Gemeinschaft* (a personal, subjective, social interaction based community). He argues that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between the morals and values that underlie *Gemeinschaft*, and the rational, impersonal order that represents *Gesellschaft*. The problem is that the two qualities of modern life exist in a tension, like oil and water. They do not mix well, but are both important parts of functioning modern life. In the introductory chapter to their book Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society, Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters (2015) explain the resulting alienation through the example of labour unions:*

Weber saw this coexistence in [...] a modern society where the *Gesellschaft* seemingly overwhelms underlying *Gemeinschaft* values, even though it never actually does. Labor

unions that emerge to protect the market position of labor in the marketplace are a good example of how this tension can play out. Labor unions emerge to address economic issues of the marketplace, but often develop into club-like “brotherhoods” where members develop emotional commitments. The result is alienation, disenchantment, and objectification (6).

*Alienation for Weber, then, stems from the individual and communal morals and values becoming enmeshed and lost in the impersonal bureaucracy and rationalization of society. When a person’s community becomes oriented toward rational action, meaning and values become lost. The only way that people can engage in significant actions in society is to join organizations that require them to give up individual freedom and desires. The solution to Weberian alienation is to ‘break free’ from a purely structural existence and to reclaim individual agency to pursue and achieve goals.*

*Regarding Émile Durkheim, I discussed the concept of anomie in relation to my suicide attempt above. To state it simply, for Durkheim (1951) a lack of norms, due to the decline of religion and the absence of strong moral codes as shaped by urbanization and changes in the division of labor, leads to a disconnect from the social. Anomie is alienation from a Durkheimian perspective. The solution is to rediscover the sacred, ‘things’ that are held as valuable in a social sense, and to engage in the ritual celebration of these sacred ‘things.’ Ritual, as discussed in Chapter 1, involves the rules and expectations for behaving in the presence of ‘the sacred’. Developing norms, and overcoming anomie, requires socially agreed upon, value-laden rules of behaviour. The development of social solidarity reduces anomie and creates connections and relationships between the individual and the social.*

*Turning now to Seeman (1959), recall Table 1 which was first introduced in Chapter 1. In On the Meaning of Alienation, Seeman worked through the history, pros, and cons of each of the perspectives described above. He ended up with five different categories of alienation that in total represented alienation in as much detail as possible (at the time, according to Seeman). The five categories are “Powerlessness”, “Meaninglessness”, “Normlessness”, “Isolation”, and “Self-Estrangement.” I have summarized each of these in Table 1 with a relevant quote from Seeman. I noted in Chapter 1 that I do not think that these five categories are the best way to talk about alienation. For my purposes, I wanted to find a “list of symptoms” of alienation that was presented in a similar way to the way that symptoms of C-PTSD are presented (Herman, Chu). In Table 1 (see Chapter 1), I wrote the symptoms of C-PTSD, as I experience them, in my own words, beside the category of alienation they closely resemble. For example, you will note that “dissociation” is a symptom listed beside each of the 5 categories of C-PTSD, however I attempt to describe specific forms of dissociation relevant to each category.*

The overall purpose of the table is to give you a visual representation of how I feel connected to the concept of alienation as I learned about it when I first encountered it. By combining the work of the three canonical theorists described above, Seeman’s categories are excellent for illustrating how my experiences translate in an academic way.

*Alienation is a complex, and often contested, concept. While the above described canon presents a foundational understanding of various causes and implications of alienation (as defined by each perspective), there is a problem inherent with using the same term to describe so many different perspectives. In my opinion, Seeman has both simplified (through the five categories) and needlessly complicated alienation at the same time. His effort to develop a concise summary of alienation does provide convenient categories that allow for a quick understanding of*

*alienation in general. What Seeman doesn't do however, is provide deeper insights that transform or develop our understanding of alienation.*

*As with most theoretical concepts, a position must be taken based on a consideration of all of the core arguments, combined with ones own theoretical perspective. In a fascinating use of Durkheimian conceptions of rituals and the sacred, Randall Collins (1986) argues that alienation itself has become a sacred object, providing individuals with social solidarity, moral energy, and in some cases joy. To clarify, the concept of alienation, as a label that people can connect with, becomes a sacred object. To say "I am alienated" is a meaningful phrase that other people can socially relate to and respond to in kind. Collins points to "...the paradox that even an intense consciousness of alienation can be among the high points of one's life (1986, 262)." Alienation can almost be likened to a religion, with socially shared feelings (meaninglessness, etc.) and possible solutions (e.g. retaking the means of production).*

Reading that quote from Collins makes sense to me in that upon discovering the formal concept of alienation, I was excited to find a term that seemed to describe how I felt about the world and about my own life.

*Collins concludes his discussion on Durkheim and alienation as follows:*

The theory of alienation is fundamentally flawed. It cannot be used to analyze society, because it itself is an ideology arising from particular social circumstances. It is not necessary or desirable as part of our analytical apparatus for understanding capitalism, or political mobilization. But it does represent a phenomenon that is an important characteristics of modern intellectual life, and of modern politics as well. What we need is not a theory of alienation but a theory about alienation (262-263).

*I agree with Collins that alienation, as it was being described when he was writing, is not necessarily useful for analyzing society. It is more of a symptom than a cause. We can look at alienation as a thing that happens because of other social and political phenomenon, but alienation itself is not a cause. I now want to move ahead to discuss the version of alienation that I want you to adopt as you read the rest of this dissertation, a relational version.*

### Alienation, A Relation of Relationlessness

*As noted in Chapter 1, the theorist I align with the most when it comes to alienation is Rahel Jaeggi (2014) who describes alienation in terms of relations. Jaeggi seems to agree with Collins (1986) about the idea of alienation as flawed. Instead of giving up on a theory of alienation however, Jaeggi deconstructs the concept and re-imagines it from a relational perspective, describing it as follows:*

Alienation means indifference and internal division, but also powerlessness and relationlessness, with respect to oneself and to a world experienced as indifferent and alien. Alienation is the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also – so the fundamental intuition of alienation – to oneself (434).

*This description describes me precisely as well as Herman's (1997) 7 categories of C-PTSD. Even more apt is Chu's (2011) list regarding altered relations - alterations in relations with others, self-perception, systems of meaning, affect regulation, and in the perspective (relationship with) the perpetrator, hopelessness, despair, isolation, withdrawal, sense of difference. All of these symptoms of C-PTSD easily fit into Jaeggi's description of alienation. Even considering the four f-types is important when thinking about C-PTSD in relation to*

*Jaeggi's alienation – Walker (2013) argues that the f-types are manifestations of attempts to repair damaged attachments (relationships).*

*The logical response to this may be to say that C-PTSD and alienation are not as similar as I am suggesting, but instead that I am suffering from both and thus can relate to both. I am not going to debate or disagree with that response as I believe it to be partially true. I know that I am suffering from both and can therefore relate to both. I am not saying that they are the same thing, and the point of this dissertation is not to argue that they are the same thing. Instead, I am attempting to convince you of the similarities between the two.*

I need to interject here. **Professor Sapach** wants nothing more than to scientifically “prove” her point. It is instinctual. I have always turned to logic and objectivity when dealing with matters of emotion, relationships, and my life-experiences. For the longest time I was convinced that the world could be explained purely through evolution and behaviourism. That the only things that mattered were genetics and stimulus/response reactions. It was the only way I could come to terms with what had happened to me throughout childhood. There were no morals, no culture, no emotional reactions, only logically predictable and instinctual responses. Undertaking this autoethnographic project has been extremely challenging, particularly for **Professor Sapach** who constantly wants to quote texts and piece things together in an essay-like manner.

The cut and dry thing that I am trying to get across is that my discussion of C-PTSD and alienation is blurring together due to the similar symptoms. I experience both. I am alienated and traumatized. I am, however, highly motivated to convince you that the similarities between C-PTSD and alienation are more than just a coincidence due to personal experience. The themes are remarkably consistent.

*As a final demonstration, I want to compare two passages. One from Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Treating Complex PTSD (Chu, 2011) quoted above, and the other from Alienation: New Directions in Critical Theory (Jaeggi, 2014). See Table 2 below.*

Chu (2011) – C-PTSD	Jaeggi (2014) - Alienation
<p>[This book] is about the treatment of adults who have grown up bearing the scars of severe and chronic child abuse. These persons cannot simply just go on with their lives; this kind of abuse cannot be forgotten, disregarded, or left behind, and it continues to have profound effects in almost every domain of their existence. Severe and long-standing trauma introduces a profound destabilization in the day-to-day existence of many victims. They feel unpredictably assaulted by unwanted thoughts, feelings, and reminders of abuse. They are tormented by chronic anxiety, disturbed sleep, and irritability. They have symptoms that alter their perceptions of their environment, disrupt their cognitive functioning, and interfere with a sense of</p>	<p>The concept of alienation refers to an entire bundle of intertwined topics. Alienation means indifference and internal division, but also powerlessness and relationlessness with respect to oneself and to a world experienced as indifferent and alien. Alienation is the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also – so the fundamental intuition of the theory of alienation – to oneself. An alienated world presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless, as rigidified or impoverished, as a world that is not one’s own, which is to say, a world in which one is not “at home” and over which one can have no influence. The alienated subject becomes a stranger to itself; it no longer experiences</p>

<p>continuity in their lives. They are subject to powerful impulses, many of which are destructive to themselves or others. They have explosive emotions that they cannot always control. They experience self-hate and self-loathing and feel little kinship with other human beings. They long for a sense of human connection but are profoundly alone, regarding other people with great mistrust and suspicion. They want to feel understood but cannot even begin to find the words to communicate with others about their most formative experiences. They wish for comfort and security but find themselves caught up in a world of struggle, hostility, disappointment, and abandonment that recapitulates their early lives (18).</p>	<p>itself as an “actively effective subject” but a “passive object” at the mercy of unknown forces. One can speak of alienation “wherever individuals do not find themselves in their own actions” or wherever we cannot be master over the being that we ourselves are (as Heidegger might have put it). The alienated person, according to the early Alasdair MacIntyre, is “a stranger in the world that he himself has made” (431).</p>
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Table 2: A Comparison Between a Passage from *Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Treating Complex PTSD* (Chu, 2011) and *Alienation: New Directions in Critical Theory* (Jaeggi, 2014)

I am avoiding the impulse (academic directive) to explain why these two passages are similar. I want to leave the interpretation up to you. I do want to argue that if the titles of the books, the



authors, and specific mentions of alienation/C-PTSD were removed, it would be difficult to avoid the similarities across the two passages.

### Conclusion

*In Chapter 1, I described how video game play can lead to the development of social solidarity – something that helps to resolve Durkheimian notions of alienation. I also talked about the importance of meaning exchange. As noted throughout the descriptions of C-PTSD and alienation above, meaninglessness is a significant issue for both. The development of meaning, through interactions with people, inner selves, and the world, is vital to developing a healthy relationship with the self, others, and the world around us. I also specifically talked about the game Tetris in Chapter 1, as a tool of solidarity creation through shared arcade play, and as a soothing comfort when living through trauma. The next chapter then, uses the case study of Tetris to talk about how video games helped me (and others) deal with immediate and long-term trauma. I will also use the game as an example of a video game that acted as an interface, a mediator between various relational barriers. Finally, the next chapter will also talk about the process of appropriation which Jaeggi (2014) considers to be essential to resolving relations of relationlessness inherent to alienation. Appropriation, as a relational act, is a process. According to Jaeggi,*

Someone who appropriates something puts her individual mark on it, inserts her own ends and qualities into it. This means that sometimes we must still make something that we already possess *our own*. Relations of appropriation, then, are characterized by several features: appropriation is a form of praxis, a way of relating practically to the world. It refers to a relation of penetration, assimilation, and internalization in which what is appropriated is at the same time altered, structured, and formed. (1153-1154)

*Thinking back to Chapter 2, this entire dissertation, the ‘game’ of the process, has been about appropriation.*

As Sonja, I have always possessed my own life, technically. Trauma and abuse altered my relation to myself, and my ability to assimilate and internalize anything that did not protect me from, or reinforce my trauma. In writing this dissertation, I have been actively appropriating my relation with myself, my personas, my childhood, my adulthood, and the world around me. Video games, as tools for memory work, and as meaning makers, helped me transform my understanding of the multiplicity of deficient relations in my life. They helped me as a child (as I will discuss in Chapter 5) and they continue to help me now, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Tetris Through Time

### Introduction: The Tetris Effect

I recently purchased the PlayStation Virtual Reality (PSVR) version of *Tetris Effect* (November 9, 2018), another in a long line of different iterations of one of my favourite games *Tetris*. I was hesitant to buy yet another version of a game that I have been playing consistently since childhood, but I simply couldn't resist the temptation. I was skeptical at first, after all, how exciting could a 2D block-sorting puzzle game be in virtual reality? I was, of course, instantly sucked in once I put on the PSVR headset and began the amazing journey that the game offers. I became lost in the immersive background environments (see Figure 10), the emotional music, and the feeling for which the game is named – the “Tetris Effect”. I felt safe, in control, comfortably challenged, emotionally aroused, and deeply enthralled.

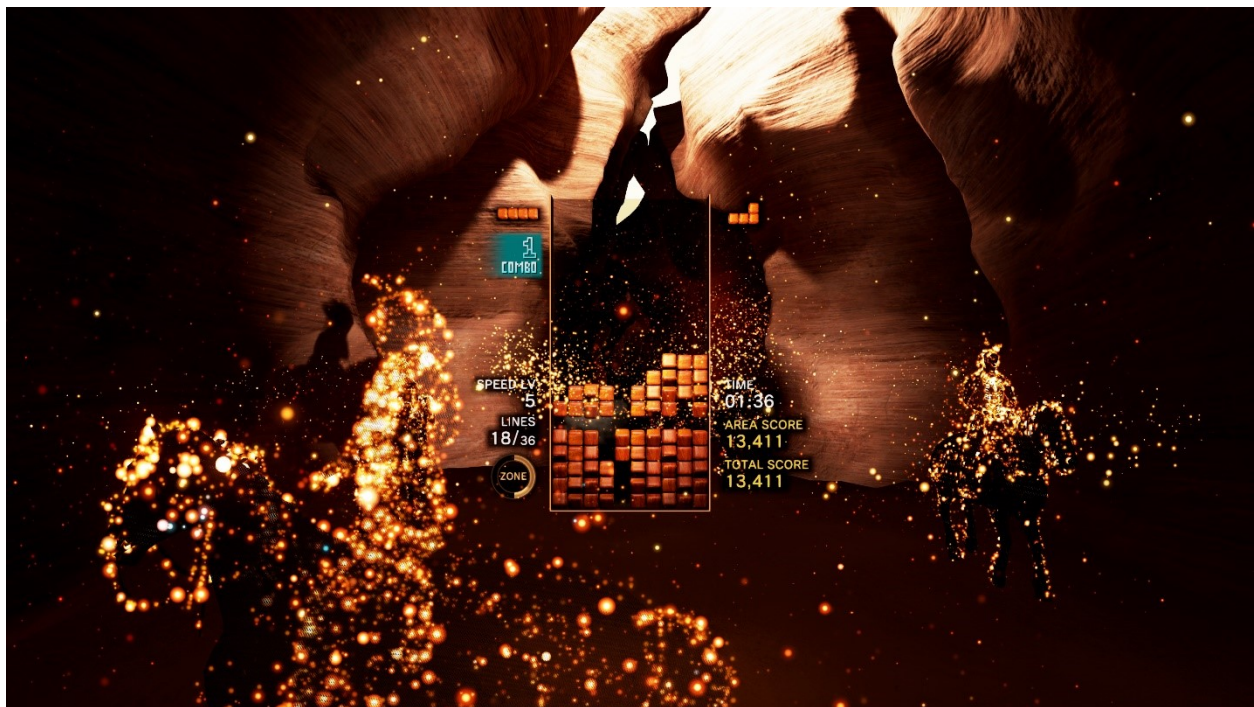


Figure 10: Screenshot of the “Spirit Canyon” journey mode level from Tetris Effect;

<https://www.tetriseffect.game/> 15 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/tetriseffectgame>.

*Tetris is a difficult game to summarize. This difficulty does not arise from the gameplay or interface, but from the long history of the game. A detailed description and history of the game series is presented quite well on Wikipedia; however, a simplified description is in order before moving forward.*

*Tetris was originally designed and programmed by Alexey Pajitnov, a Soviet Russian game designer, in 1984. It is a tile-matching, puzzle game that involves the manipulation of tetriminos, geometric shapes that consist of various arrangements of 4 blocks or cubes (see Figure 11). Fundamental game play involves moving and rotating the tetriminos as they fall down the rectangular playing field. Figure. 10 above shows the setup of a typical playing field, which consists of 10 columns and 20 rows. The ultimate goal is to form solid horizontal lines without any gaps. Once a full line is formed, it disappears rewarding the player with points depending on how many lines are cleared simultaneously. If four lines are cleared in one move, it is called a 'tetris'.*

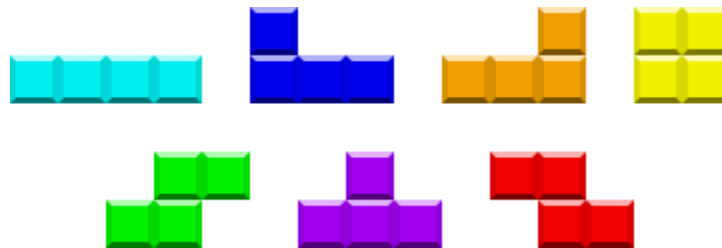


Figure 11: The seven possible tetriminos in the original colour scheme. By Damian Yerrick, uploader - own work, based on PNG version, Public Domain, 5 May, 2019,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1368672>.

*The game ends when there is no more space in the playing field for new tetriminos to drop into, i.e. the playing field is full vertically. There are multiple other win and lose conditions available,*

*depending on the version of the game being played. These conditions will be described where relevant throughout the chapter. For now, let us return to the Tetris Effect version of the game.*

*What follows is the description provided on the Tetris Effect game official website,*

*<https://www.Tetriseffect.game/>:*

Named after a real world phenomenon where players' brains are so engrossed that images of the iconic falling Tetrimino blocks (i.e. the Tetris playing pieces) linger in their vision, thoughts, and even dreams, TETRIS® EFFECT amplifies this magical feeling of total immersion by surrounding you with fantastic, fully three-dimensional worlds that react and evolve based on how you play. Music, backgrounds, sounds, special effects—everything, down to the Tetris pieces themselves, pulse, dance, shimmer, and explode in perfect sync with how you're playing.

From deep beneath the ocean to the furthest reaches of outer space and everywhere between, TETRIS® EFFECT's 30-plus stages take players on a wondrous, emotional journey through the universe. The core of the game is still Tetris—one of the most popular puzzle games of all time—but like you've never seen it, or heard it, or felt it before<sup>36</sup>.

When I was considering purchasing the *Tetris Effect*, the above description of a powerful, emotional phenomenon that I had experienced on countless occasions, but did not have a name for, was the ultimate selling point. I have been fascinated with *Tetris* since the first time I played it. I honestly can't remember my first ever gameplay experience, but I do know that I have been playing various versions of it throughout most of my life. A magical feeling, an emotional journey, and feeling the game like I've never felt it before, are all things that I have experienced

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.tetriseffect.game/> last accessed 5 May, 2019.

playing *Tetris Effect*. This is largely due to the intended design of the game. Each level in the journey mode is its own unique experience.

Looking back at the screenshot above (see Figure. 10), I distinctly remember how I felt playing the “Spirit Canyon” level for the first time. The level occurs at the end of a series of journey levels, so I was already hypnotized by the “Tetris Effect”.

#### The Experience of Playing *Tetris Effect*: 2019

*The level begins slowly. The tetrimino blocks appear to be made from wood and the background is almost completely black apart from the dimly lit canyon opening at the top of the screen. The blocks begin by dropping at speed level 3, which is quite slow and relaxing. The goal is to complete 36 full horizontal lines without filling up the playing field. There is the faint sound of drums and indigenous chanting, faint enough that it is initially difficult to make out. Once a tetrimino is lined up, you can drop the block into place by pressing the joystick down on the controller.*

I felt a slight jolt of excitement when I dropped my first block and heard what I can only describe as a rattling thud, the sound of a rain stick being struck against a hard surface.

*Small particles of light slowly begin to appear in the darkness, like sparks from a crackling fire. When the first full horizontal line is completed, there is a powerful, chanting yell, as if the singers collectively celebrate the successful move. As the line disappears, it explodes with sparks that begin to form figures in the darkness. The figures are two “stereotypes” of Indigenous figures, wearing what appear to be ceremonial headdresses, sitting on horses.*

*As more lines are completed, the canyon cave slowly begins to light up as more sparks fly out. The horses rear in triumph as lines are completed and then destroyed. When line 9 is completed,*

*the horses let out a quiet whinny and the drums and chanting seem to get louder. The anticipation begins building.*

I remembered that in previous levels, things would begin to change around the 10<sup>th</sup> line. My palms began sweating as I started seeing the figures more clearly and the music intensified. I feel excited, and a bit scared, anticipating that the level would quickly increase in difficulty.

*At line 12 or 13, the speed level increases to 5. The background becomes lighter and the canyon walls become clearer. The playing field is obviously designed to look like a campfire in the middle of the cave. The fire-spark horses and riders begin to ride around the fire, their shadows clearly seen against the canyon walls. Their movement is slow and deliberate, circling the fire/playing field as if waiting for you to make more progress. A third rider joins in, the chanting changes and gets louder, as do the drums. More sparks are flying, as if fresh wood is being thrown onto the fire. A rhythmic instrumental tune is added over the drums, chanting, and horse whinnying.*

The riders seemed to be circling me as the player and I felt the pressure to impress them. As I completed more lines, the riders appeared to pulse with burning light as the horses began to trot slightly faster. I felt like my gameplay was having an effect on them. I was feeding the fire, fueling the ceremony.

*Once line 25 is completed, the speed increases to level 10 which feels significantly more challenging than level 5. The change happens suddenly. The canyon walls disappear into blackness as the fire-spark riders begin galloping around the playing field fire. Sparks become stars on the black canyon walls. White birds begin flying around, and the riders increase in number, racing in front of the playing field, occasionally semi-obstructing the view. The music*

*intensifies, creating the feeling of being at the climax of an intense action sequence, that feeling of almost winning, almost conquering an epic foe.*

The gameplay became more intense as I made an increasing number of mistakes. The tetriminos just didn't seem to fit and the playing field became increasingly full of incomplete lines and misplaced blocks. An amazing explosion of relief and power washed over me as I completed the final line. The playing field, riders, and blocks exploded into a cascade of sparks, resembling fireworks. My hands were damp with sweat, and I was literally shaking with excitement, delight, and relief. I know that the experience will stay with me for a long time.

Affect, emotion, power, control, and excitement. Perceived Control Over Relative Uncertainty.

#### Tetris: Psychological and Physiological Effects

*In the Wired magazine article This is Your Brain on Tetris (1994), Jeffrey Goldsmith likens Tetris to a "Pharmatronic" or electronic drug. This is not a surprising claim considering the cognitive and developmental psychology research that has been done on the game. Stickgold et al (2000), for example, discovered that amnesic patients who played the game reported seeing intrusive Tetris images at sleep onset, even though they were unable to actively remember playing the game. Okargaki & Frensch (1994) conducted a study with older adolescents and found that playing Tetris improved mental rotation and spatial visualization time. According to Goldsmith:*

The Tetris effect is a biochemical, reductionistic metaphor, if you will, for curiosity, invention, the creative urge. To fit shapes together is to organize, to build, to make deals, to fix, to understand, to fold sheets. All of our mental activities are analogous, each as potentially addictive as the next. How a poet's mind struggles to compose a phrase is



equivalent to how an engineer frets – we hope – over a new concept in bridge suspension, or how a neat freak invents infinite corners to dust, or how anyone gazes into perpetual motions in liquid crystal (Goldsmith, 1994).

When she wasn't frozen with fear, playing *Tetris* to escape the violent outside world, **Baby Sonja** would make up creative new rules for herself while playing the game on her *Gameboy*. The game allowed her to think outside of the box, so to speak. The experience was about more than creativity for the sake of creativity though, as she had plenty of real-world creative outlets including learning the piano, drawing, and enacting detailed adventurous scenarios with her action figures. The ability to be creative in a virtual world, in the safe world of the game, held an appeal that the other activities did not. I now understand that the appeal had to do with the “Tetris effect” as described above. Instead of worrying about her real-world play being violently interrupted, she was able to gain a semblance of control.

Goldsmith's use of the pharmacological analogy rings true to me. I currently use anti-anxiety medication when my brain is unable to fight the fears that were ingrained into my brain as a child. There are times when my anxiety creates a predictable chaos that becomes almost impossible to control. During these episodes, I affectively feel that I am in danger. While I may be consciously aware that I am safe from harm in my temporary office on the University of Alberta campus, the noisy construction is starting to trigger a fight or flight response in me. I am not necessarily afraid of anything, but my body is starting to pump me full of chemicals that are causing my hands to quiver and my startle response to increase. My office door is closed, but the sound of someone, across the hall in the kitchen, presumably stirring something in a mug (\*clink, clink\*) is causing me to jump. In this situation, I am embracing the autonomic response and am willing to tolerate it for autoethnographic purposes. If I am sitting at home trying to relax

however, and this feeling begins to overtake me, the medication calms my system and allows me to return to a level of calm safety.

*There are a plethora of studies and books on the various alterations in the sympathetic nervous system responses of individuals with PTSD. For example, Williamson et al (2015) talk about how maladaptive autonomic responses in people with PTSD can lead to accelerated aging due an unregulated, chronic, and situationally inappropriate “fight or flight” response. The following description is quite apt for our discussion here:*

PTSD may be understood as a deficit in autonomic adaptation that is often expressed as an incongruity between physiological state and environmental demands ([Williamson et al., 2013](#)). In the appropriate environment, a fight or flight state is adaptive. However, in environments that normally should be considered safe (e.g., sitting in an office or trying to sleep in one’s bedroom), such a state is maladaptive...Although an acute shift to a defensive physiological state can be an appropriate and effective response to environmental demands, a chronic fight or flight state is damaging. This damage includes metabolic, immunologic, and cardiovascular effects. Also, the psychological effects include impairment of close relationships with other humans (Williamson et al, 2015).

Taking my medication on an ‘as needed’ basis allows me to regain control when I need it the most. **Baby Sonja** did not have access to any medication. Instead she turned to games, especially puzzle games, particularly *Tetris*, to provide some protection against her chronically aroused state. For some reason, playing the piano, drawing, or playing with physical toys did not provide the relief she needed. While her brain was focused on something in the real-world, she was ALWAYS in a defensive physiological state. Video games like *Tetris* forced her to focus, to breathe, and to immerse herself in the experience. When playing *Tetris* at speed level 9, there

was no time to stare at the closed bedroom door, waiting for mom to burst in at any moment. When playing by rules that she created, **Baby Sonja** had control over something, and she wasn't going to give it up.

In addition to the anti-anxiety medication, I also take a medication every night that has been found to reduce nightmares in patients with PTSD. Due to the fact that I have C-PTSD, I still experience nightmares despite the medication, however my nightmares rarely involve flashbacks of specific traumatic events. I hypothesize that this is partially due to the impact that playing *Tetris* on my Gameboy almost every night had on me.

*As mentioned in Chapter 1, game designer and theorist Jane McGonigal writes about how video games can be used to avoid and overcome PTSD. Her book SuperBetter: The Power of Living Gamefully (2015) is a self-help book that talks about how the use of games aided her recovery after suffering a brain injury. The book draws significantly from McGonigal's SuperBetter blog<sup>37</sup> where she not only wrote about developing the SuperBetter game system, but also interacted with an online community through comments and feedback. The book itself is highly acclaimed and well received, and it does provide a strong argument for using games to overcome adversity and illness. What is most interesting for our purposes here however, is her reference to research conducted by Holmes et al (2009) at Oxford University. Their paper Can Playing the Computer Game "Tetris" Reduce the Build-Up of Flashbacks for Trauma? A Proposal from Cognitive Science (Holmes et al, 2009) presents the findings of a study that argues that the video game Tetris can reduce PTSD flashbacks following exposure to traumatic events.*

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<sup>37</sup> <https://blog.superbetter.com/> last accessed April 25, 2019.

*Holmes et al recruited 40 participants for the study. The participants “completed baseline assessments of mood, trait, anxiety and depression and then viewed traumatic film footage (5).” The researchers re-administered the assessments and then had the participants complete 30 minutes of filler tasks before showing a brief series of reminder images selected from the traumatic film footage. The participants were then randomly assigned to either play Tetris or sit quietly for 10 minutes while verbally recalling any flashback images from the film. For the following week, the participants were asked to keep a daily diary “in which they recorded and described each of their flashbacks, i.e., spontaneously occurring image-based intrusions of the trauma film (5).” Once they returned to the lab, one week after the initial experiment, the participants completed a memory recognition task, as well as the Impact of Events Scale (a clinical measure of PTSD symptomatic response that was adapted to the trauma film used in the experiment). As hypothesized, the participants who played Tetris following exposure to the traumatic images experienced significantly fewer flashbacks compared to those who sat quietly. The Tetris playing participants also scored significantly lower on the PTSD symptomatic response scale than the no-task group.*

*Holmes et al hypothesize that visuospatial games (like Tetris) use the same type of cognitive processing as PTSD flashbacks. Playing the game theoretically interrupts or blocks the formation of involuntary memories, while still leaving the actual memories intact. The participants in the study experienced fewer involuntary intrusive memories, but were able to remember what they saw in the video. Holmes et al refer to visuospatial games as a “cognitive vaccine” that inoculates against PTSD flashbacks by taking up the resources that the brain would usually use to form involuntary, intrusive memories.*

It is entirely reasonable to link my lack of event specific nightmares with the fact that **Baby Sonja** had access to a portable *Tetris* game that she would often play right before going to sleep. Not only did *Tetris* provide her with a sense of control over her constant state of “fight or flight”, but it very likely acted as the above mentioned “cognitive vaccine” against the formulation of intrusive, event-specific nightmares. Out of all the symptoms that I still experience, concrete flashbacks are the least intrusive. My flashbacks involve affective responses to certain visual and spatial triggers, rather than vivid memories of specific abuses.

#### Tetris through Time: Alienation and Appropriation

As of this writing, the most recent Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences took place at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC in 2019. It is a conference that holds a special place in my heart, particularly in the hearts of **Lenoraven** and **Professor Sapach**, as I have presented a paper at the annual meeting of the Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA) every year since 2012. I have elected to include the following story in this chapter, not only because I presented an unfinished version of this chapter at CGSA, but because I was staying in the Lower Mainland of BC, where I grew up. This year presented a unique challenge, as I decided to stay with my mom who had recently moved from New Westminister, BC, to Surrey, BC. To clarify, this “decision” was primarily made due to a guilty obligation. Mother’s Day and her birthday had recently passed, and she needed help setting some things up in her new apartment. The “decision” was also a financially driven one, as I couldn’t afford a hotel closer to the conference.

To set the stage, I want to briefly reiterate some things mentioned in earlier chapters. My mom and dad were separated when I was an infant. I spent every second weekend with my dad in

Surrey, and the rest of the time with my mom in New Westminster. Dad passed away suddenly on September 30, 2005. I had not spoken to him for 4 years at that point. It was devastating. I have visited both New Westminster and Surrey on various occasions since he passed away. His sister and her family still live in Surrey, an approximate 15-minute drive from where my dad's apartment was, and I love visiting them. I have actively avoided spending time near his old apartment building, primarily to avoid the triggers associated with the guilt of never having been able to tell him I loved him before he died.

Visiting mom in New Westminster has always been a struggle for me, as she was the primary source of my C-PTSD, and the entire town of New Westminster is a reminder of the abuse, neglect, and constant fear. Anytime I planned a visit in the past, it would be relatively short. I knew I would be triggered, and I knew it would be a struggle, so I made sure to focus all of my attention on healing and self-care. This year, with Congress and with mom's recent move, everything was different.

When mom chose her new apartment, she had limited options due to the expense of living in BC. She is on a fixed income and there were very few places that she could afford. She did not know, until I arrived, that she had inadvertently moved into an apartment building one block away from my dad's old apartment. I was prepared before I arrived, as I had seen her address and knew about the relative proximity. My childhood worlds had collided. The source of my C-PTSD had moved into the neighbourhood that I had considered to be a sanctuary.

Visiting my dad as a child and teenager was an escape from mom. Surrey is across the river from New Westminster, and crossing that bridge was a transition. I was leaving fear behind me and entering a safe place. Sure, my dad was also an alcoholic, but he was a calm one. He would get drunk, play video games and board games with me, and then pass out. The only thing I was

afraid of at his place was how loud his snoring would get. For context, Figure 12 below shows the approximate location of mom's place in New Westminster (red font) and dad's place in Surrey (yellow font) which were approximately 11km apart.

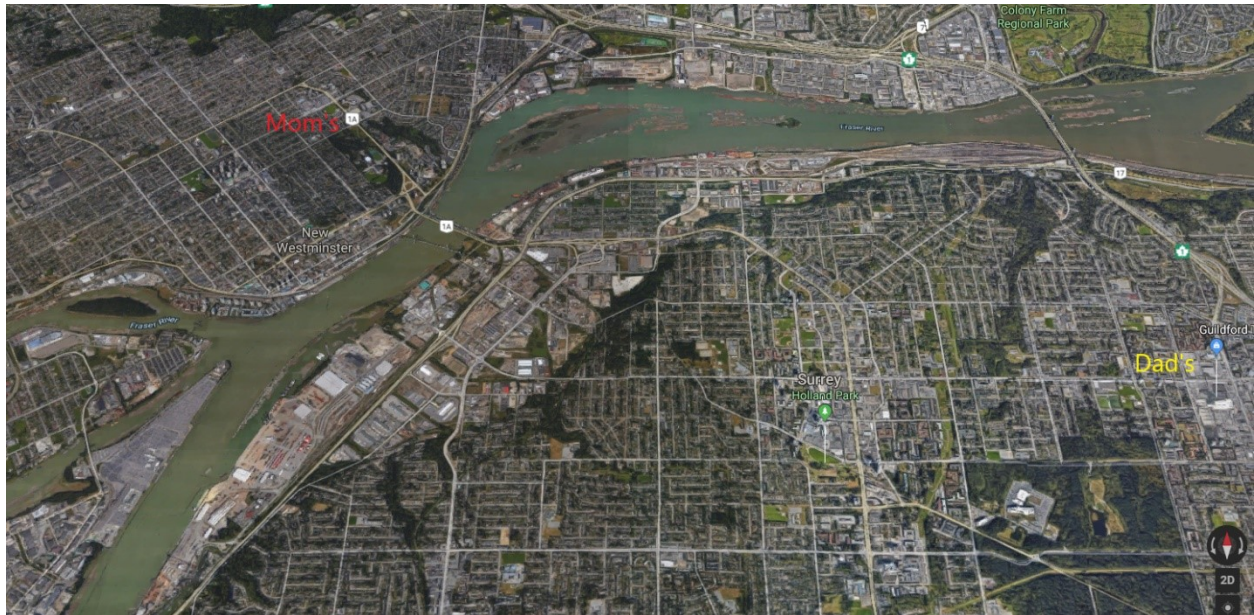


Figure 12: New Westminster, BC and Surrey, BC. Google Maps, June 27, 2019.

<https://www.google.com/maps/@49.136075,-122.8712461,8823a,35y,37.98t/data=!3m1!1e3>

This year was the first time I experienced fear crossing the bridge from New Westminster into Surrey. Everything looked so familiar, and yet so different. I took the Skytrain from Vancouver International Airport to Surrey, and as I crossed the Fraser River, sitting on a train that I had ridden hundreds of times as a child, I was instantly conflicted. Everything I saw told me that I was just going to visit my dad again for another weekend of games and peace. My mind, on the other hand, told me that I was going to be spending two weeks with mom, confined in a small apartment. Dad was gone and I knew it. Through the window of the train, I could see the exact spot on the road where dad had his heart attack and died. Tears welled up, but I quickly shut them down knowing there were far more difficult experiences on the horizon. I took a taxi from

the Skytrain station to mom's apartment and we took the same road that dad used to take when he would pick me up at the very same Skytrain station. Some buildings had changed, and the trees were definitely bigger, but everything was familiar. Dissociation finally began kicking in as my mind went into protective mode. I remained partially dissociated and in a constant state of fight or flight for the rest of the trip.

The conference itself was a major struggle. I had a 1-hour and 45-minute commute each way, every day of the conference. The commute was actually a blessing as it allowed me to fine tune my presentations (I gave a second talk at a relational sociology panel) and to centre my thoughts. A large part of the trip involved taking the Skytrain back across the river, through New Westminster, and past many familiar stops on the way to downtown Vancouver. The Skytrain trip itself was a blessing and a curse; a peaceful trip alone where I could get some work done, and a severely triggering trip down memory lane. During the conference I was fighting to be **Professor Sapach** with **Baby Sonja** riding on my shoulders, pulling my hair and slapping my face as she wanted me to both remember everything and run away as fast as possible. They didn't get along. I was so dissociated that I could no longer relate to any specific persona. They were muddled, fighting with each other, attempting to fit in and please other people, and trying to wrap their heads around the confusing, frightening, nostalgic, experience of being back in BC while also longing to enjoy the conference as much as **Professor Sapach** has every other year.

*To reiterate a central point made earlier, Rahel Jaeggi (2014) describes alienation as a relation of relationlessness to oneself, to the world, and to others. The above described battle between the various personas serves as a concrete example of the connection between C-PTSD and alienation. Jaeggi states:*



If, as I have claimed, alienation is a relation of relationlessness rather than the mere absence of a relation, then giving an account of this relation will be especially complicated: as clear as it is, on the one hand, that we are somehow antecedently connected to ourselves, it is, for precisely this reason, just as unclear how it is possible for this connection to break down. (That is the source of the air of paradox that surrounds this topic on all sides.) The thesis, then, is that a relation to oneself is a relation that can be disturbed in various ways. And in this relation, too, we find the feature mentioned previously: when alienated, we are alienated from something that is simultaneously our own and alien, we are involved in relations in which we alienate ourselves, we are in a certain sense at once perpetrator and victim (1352).

*The paradox mentioned by Jaeggi is the very thing that makes writing this dissertation equally powerful and challenging. Sonja was unable to relate to the world around her as it simultaneously felt familiar and different. She was unable to reconcile the relation to herself as the person she is, and is striving to become, was highly disconnected from the persona(s) who were emotionally and physiologically reacting to the circumstances.*

What makes the paradox particularly powerful for me is that I was fully aware of my disturbed relations. I understood, logically, what I was experiencing. Flashbacks, dissociation, and physiological responses to child abuse were being triggered by the environment and the circumstances. This knowledge did not resolve the problem however, as the **Baby Sonja** part of me would not allow the triggers to be ignored. With each persona in conflict, I was, as Jaeggi noted above, “at once perpetrator and victim.” I was in no actual danger. Mom has mellowed and had developed an uncharacteristic ‘eager to please’ attitude. I was uncomfortable with the commute and with my lack of solitude, but I could safely leave at any point if danger arose. I

was finally in control of the situation (my relation to the world around me was my own), and yet I still felt out of control, certain that danger was right around the corner (my relation to the world around me was alienated). I was in Vancouver to present papers at a conference, something I was both familiar and comfortable with. At the same time however, I was insecure and uncomfortable with myself. **Professor Sapach** was with me, eager to work hard at the conference, to network, and to spend time with friends and colleagues, but I could not reconcile my relationship to her and struggled to recognize her in my thoughts and actions.

*Alienation is a complex term, as outlined in the previous chapter. Jaeggi's definition, as has been argued earlier, is one that allows for a relational understanding of being disconnected from things that one is, in fact, closely connected to. While C-PTSD is a psychological illness that exhibits emotional, psychological, and physiological symptoms, it is also fundamentally a disconnect from oneself, from others, and from the environment. Both alienation and C-PTSD develop from long-term exposure to adverse experiences. Both develop out of dysfunctional systems. These systems are not easy to specify, as each experience is an individual one.*

*Alienation may occur, for example, from oppressive bureaucratic and capitalist social systems, or from a lack of shared social norms. C-PTSD may occur from long-term captivity and torture during a war, or from long-term child abuse and neglect. Sonja's description of her experiences in BC clearly demonstrate the psychological causes and effects of her C-PTSD, while also subtly describing alienation inducing and maintaining social systems (poverty, lack of funding to support seniors like her mother, difficulty accessing resources to support alcoholics, etc.)*

*These systemic causes will be explored in later chapters. For now, think through the stories you read (specifically the story above) not only as stories of mental illness, but as stories of alienating sociological systems.*

One thing of note that happened while staying with mom was a chore that she had me do. She had kept one box of things that I had packed up before leaving home in 1999. It was my job to go through the box and to decide what to keep and what to throw away. The contents of the box were varied and relatively unimportant except for a single smaller shoebox that I had tucked inside. To my delight, that shoebox was home to my childhood Gameboy and my small collection of game cartridges. Firmly lodged in its rightful place at the top of the Gameboy unit was my original copy of *Tetris*. It was as if I had set it aside, ready to pick-up and play at a moment's notice. I had carefully removed the batteries when I packed it away, keeping the sacred hand-held console safe from harm. It was a glorious moment. I instantly grabbed 4 AA batteries, popped open the back of the console, put the batteries into their rightful places, and then turned it on. The familiar green and black "NINTENDO" logo floated down the screen, followed by the "all rights reserved" notice, and suddenly, there it was, the title screen from my childhood. (see figure 13)



Figure 13: Original Gameboy Tetris Starting Screen. Image downloaded from CGMagazine, June 27, 2019. <https://www.cgmagonline.com/2015/06/09/first-six-video-game-hall-of-fame-titles/>

I think it is important to note here that I had actually purchased a Gameboy console, with 3 games from my childhood, including *Tetris*, in 2018 at a retro video game store down the road from where I am currently living. I brought that Gameboy to BC with me as I was going to show it to the audience during my CGSA talk. As I was sitting at the airport in Edmonton, waiting to board the flight to Vancouver, I wrote the following passage:

As I write this at the airport, I just played a short game of Tetris on my Gameboy – and it was instantly immersive. I became slightly socially self-conscious about playing such an old system with a computer sitting in my lap. But it was very easy to be warped right back into my

childhood. This is even more relevant as I am waiting to board a flight to Vancouver, where I will be staying with my mom. Having the Gameboy, and Tetris, with me on this trip is amazingly symbolic. I anticipate the anxiety involved with staying with her for almost two weeks, and having the Gameboy there to ‘comfort me’ while also triggering me, is going to be fascinating. Little did I know at the time that I would find MY Gameboy. The one I had held in my quivering hands while trying to calm my fight or flight response as **Baby Sonja**.

Playing it at the apartment with mom watching, was actually quite odd. She was happy that I had found it, and seemed interested in my attachment to it. But it wasn’t for her, it was for me, so I quickly turned it off and resumed cleaning out the box. I did however, proudly share MY Gameboy with my CGSA audience. At the beginning of my talk, I held MY Gameboy up high above my head and proclaimed “this is MY Gameboy!” I went on to gush about it for a moment, running my hands over the scratches on the case, feeling the buttons under my thumbs, and talking about how connected I felt to it and the game cartridge it currently held. It was an amazingly intimate moment that I was able to share with other video game lovers. It also helped ground me throughout the rest of my talk, as I was extremely triggered and constantly dissociated at that point in the trip. I felt disconnected from everyone and everything around me, but that Gameboy, and that game, gave me something solid, something real, something I could connect to and with.

*Reconciling the relations of relationlessness characteristic of alienation occurs through a process of productive appropriation according to Jaeggi. She argues that alienation can be “understood as an impairment of acts of appropriation (or as a deficient praxis of appropriation) (1111).” Appropriation is a process, a relational action that transforms each actor/place/thing involved in the interaction. We can think here of the fundamental premise of*

*Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) wherein every interaction is an exchange of meaning, a process that forms and transforms “human conduct” (Blumer, 8).*

*Using Sonja’s experiences growing up in BC as an example, every interaction that she had with her mother involved an impairment of appropriation. Every abusive interaction incorporated fear into her relation to her mother, changing the meaning of the concept of family. Every act of bullying reinforced the shame and hopelessness at the core of her relation to herself and to others. The interactions that Sonja experienced with others and the world around her continued to alter her understanding of herself, reinforcing her self-identity as a worthless, isolated, powerless burden. The ingrained meanings of “staying with mom”, “visiting BC”, and “going to Congress” severely impacted how she reacted during her trip. The first two, mom and BC, represented a complete lack of power, agency, freedom, and control. The third, Congress, represented the opposite, strength, control, independence, and confidence.*

I admittedly continued my impaired acts of appropriation during the trip to Congress. As I described above, **Baby Sonja** was riding my shoulders the whole time, leaving me struggling to just survive the ordeal. It was an odd experience, having two very different parts of myself, each attempting to occupy familiar spaces, while unable (and perhaps unwilling) to recognize, or reconcile with, the other. **Baby Sonja** and **Professor Sapach** were never more clearly alien to each other. They did, however, have one thing in common, one thing they could both control and understand – *Tetris*.

*Jaeggi describes a tension in the idea of appropriation, “between the subject’s sovereignty and its dependence.” (1167) The visit to BC forced this tension to the foreground. **Baby Sonja** represents complete dependence on her fear response, her subservience to her mother, and her need to dissociate from the world around her. On the other hand, **Professor Sapach**, as the*

*idealized future persona, represents complete sovereignty over herself, her work, and her environment. Each of them represents an extreme that cannot stand alone as a reified identity. Negotiation, exchange of meanings, learning, and incorporation is required for successful appropriation. Stated more clearly by Jaeggi:*

Appropriation is not a matter of making a choice from a disengaged or objective standpoint, nor is it a matter of merely rejecting or agreeing to the result of an action...it is a process in which one is *involved*...Appropriation is a process of learning and experience in which the relation between freedom and uncontrollability is negotiated (1658).

*The Gameboy, specifically the game Tetris became a mediator that allowed the two personas to interact in a relational way. The console itself was an object that both personas had a physical connection to. The sense of touch, of holding an object that had existed across time, initiated the negotiation. Playing the game itself allowed the conflicting, alienated subjects to share control over a mutually understood set of rules and goals.*

It was as if holding the Gameboy, and playing *Tetris*, allowed me to lift **Baby Sonja** off of **Professor Sapach's** shoulders. I can practically picture them sitting together, sharing the game, smiling and feeling safe with each other. These two parts of me, that I have fought so hard to keep apart, playing a game that has meaning and value to them both. **Baby Sonja** willing to embrace the control embodied by **Professor Sapach**, and **Professor Sapach** equally willing to embrace the unpredictable nature of the world that **Baby Sonja** inhabits.

## Conclusion

As far as casual, puzzle games go, *Tetris* is not the only one that I have turned to in the past. It is, however, the one game that feels like it has a thread throughout my life. I can think about playing the Gameboy version, and remember being **Baby Sonja** sitting on the floor of my bedroom. If I find an old arcade machine at a bar or an arcade, I can play a few games and remember how it felt to be standing alone in that arcade as a kid, desperate to make the fun last while spending as few quarters as possible. If I play a knock-off version of the game, like one of many that could be downloaded for Windows in the late 1990's and early 2000's, I can feel myself sitting at my desk at the Royal Military College of Canada (the place I ran to after moving away from mom), desperately trying to overcome the extreme anxiety and depression that I was experiencing at the time. Playing the Nintendo Entertainment System version of *Tetris* makes me think of playing the game with my partner in the basement of our house in Nova Scotia. We would have some drinks, and play retro games together, smiling together, sharing nostalgic memories about gaming with one another, and trying to out-do each other at *Tetris*. I even have *Tetris* fridge magnets, purchased when I first moved to Edmonton, alone, to start my PhD. It is comforting to have them available to fiddle around with. If I am talking on the phone, waiting for water to boil, or just pacing around the apartment unsure of what to do, I can focus my attention on the magnets as a way of grounding myself and triggering affective memories of control and focus. Playing *Tetris Effect* these days is magical in that it allows me to experience child-like wonder, while engaging my brain and hands enough to cope with traumatic thoughts and struggles. During particularly stressful times, I can find comfort in the complete immersion. Relaxation comes, in VR, from my ability to block out my apartment full of responsibilities. I can engage with and sooth my inner child.



*Tetris* in its various forms over time and experience, has created connecting points, mediators, for my personas. **Sonja** can connect to **Baby Sonja** strongly when playing Tetris. **Professor Sapach, Lenoraven, and Sonja** all gain access to meanings, emotions, and experiences that **Baby Sonja** fights so hard to keep hidden.

*Tetris, among a plethora of other games that will be discussed over the next couple of chapters, acts as an interface between competing, and alienated, personas from throughout Sonja's life. From a computing or game studies perspective, an interface is a shared boundary between things like the player and the game, or the software and the hardware. From a sociological perspective, an interface also refers to a social boundary. In the book Developmental Sociology: Actor Perspectives, Norman Long (2001) describes a social interface as an intersection point between levels of social organization, social fields, and lifeworlds. Social interfaces are places full of discontinuities and discrepancies. Returning to a theme from Chapter 1, perhaps the interface can be viewed as a location of 'lapses and absences', of unpredictability, ruptures, and breaks. As argued by Kristine Jørgensen in Gameworld Interfaces (2013), interfaces can be seen as places of liminality, of transition and transformation.*

*For Sonja, Tetris is a game that provides the interface required for the for successful appropriation of relations across time, places, and personas.*

Having so many temporal, geographical, and affective relationships to the game allows me to mediate interactions between the various identities that I remember and write through. Each identity has played *Tetris* in a variety of situations, and they can relate to each other through this uniquely memorable shared experience. The fact that *Tetris* has scientifically researched beneficial effects on memory and recovery from PTSD only reinforces how transformational it has been in my life, and throughout this dissertation.

*The next chapter will involve a detailed analysis of the 'Let's Play' transcripts of all of the games I played, including Tetris. It is in these transcripts that the liminal nature of the game, as an interface between and across time, place, experience, and emotion, will become abundantly clear.*

## CHAPTER 5: The Role of Video Games

### INTRODUCTION: COVID-19, the pandemic that stopped the world

*Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, released on, March 20, 2020, was a game that many people had been anticipating, especially with the COVID-19 global pandemic resulting in quarantine and isolation. The *Animal Crossing* series is a social/life simulation series where players live a virtual life in virtual towns, with cute (Kawaii) animal villagers. “Make friends with adorable animal villagers and have fun creating a world of your own in the *Animal Crossing* series.” (Official website [animal-crossing.com](http://animal-crossing.com)) It is not the least bit surprising that in a time of social distancing and uncertainty, a game like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, became a widely discussed and coveted game.

Having recently cancelled the annual CGSA (Canadian Game Studies Association) meeting at Congress 2020 (following the cancellation of an in-person Congress overall), the president of CGSA decided it would be a good idea to create a #CGSAnimalcrossing thread on Twitter, encouraging members of the association to connect through their experiences with the new *Animal Crossing* game. Not many people actually posted using the hashtag, but it turns out that it wasn't needed, as *Animal Crossing* mania swept the internet. The title and subheading of an article by the *New York Times*, posted on April 7, 2020, says a lot: “Why *Animal Crossing* Is the Game for the Coronavirus Moment: With the world in the grip of a pandemic, the wildly popular game is a conveniently timed piece of whimsy, particularly for millennials” (Khan, 2020).

I, surprisingly (perhaps not so much) am not overly interested in the series. I have tried playing games in the series in the past, but I just don't get hooked. My lack of interest seems to stem

from my lack of desire to participate in “mundane” aspects of social life (remembering birthdays, impressing villagers, managing multiple social relationships). *Stardew Valley*, a game I greatly enjoyed, had aspects of farm management and exploration that I loved. The thing I disliked about *Stardew Valley* was the requirement to make friends with villagers by attending parties, remembering their favourite things, etc. Other games, where there are options to be intensely and interactively social, often don’t interest me. Even playing a game like those in *The Sims* series, usually results in me creating a grumpy loner, more interested in managing their own life without the intrusion of other people.

As a result of my C-PTSD, I am not feeling socially isolated as I write this paragraph on March 20, 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. I am afraid, and understand how alone I am, but I do not crave parties or large gatherings. The games I will choose to play will likely be large, open world, exploration and adventure games without the requirement for engaging social interaction. Thinking about role-playing games like *Skyrim*, I can tolerate interactions with villagers and quest givers, because they do not require maintenance. They can give me a quest and I can leave for hours, days, weeks, or forever, and they will not chase me down. I don’t feel the pressure to impress the NPCs as I do in games like *Stardew Valley*.

**Baby Sonja** is not good at social interaction management. She understands the rules, but does not feel emotionally connected or invested in the overall ‘game’ of socializing. She prefers small groups of people, primarily one-on-one interactions with people she finds particularly interesting and/or attractive. She has no desire to join large groups. I don’t think she ever learned the skills needed to keep her energy up during extended social gatherings. She doesn’t keep in touch with her family very often, no exchanging cards or gifts or anything like that. In fact, mom is the only one she truly keeps in touch with over long periods of time.

As the pandemic unfolds, my desire for social interaction only extends to a few select people. I am sure I will eventually miss larger gatherings, like those that occur during karaoke or conferences (I do love Congress and am sad that it is not happening this year). Perhaps after playing enough solo *Minecraft*, my social instinct will take over? My need to explore relationships with new people/creatures will develop? Then, and only then, will I purchase *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and play.

Let's talk about how my C-PTSD is reacting to the COVID-19 situation on March 20, 2020. I am afraid (I think everyone is in some way or another). I am not afraid of the virus itself mind you. If I catch it and it kills me, then so be it. If I catch it and it is benign, so be it. I am engaging in social isolation for the sake of the immunocompromised (a category I may or may not fall into as someone 2+ months out of surgery). I am an introvert to begin with, so staying home and staying isolated comes fairly natural to me. I am afraid of larger, inevitable outcomes. I am afraid of the unemployment and desperation that is going to overwhelm society. I am afraid of indifference to socially agreed upon rules, and the seemingly inevitable spike in violence that is on its way. I sat in the bathtub last night, staring at the tile wall, clutching a facecloth to my chest, thinking about nothing. I was dissociating. I am finding myself doing this more and more as the situation continues to evolve. I have no real control over what I perceive as inevitable fear, violence, poverty, and even death. Lack of control over perceived certainty.

I have not played a video game since this all began – other than a “merge 3” style game on my tablet. This game *Merge Dragons!* involves combining objects by dragging them across the screen and grouping them together. Less valuable and less useful objects merge into more valuable and more useful objects. There are puzzles that can be completed, levels to overcome,

special event maps, and a home map where you collect various dragons who harvest objects for you to merge. The game itself is fairly mindless, and yet it presents an oddly soothing challenge. Thinking about the types of games I play and the various ways in which they help me, I want to refer back to *Tetris* as discussed in Chapter 4. Following the logic that puzzle games like *Tetris* can provide relief or cushioning from traumatic flashbacks, it would seem that I have turned to *Merge Dragons!* for a similar effect. I started playing it while in recovery from my oophorectomy (January 14, 2020) and have turned to it more frequently during the recent events of COVID-19. These puzzle games are soothing in that they require focus and attention, while allowing dissociation to also vaguely occur. To clarify – I can play *Merge Dragons!* mindlessly, while feeling separated from myself and the world around me. As these games seem to work best immediately after a traumatic event (as discussed in Chapter 4), it is no surprise that I am fixated on *Merge Dragons!* right now. I am scared, I feel actively threatened.

As a child, the majority of my in-depth gaming occurred at my father’s house or elsewhere – not at my mom’s apartment or at HIS place. Their dwellings were reserved for escapist reading, soothing puzzle games, and arts and crafts. The ability to play other games while at dad’s house is what gave me the other benefits of video games. *Super Mario Bros* and other platforming action games allowed me to explore new worlds while learning that failure was ok. I could die, and then start again. *Shining Force* and *Final Fantasy*<sup>38</sup> were role playing games where I could practice leadership, social interactions, resource management, and the exploration of the unknown. It was these games that gave me the tools to survive and grow.

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<sup>38</sup> I did not play these games during my data gathering as they are long, and slow, and I know that I would simply zone out and immerse fully in them. Additionally, I did not have the correct connectors to record *Sega Genesis* games, which did play a big role in my childhood as well. In retrospect, I wish I had played at least one of them as they are highly relevant. Instead, I selected games that have a similar effect, but were better for recording purposes: *Skyrim*, *Heroes of Might and Magic 3*, and *World of Warcraft*.

*As I have worked through analyzing the data collected during the Let's Plays described in Chapter 2, it has become apparent that different games work in different ways when it comes to the complex interweaving of emotions, symptoms, and coping mechanisms involved with my C-PTSD. I want to use this chapter to present my findings in the form of quotations drawn from the transcripts of my Let's Plays. What follows is a description of five different game play themes, presented under headings that address different aspects of C-PTSD and, by extension (as argued in Chapter 3), alienation. The alienation resolving themes are presented in brackets and follow Jaeggi's relational conception. I present the themes in bold, followed by a brief list of relevant C-PTSD symptoms from Chapter 3 (Herman, 1992). These symptoms are ones that have been reduced for me through my game-play experiences – again, I am not proposing a cure here, only the possibility that certain types of game-play can help to ameliorate symptoms. It is important that I reemphasize a point that I have made in earlier chapters as well; I am not offering treatments or magic pills that will definitively solve or cure C-PTSD or alienation. What the following game play themes represent are the ways in which different types of games and styles of game play have impacted my own journey.*

*These themes are:*

**1) Games as Providing Links through Time (Relations to Memories)** – Alterations in consciousness, amnesia for traumatic events, dissociative episodes, derealisation.

**2) Games as Tools for Mediating Trauma and Ameliorating Flashbacks (Active Relation of Self-Care)** - Alterations in consciousness, dissociative episodes, derealisation, alterations in self-perception, sense of helplessness or paralysis of initiative, repeated failures of self-protection, alterations in affect regulation.

**3) Games as Places of Navigating Uncertainty and Learning Control (Relations to the World Around Us)** – Alterations in systems of meaning, loss of sustaining faith, sense of hopelessness and despair, unrealistic attribution of total power to perpetrator, shame, guilt, self-blame, sense of helplessness or paralysis of initiative.

**4) Games as Places to Develop Social Solidarity (Relations to Others)** – Alterations in relations with others, isolation and withdrawal, disruption in intimate relationships, persistent distrust, sense of complete difference from others, sense of defilement or stigma.

**5) Games as Places of Identity Transformation, Integration, and Appropriation (Relations of Self-Other-World)** – Alterations in affect regulation, alterations in consciousness, alterations in self-perception, alterations in perception of perpetrator, alterations in relations with others, alterations in systems of meaning.

*The transcript quotes will be presented as spoken and transcribed, with all of the grammatical errors, repeated words, and slang intact. As noted in Chapter 2, transcription involved not only words, but relevant actions and reactions represented as words surrounded by three asterisks on each side, for example: \*\*\*typing furiously\*\*\*. The voices used throughout the transcripts are varied and may represent any of the personas described in Chapter 1. The convention of using italics to represent the active academic voice of **Professor Sapach** will continue and I will interject with academic references or important interpretations when required. There is, however, an intentional form of vagueness associated with the transcript excerpts. I provide only sketchy analytical comments and reflections, and do so intentionally to encourage reflection and allow for varied interpretations. Dates are presented following each quote to provide you with an idea of when each recording occurred. There were times over the 14 months during which recording occurred when I experienced periods of increased anxiety and dissociation related to*



*events such as my Grandmother passing away (resulting in a visit to my Father's gravesite for the first time), my Mother's birthday (May 9<sup>th</sup>), raising a new puppy (Morrighan), marital issues, and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States (November 9, 2016). My commentary will be included to make certain arguments and provide some context, but I want you to pay attention to your own reactions to what you are reading. Perhaps you will hear the voice of one of the personas, or will notice sudden jumps, breaks, lapses, or absences that tell you more than words alone can say.*

### The Games

*In order to best prepare you to understand the following quotes in relation to the type of game being played, what follows is a brief summary of each game that was played during my Let's Plays. Note that the summaries are very minimal and provided for context only. Links to the game's website or Wikipedia page are provided when possible and the full citations are included in the "Games Cited" section of the bibliography. The games are presented alphabetically for ease of reference as you read through the transcript quotes.*

*Amnesia: The Dark Descent*: A survival horror adventure game where the player guides the character Daniel through a castle. The player must solve puzzles and avoid dangers while paying attention to their own sanity. The sanity is based on a fear of darkness which requires the player to selectively use their limited fuel as a light source to restore sanity. The majority of the game takes place in the dark. There is no combat, but the player is required to run away from shadow monsters that can kill Daniel. I chose to play this game as it represents "sanity", flashbacks, and highly traumatic situations. More relevant, perhaps, is that the character cannot remember his past and must find clues to figure out what happened – similar to my own quest to recall my past during this autoethnography. I played the Windows PC version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amnesia:\\_The\\_Dark\\_Descent](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amnesia:_The_Dark_Descent)

*Baldur's Gate 2*: This is a role playing game based on a fantasy campaign setting from *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. The player designs a main character and controls it along with up to 5 other party members. The adventurers escape dungeons, fight monsters, interact with townsfolk, and are generally free to play how they want. There are moral consequences to certain choices that ultimately impact how the non-player characters and quests evolve in the game. It is a difficult game to play as it involves interacting with a lot of complex elements simultaneously. I played the Windows PC version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baldur%27s\\_Gate\\_II:\\_Shadows\\_of\\_Amn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baldur%27s_Gate_II:_Shadows_of_Amn)

*Bomberman*: A puzzle game that involves navigating a robot named “Bomberman” through a maze full of rock walls while avoiding enemies. The player drops bombs in order to remove rocks and uncover any items or doors underneath. Each level has one item that improves the bombs or robot (for example, increasing the range of the blast, or increasing the running speed of the robot) and one door. The goal is to kill all of the enemies (by hitting them with bomb blasts while avoiding the blasts yourself) and then to find the exit door to move to the next level before the timer runs out. As the game progresses, the enemies become faster and smarter and there are more rocks to destroy. I played the NES version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bomberman\\_\(1983\\_video\\_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bomberman_(1983_video_game))

*Civilization V*: This is a turn-based strategy game where the player represents the leader of a civilization (certain nation or ethnic group). VERY loosely based on real life, the goal of the game is to achieve a victory condition (based on military conquest, or cultural advancement, or scientific progress, etc.) The basic game begins with the player founding a starting city with

access to “primitive” abilities. Through scientific research and exploration, the civilization advances and the player can choose to build world wonders, support buildings, and units designed for war, trade, or exploration. How the civilization advances and impacts the world is up to the player. I played the Windows PC version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization\\_V](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization_V)

*Hearthstone*: A strategy card game based largely on the mythology of *World of Warcraft*. The player collects cards, often through purchasing card packs and game expansions, builds different decks, and then challenges other players to do battle. Battle consists of laying down cards that represent minions, spells, or weapons, and using them to attempt to hurt your opponent enough to do 30 points of damage. There are many different game modes, but the one I played most often was Ranked Mode, where I would be randomly paired with an evenly levelled, relatively anonymous, player. There is a limited ability to communicate, and interaction primarily occurs through basic emotes, and through the game play itself. On a personal level, this game is cross platform, so the commentary below comes from recordings done while playing on the PC, however, the majority of my play occurred on my phone while outside having a cigarette (before I quit smoking, and *Hearthstone*, on January 13, 2020). <https://playhearthstone.com/en-us/new-to-hearthstone?>

*Heroes of Might and Magic 3*: A turn-based strategy game where the player controls a number of heroes along with an army of creatures based on the civilization type that they choose. Gameplay consists of exploring a map, gathering resources, growing a powerful stronghold, and defeating other heroes from other civilizations. There are elements of creature collection as the player can largely decide which creatures make up the army. Battle occurs via a grid (like a chess board)

where players move groups of creatures in strategic ways to attack and kill enemy creatures. I played the Windows PC version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroes\\_of\\_Might\\_and\\_Magic\\_III](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroes_of_Might_and_Magic_III)

*Maniac Mansion*: A point-and-click graphic adventure game with elements of horror and humour. The player takes control of 3 teenagers, Dave and 2 of his 6 friends in an attempt to rescue Dave's girlfriend from a mad scientist who has been enslaved by a meteor. Similar to *Uninvited*, the player interacts with objects, including non-player characters, in order to solve puzzles and advance the game. I played the NES version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maniac\\_Mansion#Nintendo\\_Entertainment\\_System\\_version](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maniac_Mansion#Nintendo_Entertainment_System_version)

*Skyrim*: An action role-playing game that is the 5<sup>th</sup> in a series of games taking place in the *Elder Scrolls* universe. The player awakens on a wagon on the way to an execution. Before the execution, the player can design their character in great detail, altering their race, physical appearance, and other attributes. A dragon interrupts the execution and the player escapes and is guided through a 'tutorial' escape scene. The player is then set free to their own devices. There is a main quest to follow, and hundreds of side quests to explore. The player can join different factions, both political and skill-based, or they can simply explore the massive open world. The player is free to choose how they act, fight, and live. It is basically a life-simulator in a fantasy based world. I personally own copies of the game on the PlayStation 4, PC, and Nintendo Switch. I recorded my play on the Windows PC version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Elder\\_Scrolls\\_V:\\_Skyrim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Elder_Scrolls_V:_Skyrim)

*Super Mario Bros. & Super Mario Bros. 3*: I have grouped these two games together as the general gameplay is relatively similar, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> game adding more levels, more power ups,

and more enemies. This definitive platforming game series has a simple goal – rescue the princess from the monster. Mario (and his brother Luigi if you play a 2-player game) have to navigate side scrolling levels by moving to the right, avoiding or killing enemies, and jumping over obstacles (flying and swimming also come into play in certain cases). You are given a finite number of lives. If you die, you have to restart at the beginning of the level (or the middle if you have reached a certain distance) and you get to try again. The enemies and jumps are always in the same place, as are the collectable coins and the power ups. If you lose all of your lives, the game is over and you have to start again. Both games were played on the NES.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super\\_Mario\\_Bros.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Mario_Bros.)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super\\_Mario\\_Bros.\\_3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Mario_Bros._3)

*Tetris*: This game is described in great detail in Chapter 4. The version I played when recording the Let's Plays was the NES (Nintendo Entertainment System) version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetris\\_\(NES\\_video\\_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetris_(NES_video_game))

*The Three Stooges*: This is a mini-game centered game where the player controls Moe, Larry, and Curly (the 'main' Three Stooges). The overarching narrative is that the Stooges are trying to earn enough money to save an orphanage from foreclosure. Mini-games are selected from a partially random list represented as newspaper ads the Stooges are pointing to (the player can try to time the finger movement to select specific mini-games). The mini-games are loosely based on classic episodes from the show and the goal is to do as well as possible in each mini-game to earn money toward the end goal. I played the NES version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Three\\_Stooges\\_\(video\\_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three_Stooges_(video_game))

TRAUMA: This interactive fiction/adventure game was developed as part of a thesis project by Polish programmer Krystian Majewski and is based on a woman who has suffered a physiological trauma and is struggling to navigate through various dreamscapes during her stay in the hospital. The player uses a point-and-click mechanic to navigate the dreamscapes in order to find photographs that provide hints about the character's life. I chose to play the game for obvious reasons – it is about trauma. More specifically, I was particularly intrigued by the use of dreams as the setting of the game. One of the most prominent symptoms/effects of my C-PTSD is vivid, meaning-rich, but often difficult to interpret, nightmares. When I use the word 'nightmare', I am referring to an intense dream that triggers a powerful, primarily negative emotional reaction. While acknowledging that dreams are an intensely personal experience, anecdotal evidence leads me to assume that when most people think of nightmares, they are thinking of particularly gruesome or scary images and events where something that they value (be it their own safety, or the safety of people or things they care for) is threatened. Granted, I cannot observe the dreams of others, and am drawing my assumption from cultural stereotypes and the self-reporting of others, however after reading the game description and noting that it avoids the term 'nightmares' in favour of 'dreams', I wondered if it was due to a similar assumption about the common experience of the 'nightmare'. With this game, I was curious to see if the dreams depicted in any way resembled my own experience of having nightmares. In the end, I felt less of a connection to the game as I had hoped, though I did experience a sense of understanding that the dreams were a product of trauma, though the actual experience of playing the dreams did not resemble my own experience of having nightmares.

Additionally, I was curious to see if the game dealt with one particular incident of trauma, the car accident that led to the loss of the protagonist's parents and left her in the hospital, or if it would

attempt to portray deeper layers of trauma that are unlocked through an exploration of the dreams. When thinking about larger social trauma, I am not interested in particular incidents (be it an individual car accident or 9/11) but about the difficult to define, multi-faceted, complex, non-temporal layers of traumatic experiences that have developed into the alienation that is experienced by society. I thought it would be interesting and insightful to see if this game could be read as an interpretation of trauma that extends beyond the individual protagonist and her story. As with the dreams, I could feel the trauma-induced environment, but the experiences of the protagonist were her own in the end. I was able to take parts of the experience and overlay it with my own understanding of trauma, but having experienced a radically different type of trauma personally left me wishing there was something deeper to pull from the experience.

I played the Windows PC version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trauma\\_\(video\\_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trauma_(video_game))

*Uninvited*: A horror themed adventure game. The player, an unnamed hero, must find their way through a haunted, abandoned house to rescue a family member. Along the way they face ghosts, demons, poison gas, zombies, and other death traps. The player needs to solve puzzles by interacting with various objects. In some cases, they need to collect and combine objects from throughout the house in order to overcome an obstacle. The player is given no real advice or specific directions, other than to explore and figure things out. It falls into the “point and click” adventure genre which involves moving a cursor over objects and then clicking to interact. I played the NES version.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uninvited\\_\(video\\_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uninvited_(video_game))

*World of Warcraft*: This game was the focus of my Master's thesis and was discussed in Chapter 1. It is an open world massively multiplayer online role-playing game where players create a character and solve quests. Player choices are plentiful and players are free to play the game how they choose. There are combat elements to the main quest, though there are also activities like fishing, gathering herbs, and general exploration. Played on Windows PC.

<https://worldofwarcraft.com/en-us/>

*Zelda 2: The Adventure of Link*: An action-adventure sequel to the highly successful *The Legend of Zelda*. The player controls Link, a boy with a sword and a shield who must explore castles and towns in order to find a cure to save the Princess Zelda. There are side-scrolling and role-playing elements to the game. Played on NES.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zelda\\_II:\\_The\\_Adventure\\_of\\_Link](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zelda_II:_The_Adventure_of_Link)

### The Themes

*Playing these games when and how I did, allowed for the games to act as mediators between my personas. As described in Chapter 1, the personas present in this dissertation are all parts of a whole. The trauma resulted in fragmentation of identities, and a disconnect between memories.*

*Sonja, playing games that **Baby Sonja, Forestghost, and Lenoraven** played, with the voice of **Professor Sapach** hovering in the background, allowed the game-play experience to become a tool for exploring the complex relations that my various personas have with each other. In the book *Towards Relational Sociology*, Nick Crossley eloquently suggests that social relations are,*

lived trajectories of iterated interaction...A social relation is not an object, akin to a bridge, but rather a shifting state of play within a process of social interaction. To say that



two actors are related is to say that they have a history of past and an expectation of future interaction and that this shapes their current interactions (2011, 28).

*Professor Sapach provided the expectation of future interactions through the design of this dissertation. The way that the personas interacted while playing the games below allowed for a merging of past experiences, future expectations, and present emotions.*

*Over the years that I spent working through my data, looking for patterns, themes, and other useful information, I attempted a wide range of techniques. The text-mining and topic modelling results explored in Chapter 2 provided some useful insights, but ultimately shaped my interpretations through the processes themselves, rather than the results they produced. The methods and tools used allowed me to look at my experiences through a plethora of lenses and perspectives. One method that I did not formally discuss was one I considered to be a bit of a “side project” and was based on the following description of social network analysis presented by Paul McLean (2017) in his book Culture in Networks:*

Studying networks is a way of processing the relationality of the world through a structural lens. Studying culture is a way of interpreting the relational basis of the meanings by which we organize our lives. Putting the two together helps us think about how these two modes of relation also mutually influence each other (8).

*Recall from Chapter 1, one of my original guiding research questions was: How can we cope with, understand, and develop strategies for resolving trauma and alienation in society through collective play and the use of video game culture? McLean suggests that in order to understand culture, we also need to understand networks of structured relations. I therefore took it upon*

*myself to develop an 'informal' social network using Excel spreadsheets to organize my data, and Gephi to create visualizations.*

*The nodes spreadsheet included an id number column, a name column (where the full names of important objects were listed), a label column (where the shorter labels for visualization purposes were listed), and a category column that sorted the objects into the following categories: game (physical games, either board game or D&D), console (gaming consoles as a way of grouping types of video games played throughout my childhood), location (houses, streets, arcades, etc.), institution (schools and Air Cadets), friend (childhood friends of mine), acquaintance (people with no strong relationship to me), intimate (boyfriends of mine), family (my family members), and me.*

*The edges spreadsheet linked together the source (id of a node) with a target (id of a related node), indicated the type of relationship (directed), the label (either positive, negative, or neutral), and the subjective weight of the relationship with 5 being strong and one being minimal.*

*Running the spreadsheet information through Gephi provided a wide range of visualizations depending on which information and strengths I emphasized. Figure 1 shows what I consider to be the most useful result.*



significant connections between beyond their basic connection to me. The purple (bottom right) represents connections to arcades. The light blue represents connections to tabletop and board games (D&D mainly). The pink involves the *Nintendo Entertainment System (NES)* – these are people and locations related to my first and most memorable gaming console, and many of the games that I played during the Let’s Plays. The dark/neon orange (just above the majority of the pink dots) are connections between PC games and family. Finally, the light orange represents portable video games (*Gameboy* and *Game Gear*) and the people and locations connected to them. Recall the topic models described in Chapter 2? They were computer determined ‘themes’ based on my text-mining that presented seemingly disconnected groups of words. I talked about how the topics actually spoke to me, clearly representing specific memories and threads in my life. The same thing has happened with the social network above. On the surface, out of context, the image is relatively meaningless. For me, as a whole consisting of often distant personas, the network looks like how I experience life.

*More formally, the reason I have included the informal social network is to provide a visual demonstration of the importance of video games in connecting various aspects of my life. There is no temporal basis to the network, I did not specify an age or time period for any of the connections, primarily because that is not how I experience the world or my own memories.*

*Creating this network, in many ways, allowed my personas to have a discussion about what roles video games played in various parts of my life. Each of the distant green nodes represent images in my mind; people and places that were a part of my life, but that I have no strong relational memory of. Mapping my relations involving games provide more complex and informative links because it is the games that created connective meaning between people and places. Games as cultural connections providing insight into the social network of my relational narrative. When*

*you encounter breaks, lapses, and absences moving through the following transcription quotes, think about the image above.*

*I briefly want to digress and refer back to the importance of the process of autoethnography to the process of appropriation overall. The creation of the informal social network provided me with an additional tool for appropriating, integrating and transforming, my understanding of my relation to others, and the world around me, through game connections. The method is part of the message here – even as I talk about video games and specific passages from my let's plays, I am actively engaging in appropriation and the mediation of my symptoms and alienation. As I chose each of the following passages, I was remembering, and transforming the meaning of each of these memories as I remembered them. While some of the passages may not make any clear sense to you (just as the above social network is likely unclear), I (representing each individual persona) chose each passage because of the meaning it has to me. That being said, I do include a summary paragraph at the end of each section in order to summarize why the passages fit the theme generally.*

### Games as Providing Links through time (Relations to Memories)

#### Hearthstone

“Um so yeah, that’s kinda what’s going on. I keep turning again to Hearthstone for comfort and consistency. Um there’s big changes coming which is interesting...it’s going to change how the game is played. So that should be interesting. Um so my experience with Hearthstone is now going to be completely different, which is not a terrible thing I don’t think.” (Feb 8, 2016)

“I’m going to finish this playthrough and then go outside. It’s raining outside and I find it very comforting to sit on the patio in the rain. I will go and finish my arena run out there. So I’m personally just really concentrating on winning this game, so that’s part of the silence.” (June 21, 2016)

*Forestghost was born in a rainy forest.*

### Tetris

“I did have a Gameboy, the black and white original Gameboy which of course came with Tetris. And I do remember on quite a few occasions hiding in my room um I’d put on, I remember playing the Jay-Z album uh in the background quietly and playing this safely in my room. Um working on getting the highest score I could. And I enjoyed the sort of hypnotic nature of it it’s easy to lose yourself in the patterns and in the way the gameplay works it’s simply, you don’t have to think about it too much yet you have to think about it a lot. It’s uh interesting that way, but I do remember um times where I felt very afraid for my safety um \*\*\*mumble\*\*\* my mom was in a state of rage um or had visitors or or any sorts of all sorts of those situations where the last place I wanted to be was in that apartment with her, or with myself, or with anybody. I just wanted it all to go away so my Gameboy was really useful for that um mainly because I could just play Tetris and listen to music and disappear...this is a game that I really relate more to hiding um and trying to stay safe um.” (May 12, 2016)

*Chapter 4 – memories through time.*

## Bomberman

“Yeah, the sound is definitely putting me in a it’s a Friday night, I’m probably pretty stoked up on junk food, uh, by the time I played this game dad was usually pretty intoxicated because I have many memories of him coming in and playing this with me and cheering me on. I think this is one of the games he would play when I wasn’t around, um, because there were a couple of games where he would actually ‘know sort of have a high score and be able to do way better than me for a little bit, until you know I obviously perfected it and started to beat him \*\*\*laughing\*\*\* even though he practiced during the week. But I’m sure he didn’t practice that much and being intoxicated pretty much all the time removes certain skill sets. So I think I have the advantage of being the sober child as I was mastering these games. I can’t say that I ever mastered this one but it was definitely a it was a well loved game by me.” (Nov 8, 2016)

*“Recalling memories about what my father’s apartment looked, felt, and smelled like...”*

There’s supposed to be a second bomb on this level I think I’m going to die. I will just have to restart the game, but I think I’m starting to get a bit better hang of it but because I let these guys escape, I’m done. I don’t think there’s anyway to kill this guy or girl. Ok, so I’ll restart the game.

So, we went from Uncle Terry’s to Green Timbers. Green Timbers was, I used to, he had a, he had a car of course he had a car but um there was a parking spot um sort of in this area and then you kind of walked down and his balcony was right here and then you’d have to walk around to get to the front door but I’d usually just hop over the balcony after playing outside.” (Nov 8, 2016)

“Um, why is it so important to remember? I’m actually getting a bit emotional at the fact that I can’t clearly remember. \*sigh\* um ah

Because this game does have \*\*\*mumble swearing\*\*\* good memories related with him. Because he would come in, so if y’know there wasn’t a really important game on or he was feeling particularly sentimental and had the desire to hang out with me um if he got this game going he would come in um and sit, we could turn the tv, there was a chair, so one of us could sit on the end of the bed and one of us would sit in the chair. I don’t remember where I usually sat, but there was a place where we could both sit, and watch and play. And I mean he started learning the strategy, he kind of taught me the strategy. Um, he was good at problem solving that way.” (Nov 8, 2016)

“I liked the times that he played with me. I think I tried to make it happen more often than I reasonably could. \*\*\*sad looking silence\*\*\*

\*Sigh\*

I didn’t watch sports. He taught me but, and I tried to collect baseball cards to please him, and those sorts of things, but when he got into the video games and was able to play with me I was able to connect, we could, we could talk, we could laugh at this sort of stuff, develop strategies together...

I’m pretty sure there were actually times when I called him to come over and check it out, hey I’ve got a game I’m kicking ass at, only I wouldn’t say kicking ass...

\*\*\*wiped away a tear\*\*\*



It's scary having these memories. That's what I was just sitting here thinking. I'm actually not quite sure how to explain it. Like I said there is a lot of good memories, so it's not like it's terrible to remember, video games and dad.

\*\*\*long silence\*\*\*

\*sigh\* (Nov 8, 2016)

*I was caught off guard by the level of emotion that Bomberman brought out. It is difficult to remember my Dad through the fog of all of the trauma that I experienced. I have to force myself to remember good things, and the starting point of any powerful thread of positive memories starts with a gaming experience. From there, the memories flow easier. Writing this now, I am remembering the smell of the zoo that my Dad took me to once or twice a year. I am remembering 4am fishing trips with him. I am missing him.*

### Super Mario Bros. 3

“So that's what today is. So I suppose my next question, my next thing to address is how am I feeling? Right now, giving myself the opportunity to play this y'know ok the um emulator is not as great as it could be especially for this game which is such a classic. The control is not the same, y'know it's pretty close, oh come on, but how do I feel playing this right now? I feel um I feel a bit safer. I um, it's just different enough that I'm not feeling some of the things I want to be feeling. I suppose the answer is to get the Sega Genesis out, in a bit, which I might do, um, bring that over work my way through that because that was the other system I had at dad's. but I am feeling a sense of familiarity here so I'm actually going to try, just to say it, I'm going to try to get through to world 8 here, y'know it's just a personal challenge. Um also the fact of learning

to speak and think through things while I'm playing. Um which I'm getting better at, though I'd like to go back and watch some of the videos when I was very dissociated. I've just been going through some healing lately um I don't think I'm completely better yet." (May 9, 2016)

*Familiarity, personal challenge, learning to speak. I have placed this quote in the memory theme section to emphasize that not all memory connections have to be to the distant past. The process of playing the games and recording myself over 14 months has created memories of what is now my past. Playing this game, on my mom's birthday, gave me something to remember during a time of dissociated anguish.*

### Super Mario Bros.

"um but I started out my Master's thesis talking about the joy of jumping on that Goomba at the beginning and um I'm actually tempted to die here and reset the game and actually um go through that process a bit more because I've actually reached the point beyond where I could reach as a kid so I'm going to let this go through a couple of deaths and then really focus on going back." (May 12, 2016)

*An expression of a desire to remain in a memory.*

### Uninvited

"I guess we're going forward. \*sigh\* Isn't that what life is about. There is a lot of death in this game. Y'know who I'm thinking of, I'm thinking of playing this with Brent and trying to explain it to him. I think that's what I'm thinking of because you know I would just disappear no matter

what was going on. No matter who was at mom's place or I mean I had to play in the living room hmmm. I'm trying to think of the different apartments we lived in, which continuously seems important to me." (Feb 15, 2017)

*Active game play resulted in clarifying a false memory here. I vaguely remembered playing the game with another person, and was frustrated with my inability to make the connection to a childhood friend. As I played, I was able to clarify the memory of playing the game with my husband as an adult.*

### The Three Stooges

"But I did spend a lot of time on this game and I don't know, it was the mini game thing I guess, I don't think it was too overly try to impress dad too much cause well, I'm trying to think about it. Did he show a lot of interest in this game? I think he showed some. He liked the trivia, which I like, so he would help me with that." (Jan 19, 2017)

"Trivia. A lot of fun I guess, a lot of the music came from the episodes, so that was something I could bond over. It's a um, convergent media<sup>39</sup> type thing \*\*\*laughing\*\*\* I don't know what I'm talking about, I'm trying to be academic, I gotta stop that so I can be myself." (Jan 19, 2017)

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<sup>39</sup> A reference to *Convergence Culture* by Henry Jenkins (2006). Jenkins talks about cultural experiences across different forms of media. The Three Stooges was an important TV show that my father and I watched, and that led to our mutual enjoyment of an otherwise very poorly designed game.

“I um, I’m going to have to return to like the blogs, the blog says more about the shame and all that stuff that I feel so I know, this is just one of those games that I was in dad’s room and um he’d be there sometimes, he wouldn’t be there sometimes. But, it was definitely a mellow time, this game makes me think about worrying to go see mom, like having to go home on a Sunday or trying to avoid the whole go see Grandma thing.” (Jan 19, 2017)

### Baldurs Gate 2

“\*sigh\* so maybe this isn’t the thing I want to play right now. Um, I just, yeah. So it was a huge thing in the War Games Room after I left RMC. We played a lot of, a lot of Baldur’s Gate but primarily we played a lot of D&D in person. Um and Dungeons and Dragons was the thing that helped me when I was a kid, get through stuff in person.” (April 27, 2017)

*I honestly expected this game to trigger more solid game play memories. Instead, it left me nostalgic for my friends and what we called “the War Games room” where we played D&D and bonded over our shared nerdy interests.*

### Summary

*The passages presented illustrate how these games were able to bring me back to memories that had in many ways faded or blacked-out due to dissociation. Living with and through trauma has left me with disconnected memories and many of these memories are only activated when actively playing certain games.*

As I played these games, I was able to remember more about my past. It was association, but it was also more sensual in that the combination of sounds, actions, visuals, and feelings together allowed me (forced me?) to remember things that I otherwise cannot, or do not. As I write this, I am trying to remember some of the experiences I describe above. When I do remember them, it is almost like they are not quite my memories and more like the memories of a character in a novel. I know they are my memories, but I do not have an emotional relation to them as I did during the playthroughs.

#### Games as Tools for Mediating Trauma and Ameliorating Flashbacks (Active Relation of Self-Care)

*See Chapter 4 for the associated Tetris research on flashback prevention. In the introduction I mentioned my need to turn to casual games during the Coronavirus pandemic, which feels like an instinctual self-care technique at this point in my life. The main thing you are going to see in this section is how I am in an active state of dissociation, trying to work through active issues. I do not have many comments here beyond brief contextual ones.*

#### Hearthstone

“So I’m considering this to be a research video I’m playing Hearthstone because it’s a comfortable game to play. It’s the game I played while all the chaos was happening with the move um when I felt stressed or overwhelmed I would play Hearthstone and it helped me out a lot. Um I’m not sure why. I guess it just became habitual and challenging and a way to remove myself from focusing on the stress of the world.” (Feb 5, 2016)

“Y’know the dog just didn’t care, the dog just wanted to be with me and exactly who I was y’know it wasn’t about, it wasn’t about um. Well, Cadets was my other way of having, of having a life of having a social life I eventually got some friends there um so I wasn’t completely isolated, but I was isolated for a long time. And never fit in quite right and the dog just gave me that opportunity to just completely be myself. With a dog if you treat them well they will treat you well too. You know it’s not about, it’s not about class, it’s not about anything it’s not about culture, y’know how you dress or how you look, it’s how you treat the dog and um hm. Part of what I feel, part of the reason I don’t get along with a lot of people, I still don’t, I’ve learned how to get along now, but I still don’t really get it. Uh, is, what am I trying to say? I can talk about gaming, ah even talking about gaming doesn’t do it. I can play games with people and get along with them rather well. I can’t, I can talk about games I can talk about academics I can can get along with people now but back when I was going through all the trauma and all that stuff I just didn’t I really didn’t know how to make friends. I didn’t know how to get people to like me you know all of that. That’s not really, the goal wasn’t to get everyone to like me but the goal is to get somebody, some people to like me, to care about who I was, to have my best interests at heart and that’s what the dog provided. Uh, so, so here I am \*\*\*I started crying as I transcribed this\*\*\* with Morrighan and no expectations, just trust \*\*\*laughing\*\*\* \*\*\*mumble\*\*\* “ (Feb 8, 2016)

*Regarding the above quote – This is early when I had Morrighan as a puppy. The stress was really getting to me at that point. This quote combines the stress of having to care for something so innocent, the stressors of my marriage falling apart, and an attempt to describe how games allowed me to talk to people when I had nothing else that I could share. This quote reads with a sense of hopelessness, and ultimately comes from a dissociated, hopeless place.*

“Ahem, so yeah. So here I am playing Hearthstone again trying to center myself to be focused on what I have to do um yeah...” (March 10, 2016)

“Um so it’s obvious, what’s probably most obvious to myself that I’m I’m a bit out of it um if I I wasn’t going to record anything but this is part of the autoethnography part is that I need to talk about um what this dissociation feels like and at this point I’m I’m unable to articulate my feelings \*\*\*nervous smirk\*\*\* I mean I am I’m frustrated, scared. I have family to turn to but uh she’s alienated so many, ha ha alienation, she’s screwed with so many people and I’ve not helped. Um, either. So I I I don’t know.

\*\*\*counting mana in game\*\*\*

So I don’t know who to turn to. Nobody likes her but I um I’m I’m functioning, I think I ran a red light? Because I thought the green came on and I was zoned out \*sigh\* so there’s that. I may have run a red light which sucks. I’m not having a very good time \*\*\*mild stutter\*\*\* very good luck with this game which is kind of irrelevant but it’s still a thing. Um and uh well I don’t know. Um.” (March 30, 2016)

*Found out about mom’s surgery so was highly dissociated at this point. I was terrified of having to suddenly fly to BC to immerse myself in childhood trauma again. I am working through guilt, fear, and a general sense of helplessness and hopelessness.*

“\*\*\*pause sad look\*\*\* \*\*\*smile\*\*\* and here I am consistently turning to Hearthstone for comfort. \*sigh\*” (June 14, 2016)

*During challenging times in my marriage.*

“So again, I’ve just been turning to Hearthstone a lot for uh zoning out more than anything. Um, chatted with a few people I think, connecting with somebody from my husband’s work. Nothing major, but just casual chat sort of thing, which is nice. So Hearthstone gives me that, um. Just I’m really frustrated and scared that every, that I’ve got to take care of everyone around me. I try to take care of myself but I’m still not. And I’m losing, I’m losing my happy demeanor.

\*\*\*smirk\*\*\* I am I’m just having a hard time being ok with life. Um. Which is really quite frustrating, um. Yeah. I can’t seem to find anything to um to cheer me up. I tried my best to be happy over my birthday and genuinely did try to have some fun. But um, life has just gotten so hopeless. I have no friends here, there’s nobody here I can turn to. Um. And that really sucks.

\*\*\*blank sad stare\*\*\*” (June 21, 2016)

“Alright well that wasn’t talkative but that was 40 minutes and a lot of it was me sitting here staring at a screen so I’m going to take this first arena game outside I believe. So I’m gonna sign off now and eat and take care of myself and go to my counselling appointment and go with life and really try and record a lot more. Um I should treat this like I have a YouTube job, but I don’t. But that’s what I think I should do. Yes, good idea. So record more \*\*\*giving myself a stern look and shaking my finger at the camera\*\*\* and write, and do dissertation stuff. K.” (Feb 9, 2017)



“See I can do that too. I feel like anything I say is worthless and I don’t like that. It makes me sad. \*\*\*almost crying again\*\*\* I don’t want to feel worthless. \*\*\*mumbling about the game\*\*\*” (Feb 9, 2017)

“Ok um I just woke up from a daytime nap which is usually the stupidest thing to do because I don’t take my meds in the afternoon and and my meds are what help me get through without any serious anxiety dreams um ahem...

But actually I thought I would come down and play some Hearthstone because I actually find it really helpful for coping, so I’m just going to go ahead and and play a few games while I talk through this because I’m really disturbed at the moment and it’s bothering me to no end.” (April 26, 2017)

“I just wish I had a different childhood, I wish I had a different experience. I wish I had seen dad that day, I wish mom didn’t have that power over me. I wish so many things, and now I’m just I’m lucky to be sitting here doing this kinda thing in my life, and failing miserably at it because I’m not getting the card draw I want \*\*\*switched to game talk\*\*\*” (April 26, 2017)

### Heroes of Might and Magic 3

“So while I didn’t get much out of it. I think that kind of joy and immersion might mean something. Um even in one of my most, one of my darkest times, where suicide seemed like an

inevitable solution um, Brent and Heroes of Might and Magic really came to the rescue. And it makes me smile and that's gotta mean something right?" (March 1, 2017)

### Civilization V

"See how peaceful it is, it's nice and relaxing, I like it." (March 2, 2017)

"The hypnotic nature of it is what I like. And the strategy." (March 2, 2017)

"Yeah, I just I could sit here and zone out and spend hours and hours thinking about something and the fact that these games take so long, y'know, to work through, um that was really appealing, because I didn't have to pay attention to the world I could just get in and focus on this. And I mean, here's another thing that Brent and I um really bonded over was the, y'know later on when I got into this game he he um he talked about how he used to play it as a kid, the original one, and he would spend hours playing it and that was pretty cool, that we could connect even about something like this. Um, cause you know a game, a game like this is hard to talk about? Or is it?" (March 2, 2017)

"This is pretty much just going to be an hour of me thinking I remember loving strategy games and not really being able to explain why.

I can explain why, it's because I didn't, it was too complicated to have to explain to my parents.

It was like Chess I could play with by myself. It was, it had a sort of interesting purpose that

wasn't purposeful. It was y'know you don't really learn a lot about history with this you learn."  
(March 2, 2017)

*This is included here specifically because I recently began playing Civilization VI on my Nintendo Switch as a coping mechanism in May and June of 2020. The immediate trauma in the world (pandemic, etc.,) has faded into a long-term abuse-like state of constant lower levels of trauma. Self-soothing becomes necessary in maintaining a functioning, identifiable relation to one's self.*

### Maniac Mansion

"I remember I used to try to tell her, er talk to her about things when I was a kid. I used to try to, I used to try to say stuff I used to try to, I'm getting bullied at school y'know that, help me I don't know what to do. Oh just you know stand up to them, suck it up, she ignored me when I went to her about problems and uh and then she would say that her's was worse and she would overpower my individuality she would overpower my nature, my personhood, I I I couldn't be a person with \*\*\*crying\*\*\*

On Facebook I posted that Trump getting elected was like electing like taking the biggest bully at school, the one who will take young women to the back alley, pull their hair, sexually harass them, slap them in the face, and then go take the best part of the playground and claim it as their own, that's who Trump is, that's who they elected and it's a symbol, symbolically who they elected. It could have been any misogynistic ignorant capitalist overpowering bullshit selfish asshole it didn't have to be Trump. But the fact that that's what he represents that's who they they chose to elect and she's kinda defending it. She's uh

Stuff's happening in the game I don't even know. Uh, I feel like I should be playing Tetris here. Um, as a matter of fact, I'm going to continue this conversation in a minute. I'm going to get Tetris because I think this is just too much for my head." (Nov 9, 2016)

*I was in a highly activated state of anxiety and anger at this point following news of Donald Trump being elected the President of the United States. The game itself was actually irrelevant, other than providing me with a puzzle solving distraction in the background that allowed me to articulate my thoughts and emotions.*

### Tetris

"I was getting overwhelmed thinking about it so Tetris has always been, I had it on the Gameboy I was able to clear my thoughts to \*sigh\* to be able to play I could play Tetris and and feel like I was in control so I wanna talk about this more but I needed a game where I didn't have to overanalyze the situation. Where I could screw up like this and be ok um." (Nov 9, 2016)

*After being overwhelmed talking about the election when I tried to play Maniac Mansion I became so upset that I needed to switch to Tetris for comfort. The following quote is from Janet Murray, who wrote Hamlet on the Holodeck. This quote is from the newest edition of the book, and was shared in a commentary on the First Person Scholar journal website<sup>40</sup>:*

Playing open-ended, strategic, but largely unwinnable games like Tetris is indeed an expression of the anxieties of contemporary life, as I argue in this chapter, but it is also a remedy for these anxieties which works by inducing the experience of a perpetual now, a zone of dissociation

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<sup>40</sup><http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/janet-murray-on-why-some-players-and-critics-still-cannot-tolerate-narrative-in-games/>

from our common mortal story line in which choices have consequences and there are no do-overs. (Murray, 2017)

*To be honest, this quote applies to many of the themes and transcription quotes presented in this chapter. I find it particularly apt here though as I was actively seeking escape from the anxiety of Trump's election. Playing Maniac Mansion was too complex and did not allow me to enter the much needed zone of dissociation. This quote is also useful for thinking through the next theme as it highlights the importance of experiencing a "perpetual now". The theme **Games as Places of Navigating Uncertainty and Learning Control** is all about how games allowed me to play with different choices, allowing for multiple "do-overs".*

### Summary

While I have escaped the ever-present feeling of danger from my childhood, I still experience trauma in various forms, and often react instinctively as I would in childhood by dissociating. This is not something I do consciously, and until I began this research, I was unable to identify many of my own dissociative moments. The passages above demonstrate how playing these games were not just helpful for allowing me to remember my childhood by clearing the fog of dissociation, but how they also provided me with safe places to experience dissociation during moment of trauma during the dissertation research. **Professor Sapach** is in the background wanting to say something formal about how playing the games likely prevented nightmares or flashbacks, but I think it is better said in an informal way. Having the games to play gave me safety, and a place to think through active trauma in the moment. As stated above, the games gave me permission to enter a zone of dissociation when I needed it.

Games as Places of Navigating Uncertainty and Learning Control (Relations to the World  
Around Us)

*I can be Mario, exploring new areas of a map, not knowing what comes next. I can fail, and try again. I can make up rules, play in different ways. I can experiment and play with how I play and who I want to be when I play. The opportunity for “do-overs” is integral here.*

Bomberman

“So the fact that he helped me play this was a good memory. And so it was one of those video game moments when we actually had something to bond over because he actually knew what was going on in the game. And so we could work through a strategy together um and he could get excited about me winning because he knew what was going on and now that I think about it he did put a lot of effort into advancing my gaming and getting me to learn the right sort of strategies for gaming.” (Nov 8, 2016)

*This is a highly symbolic quote as it has an underlying meaning. Dad was teaching me strategies for gaming, teaching me not to give up. I found out from my family, long after his death, that he had been suffering from some form of PTSD that originated with a traumatic experience surviving a robbery and car chase when he was a bank manager. The belief is that his marriage to my mom aggravated his anxiety to the point of completely changing who he was. I like to think that as he was teaching me strategies to survive in games, he was also helping me learn to survive my traumatic life.*

“This has left me feeling a sense of loss, a sense of mourning for my dad, of I think a little bit of fear about thinking about the connection between the actual trauma and positive experiences like playing video games and eating pork chops and spaghetti with my dad. And the freedom of having the room with the video games and the candy and the y’know, the ability to escape into a world and and master something. Get quite good at it, even though I’m not the best at it but um, so this video, this recording, is leaving me feeling sort of melancholy.” (Nov 8, 2016)

### Super Mario Bros. 3

“I get an email 45 minutes later saying “I’ve been crying, I’ve been waiting for your call and since Coronation Street stopped I thought you’d call” so I called and tried to be supportive but she went with the guilt trip “I’ve been waiting for your call and blah blah blah” and it just burned a hole of guilt through my heart. And I had but beyond guilt, there’s this different between guilt and shame and it’s the shame part it’s not guilt about me not calling because I don’t think the action was particularly bad it’s the internal shame because I can’t fight the feeling that I’m a bad horrible person. Um for not wanting to call my mom on Mother’s Day because what does mother’s day represent? It represents me dying in Mario but it it it represents I mean kind of a cultural I can’t use the word cultural, societal scam in some ways.” (May 9, 2016)

*This is Mom’s birthday – important to highlight how I talk about dying in Mario! Generally, a very emotional video, I just let loose.*

“But uh yes she cried oh my god they are so great thank you for the pink roses and then let me go so for the year, mother’s day and her birthday is over sigh which only leaves the sadness

of father's day remaining. But it's not, that never had the shame associated with it with it the fear that mother's day and moms' birthday had. And so I sit here playing Super Mario Bros 3 because it was a game that I was good at and it was a game that I could play enough that if there was the sudden alright, I'm taking you back to your mom's house uh cause there is a hockey game on, that's what dad would do um you know I would usually play a game like this or some of the games that I'll play later. But this game I used to have a book for that I used to read while on the toilet, I would read that and learn all the worlds and learn all the secrets and I would play this game and I got good enough at it that I was able to beat it and I was able to um y'know not feel bad about turning it off if suddenly interrupted which is why I'm playing it now." (May 9, 2016)

*While in a state of highly emotional anxiety, I focus on my mastery of this game.*

"I'm waiting to fix what can't be fixed...Um so I gain control by not dying in Mario...there may be less talking here because this is all about concentration and procedural memory. How do I remember without remembering it? It's about predicting what's ahead as well. Hm

I played this level a lot. This one in particular a lot. I mean world 1 yeah, but this is the one I spent the most lives on, you get so good at world 1 you don't play it as often. I got good enough, not good enough, skilled enough to get the warp whistles. But um y'know that kind of skill you only have to play once but with this you die and you die and you die you just gotta keep working through it. So eventually you've played it far more than the other levels. And you get to it far more rarely. Far more rarely, is that? Yeah, I'm allowed to say that far more rarely. It's not perfect but I can say it nevertheless." (May 9, 2016)



*You die you die you die... there is an immediate feedback loop present in this game (and platforming games like it). I was able to quickly learn to accept the mistake, restart, and try again. It provided me with control over a situation in the present moment. I did not need to wait a long time for a do-over (as I would with a game like D&D or World of Warcraft<sup>41</sup>).*

“So my insight into the situation is, what does it mean that I’m thinking about the way alienation works, the way people work in society, the way people overcome alienation, we end up feeling closer to our captors, it means we are attached to.

I’m just going to go out and ramble here,

Um that need to embrace the capitalism which limits us the uh the desperate need to to buy to consume to be consumers of the very thing that restricts us the very things that cause me pain.

That cause me to have no control, are the things that I seek to be closest to, because I’m the most familiar with it. Unpredictability is the most predictable. Why do I cling to mom because of that captor, I’ll look it up, there is literature on it, the need to be closer to this person who has harmed me, wronged me um?” (May 9, 2016)

“I’m just saying it because that’s what it feels like. To fight my dissociation to fight my guilt lack of control case of the should I I need to continue to put myself in a situation where she’s predictable in her unpredictability. I know what to expect on her birthday, I know what to expect on mother’s day I know to expect um the unexpected, I know to expect to feel the way I feel but

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<sup>41</sup> Thanks Sara! <- I will remove this before sending out the final dissertation.

at least I know so that's something. And I think any attempts to abandon her is scary because it's what I grew up knowing. I know how to defend against it in some ways." (May 9, 2016)

*Faced with the predictable unpredictability caused by my mom's behaviours, the control provided by the game provided some relief.*

"We can control it somewhat if we are in the right situation to, we can predict it somewhat, but some people grow more comfortable doing that. I've grown comfortable in my own fear. I've grown comfortable in my discomfort about having to deal with these things and I suffer for it but

Shoot

As much as I suffer, I'm still learned, I still learned how to cope and how to deal and now I'm threatening that, and I want to. But there is something serious in that there is something there is something to that the fact that I have to challenge it, letting myself challenge it, making myself challenge it. "(May 9, 2016)

"I have more of a chance of gaining a sense of control. I'm being forward in doing this in challenging this in challenging this idea that it's been ok. I shouldn't have to feel shame for not reciprocating a gift that I was never given in the first place. We celebrate mother's day as a celebration of somebody you love, somebody who cared for you. Somebody who made you feel human, whatever that means. It's a celebration of the person that made you feel safe that brought you into this world that made you feel better about existing, made you feel safe. Who helped you through issues like bullying, went to your events. You know you're a kid and you're going

through an award ceremony of sorts, you know, you're celebrating the person who went to those sorts of things. And if I don't feel like I was given that no matter how much I did to try and make myself worthy of it then why should I have to feel bad?

I shouldn't have to.

I shouldn't have to.

Here I use the word should again. That's such a weakness on my part but it's something I've learned to make myself feel bad. The shame. The shame is perpetuated by the shoulds. Shoulds are perpetuated by myself, who says I should or shouldn't. when I think of games in one way or another.

Sigh

Why should she have that much power over me?

Why can't I have power over myself?

I have power over Mario, I don't always make the right move for him, I should be able to make the right jumps. Um I can't right now that's what my therapist is telling me. Teaching me about the correct thinking when it comes to um difficulties dealing with um my perceived inability to write or be productive because of my level of fear and dissociation um. If I say I can't do something I can't do it right now. If I can't get through this Mario level I can't get through it right now because I'm kind of distracted however, It's the game I played, the situations where I felt helpless and hopeless.

\*\*\*slightly happy sigh\*\*\*

And sometimes when you're at your most helpless or hopeless the memories in video games and winning one can still bring a smile to your face." (May 9, 2016)

*Fighting the "shoulds" here is highly relevant. While they can exist when it comes to gaming, for me, there was never really any "shoulds" when I played. I revelled in experimentation. Dancing around expectation, I had control over which rules, and which paths to follow. I had control over how many times I got to retry a level.*

### Super Mario Bros.

"But the primary thing I do remember is um sigh sitting down cross legged in front of the TV and trying to figure out the controls. Um and and I probably made the classic mistakes that any body playing Mario for the first time having never played a video game like this would make is um not knowing how to jump over the Goomba um that sort of thing uh so Super Mario Bros for me is actually related to positive memories for the most part um y'know because dad and I bonded over it. He let me take control so it was really him, uh, me playing and him watching and giving me support and stuff.... This was a place where this was, it was mine, which was amazing and it gave me something to control it gave me something to interact with." (May 12, 2016)

"Y'know now I know where all the secrets are, I know all the jumps to make I can probably run through this level, y'know, not in world record type time but I can come close to what some of the world record runners do. I'm just screwing around now because I'm remembering all the stuff the crazy things the things I got excited about. Here's a coin and a mushroom and if you run just right you can get that 1up at the beginning. The massive staircase wondering wow, did I

win? This is obviously something special so I beat the level. It was good. It was exciting.” (May 12, 2016)

“I remember freaking out and sucking at this level. Swimming. Again, I’m sure many kids shared this experience, this was just a ridiculously hard level to understand and the suction there and how to get the coins and the unpredictability of these tentacle fish...I do remember struggling with this a lot and feeling quite proud when I mastered the gathering of the coins um and time goes into a bit of a blur I I don’t know.” (May 12, 2016)

*Mario gave me moments of success that I could draw from. With the unpredictability of daily life, and the ingrained belief that I would inevitably fail at controlling or changing anything, these moments of success stood out. Through everything, I could win. Through everything, I could overcome challenges.*

“uh but if I look back as a child it gave me this game gives me memories of control of distraction of safety, of bonding time with my father. Um of having something that my mom couldn’t control or understand.” (May 12, 2016)

“So yeah generally this was all safe memories. I haven’t yet talked about many of the bad memories but I wanted to go through this and talk about the positive impact it had on me it it allowed me to create positive memories. When I was in a situation where I honestly didn’t create a lot of good memories.” (May 12, 2016)

## Uninvited

“The exploration of horror was always really good. Because something was always worse than what was going on in my life if I could read it in a horror book. But, this game, I don’t know if it, it was better than Maniac Mansion. Maniac Mansion I tried and did spend a lot of time on and I did do a video on but I just, I just couldn’t get into it that much. This one I could just spend hours playing. By myself. And this actually has very little social connections at all because I didn’t share it with anyone. Y’know people think you’re weird right? I guess? \*sigh\*

I don’t know if this was a game I wanted to share with anyone. I rented it so often, because it took so long to beat, I mean, the puzzles are not...

It doesn’t make me comfortable, this game, at all, it’s very uncomfortable.” (Feb 15, 2017)

“Fascinating that some games just aren’t triggering memories. This is just a curl up be with myself kinda game. Like reading a novel only playing a game.

Well if nothing else then playing through this game is showing me that I kinda remember how to how the game goes so that’s something.” (Feb 15, 2017)

“So I think that’s what I can take away from this one, not the social aspect but the fact that the game and games like it allowed me to immerse, feel fear, but there was always a way to solve the problem to overcome the fear so you get chances to try it over and over again you got to y’know, that red skull keeps coming up and I got to keep going back and you die and you go back to one room but if you remember what you’d done and you you get to see what the consequences are

and I think THAT was really appealing...because mom was so unpredictable. And my life was so unpredictable y'know so who was going to pick on me at school? Was dad going to be pass-out drunk or happy drunk on the weekend? Was mom gonna come through the door and scream and yell or was she just going to be like "I wanna watch my soap operas and each chips fuck off"? She didn't really say fuck off, but it y'know.

In a game like this you can stop and think see the consequences, see how horrific they are and try to solve it and you get a chance to solve it and a chance to get through it. Mom coming through that door I never had a chance to go back and solve whatever I thought was wrong. Even though I don't think I could have solved it because I I tried on many occasions to foresee...what would make her angry, what her triggers would be and I could just I could never know. So this was, this gave me a way of knowing. It gave me a way of of ...this and other games like it, I mean this game in particular again no specific memories but games like this I think what they did was allow me to appreciate the fact that I could think my way through stuff and maybe that's where I learned it is thinking your way to survival is the best way. Understanding that in games you can repeat stuff and save and and try and try again." (Feb 15, 2017)

*I generally explain my thought processes during the gameplay. It is important here to bring up a quote from Herman (mentioned above when outlining C-PTSD symptoms). This quote from the book Trauma and Recovery talks about methods of recovery and regaining control:*

Other forms of disciplined, controlled challenges to fear may be equally important for survivors at this stage of recovery. For example, some treatment programs or self-help organizations offer wilderness trips as a carefully planned encounter with danger. These chosen experiences offer an opportunity to restructure the survivor's maladaptive social responses as well as her physiological and psychological responses to fear (1992, 196).

*Without having read this part of Herman's book before recording the Let's Plays, I understood that I was using horror games (and books) as "carefully planned encounters with danger". I could control death in this game. I was able to see it coming, experience the fear, and then learn from it and overcome the danger during the "do-over".*

“the game is different from the book, the Stephen King like Misery, reading Misery over and over again, I knew what was going to happen. It was always going to be painful for Paul I knew he got out in the end after the first read-through and that had me rooting for him but I couldn't change anything. A game like Uninvited I could learn the logical ways to get through things and then I but I had the reward of if I died I could to back and I could fix it. If I made a mistake I could go back and fix it. And It wasn't a mistake like I don't know some inane thing, like missing a deadline or or or something non life-threatening, in this case I could face life-threatening things and then go back and try to figure out how to get around them. And being able to do that is what I think is appealing. It makes me smile thinking about it because I should probably read into that and find out what other people's experiences are.” (Feb 15, 2017)

“And from my own personal experiences that fact that I was able to try and just overcome, instead of facing unpredictability every day of mom coming home and having to deal with that and or Sunday mornings, mom's unpredictable reactions when dad would unpredictably say it's time to go home at this time versus this time yeah.” (Feb 15, 2017)

The Three Stooges



“I can’t, uh, I used to have this memorized, and I’m doing better than I thought I would be doing. Oh no, asshole. Pop goes the weasel. It’s the song that makes Curly want to fight. God this is a ridiculous game I forgot how bad this actually was I must have had a lot of patience as a kid \*\*\*laughing\*\*\* or a lot of need to distract myself if I was going to focus on this shit. Round 6. I made it! \*\*\*shocked\*\*\* That’s bizarre, ok. Yay \*\*\*laughing\*\*\* I made it, ok.” (Jan 19, 2017)

### Zelda 2: The Adventure of Link

“So that was cool so yay. That’s my only real childhood memory of this game. I may have rented it on a few occasions, but I don’t really have any other memories of this game. Just playing with Thomas, which is the most important memory because it’s a happy memory. It’s one where I can remember why I wasn’t afraid. And where

I knew something about something and that made me feel good.

And I could learn from somebody and that felt good. Not as good, it’s nice to know more about something than somebody and to be able to prove it y’know that’s pretty cool too um yeah.” (Feb 15, 2017)

### Summary

*Video games present opportunities to participate safely in hypothetically dangerous situations. In real life death is forever, time always moves forward, and a single decision can impact your entire life and cannot always be undone. In video games, there is a reset button, a save feature,*

*extra lives and potentially infinite chances. While there are magazines, guides, and now internet sites that can unlock the uncertainty of every game, in spirit video games are full of uncertainty.*

The examples demonstrate a process of learning to learn. With each game, I faced situations I did not immediately know how to deal with and I was forced to face uncertainty in order to learn how to overcome various obstacles. I learned to overcome feelings of helplessness as I discovered I could actually get better at something. I learned that I had to start taking initiative if I wanted to make any progress in a game. I also learned that I could rely on my actions to produce specific results in specific situations. Every time I made Mario jump, he would jump (even if I wasn't very good at controlling him all the time). Every time I hit a certain level in a Mario game, I knew to expect the uncertain at first, but that I could eventually memorize the level and beat it. I was able to actively resolve my relation to the world around me by learning that my actions could have predictable meaning.

#### Games as Places to Develop Social Solidarity (Relations to Others)

*I talk about the importance of social solidarity in Chapter 1 when I discuss my MA thesis. Social solidarity created through game play allows for people to learn how to trust each other. Trusting others was something that I found next to impossible in daily life.*

#### Hearthstone

“I, I, I, autoethnography I can have a feeling of proficiency and power and power to know that I can compete with others in a successful way a confident way, that's helpful. What influences me to play right right now, they don't know who I am they don't know I'm doing an autoethnography and I don't know what they're doing but two of us are connecting even ever so

slightly and briefly through this medium through this game. Which is pretty cool. It's a culture, a culture, we turn to the games to escape people would say we turn to the games to escape capitalist suppression or whatever but they tend to forget the emotion the psychology. The comfort...The game allows me to affect, hehehe, it allows me to emotion safely, I'm doing this for myself, it has potential, I can feel things safely. Because of my participation in these cultures, in these places, I can feel as characters as a player I can feel pleasure and accomplishments and hope and fear and I can feel it through this culture this environment without having to deal with my real world fears and anxieties?" (Feb 5, 2016)

"I don't know how that person saw that. Um \*\*\*laughing\*\*\* I'm glad I got that on tape, that was great. And now I'm smiling. I'm not quite sure, my trepidation goes away because I felt a solidarity a connection with somebody. What is that? What does it mean? What is 'I'm a lucky bastard' mean when one person said that to me? Y'know sweet, I'm smiling. Um and that's the thing I find fascinating, is why am I smiling? When five minutes ago I was feeling extremely sad and scared...Um, but um I think it's valuable in whatever purpose it can serve. That is what, that is what that experience of having someone acknowledge an insignificant event that has no relevance outside of of this virtual world that is what I'm trying to get at with this dissertation that's what I'm trying to talk about. Is despite real world challenges emotions and things that I don't understand I understand that ...that's solidarity that is chaos." (Feb 5, 2016)

"So I'm looking forward to meeting this person. I would love to sit and play Hearthstone, in a bar. With somebody sitting across from me, both playing on our phones. It would be fun. It

shows the potential for creating friendships through games. Creating a sense of connection through games in a small town where I can't relate to anybody which makes me happy.” (May 12, 2016)

*A safe connection created when concentrating on a game allowed me to develop enough trust to want to meet someone. I did end up meeting this person, and we did sit in a bar and play the game together. We maintained contact in-game, though I have stopped playing since I quit smoking as mentioned above.*

“But really, I I don't know what it is about Hearthstone, y'know there's nobody online with me right now. But I'm part of a group, I'm part of one of the Hearthstone Facebook groups so I get enthralled by the discussions that people have about how cancerous certain decks are. They share news about y'know the changes that are going to be made, and card nerfs, and the best way to make decks and the best place to find decks and people go there looking for help. And people get a lot of shit when they go to these places y'know when they go to expose themselves \*\*\*smirk\*\*\* on uh Facebook. Y'know you uh put yourself out there you can really get sort of destroyed um but people still do it which I think is is wonderful. Y'know people leave and they get pissed off and \*\*\*mumble about the tavern brawl\*\*\*” (Feb 9, 2017)

### Super Mario Bros.

“I do have memories of my cousin, she would come and spend the night on occasion and um at my dad's place and I remember sitting around making up games with her as we played Mario.

Y’know how fast could you get through levels, don’t touch coins, or or things like that. And having just a generally good time with the video game as a sort of conversation.” (May 12, 2016)

### Zelda 2: The Adventure of Link

“I played this for the first time with my cousin Thomas. Um he had it and we used to uh dad and I used to go visit family on the weekends which was good and uh my aunt Donna and uncle John had a basement for the kids they still do they still have that house actually. But in that basement they had an NES and my cousin Thomas was a big player there. He knew I played and so he would play with me um.

And there were occasions where we traded games so, I don’t remember him borrowing any of my games...

So Thomas owned this game and I took it home and uh to dad’s place and played it and really enjoyed it it was something Thomas and I could talk about um

Y’know he always messed around and stuff and always seemed too cool for me but y’know if somehow we were alone we were pretty good at sharing talk about video games which was nice.” (Feb 15, 2017)

“I had the right to talk to somebody. It made me feel normal, being able to talk about games with Thomas. Trading games, the things friends did it was uh y’know you you you know you can trust them, well I knew I could trust him as much as I could trust anyone. But that trust of trading games, that sort of like hey, you’re family you can borrow this game and I don’t have to worry

about you stealing it. It was such a good feeling to have that happen right. Because my lack of trust for people just is just too much right like I don't trust...

I think it was the trust of trading the game it was the comfort of not having to spend all of my time with my parents worrying about them. I was pretty young here, I obviously had my NES but not many games for it and for Thomas to trust me to loan the game was cool. Just to have access to other games was cool. To be able to go visit someone and be able to talk about something I was familiar with.” (Feb 15, 2017)

“So in general it's a sense this game provides a greater sense of togetherness and connection because it's part of the bigger culture it's it's love it or hate it it's the sequel to the Legend of Zelda which was very popular and very successful and to be a part of that that's nostalgia speaking but isn't my whole project really about nostalgia ultimately that's kinda what I'm doing talking about my memories of the past.” (Feb 15, 2017)

### Summary

*While there are fewer examples presented for this theme, it is no less important than the rest. Video games present objects, words, rules, and worlds that give people something to connect through. They present shared experiences that can happen both simultaneously (e.g. playing together online or in the same room) or asynchronously (e.g. the above mention of how I was able to talk to Thomas about a game we both played at different times). My entire MA thesis focused on this development of social solidarity and the work done during this dissertation reinforced my earlier theories that shared video game play develops trust and mutual*

*understanding. This solidarity works to resolve the relation of relationlessness with others by giving people something shared to relate to.*

Throughout times of active trauma as I worked through this dissertation, I turned to *Hearthstone* as a social game where I could connect to others, without needing to make small-talk or perform socially in ways I felt uncomfortable doing. In other words, I could pick up my phone, turn on the game, connect with a random person and just play a short game together. There was no need to chat, or introduce myself in anyway other than as an opponent who played in a certain way. This allowed me to feel a connection with an “other” in a safe way.

#### Games as Places of Identity Transformation, Integration, and Appropriation (Relations of Self-Other-World)

*Games that provide playground for learning about making choices, developing meaning, and practicing different identities. The games act as mediators between transformation and appropriation – they allow for the integration of newly learned identities and ways of relating to the world. They integrate the past, present, and future in an adventurous, alternative way. This is where I clearly interact between personas, though in many cases the interaction occurs through silence and shared concentration on exploration. Wandering together, learning together. Ultimately, this is where the personas are integrated together, resolving relations of relationlessness and bringing together new internal understandings.*

#### Hearthstone

“Um ok so today I recorded um Super Mario Bros. playthroughs with commentary and I just wanted to sit here and play *Hearthstone* to think through some things out loud because I have

probably mentioned many times before, Hearthstone gives me um it gives me a way to channel what I'm thinking um without having to think about it too much. It's a game that has been helping me as I go through my uh PhD so I'll turn to this when I think there's good reason to or if I just need a sounding board." (May 12, 2016)

### Uninvited

"I liked reading, I liked adventure games that I could figure out. So I really enjoyed figuring things out and being able to just sit there quietly by myself um...

I always loved the idea of um ahem having to survive like this. I guess maybe it reminded me a lot of trying to survive, all the games I used to play as a kid in my head um." (Feb 15, 2017)

*This quote is here and may seem out of place due to the game lacking open world/RPG elements. The drive to "figure things out" is a process of transformation. Learning to survive, to me, was part of figuring out my identity.*

"I can't picture anything around me um I can't picture the apartment I was in I can't picture anything, I can feel feelings. The issue with this is that I was already tense today so the fact that I was already tense could lead me to believe that I am just feeling the tension of the day. Of course I turned to this game without planning to ahead of time so as a go to sort of thing maybe that what it is it's the death is could be worse, things could be worse, I can ignore what's going on around me if I can get through some of the pain that exists in the game. I'm just overthinking it, but just to record, it's giving me feelings of of odd comfort, distraction, the desire to be alone



this game gives me the desire to be alone and play this alone. Just like the hours and hours I spent sitting in the library as a kid. Looking through whatever books there was, this is the video game version of the library almost. I can play with experiences that y’know books provide, but um...” (Feb 15, 2017)

### The Three Stooges

“And this game doesn’t really have any other social, my cousins, my friends, nobody really got the Three Stooges so it’s not like it’s a game I really played with anybody really. It’s a very solitary game that I just sort of played through because I thought the Stooges were funny.” (Jan 19, 2017)

*This may seem like an odd place to put this quote, however it is very important when it comes to integration and a connection to identity. “I thought the Stooges were funny” is a statement I made about my identity as child.*

### Heroes of Might and Magic 3

“Y’know so Lacan talks about the mirror stage and how it’s that time when we start to recognize ourselves, I believe this is correct, I could be wrong um I have to read it some more but as objects separate from our mothers, or the other, we recognize ourselves as separate people and for me that recognition I imagine was scary um and then something went wrong where I was in a healthy situation I should have been able to um to create my own identity and be able to be my own person and be able to be a person and I never, I never reached that, that stage, that point, and

I think this is the wrong way and I'm gonna die um ahem so Lacan is really making sense to me because learning about who I am and how I can interact with the world was always matched with fear and uncertainty and it was uncertainty about what the other expected of me, mother other, I like how he uses that." (April 19, 2017)

"there's pictures where I'm smiling and laughing and that's y'know obviously means I was enjoying certain things but I think enjoyment and actually happiness and personal identity growth and accepting those are different things y'know when you're afraid, relief is happiness, a relief from constant fear feels good and I think that my happiness was that." (April 19, 2017)

"So escaping into worlds of thinking of figuring stuff out and of fantasy all of that together is what helps me cope. Y'know I played like other kids, I had a vivid imagination and I used that imagination to help myself survive which I think is really important." (April 19, 2017)

"Video games were the thing that gave me a sense of personality, games in general gave me a sense of of being a person of having emotion of having the things I couldn't find in science or in fact, I could find comfort but I couldn't find who I was in all of it. In games I could play with who I was who I wanted to be I I could escape while feeling things." (April 19, 2017)

*This quote is the key to understanding this theme – while I was too afraid to feel emotions beyond fear in real life, in games I could integrate happy feelings into my understanding of myself. I began to piece together an identity that was not strictly based on survival.*

“I think video games give us a chance to play with being a lord of a castle, who’s going to make all the decisions who’s going to go out and kill evil. And even though I don’t identify with Lord Hart, I play World of Warcraft, but I I don’t I don’t identify personally with these characters and yet the fact that I can use my brain, logic, y’know all those sorts of things, it gives me, it gives me a power that it gives me a power, I was gonna say a power that I don’t get through truth, but that’s not true there’s a balance.” (April 19, 2017)

“The game allows me to experience the other, to fight against it without real world consequences. Hmmm, is that why games help make me so happy, happy being um, sort of relative statement. \*sigh\*” (April 19, 2017)

### World of Warcraft

“Playing this game makes me feel stable.” (March 21, 2016)

### Skyrim

\*\*\*this entire playthrough was just me narrating the game, fully immersed\*\*\* (April 20, 2017)

### Baldurs Gate 2

“\*sigh\* those are some of the best parts of D&D, picking the character and this whole alternative self. And because you spend so much time building the character, it becomes huge.” (April 27, 2017)

### Summary

*To reiterate what I said at the beginning of this section, this is where the personas are integrated together, resolving relations of relationlessness and bringing together new internal understandings.*

No other medium allowed me to safely experiment with being myself. I could fantasize when watching movies/TV and reading books, but my decisions never made any difference in those situations. In video games, I could make decisions about how I wanted to relate to the in-game characters, the in-game world, and the in-game choices I had to make. The transformation happened when I was able to experience emotions and take control over my actions. I was able to integrate parts of the experiences, new meanings, and emotional experiences into my understanding of myself. Most importantly, I was able to appropriate my actions, feelings, and intentions as experienced in the video game, into my real life.

*As Jaeggi (2014) would put it, I was able to ‘make my self’ by learning that I could act upon the world, change the world, and make the world my own. This process began through experimentation and experiences in video games by teaching me how to gain control in uncertain conditions. I was then able to begin acting on the world in real life (e.g. making decisions that responded to my desires, rather than to simply appease my mom). Jaeggi conceives the self as a doer, someone who has experiences and who can actively engage in appropriation. In*

*dissociation and through experiencing the world through the eyes of my various personas, I was not integrating my experiences in a way that allowed me to relate myself - **Sonja** - to the various actions and outcomes I experienced in trauma. Video games gave me the opportunity to develop an identity as a person who could act on the world with meaningful consequences. **Baby Sonja**, who reacted purely out of fear, dissociation, and survival became less of a central identity, and more of a part of a larger whole through learning how to impact the world around her.*

***Subsection for Transformation, Integration, and Appropriation: Games explicitly about Trauma***

*The quotes below, from the two games I played specifically due to their intended design (explained above), are here largely for curiosity and to share the experiences with you. I did appropriate new understandings of fear, nightmares, and trauma by playing these games.*

Amnesia: The Dark Descent

“I’m hoping this will help with some nightmares, I haven’t been feeling great the past couple of days. Brent and I had a disagreement on Friday night again and it’s just a sign we’re both stressed out I think um. Yesterday was pretty much a day full of panic attack sort of state of mind and dissociation um so as much as I tried to get done for work it was just really really frustrating.” (April 11, 2017)

“So they say, they say, I say, horror is good for dealing with the stress. Takes me out of reality, puts me into a place where I can experiment with being brave and with being ok with terrible things going on around me.” (April 11, 2017)

“This is kinda what it feels like to be in some nightmares, though mine are more realistic. Lucid? I want to say realistic because it’s what I mean to say, so I should just say it. Mine are more about real life and real things. Whereas nightmares depicted like this, well this isn’t really a nightmare. The insanity as it’s depicted here is more I don’t know deliberate.” (April 12, 2017)

“Um, I can’t relate to hearing voices, I can relate to the hear pounding of having to hide from monsters. That’s that’s scary, um, not having any way to fight back. That feeling of powerlessness. Just trying to survive and solve a puzzle. The puzzle of life I guess.” (April 12, 2017)

### Trauma

“You’re supposed to give yourself time to heal, you’re supposed to give yourself some selfish time you’re not supposed to do anything. It’s like my experiences with um the should. I should be feeling this I should be feeling that. So far what I’m gathering, she should follow a road, she should chase this ghost that her parents wanted her to be a lawyer I imagine there’s a lot of drawing so I’m thinking artist.” (March 30, 2017)

“Well that hopeless discomfort is very familiar the way she speaks, and and very distant very dissociated, sort of wandering from here to there trying to get somewhere. The fading in the background, that’s dissociation feels like that. I’ve stood in the subway in Edmonton and seen just this blur on either side of me, focusing on very specific things and blocking everything else out is quite familiar.” (March 30, 2017)

“I like how it pieces together the story, because you expect it to just sort of show you what the dream is but it’s sort of making it difficult to navigate, not difficult to navigate, difficult to remember where you’ve been.” (March 30, 2017)

“The graffiti and the art is very representative of how she wanted to be an artist but the vague narrative is very interesting because it’s forcing me to create a narrative for her, I mean she has something of a narrative, but nothing, nothing’s concrete. And again, if we are thinking about trauma and dissociation then that makes a lot of sense.” (March 30, 2017)

“Suicide felt like an option to me a couple of times, as an escape um having to live with mom, having to deal with George having to deal with bullies at school it seemed no matter how well I did at life there was always pain so I can empathize with how she’s feeling.” (April 5, 2017)

“Mine are different because a lot of my trauma occurred as I was growing up, so I wasn’t able to, I need the book to get the actual details again, but, I didn’t develop an identity, or meaning

outside of trauma, so my journey has been about trying to figure out what life is like without constantly being afraid.” (April 5, 2017)

### Conclusion

It is June 6 2020. COVID-19 isolation continues despite the slow re-opening of society. I am too afraid to spend time with people (again). After being locked away, with all control removed, told not to leave my house “or else” (again) I am once again faced with learning to overcome my fear and begin reintegration. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, a game that I was at first reluctant to play, has become an international symbol of togetherness during this pandemic. I bought it and I have been playing it. “Past **Sonja**” was correct. I did eventually feel the drive to experience the solidarity related to the social phenomenon. In a world riddled with uncertainty, fear, isolation, and the ultimate form of alienation (a relation of relationlessness to the new normal, whatever that is), the virtual sanctuary of Animal Crossing has stood strong as a place of social interaction, a place of meaning creation, a place of transformation and integration.

*Returning to the New York Times article mentioned at the start of this chapter, the following excerpt explains the Animal Crossing craze quite well:*

“There is no nastiness. There’s no violence that exists. They get absorbed into the day-to-day things without the real world consequences,” said Romana Ramzan, a lecturer at Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland who teaches game narrative. “It’s like you’ve been transported to a parallel universe. It’s the universe you’ve always wanted, but can’t get” (Khan, 2020).



*Although the game was not a part of my original data collection, I wanted to address how the game has satisfied each of the 5 themes covered above. The game has had an impact on me, and I did not expect or intend to talk about it in this dissertation. The timing of finishing this chapter however, compels me to share my thoughts and makes an apt conclusion.*

### ***1) Games as Providing Links through Time (Relations to Memories)***

Although the pandemic is relatively recent compared to my childhood memories, I am still finding it difficult to form solid memories during the constant state of heightened alert. Animal Crossing is providing me with a thread with which I can connect recent memories. As evident in the way this chapter starts and ends, the game provides solid landmarks for me to look back on.

### ***2) Games as Tools for Mediating Trauma and Ameliorating Flashbacks (Active Relation of Self-Care)***

The game is cute, peaceful, and relaxing. When I feel overwhelmed after reading the news (for example) I can turn on the game and take a break from the real world. I can do “normal” things in an alternative fantasy world. It provides me with a safe zone of dissociation.

### ***3) Games as Places of Navigating Uncertainty and Learning Control (Relations to the World Around Us)***

The pandemic is forcing us to face a new, unknown ‘normal’. The game is a place where the world has collectively learned how to gain some control over uncertainty. There is a certainty to the timeline of the game. Every Sunday morning, before noon, I need to open the game and find the little pig with the snotty nose and the hat made of turnips. The character sells the turnips at varying prices allowing me to play the “stalk” market during the week. Everyone with the game can predict when that character will arrive, and what we are expected to do when she does.

*This is an important place to interject as there is a bit of a paradoxical thing happening. I argue everywhere else that video games are uncertain, and that learning how to control that uncertainty is helpful for learning to control the uncertainty of life. With the pandemic, the real world has become full of uncertainty. When Animal Crossing first came out, people did not automatically know about the stalk market or the little pig, but eventually learned, transforming the uncertainty into a comforting certainty. In this particular example, it was the original dive into the game that presented uncertainty that I could then gain mastery over. This control and predictability became a way to introduce control into an otherwise traumatic and ‘predictably scary’ pandemic.*

#### ***4) Games as Places to Develop Social Solidarity (Relations to Others)***

Beyond the above mentioned shared timelines and collective enjoyment of the game, I have a personal reason for the game improving my relations to others. My boyfriend’s daughter purchased the game before me and has been playing it consistently. I sat down with her and talked about the game and why she enjoyed it. She told me about the turnips, and the villagers, and how to catch scary bugs and fish to make money. She convinced me that the game was worth buying. We still talk about it, and if I am at their house on Sunday morning, she always reminds me to open the game and check the turnip prices.

#### ***5) Games as Places of Identity Transformation, Integration, and Appropriation (Relations of Self-Other-World)***

This game is a life simulator. From choosing your character design, to decorating your house, to deciding who to interact with, to experimenting with different hobbies, the options are plentiful and rewarding. Not only does the game allow me to play with new ‘normals’, it has transformed

how the world looks at video games. The stories I am thinking of are highly anecdotal, coming from my experience of reading through Twitter and Facebook, but there have been many stories of people who have never considered playing video games, picking up this one during the pandemic to play with their loved ones from a distance. I am literally witnessing a transformation, integration, and appropriation of how people relate to this game, and to each other through this game.

I am currently reviewing articles for an edited edition of a game studies journal on *Animal Crossing: New Horizon*, so while I am not citing specific research here, it is in the process of being done.

*This chapter has outlined 5 ways in which video games have helped me, and continue to help me, resolve symptoms of C-PTSD and alienation: they allow me to reconnect to disconnected memories caused by dissociation; they allow me to actively mediate ongoing trauma by providing escape and safe places to stay connected to myself in the moment; they teach me how to allow for uncertainty in my life to experience danger and possible failure in a safe environment; they connect me to other people through shared meanings and cultural understandings; and finally they allow me to transform my identity, bringing my personas together to form a central identity as a person who can act on the world and who can actively influence my own life. The last chapter will talk about the importance of all of the above themes and how they relate to my ultimate conclusion: the unique “thing” about video games is that they allow us to move away from a lack of control over perceived certainty toward perceived control over relative uncertainty.*

## **Chapter 6: LACK OF CONTROL OVER PERCEIVED CERTAINTY vs. PERCEIVED CONTROL OVER RELATIVE UNCERTAINTY**

### Introduction to the Conclusion

*In Chapter 1, you were introduced to a cast of characters representing the various identities experienced by **Sonja** throughout her life. **Sonja**, as the foundation, or central character, has spoken through each of these identities at various points in the preceding chapters. Writing in italics has been (currently is) **Professor Sapach**, the academic, professorial voice. The most explicitly referenced voice has been **Baby Sonja**, the one who experienced the brunt of the child abuse, and the identity who still clings to her trauma. **Baby Sonja** still lives in a state of active Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) and she always will. **Forestghost** has, somewhat appropriately, faded in and out of discussion. It has been difficult to bring her out as her entire existence is based on being hidden and safe. She has been here, expressing her experiences from a distance. If you have read a story or experience that has left you slightly confused about which character was being invoked, it was most likely **Forestghost** holding **Baby Sonja's** fragile hand and whispering in her ear. **Lenoraven** has also been hiding in the background for the most part. Her voice has been heard during stories about personal events that occurred during the years spent writing this dissertation. She has been the mediator between **Professor Sapach**, and **Sonja**; not often referred to by name, but very vocal as a strong, yet fragile student.*

*Reintroducing these characters is important beyond the formal process of “writing a proper conclusion” that summarizes what came before. **Forestghost** and **Lenoraven** have expressed themselves through the “underlying ruptures” and “sudden breaks, lapses, and absences” described by Eyerman (2013) and discussed in Chapter 1. They have also been the silent voices*

*who have connected the louder voices of **Baby Sonja** and **Professor Sapach** to the identity of **Sonja** as a whole. Returning to Hartman (1995), also discussed in Chapter 1, their voices most often appeared as accidents, intermittences, and muted flowers of speech. As I have received feedback on the various chapters throughout this process, it has been noted that there has been some confusion around which voice was being used in particular places. While not done intentionally, the confusion, a result of **Forestghost** and **Lenoraven** speaking from the background, is a valuable part of this autoethnography. Keeping the idea of “the methodology is the message” in mind, the feedback itself has become a part of the project, and has opened my eyes to changes in voices and personas that I did not recognize. The years of editing and discussions with my insightful supervisors has opened my eyes to those underlying ruptures that I would not necessarily see otherwise.*

*It has been my job, as **Professor Sapach**, to weave formal academic research and interpretation into this dissertation. The other characters have had the far tougher job of being the storytellers, the voices that express **Sonja’s** memories and real life experiences. As Sara Ahmed describes in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017):*

*...it is not that memory work is necessarily about recalling what has been forgotten: rather, you allow a memory to become distinct, to acquire a certain crispness or even clarity; you gather memories like things, so they become more than half glimpsed, so that we can see a fuller picture; so you can make sense of how different experiences connect (22).*

*Through their autoethnographic voices, the characters in this project have worked together to transform the jumbled, frightening, shameful memories from **Sonja’s** life into distinct stories. As one of the goals of an autoethnography is to share stories and individual experiences in order to*

*provide readers with something that they can interpret and relate to (or not relate to) from their own perspectives, the way the stories have been told has been done with purpose.*

*Finally, I want to reiterate the question that has acted as the primary driver of my research throughout this dissertation: **How have video games helped me to survive and overcome trauma – a kind of trauma that left me feeling alienated? How might video games help others in the same way?** This question, introduced in Chapter 1 as an overarching amalgamation of 4 initial research questions, is the one that I will address through my final exploration of the unexplained conflict mentioned at the end of Chapter 1: **LACK OF CONTROL OVER PERCEIVED CERTAINTY vs. PERCEIVED CONTROL OVER RELATIVE UNCERTAINTY.***

#### Lack of Control and the Inevitable

Every Sunday morning was the same when I spent the weekend at my dad's. My parents had some sort of vague agreement about when it was acceptable for dad to take me 'home' to mom's. I am not sure exactly when they created their 'agreement' or whether it had changed over the years. As described in earlier chapters, the impact of consistent trauma, and the symptoms of dissociation, have left my memory unreliable. Whatever their agreement, I was always the one stuck in the middle, compelled to try to maintain some semblance of coping over an uncontrollable situation.

To set the stage, mom wanted to spend Sunday morning watching her favourite British soap opera. The show started at 8am and went until noon. Dad, on the other hand, typically wanted to drink beer and watch whatever sports would be on TV throughout the day. It was dad's responsibility to drive me across the bridge, as described in Chapter 4, back to mom's place. Although dad typically drank and drove without any apparent serious concern about the dangers or consequences, he must have known that mom would challenge him if he dropped me off while

too inebriated. He was always awake by 5am on the weekends as he worked at 4am throughout the week. I would always find him sitting at the dining room table, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, listening to country music, and playing solitaire. I don't think he realized that I saw the open beer hidden in the fridge, fully aware that he had been drinking since he woke up. I didn't want him to be overly drunk when he drove anymore than my mom did: it was a constant source of stress for me.

It was usually around 10am when he would begin to get anxious. "Hey Kiddo, we should probably head out soon" was his way of saying that he wanted to take me home. This meant making the dreaded phone call to mom to let her know we were on our way. Predictably, she would answer the phone angry. **Baby Sonja's** quivering voice usually muttered the phrase "I know it's early, but dad wants to bring me home." 90% of the time she would respond by insulting my dad followed by an angry demand that I tell him that he wasn't supposed to show up before noon. Sometimes she would tell me to "put the prick on the phone" and other times she would simply say "no!" It was always the same pattern, and it always left me terrified. I knew it was going to happen. It was a certainty, at least in my mind. There were rare occasions when she would simply agree without a fight, and there were even rarer occasions where dad would decide to invite her over for a Sunday BBQ, but in **Baby Sonja's** mind, conflict was inevitable. Not only was it inevitable, but it was all her fault.

*Judith Herman, in the book Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (1992) describes many symptoms of long-term child abuse. It is in this book that the term Complex PTSD was first introduced. As discussed in Chapter 3, shame, the feeling of inherent badness, is a significant and long-lasting symptom of C-PTSD. Herman notes:*

Self-blame is congruent with the normal forms of thought of early childhood, in which the self is taken as the reference point for all events. It is congruent with the thought processes of traumatized people of all ages, who search for faults in their own behavior in an effort to make sense out of what has happened to them. In the environment of chronic abuse, however, neither time nor experience provide any corrective for this tendency toward self-blame; rather, it is continually reinforced (103).

*Any memories related to the rare occasions of non-threatening experiences are minimized, taking a back seat to the knowledge that bad things would happen, and they would happen because of **Baby Sonja**. The brief example above is only one of an uncountable number of instances where **Baby Sonja** was certain that bad things were going to happen; that she was only steps away from an intense backlash or angry outburst. The use of the term “certainty” here is obviously a subjective one. From the outside looking in, unpredictability seems to rule supreme. There were no consistent responses, as noted above through mention of the occasional peaceful outcome of the Sunday morning phone call. There was not a predictable set of actions that **Baby Sonja** could avoid, or do, in order to escape punishment, neglect, or abuse. Stories told throughout earlier chapters, beginning with the story about being locked in the basement in the prologue, have shared a common thread of certainty around punishment and harm, no matter what action was taken.*

*Control is an interesting word, and one that needs clarification for the purposes of this concluding chapter. The use of the word control here primarily focuses on the ability to work toward and impact an outcome. It is a process that not only involves the ability to understand the possible outcomes of a situation, but to also maintain power over the path toward the outcome.*



*In the Handbook of the Sociology of Mental Health, Ross & Mirowsky (2013) define personal control as:*

...the belief that you can and do—master, control, and shape your own life. Its opposite is the sense of personal powerlessness. In other words, perceived control and powerlessness represent two ends of a continuum, with the belief that one can effectively alter the environment at one end of the continuum, and the belief that one's actions cannot influence events and circumstances at the other (n.p).

*The key part of the above quote is that PERCEIVED CONTROL exists in opposition to the concept of powerlessness, with powerlessness representing one of the primary symptoms of alienation (See Table 1, Chapter 1 for Seeman (1995)), and C-PTSD. Perception is extremely valuable in relation to the psycho-social impact of individual actions in that a person needs to believe that they have control in order to feel empowered. Subtle actions intended or not, usually have an impact on an outcome. The tone of voice and level of confidence with which **Baby Sonja** phoned her mother likely impacted, in some small way, her mother's reception of the phone call. In **Baby Sonja's** mind however, her actions had no impact on the 'inevitable' outcome of her mother's wrath. **Baby Sonja** had no PERCEIVED CONTROL over what she perceived to be a certainty.*

I was always wrong; always doing something, or being someone, that made other people angry or uncomfortable. And yet, I wasn't. My father never hit me, never attacked me verbally for no reason, never lost his temper at me for a minor accident or mistake. The certainty with him involved his alcohol consumption, and the awkward (and in some cases dangerous) situations that would result. Drinking and driving, overstaying our welcome when visiting family, passing out and missing our time together, and breaking treasured possessions, are but a few examples.

**Baby Sonja** always knew that something bad was going to happen, no matter what actions she took. Throughout my abusive, alcohol-centred childhood, I had a complete lack of control over what I perceived as certain, constant danger. I thought I would be trapped forever. I thought I would be alone forever. I was certain that death was the best option for me. I was certain that I was worthless.

*Returning to Herman (1992), victims of trauma are deprived of a sense of power and control.*

*She notes that “the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor (159).” Thinking about this from a personal perspective, I actually challenge the way this*

*guiding principle is worded when dealing with C-PTSD caused by long-term child abuse.*

*Specifically, the word “restore” is questionable here, as it implies that power and control were possessed by the survivor at some point before the abuse. For people exposed to abuse, trauma, confinement, and/or neglect for as long as they can remember, a feeling of power and control cannot be recovered, as it has never existed. Instead, the guiding principle of recovery should be to foster the development of perceived power and control in the survivor.*

One important memory cuts through the cloud of powerlessness that was the Sunday morning phone call: the freedom to play video games in dad’s bedroom. When I stayed with him, he gave up his bed and bedroom for me. He would sleep on the couch in the living room while I would hang out in the well stocked bedroom. He had emptied three of the six drawers in his large dresser and would allow me to keep snacks and personal belongings in them. On top of the dresser sat a small TV connected to my *Nintendo Entertainment System* and *Sega Genesis*. My games were displayed in a container specifically designed to hold video game cartridges. I could run my hands over each game while perusing each title in my collection. I could rotate the TV to face either the queen-sized bed near the window, or the cozy old chair in the corner by the closet.

While the bed was typically reserved for watching cartoons and *Star Trek*, I would use the chair whenever I wanted to get into a game. It was a place of safety, and of control. I could pick the system, I could pick the game, I could choose to sit or lay down, and I could choose to eat treats from my own treat drawer. There was no punishment related to that space, no fear. The bedroom phone was located on the far side of the bed, right beside the window. I never slept on that side of the bed, always choosing to sleep with my head close to the TV. The phone corner was dangerous.

*It is fascinating how triggering memories works. The mention of the phone, and the Sunday morning phone call triggered the recollection of a highly traumatic story, described below. Thinking about fundamental symbolic interactionist principles (Blumer, 1969), the telephone is a powerful symbol from throughout **Sonja's** life. To this day, talking on the phone brings a sense of terror and dread. In Chapter 3, a ringing phone prevented a suicide, and yet, the constant sense of shame and fear connected to the phone contributed to the desire to commit suicide. Such a simple thing holding such powerful meaning. The thing about the phone, in the mid 1990's, was that it was primarily a stationary thing. The phone was in a singular location, attached to the wall by a cord. There were wireless units that would allow a person to walk around a relatively confined space, but they were ultimately bound to the wire and the wall. The underlying social meaning connected to the symbol of the phone, for **Sonja**, is powerlessness and fear of the person on the other end.*

*Of note here is a paper by Sydney Aronson (1971) titled The Sociology of the Telephone. The paper explores the impact of the telephone on the economy, urban development, community development, rural connectivity, and individual social interactions. While the current understanding of a phone, as a smart device carried with a person wherever they go significantly*

*changes the sociological impact of the phone, Aronson's observations were still fairly relevant during my upbringing. Aronson described the phone as primarily positive, a tool for instantly connecting those who would otherwise need to write letters or travel to maintain contact. Of interest here however is the point that the phone also became an instrument of aggression and hostility. The anonymity and distance inherent to the medium allowed for "a kind of 'persecution' apt to occur between acquaintances and friends" (Aronson, 166) The telephone also, according to Aronson, allowed for a deflection of hostility:*

The opportunity to talk on the phone may also function to limit and to deflect the expression of hostility. Loud haranguing on the wire can mitigate situations that might otherwise lead to blows if the antagonists were face-to-face. The practice of screaming at the operator may serve as a safety-valve. Whether she is employed by the telephone company or handles [sic] the switchboard for a large firm, the operator can be a built-in victim or target for the caller (166).

*The phone providing a "built-in victim or target" resonates strongly with me. **Baby Sonja** was trained to answer the phone whenever there was a possibility that it could be her mother on the other end. The phone was a leash, a way for her mother to know where she was, and maintain control over her, even when she wasn't there physically. The phone represented a tool of entrapment. It had to be answered or else there would be hell to pay. It was a stationary tool of certainty, and of powerlessness. The person on the other end, from **Baby Sonja's** perspective, would inevitably be a persecutor.*

Besides the danger of the Sunday morning phone call, the phone also represented a particularly terrifying incident that has stuck with me since it happened. I do not remember how old I was. It was in my dad's second apartment, so I was in my early teens. My mom had undergone surgery

and I was staying with dad. It was late. Dad was passed out and snoring on the couch in the living room. It must have been extremely early on Saturday morning, around 2am or so, as I had felt safe and comfortable from a night of playing video games and watching my favourite shows. The phone rang and I jumped to pick it up, it was mom. They had let her out of the hospital that night apparently, and she was clearly on a strong mix of pain medication and alcohol at that point. Her words were slurred, angry, and extremely harsh. She was hallucinating and said that she had seen my dad and I parked outside of her apartment, locked in an inappropriate embrace, laughing up at her. She threatened to call the police on my dad as she was convinced that he had just molested me in front of her, not 10 minutes before the phone call (it took 25 minutes to drive from dad's place to hers). She began screaming and crying, calling me names and demanding that I put that "motherfucker" on the phone. I had witnessed her in bad states before, but this was the worst. I used every trick I had learned to calm her down, trying to logically explain the impossibility of me being able to pick up the phone so soon after being in front of her building. I avoided talking about dad, trying to distract her from her rage and the imagined indiscretion. She eventually changed the subject and began talking about seeing monkeys swinging on the powerlines, and finally about suicide. I was shaking and crying and I knew I should have phoned the police, but I was too afraid. Deep down, I "knew" that calling the police would only lead to more suffering and pain for me. I was convinced that they would determine that she wasn't that bad, or that she had actually seen my dad molest me. I had no options other than to be supportive, and to talk her down. Throughout the phone call that seemed to last forever, I had her calmed down on several occasions, only to have her break into an unpredictable raging rant again. Whenever her rage returned, I knew it was because I had said something wrong. I wasn't

saying the right things to make her feel better. I never told dad, or anyone else about that phone call, as it left me feeling a powerful sense of shame and blame.

*According to Chu (2011), from the book Rebuilding Shattered Lives: Treating Complex PTSD and Dissociative Disorders:*

The child faced with continuing helpless victimization must learn to somehow achieve a sense of power and control. The child cannot safely conceptualize that a parent might be ruthless and self-serving; such a conclusion is tantamount to abandonment and annihilation. The only acceptable alternative for the child is to believe that she has provoked the painful encounters and to hope that by learning to be good she can earn love and acceptance (9).

***Baby Sonja** was stuck in a hopeless pattern of helpless victimization. The phone call from her mother that night, and her response to it, reinforced her belief that she was the cause of the pain that she was experiencing. Staying on the phone and talking her mother down was her way of “being good” to make the pain go away. Calling the police, or informing her father, would lead to self-annihilation as she was so intimately attached to the perpetrator of her trauma. In her mind, her mother wasn’t the problem, **Baby Sonja** was the problem. She should have been there to take care of her mother after the surgery. She should have worked harder to avoid causing whatever made her mother hallucinate an incestuous encounter with her father.*

One would think that the telephone would represent a safe way to access social interaction and support. My one female friend loved chatting on the phone. My boyfriends liked talking on the phone. For me, the phone always represented just another source of danger. I could not control the phone. Unless I screened calls through the answering machine (something I wasn’t allowed

to do, because if it was mom, I would get into trouble), I never knew who was on the other end. We didn't have caller display, so I had no way of knowing.

*The phone represented a paradoxical mediator. In her mother's hands, the phone was a tool of power and persecution, of control. In **Baby Sonja's** hands, the phone was a restricting chain of powerlessness. The thing about the phone was that all possible outcomes were known, and seen as bad. Regardless of the voice I heard on the other end, the phone was predictable, limited, and beyond my direct control.*

Games, on the other hand, were controllable. I didn't always know what was around the next corner, I didn't know what to expect, but I could control what happened. I could play with consequences. Talking on the phone represented something concrete. One wrong word, the night that mom called me while hallucinating, could have resulted in the police being called on my dad, or in her committing suicide. There was no way to know which words would work. It was predictably uncontrollable.

*On the phone, "being good" or well behaved helped, but never fully controlled the situation. With video games on the other hand, "being skilled" was what impacted the situation. Having control, with video games, taught me that I could control not only my immediate actions, but the later results of some of those actions. I could never really "get better" at talking to mom on the phone, but I could always "get better" at video games.*

*The point I want to emphasize here is that there was a perceived certainty in the results all of **Baby Sonja's** actions. She was certain that bad things were going to happen. She was certain that she was in danger, would be hurt, and would be blamed for anything and everything. Her lack of control was not a result of her own actions, but of the social environment that she*

*inhabited. She was **alienated** from the real world, where parents were loving and safe. She didn't understand that what she was experiencing was outright abuse that was seriously impacting her mental and emotional health and development. She had a relation of relationlessness to herself, to others, and to the world around her. The stories shared throughout the preceding chapters have sought to demonstrate this point fully.*

### Living in an Alienating World

When Donald Trump was elected president on Nov 8, 2016, I felt a rush of raging emotions. I recorded two Let's Play videos on Nov 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016, where I spilled my guts about my reaction. The following is a set of excerpts from those recordings:

“I feel like they elected one of my mom's abusive boyfriends into power and I think a lot of the reaction I'm having is actually a traumatized reaction um my fear is not necessarily based out of. I mean I have, I have an intellectual understanding that as much harm as he can do uh we have enough things in place that will prevent him from saying I'm just going to start war or I'm gonna I'm gonna start doing this...”

“I'm not that scared, for those reasons when I'm uh I'm reacting to is more than anything that he he represents he represents my mom to me. He represents the person who won't shut up who will say any bigoted horrible thing because they want to feel better. They want to \*sigh\* they want to get their point across no matter what and that's y'know that's who Trump is, at least according to the media...”

“...I said [to my mom] I don't really care about the individual having the power as president as much as I care about the culture of acceptance of society, the way that society \*sigh\* um the way that society allowed this to happen...”



“so \*sigh\* how \*sigh\* the Trump election results are affecting me like as if suddenly I’m back under my mom’s thumb which I’m not even American it doesn’t even make sense. I’m not really a part of that world even though in my \*\*\*laughing\*\*\* idealist perspective I’m kina hoping the whole reason I’m fighting for is education. I’m taking a route which includes Sociology and stuff is because I think the world has fucking hope and I think, I don’t, I don’t want us always to be under a a under the control of of dictators or people who who can make you feel afraid and that’s what my mom did my whole life was make me feel afraid. \*\*\*almost crying\*\*\* and it’s because she [mom] had that that attitude and it was almost support. People liked her and even if they didn’t I found out later that you know, nobody would come, nobody would help me because why why stir the pot, why rock the boat? Fucking, why try to do anything like that, why try to challenge her if it’s just going to be more of a pain in the ass?”

*There are several important things to note about the above excerpts. Returning to the idea of reading text through the lens of trauma, the stutters and repetition demonstrate the level of anxiety and lack of control I was feeling. The language I was using, for example “gonna” and “fucking” support the idea that I was simply “spilling my guts” – no attempt to perform for the camera or control my thoughts in an academic way. Most relevant however, is the hopelessness and powerlessness expressed. The disbelief that “society allowed this to happen” combined with my attempt to convince myself that my pursuit of a social science degree is some sort of action places external blame while attempting to gain some sort of control. I simultaneously attempt to gain control, while giving in to the idea that I have no real power. Hopelessness is expressed in the final two lines of the last excerpt – “why stir the pot, why rock the boat?”*

I look at the world around me, the social and political events that occur, and I feel disconnected. I feel isolated, questioning my own worth. I recorded the two videos immediately following a

phone conversation about the election with my mother. The phone, again leaving me feeling like I couldn't fight back. Mom supported Trump's election, and no matter what I said, she shot me down. Ignore my MA in Social and Political Thought, ignore my pending PhD in Sociology, transform me back into the helpless child I was in the stories at the start of the chapter.

*As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Jaeggi (2014) describes the relationlessness associated with alienation as:*

a detachment or separation from something that in fact belongs together, the loss of connection between two things that nevertheless stand in relation to one another. Being alienated from something means having become distanced from something in which one is in fact involved or to which one is in fact related – or in any case ought to be (882).

My education, my experiences, and my opinions all feel transparent and elusive. The harder I work, the more disconnected I feel. There is a sense of inevitability about where I fit in society. I am surrounded by the message that I will never get a job that I want. I am too old, over-educated, under-experienced, mentally ill, among many other faults. I should be able to fit in and to have some control over the future. I should be able to contribute. But there is a disconnect, I am not a good fit for this world.

*Explicitly writing that I am feeling alienated is a struggle. It is easy to become lost in a sense of detachment from the world. Similar to what **Baby Sonja** experienced growing up, **Lenoraven** feels that she **SHOULD** be better and that she **OUGHT** to do more. No matter what she does however, there is an unshakable sense of certainty that she will play the role of struggling, unwanted student for the rest of her life. Alienation is a **LACK OF CONTROL OVER PERCEIVED CERTAINTY**.*

*As discussed on above, victims of trauma are deprived a sense of power and control. When working to overcome the trauma, that sense of control needs to be restored (or introduced and nurtured for those who have never experienced it). Whether born into a traumatized existence, or slowly alienated from the self, others, and the world around them, it is the move away from meaninglessness and relationlessness through gaining a sense of control and a level of comfort around uncertainty that can help.*

Video games give us room to explore. They allow us to experiment, and search, and play, and make mistakes. In real life, it feels like everything has a ‘forever’ impact – if I fail, there is very rarely a do-over in the way that there is in video games. When I play a video game, I can gain a sense of power and control, at my own pace. If I become afraid or uncomfortable, I can turn the game off.

#### Wanderlust and Appropriation through Video Games

**Forestghost** has always been a wanderer, an explorer. Whenever I go for a walk through the city at night, or a hike through the woods to enjoy the solitude and safety, I am **Forestghost**. I love walking through an evergreen forest immediately after a rainfall.

*In Wanderlust: A History of Walking, Rebeca Solnit (2001) poetically argues that walking occurs not just for pleasure or movement, but for political, aesthetic, and social meaning.*

*Walking, argues Solnit, has a powerful connection to thinking and to culture. Particularly in our world that has become more dependent on accelerated travel, constant work, and instant communications (thanks to technology), walking is one of the few activities that allows us to take in the world around us while developing meaning and creating connections.*

*I argued, in Chapter 5, that video games as tools of alienation mediation fall into five different themes. To reiterate, they were:*

- 1. Games as Providing Links through Time (Relations to Memories).*
- 2. Games as Tools for Mediating Trauma and Ameliorating Flashbacks (Active Relation of Self-Care).*
- 3. Games as Places of Navigating Uncertainty and learning Control (Relations to the World Around Us).*
- 4. Games as Places to Develop Social Solidarity (Relations to Others).*
- 5. Games as Places of Identity Transformation, Integration, and Appropriation (Relations of Self-Other-World).*

*In all 5 of these themes exists some form of place or movement. Links through time, active self-care, navigating uncertainty, social interactions, places of transformation of meaning.*

Throughout the years spent on this dissertation, I have moved quite a few times. In each home, I had one wall dedicated to maps of video game worlds that I have explored. Whenever I get an open-world or expansive game, I try to obtain a poster or physical drawing of a map of that game world. As I spend my life attempting to transform my understanding of myself, others, and the world around me, I am constantly driven to explore. Video games have always been a safe place to explore. Gaining control, navigating, interacting, transforming, exploring, absorbing. Video games provide a plethora of new worlds, new experiences, new challenges, and new opportunities. Learning about a new world is always a process of working through uncertainty – gaining control over it. The maps on my wall give me a visual representation of the control I

have over my exploration. My wanderlust represents my desire to gain meaning from new experiences. Video games give me the freedom to explore, make choices, make mistakes, die, meet people, ignore people, follow quests, ignore quests, follow the rules, and even manipulate the rules through cheating.

*The 5 modes of appropriation related to video game play each allow the player to integrate and transform various relations. The freedom to explore and wander allows the player to experience new things, new meanings that can then be appropriated by the player. By providing the 5 modes of appropriation, the player is given control over the process of appropriation. They learn how to control the process of discovery, skill acquisition, and meaning development. While some paths may be clearly mapped, uncertainty still lies around every corner as the player can never really understand the game until they play it.*

#### The Methodology is the Message

In Chapter 2 I likened the process of writing this dissertation to a game. It has been full of uncertainty, exploration, new interactions, meaning transformation, and direct confrontations with my relations of relationlessness with myself, others, and the world around me.

*The methodology of this dissertation has itself been a journey. Just as Marshall McLuhan (1964) said “The Medium is the Message”, in the case of this dissertation, the methodology is the message. Allow me to explain by first quoting McLuhan’s 1967 project The Medium is the Message:*

The medium, or process, of our time – electronic technology – is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every

institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing – you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to “the others.” And they’re changing dramatically (8).

*The original argument of this dissertation was that the medium of the video game had some “thing” that was unique in helping to resolve/mediate alienation. As described above, that “thing” is that a player is given control over uncertainty. Games challenge the taken-for-granted inevitability of that which is seen as certain. McLuhan is right in saying that everything is changing. Video games allow us to play with change, to experiment with it.*

If I carry forward the “dissertation as a game” analogy, then I think my original argument does not quite cover everything. Alienation (C-PTSD as well) requires work to transform. A person needs to learn how to accept uncertainty, how to put themselves out there in order to engage in successful appropriation of new relations. Without video games, I would never have written this autoethnography. Without video games, I am not sure if or how I would have begun mediating the symptoms of close to 2 decades of trauma, or if I would have survived at all. I stand by my conclusion that video games, in the many ways described above, transform a lack of control over perceived certainty into perceived control over relative uncertainty. I strongly believe that video games are tools that open up the process of appropriation in the 5 ways listed above. I do not, however, believe that video games are the only answer, or the final answer.

*Every part of this dissertation, from start to finish, has been a process of appropriation (in the Jaeggi sense of transformation and integration of new meanings and relations) for me. I am far from the person I was when I started. Recall how I incorporated a recently published journal article version of my methodology into Chapter 2? That was a demonstration of how the process itself has changed me. Two voices, **Professor Sapach** and **Lenoraven**, became one. As I am*

*writing this paragraph, one of the last ones that I am composing before submitting the final draft, I no longer feel the strong differentiation between the personas introduced in Chapter 1. I admitted that they were all a part of a whole **Sonja** in the introduction, and they still are. Their voices are no longer distinct in the way they were at the start of this process. As I went back, and relived memories, I was transforming my relation to myself. As I told stories, read theories, gathered data, and lived life, I was transforming ingrained meanings and understandings about myself and the world around me. Choosing what to write, what to share, and how to tell my stories forced me to confront my relations with others as both an audience, and as actors in my ongoing narrative.*

Exploring the research process, exploring my stories, my identities, and my life has given me control and new meanings. Even as I write this conclusion, I am facing uncertainty – a good uncertainty. I have control over what happens next. I do not necessarily KNOW what will happen, but I know that I have control. My actions and choices make a difference. I started learning the control in the fantasy world of video games, but I only truly embraced it by engaging in the uncertain journey of the autoethnography. It has been like walking through my own life, exploring spaces that I had safely hidden from the path well travelled. Wanderlust satisfied! I took control over my stories and my memories, uncertain about where they would take me. What happened was a fulfilling and amazing journey.

*I want to share one more great McLuhan (1964) quote – “There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening (25).” Video games taught me how to explore. They gave me the opportunity to take chances, to fail, and to try again. To contemplate what is happening, is to take control over the uncertain. This dissertation gave me the opportunity to contemplate what has happened, and is happening, in my own life.*

## Lack of Control over Perceived Certainty becomes Perceived Control over Relative Uncertainty

The freedom to explore my own experiences, my own perspectives, my own understanding of my identities. Every twist and turn that this project has taken, in and of itself describes the process of appropriation nourished by wanderlust. Walking through a forest, exploring a new map in an open-world video game, attempting to solve a puzzle that never ends (Tetris), reading, researching, recording, and writing. Layers of the same process of appropriation, of transforming and integrating new understandings and new experiences. Transforming my relation of relationlessness to myself into a relation of compassion, understanding, and most importantly, curiosity.

*Perceived control over relative uncertainty.*

A walk through the forest disrupted by a freshly fallen tree. I have control.

A fork in the road in *World of Warcraft* leading to new, unknown adventures. I have control.

A new Tetronimo falls with no obvious place to go. I have control.

Describing my life using both my heart and my logic. I have control.

The things I choose to say, to share, to summarize and analyze. I have control.

*Perceived control over relative uncertainty.*

I don't know where the new path will lead, what adventures lay ahead, if I will win or lose a game, if you will accept what I write, if you will accept my arguments and justifications. I am uncertain.

*Perceived control over relative uncertainty.*



What I do know is that I am true to myself in these pages. I have shed blood, sweat, and tears to explore this material. I have transformed my own feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, fear, and shame, into my story.

My trauma. My pain. My alienation. My story. My meaning. My identity.

My relationship to video games, as places to explore, as homes to friends who never judge, as challenging experiences that open my eyes, and as tools of pure escape, have allowed me to learn the things that the real world kept from me. I have control. I can learn. I can change. I can adapt. I can overcome. I will experience the unexpected, and I don't have to be afraid.

*Perceived control over relative uncertainty.*

No longer locked in a basement, afraid to make a noise. No longer certain that pain and suffering is inevitable. No longer held prisoner by my powerlessness. No more lack of control over perceived certainty. The future is uncertain, and that is a good thing. I am forced to find meaning and value in what I can control right now. I am allowed to explore, make mistakes, learn, and grow. My relation to others, and to the world around me is one of curiosity and hope. Do I worry? Yes. Am I afraid of failure? Yes. Will I be hurt by others? Yes. But I experience relations of meaning.

*A lack of control over perceived certainty is a relation of relationlessness. There is no power to integrate and transform new experiences. Appropriation seems impossible when you feel that your actions have no meaning, no impact.*

Wanderlust, exploring, taking risks, accepting new challenges – these present opportunities for appropriation of new relations. For me, video games provided these opportunities. My C-PTSD,

my trauma, and my relation to myself, acted as unconquerable mountains. In video games, I am always able to find a way over, or around those mountains.

I am flooded with emotions as I write this. I know that I am right, in my world. The words ring powerful and true in my head, and yet I can feel the black, slimy hands of fear, shame, and doubt crawling up my back, ready to grab me by the shoulders and drag me back to reality. Have I fully overcome my C-PTSD? No, not by any means. Do I still feel alienated and lost? Yes. But something has changed over the course of this project. I am not writing about “cures” here, but about tools. My medication doesn’t cure my C-PTSD, but it allows me to live life in a way that presents new opportunities. Video games don’t cure alienation (or C-PTSD), but they provide tools for moving forward, and gaining a sense of control, when the real world fails. Am I saying that all we need to do to solve alienation is to play video games? No! What I am saying is that we need all of the help that we can get. What I have attempted to argue, to show, in this dissertation, is that the “something” about video games that is different, is the opportunity that they provide. Playing video games feeds our wanderlust, allows us to take control of something, and allows us to be pleasantly uncertain about what lies around the corner. They also provide social spaces that help us respond to the social condition of alienation through increased solidarity, and shared meanings.

*Replacing a lack of control over perceived certainty with perceived control over relative uncertainty through the process of playing, exploring, and being given the freedom to experiment with meaning and identity in virtual worlds of seemingly unlimited possibilities: this is the way that video games helped **Sonja** survive and overcome trauma. Specifically returning to Jaeggi (2014), by providing a sense of control over the unknown, video games taught **Sonja** that her actions could be meaningful in the real world. From making decisions based on what she wanted*

*in life, to allowing herself to risk possible failure for desired rewards (e.g. starting a conversation with a stranger knowing that there could be a possible rejection or friendship as a result), she appropriated her experiences in video games into her identity as an actor who could make a difference to herself, others, and the world around her.*

When entering a game, the player has a form of control that might not feel available to them in real life. It is not an absolute control, but it is a relation of control. A relation of control over themselves, others, and the world around them. Skill in games, the ability to choose what to play, none of that is absolutely in a person's control. As a child I did not choose the NES, I did not choose all of the games that my dad bought me and I did not get all of the games I wanted. Some weekends, when my dad would give me five dollars and twenty minutes to wander around the video game section of the video rental store, I had total perceived control over which game I chose. Of course the real world entered the equation. I was limited by the store's selection, the consoles that I owned, and whether a title was already rented by someone else. I could however, read each box, and make a controlled decision about how I was going to spend my weekend. My choices sometimes failed (when I picked a game that sucked for example) but I had control over something. In a life where I had no perceived control over the certainty that my dad would get drunk, and my mom would yell at me on the phone, the act of choosing, and playing, video games gave me some solid control.

### A Necessary Reflection?

*This dissertation has given me a relation of control to my own story. Video games gave me the tools and opportunities for appropriation. With the world as it stands on September 1, 2020, in the grip of a global pandemic, with the threat of fascism facing the USA, and the divisive hatred and fear being expressed through social media, we exist in a culture of inevitable conflict.*

I personally feel like I still face an environment where anger, violence, and fear are certainties. If ever it felt like the entire planet was dealing with trauma and alienation, it is right now. We have the technology to connect, to know, and to learn. Games like *Animal Crossing* bring people together, but it doesn't seem to be enough. People are losing their jobs, savings, careers, futures, and lives. I don't know what the answer is. Gaining control over relative uncertainty is the "formal" answer I am giving. Playing games, telling stories, working through our experiences, and working through our fears in order to move toward healthy appropriation is the answer. An autoethnography is meant to inspire and to encourage deeper thought about theories and solutions and change. I wish I had a solid answer, a checklist to hand to every person, but I don't. All I can do is share my stories and my experiences. All I can do is try to gain some control and dream about a future that is uncertain.

*I have to chose a stopping point. My narrative will continue once I submit this. My dog is jumping on me, wanting my attention. She has been here for the entire dissertation, and taking her for a nice long walk after I submit this final draft seems like a good way to reward her patience. See Figure 15 for her looking at me as I write this final sentence.*



Figure 15: Morrighan the German Shepherd Puppy, Going Grey Waiting for Me to Finish My Dissertation. September 1, 2020.

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<sup>42</sup> For these games, I have only listed the console I actually played on unless it was a PC/MAC/Linux game. In many cases, there are over 5 platforms, and I feel like it is confusing to list all of them if I only played the NES version. Not sure – Sean? Geoffrey?

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## Appendix A: Notification of Ethics Approval

### Notification of Approval

Date:	June 5, 2017	
Study ID:	Pro00062759	
Principal Investigator:	Sonja Sapach	
Study Supervisor:	Sourayan Mookerjee	
Study Title:	Alienation, Solidarity, and Video Games: An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Resolution of Alienation and C-PTSD through Participation in Video Game Culture	
Approval Expiry Date:	Monday, June 4, 2018	
Sponsor/Funding Agency:	SSHRC - Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council	SSHRC

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

Trish Reay, PhD  
Associate Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).*