Sparking a Steam Revolution: Examining the Evolution and Impact of Digital Distribution in Gaming

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> At this moment there's a Renaissance taking place in games, in the breadth of genres and the range of emotional territory they cover. I'd hate to see this wither on the vine because the cultural conversation never caught up to what was going on. We need to be able to talk about art games and 'indie' games the ways we do about art and indie film. (Isbister xvii)

The thought of a videogame Renaissance, as suggested by Katherine Isbister, is both appealing and reasonable, yet she uses the term Renaissance rather casually in her introduction to *How Games Move Us* (2016). She is right to assert that there is diversity in the genres being covered and invented and to point out the effectiveness of games to reach substantive emotional levels in players. As a revival of something in the past, a Renaissance signifies change based on revision, revitalization, and rediscovery. For this term to apply to games then, there would need to be a radical change based not necessarily on rediscovery of, but inspired/incited by something perceived to be from a better time. In this regard the videogame industry shows signs of being in a Renaissance.

Videogame developers have been attempting to innovate and push the industry forward for years, yet people still widely regard classics, like Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), as the best games of all time. As with the infatuation with sequels in contemporary Hollywood cinema, game companies are often perceived as producing content only for the money while neglecting quality. Slapping a new title on a revamped version of the *Call of Duty* franchise is almost guaranteed to bring in sales. This practice has led to a period in game development that is often perceived as stale and increasingly commercial. Developers have begun to favor new methods of monetization in recent years, such as an increasing volume of downloadable content (DLC), where games are often published in a somewhat

unfinished state only to have post-release patch updates or optional paid DLC that seek to resolve issues and fill in a game's price tag. This trend of releasing somewhat unfinished products that require updates post-purchase, whether paid or not, has been enabled by the growth of digital game distribution and has led to a general sense of a drop in the quality of AAA[1] games in recent years. While this is not to say that all major titles have fallen down this rabbit hole—many games incorporate patches and DLC elements to enrich the player experience in a number of ways rather than make up for initial flaws—this process can be used as a crutch for developers seeking to meet deadlines. The recent release of Bioware's latest addition to the critically acclaimed *Mass Effect* franchise, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), is an example of the way developers can use updates as a response to negative criticism from both players and game reviewers.

From this perspective, and looking exclusively at the frequent release of AAA titles as parts of ongoing series, one might argue that we are far from a Renaissance in this moment. However, this is only one perspective. Not only were there influential AAA titles in 2016 that will remain influential in the public memory, like Blizzard's *Overwatch* (2016), but several indie games made huge splashes for their artistic and narrative design such as *Inside* (2016) and *Firewatch* (2016). One can claim that games have only recently begun to break out of the established patterns of game design that emphasize commercial success over innovation.

Isbister's claim that there is a videogame Renaissance works as an extension of Kevin Tavore's observation in "A Video Game Renaissance" that many developers

[1] AAA, pronounced "triple-A," refers to games that are in the highest tier when it comes to production budget and advertising capability.

are finding success not by maintaining series that have continued over the past decade, but by resurrecting and learning from franchises that have not been seen in years (Tavore). Tavore mentions the influence of older story-driven adventure games on the flood of narrative-focused games such as *Life is Strange* (2015) and *Ori and the Blind Forest* (2015). However, it is not only indie developers looking to successful traditions for inspiration. The Game Developer's Choice Award winner for Best Game of 2016, *Overwatch*, is remarkably similar in its overall gameplay to Valve's wildly popular *Team Fortress 2* (2007). Both games offer a unique take on the traditional versus action of the first-person shooter (FPS) genre by having players take on the role of one of a number of selectable heroes, each of which has a unique skillset for completing objectives, a scenario more similar to a massively online battle arena (MOBA) game than traditional first-person shooters. The resurgence of familiar gameplay elements and even old franchises like *DOOM* and *Mario* does indicate a Renaissance in its traditional sense. However, I would argue that the underlying cause for the changes in the game industry over the past decade is actually the result of an accelerating evolution in how games are produced and consumed. This evolution towards a rise in digital game distribution is building up to a revolution that will see a major overhaul in the way games are consumed and the kinds of games that succeed in the new videogame ecosystem.

The advent of purely digital distribution methods has changed the landscape of the game industry not only by altering sites of videogame consumption but also the kinds of games being played. The decline of movie rental companies like Blockbuster as digital alternatives rose to prominence brought with it a decline in

physical game consumption both in terms of rentals and purchasing. Some examples of important digital distribution applications and websites beginning in the early 2000s include Valve's Steam, Blizzard's Battle.net, gog.com (formerly Good Old Games), Desura, Origin, and more recent generations of console platforms such as Sony's PlayStation Network (and PlayStation Store), Microsoft's Xbox Marketplace, and Nintendo's eShop. Unlike the Renaissance of game content and style suggested earlier, what made this shift possible was entirely new in the game industry, not based on the past. The ability to not only play games but also purchase and download them without ever leaving one's couch or computer chair has a profound impact on gaming. A player can now find a desired game, pay for it, download and install it, and play with a few clicks of a button. While this software has been available for over a decade, digital game sales are rising every month, with CNBC reporting a 10% growth in digital game sales revenue in January of 2017 from the same time the previous year. This growth can be attributed to a 34% rise in sales to PCs and a 32% rise in digital sales on console networks, such as the PlayStation Network and Xbox Marketplace (DiChristopher).

With this new level of accessibility afforded by a rise in digital distribution comes the availability of a much larger variety of games and increased participation on behalf of the playerbase. Digital marketplace platforms grant almost instant access to games otherwise inaccessible due to physical limitations such as obtaining the necessary console, game disc or cartridge, controller, and even the proper connector cables and adapters for newer model televisions or monitors. However, not only have older games become accessible as a result of digital distribution

technologies, but smaller scale developers have increasing opportunities to publish their games on platforms that will be visible to large numbers of potential players. Programs like Steam's Greenlight and Early Access open up new avenues for exposure on the part of developers and the ability for players to take part in the development process for games still in production. The drastic cuts in production costs afforded by digital retail enable access to games developed with more strictly limited resources, usually including those by indie developers and pet projects of large companies. Games can be ported to multiple distribution platforms spanning consoles and computers. In this system, players have a significantly higher level of involvement than in the days of strictly retail game production. Players can not only provide feedback for developers, leading games to better meet users' expectations, but also take part in the process of categorizing and promoting new games. The level of collaboration possible between players and developers is a unique property of the videogame industry that will be what pushes games forward as recognized artistic and cultural objects; it is essential that players understand their influence and take responsibility for how they want videogames to evolve as a medium.

Katherine Isbister's hopes and concerns about the state of the videogame industry and the cultural reception of videogames are particularly relevant in light of these changes due to the rapidly increasing volume of indie games resulting from the growth in digital videogame distribution. While game designers continue to explore the boundaries of this medium, critics and player communities constantly push back on attempts to experiment with the potential of games as art. For instance, a common conception is that games are simply entertainment or a form of

distraction, and that many of the more intentionally artistic games that are somewhat minimal in terms of mechanics[2] and lack clear win conditions are not actually games at all. However, these are the kinds of games that have been enabled to flourish in the current landscape. The world of expansive environments filled with hours of character interactions, quests, and exploration tends to be left to large companies. On the other hand, narrative or theme-driven games that offer rich but compressed experiences are easier to develop in the sense that they require fewer resources. Independent developers are at the heart of the revolution in game production and design that increasingly encourages artistic creativity and experimentation, whether thematically, visually, aurally, or mechanically. While larger companies play an important role in pushing the medium forward because of the weight they bear in the public eye, they are also more limited by the need to maintain a public image and achieve commercial success. It is easy to place too much of the artistic burden of the videogame medium on indie games and it is important to be wary of giving them undue credit. However, given the less restrained capacity for creative freedom, "indie games" as an umbrella term for anything not developed with a large production budget currently serves as the gaming community's catch-all for games that seek to innovate in any number of ways.

Because of this ambiguity comes an increasing emphasis on understanding the terminology and categorization of games in general. Even indicated by Isbister's

[2] The term "mechanics" refers to how a game is played, that is, what the player is asked to do and is capable of doing. Examples of game mechanics include basic actions like jumping and the frame-specific interactions and properties of in-game abilities.

use of scare quotes referring to “indie” games, there is a wide range of assumptions and questions surrounding “art games,” “indie games,” “experimental games,” and “serious games.” While these terms are often used interchangeably, leading to confusion among players and critics, each holds a unique place that must be understood in order for conversations about games to move forward. For example, Edward Smith, a writer about games, film, and culture for *International Business Times UK*, argues that a conflation of the terms “indie games” and “art games” has not only led to confusion about the two terms, but also resulted in a failure to adequately recognize the shortcomings of the games often heralded as the medium’s primary artistic examples (Smith). He believes that game critics are so eager to champion the artistic merits of indie games that they often claim to find significance where there is none. He also challenges the capacity for contemporary games to be considered great art, stating that “these first waves are just the cave paintings; exciting though they may be, if we want them to develop, we can’t continue talking about them as if they’re *Guernica*” (Smith). Using Smith’s analogy, even cave paintings need a cave wall as a means to be conveyed. For artistic games in their current state, digital marketplace platforms are the cave wall that enables games to be broadcast to a large potential user base and as the means for games to continue to evolve as a form of artistic and cultural expression.

The continual growth of digital videogame distribution platforms like Steam has laid the groundwork for a potential revolution in the way games are consumed, produced, taught, and perceived as a whole. While these issues are already in flux, it is up to developers and players to embrace change in light of the tools available.

Both parties must address problems of terminology and categorization, where not only genres, but also the intentions of different games must be made clear on behalf of everyone involved. I will use Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* (2013) as an example of the fluid relationship between developers and players. Wreden's metafictional critique of game design showcases the power of videogames as an artistic and cultural force precisely because of its self-referentiality and its depiction of many tropes that define games as a medium. I will follow this analysis by expanding on how Steam specifically places much of the burden for change in the hands of players as they interact with games through tagging, and examining how the relationship between players and developers mediated through marketplace platforms like Steam is at the heart of any potential for change. Rather than relegating systems like Steam's Greenlight and Early Access to indie developers in need of support, more fluid collaboration between both parties at all stages of development even on AAA projects will have a significant impact on how games evolve. Frequent and purposeful collaboration is already happening in small-scale projects and everyone involved needs to make an effort to extend this process throughout the industry.

Art Games, and Serious Games, and Indie Games, Oh My!

In order to get into the issue of how artistic videogames specifically fit into the type of evolution and revolution that I propose n the previous section, it is important that I first establish clear baseline definitions of the terms "art game," "serious game," "experimental game," "indie game," and even "videogame."

Questions about naming begin with the discipline of game studies itself and trickle down to its most basic levels. Critics refer to their object of study as "videogames," "video games," "digital games," "computer games," or simply "games." This leads to the field itself being called any of these in the singular attached to the word "studies," or often "ludology," referring to play not simply in digital and virtual spaces but also in board games, sports, etc. For the sake of clarity and ease of reading, I use phrases like videogame and digital game interchangeably in this paper. With labeling issues stemming all the way to the name of the field, it is no surprise that the naming of individual categories can become somewhat contentious considering how new the field of game studies is.

There is indeed overlap among the four categories I listed above, "art," "serious," "experimental," and "indie," but not enough to negate the importance of a closer look. These games have proven to be quite problematic and difficult to define because they raise questions about what a game actually is and in some ways challenge the commercially focused game industry. First of all, art games, not surprisingly, are known for their intentionally artistic qualities, whether visual, aural, or mechanical, and often in their depiction of abstract or more conceptual content. The term "art game" represents the director's/developer's intent to represent more artistic content that asks questions and shirks duties of clarification rather than providing solutions and assisting the player. Games like Jonathan Blow's *Braid* and *The Witness* are art games recognizable for their puzzle solving and unique mechanics while a game like *Journey* (2012), the third in a three game collaboration between Sony and Jenova Chen—as part of thatgamecompany—

bringing artistic games to the PlayStation 3 console, emphasizes storytelling and emotional connection through discovery, freedom of movement, and visual design. While a AAA game might involve detailed visual artwork to aid in creating a more provocative world—and probably includes many more artists and visual designers than an art game—its intention is not to draw attention to these aspects of the game. On the contrary, an art game uses the images, sound, and mechanics at its disposure to pose philosophical questions, cause players to consider how their senses are being manipulated, and think more actively about their performance of certain actions within the game. As in art film, the existence of art games does not indicate that other games are not art, but that their intent is artistic as opposed to the noticeable artistic elements in commercial games. Videogames offer a space where a wide range of analytical skills may be applied. Because games incorporate aspects of many different media forms, artistic qualities of games can include visual and sound design—color, lighting, art style, sense of depth, music, diegetic and non-diegetic sound, dialogue, etc.—which are essential in film as well, to the use of text, including the literary qualities of the writing, and especially mechanics and the construction of space. For example, videogame environments and buildings can be analyzed through the lenses of architecture and landscape architecture.

While serious games *can* be art games, it is important to note that they can be considered "serious" for two main reasons: 1) they deal explicitly with difficult, human issues such as the loss of a loved one as in Ryan Green and Numinous Games' *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016), or 2) they engage with real-world issues like immigration policy as in *Papers, Please* (2013) or the unseen effects of war on

civilians as in *This War of Mine* (2014). In this way, the term "serious game" can potentially be applied rather liberally in that it deals more with content than strictly aesthetics. Like many art games, serious games often de-emphasize the player's pleasure in favor of delivering an intended message. In *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (2010), Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer examine games and simulations as journalistic objects in order to think about how games as a medium can be pushed beyond entertainment or even artistic purposes. While they make a distinction between games and simulations, in which users play out a given scenario either to determine the best outcome or course of action, they argue that both forms can be examples of "serious" play. For instance, Gonzalo Frasca's freely accessible flash game *September 12th* puts users in charge of missile strikes over an unnamed middle-eastern city where civilians and clearly marked terrorists fill the streets. The game's objective of eliminating terrorist threats is balanced with a delay between missile launch and the time to impact. In this mechanic is a built-in narrative that there is no "winning" scenario in which the lives of innocent civilians are spared. The game's timely release following the September 11th attacks and clear message exemplify serious play and the journalistic potential of games (Bogost et al. 11-13).

The term "experimental" indicates exactly that. Usually games referred to as "experimental games" fall under the category of "art games," as their most notable features tend to be in their artistic qualities and/or attempts to push the boundaries of traditional understandings of gameplay. An example of an experimental game is Awkward Silence Games' *One Chance* (2010), in which the player is given six days to save the human race and upon completing the game, whether ending in success or

failure, there is no way to play the game again. Unless players clear their browser history and cache, they are stuck with whatever ending they got in their first play through. While *One Chance* could reasonably be considered a serious game for its theme, the game's extreme subversion of a traditional gameplay mechanic of allowing multiple attempts exemplifies the ways in which experimental games call to attention the patterns and limitations of established systems of play. This game is a clear example of blending terms like "serious game" and "experimental game," but I would argue that it is more powerful in the way that it challenges game design strategies than in its thematic presentation.

Finally, "indie game" is the broadest category of those I have mentioned here as it refers to the fact that the developer(s) worked separately from any major game development organization, and has little to no bearing on a game's content or aesthetics. Typically, games in one of the previous three categories also fall under the category of "indie games" because major developers do not have the freedom to separate their products from commercial intent and success. The confinement of larger developers to safer design schemes can lead to the kinds of stale periods I mentioned in the previous section. Edward Smith's concern about the confusion between art games and indie games is aimed at the failure to recognize that content and form are not necessarily associated with a game's developer. While indie developers tend to produce more intentionally artistic games on their lower budgets, players need to be able to distinguish between an indie game that is an art game and one that is more commercially designed. Put simply, art games emphasize

the ideas or questions that they pose rather than foregrounding a pleasurable play experience that defines games designed for commercial success.

The issues of terminology in game design and game studies, then, affect all those involved in the game industry from players and developers to critics. Some terms refer to content while others refer to aesthetic qualities or even the renown of the developer. In an interview with GameSpot, a gaming news and review site, Jonathan Blow, designer of the critically acclaimed and award-winning games *Braid* (2008) and recently *The Witness* (2016), points out the failures of current genres in gaming to accurately describe games themselves. He points out that a spectator's expectations of a film coincide with the kind of language used to describe it (GameSpot). One does not enter a newly released film billed as a tragedy expecting to leave it with a smile and a new arsenal of jokes. Blow notes that game genres are almost exclusively based along mechanical lines, or how the player actually engages with the game world. In film terms, this is more like the categories of silent films or 3D films.

Blow's observation about the ties between game mechanics and genres points to a current weakness in how we talk about videogames. While it is important to identify genre boundaries along these lines, relying on these terms can only take the industry so far. Games that show an awareness of genre conventions by intentionally breaking them are important in thinking about how the medium as a whole can evolve. In conscious twist on the FPS genre, Valve's game *Portal* (2007) blends puzzle-solving, a common game trope, with shooting. Contrary to the typically action-focused, combat-based FPS genre, *Portal* puts players in command

of a handheld, two-way portal gun that allows them to travel and move objects in unique ways. With these powers, players solve spatial puzzles where they must gain access to new areas by redirecting lasers, pressing buttons, and performing momentum-based jumps. Although one could feasibly call *Portal* an FPS or puzzle-solving game, using either term alone or even both together does not fully describe the play experience. Similarly, Toby Fox's top-down[3] role-playing game (RPG) *Undertale* (2015) challenges many elements of traditional RPGs mainly through its unique combat system. Aware of the fact that RPGs tend to revolve around turn-based combat in which players must defeat randomly encountered monsters while progressing through the game's narrative, Fox's combat system gives players the unique option to "act" their way out of battles by giving compliments, threatening enemies, and more. Choosing whether to spare enemies or kill them by fighting determines the game's ending and affects the course of the game's narrative. Even the "fight" option, most standard in traditional RPGs, implements a unique "bullet-hell" mini-game, itself an entire genre of games, where the player must dodge enemy attacks as a small heart representing the character's soul. What began as a Kickstarter project turned into a critically acclaimed example of how genres can be blended together and broken down in entirely new ways. In terms of mechanics, it is difficult to describe a game like *Undertale* in a few words other than to say it generally follows a top-down format with many RPG elements, but this does not do justice to the complexity of the game's play or especially themes.

[3] Top-down refers to a perspective in which the player controls a character from above, and where the player has vision of the area surrounding the character on all sides.

In his interview with Gamespot, Jonathan Blow suggests that games could be described according to what type of effect/impression they intend to make on players rather than mechanics, as not all games are meant to be "fun" (GameSpot). While this suggestion admittedly has its own flaws, Blow attempts to speak to problems with how certain games are perceived based on the way they are categorized. The issue of fun in games is an important one because it speaks to one of the most common expectations of players while failing to adequately describe the intended effect of many games. In other words, fun is not the game equivalent to "good." While a fun game may be good, or have its desired effect of being a pleasurable experience, not all games deserve the same expectations. While this may seem obvious, the issue of player expectations can lead to the crushing failure of even well supported titles. For instance, a player who traditionally does not enjoy puzzle games may still love *Portal*. While the game is heavily reliant on solving puzzles, the characters, story, portal mechanics, or even its place as cultural "required reading" could be enough to earn a player's appreciation without being fun in a basic sense. Blow's observation about game categories also points to an issue with the term "art game" specifically that can cause problems for games with this label.

Due largely to the fact that commercial success is paramount in the game industry, labeling and image are extremely important; what this means for artistic games if they are to be produced by major developers is that they have to make money. While many indie games have achieved enormous financial success on top of their critical acclaim, a la *Minecraft* (2011) and *Stardew Valley* (2016), games like

this were also able to avoid the label "art game," and remained simply "indie." "Art game" carries with it a number of stigmata that often evoke confusion among players and fear among developers seeking commercial success. First of all, there is a general sense in the gaming community that art games are not fun. As I mentioned earlier, this has obvious repercussions in an entertainment industry that leads to both an aversion to the label and, in some ways, content that could earn the label from players. Second is the term's potential divisiveness in the game vs. art debate. If only certain games are labeled "art games," then what does that do for the argument that videogames more generally are art?

Film again can serve as a clear parallel in this case, where the existence of art films has no bearing on whether film as a whole is an artistic medium. Games and film also face similar challenges with regards to the rating systems imposed on them as part of their labeling; in order to reach the widest audience possible in either medium, it may be necessary to restrain creative freedom in favor of choices that embrace the qualities of accessible ratings like E (Everyone) or T (Teen) for games, and PG or PG-13 for film. The issues of terminology and categorization are heightened in the landscape of digital distribution offered by platforms like Steam that engage openly with users as not only players, but also reviewers and coders to some extent.

Steam as Database and the Role of Tagging

Since I will be using Steam as my example for showcasing the importance of terminology and tagging in the digital distribution of videogames, it is worthwhile to

note that, as of Kris Graft's 2011 article on Gamasutra, Steam controlled approximately 70% of the digital distribution market and that digital distribution accounted for about 25% of a game's total revenues as of 2009 (Graft). This, of course, is for games afforded the opportunity of physical retail. Furthermore, these numbers have undoubtedly fluctuated since the time of Graft's writing as I indicated earlier with the growth of digital sales revenue. While I would be interested to see how much the first number has changed since the number and quality of Steam's competitors have grown, the second figure has undoubtedly increased. However, based on these numbers, it is fair to say that Steam is the industry leader and standard for digital distribution and that it occupies a significant portion of any given game's potential revenue.

Steam's formula for success, while nothing new in the realm of database structure, is one that allows users to actively manipulate its database as curators through tagging. While this could be a risky prospect for newer platforms with relatively small bodies of active users, Steam's massive user base would ideally outweigh outliers. The pull that Valve and Steam have due to the platform's dominance amplifies the significance of maintaining a system that incorporates user input to such a degree. Steam's size and influence specifically work as an important tandem in the overall organization of Steam's database structure as well as effectively acting as advertisements. The weight that Steam users collectively wield can seal a game's fate on that platform.

Tagging is the act of applying specific signifying terms, or tags, to individual elements in the Steam database. For instance, after playing, or even not playing, a

survival horror game about ghosts, a user may choose to either reinforce tags supplied by other players that indicate genre like “horror” or “survival.” The same user could also choose to apply more specific tags to help those looking specifically for games about ghosts, whether horror or not, or tag the game with terms like “aliens” and “hack and slash” that are actually completely unassociated with the game. This is where the size of Steam’s user base can help to outweigh accidentally or intentionally misleading information. Items tagged with the same terms begin to appear as recommendations personalized for each user on the store’s home page based on purchase and play history, and suggestions based on what item is currently being viewed in the store appear at the bottom of the page using tags to determine similar games.

Steam’s system of open tagging points to a key aspect of database theory noted by Lev Manovich in his 1999 article, “Database as Symbolic Form.” Manovich claims that in new media objects, and specifically interactive digital objects, the paradigmatic is privileged over the syntagmatic (Manovich 89-90). Manovich applies Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic model of paradigm and syntagm to identify links between the structure of a database and narrative. Syntagmatic elements are those connected in a linear fashion and made apparent to a reader or user, while paradigmatic elements are those left unseen and represent theoretical or possible connections. To clarify using a sentence as an example, the words of the sentence are syntagmatic because they are presented in a linear fashion with a logical connection between each element. The paradigmatic level of the sentence are the sets of possible substitutes for each word that are theoretically connected, yet

do not appear on the page. Manovich's assertion that new media interfaces—in his article he looks primarily at the CD-ROM and film—privilege the paradigmatic, or the level of theoretical connection, can be mapped onto the Steam distribution platform. Through open tagging, users, rather than exclusively experts, define the connections between items in the database. The network of connections that makes up the symbolic power of databases, in Manovich's view, is, in Steam's case, one that is constantly in flux as new tags are added and new items are added to the database.

Manovich's analysis of the database as a symbolic form, being capable of exhibiting narrative qualities through the types of connections that form its network, has important implications for the role that Steam and other digital distribution platforms play in the burgeoning development of indie games. Because user-based tags have the potential to define an item in the eyes of other users, taking the control out of the hands of the developers, it is increasing important that the Steam community as a whole not only understands the content that they define, but also the critical and commercial implications of what they do. On one hand, developers could look at user tagging patterns and design games that correlate with tags that tend to be more successful. While a commercial positive on the surface, this pattern of reverse engineering games to match popular user tags could prove problematic in terms of pushing videogames forward as a culture-rich medium. On the other hand, as I discussed when making distinctions between "indie," "art," "serious," and "experimental" games earlier, considering labeling issues in the game industry and among game critics is important but also difficult. For instance, the tags "art" and "art game" do not have enough matches to be searchable while

"experimental" and the phrase "walking simulator," a common descriptor for many story or atmosphere driven adventure games, typically falling under the indie category, result in a large number of matches. In situations like this, critics must examine the use of terms like "art games" that are commonly understood by academics and writers about games, but may not actually be common knowledge to the larger body of videogame players that they are writing for and about. For example, I asked two of my friends who study game design about art games as opposed to commercial games and I was misunderstood to mean games specifically about drawing or painting. The value, then, comes in the ability of the Steam community to be able to define games in clearly comprehensible ways that are widely recognizable to other players. While user tagging is an important aspect of how players interact with Steam as curators of a database and, while it has an impact on game development, this is only one of many ways that digital distribution software is building towards a revolution in game production.

Digital Distribution, the Current Landscape, and the Way Forward

As I mentioned above in the example of how digital distribution has enabled flawed and often rushed releases of games due to the accessibility of patches and DLC packages, there are problems with marketplace platforms that accompany the positives. Although there are often positive sides to some of Steam's pitfalls, there are significant weaknesses in not only the way Steam operates, but also its almost untouchable status at this moment among its peers.

The first of several main arguments against Steam is its effective monopoly on digital game distribution for PCs, a source of concern in the game industry. Should Valve choose to impose their will in any number of ways, from shutting out specific developers to taking larger percentages of the revenue from game sales, they would likely be able to get away with it. While it is difficult to argue in favor of a monopoly, I will let the voices of indie developers speak for me. While it may be surprising that this would be the group in favor of Steam's monopoly, developers themselves seem unconcerned because they are convinced that Valve runs a fair organization. For instance, Beamdog CEO Trent Oster stated in an interview with Gamasutra, "I think Gabe[4] is a benevolent dictator. A well-done benevolent dictatorship is a positive thing" (Nutt). Developers have tended to make the best of the situation by appreciating Valve's efforts to leave discoverability and acceptance onto the Steam platform an even playing field.

Due in part to Steam's effective monopoly, overcrowding is a continually rising issue in the digital marketplace. Those critical of Steam's acceptance practices have argued that Steam is becoming more like the App Store, where anything regardless of quality can be uploaded and potentially sold. Overcrowding can cause problems on a number of levels, from making it more difficult for users to find quality products to developers having a harder time getting their products noticed. In both of these cases, tagging and the ability for users to leave reviews work to some extent in solving the problem. In recent years Steam has implemented several features to allow users to essentially determine what kinds of games they would like

[4] Gabe Newell is co-founder of Valve and works very closely with Steam's operation.

to see available in the store. Jessica Conditt notes the transition from Steam's Greenlight system implemented in 2012, which allowed players to effectively vote for certain games, to Early Access in 2013, a system that allows users to purchase and play games before they are fully released in order to give developers feedback (Conditt). Neither of these systems has gone without criticism, as Steam continues to add hundreds of games to its digital shelves every year, many of which get very little attention. The Early Access system also encourages developers to cater to the demands of players who do purchase their game rather than a completely finished product (Conditt). By taking their curatorial hands off and giving players more power over the kinds of games that appear, Steam has become a platform open to a wide range of games with little quality control. However, the level playing field for indie developers amidst a great deal of competition has some developers feeling positive about the state of the industry. For instance, developers like Paul Kilduff-Taylor at Mode 7 and Greg Kasavin, formerly of GameSpot, point out that having more competition is a far better option than not having the opportunity to design games (Lahti). Developers still have to have an idea of who would want to play their game and must do their best to reach those audiences.

While the previous two issues have more bearing on game developers than players for the time being, Steam's adherence to digital rights management (DRM) has many players squirming. DRM is a means of restricting access to digitally downloaded content, and, in Steam's case, means that players do not have access to what they purchase from Steam if they are not logged into their accounts. What this means, however, is that players who pay for games on Steam are actually only

purchasing the rights to use that game's files. If a user were to lose access to his/her account or if Valve were to shut down Steam and move on to bigger and better things, players who have invested hundreds or even thousands of dollars in Steam's store would have nothing to show for it. The DRM policy has obvious anti-piracy intentions, but it is both frustrating and frightening to realize that the rights to content downloaded from Steam could easily be taken away. While Steam's policy in this area leaves the potential for lost investment both financially and in terms of time spent playing, Steam's dominance in the industry and typically reasonable practices can provide some assurance that these investments are not likely to be lost in the near future.

More serious, though, are the accusations made by Edward Smith in his article "Indie Games Aren't Art Games," where he places some of the blame on the problems with current conceptions of indie and art games on digital distribution. Smith writes that, despite the celebration of digital distribution, it has actually "created the stereotypical indie gamer and the stereotypical gamer; we've mentally separated indie and AAA games on the supposition that one is innately valuable and the other is inherently artless" (Smith). While his statements throughout the article, like this one, are rather sweeping, Smith makes an important point about the way games are marketed to specific audiences. Once players believe themselves to fall into a given category, it makes sense that game developers would no longer be pushed as hard to innovate if they have found a reasonable market for their proven successful content. This passage indicates his general message of caution against the pitfall of treating all indie games as art games, and more specifically the pitfall of

believing that all art games are automatically good art. Through his abrasive tone and writing style, Smith's charge that game critics and reviewers are often overeager to praise indie games is a healthy dose of poison; yet Smith's critiques of game criticism and the tendency to talk about all indie games as if they are *Guernica* hints that some games *are*, in fact, *Guernica*. Furthermore, there is a disconnect in his association between creating the "stereotypical indie gamer" that sees all indie games as good art and digital distribution. While gaming communities and individual players may identify as one kind of gamer or another, improved access to a variety of games with a stronger foundational understanding of different kinds of games would encourage players to move beyond these stereotypes. Digital distribution of videogames offers one key asset that allows it to be a spark of change as it is improved across platforms, accessibility. Despite its flaws, the boon in accessibility for both players and developers afforded by digital distribution software enables the possibility for drastic change in the way games are perceived as cultural and artistic objects outside the videogame industry.

On one side there are the players, for whom ease of access enables engagement with a much wider range of content. In the days of exclusively physical retail games, there was much greater uniformity in pricing that allowed for fewer games to be bought and played. While one advantage of physical copies of games is their ability to be resold and purchased for reduced prices, digital distributors counter this by offering sales of their own. Oddly, the sales are not based in any way on supply and demand given the stores' essentially infinite capacity, yet digital sales reach outrageous levels not possible for retail games. For example, games on Steam

regularly go on sale for anywhere from 10-90% off. In this way, the accessibility of digitally distributed games goes beyond simply downloading content from home, but it is much more financially lucrative, and addicting, even considering the return value of game CDs and cartridges. In the current landscape, players are able to experience more, cheaper games, the prime example of games that are going to fill that role are indie games. Conditt notes that the average price of games on Steam has dropped from $14.21 in 2013 to $10.33 in 2016 (Conditt). While this appears to be a positive thing for players because it means that games are easier to obtain, it also raises questions about quality control and discoverability. In order for digital distribution to make a significant change on the players' end, then, users must actively and critically engage with the tools given to them.

While there are a number of benefits for players on digital game platforms like Steam, developers are the ones who have to live by the successes or failures of their games. Conditt notes the increasing ease of developing games and the kind of impact that this trend has for the game industry in the near future. To this point she quotes Rami Ismail, co-creator of *Nuclear Throne* (2015), as he states "Game development is becoming more and more like photography or music bands… Almost everyone can make a good photo or learn to play an instrument, but only a few do it professionally, and of those, only few can sustain themselves. Games will be like that" (Conditt). As there are increasingly more developers and games, the harsh realities of becoming a successful professional game designer cannot be ignored. Conditt points to advice from numerous developers to reach out to a number of platforms rather than hoping that Steam will be a "magical moneymaking machine"

(Conditt). In order for digital distribution to truly be a way forward in terms of artistic and cultural expression, there needs to be room for a wide variety of games, as there is now, but these games also need to be set up to flourish rather than die after a brief spark of life at launch. While developers are positive about the landscape in its current form due to the potential for success lying largely in developers' abilities to promote their games and make their work discoverable, healthy competition among other distribution platforms on consoles and PC could encourage more specialization in terms of the kinds of games offered in each platform. In turn, players would be able to more easily access the kinds of games they want to play and give developers more power with their choice of marketplace.

In order to enter the conversations around film and literature as prime examples of art and culture, games must become accessible in the way film and literature are, as I would argue digital distribution has the potential to do, but game designers and players must also seek to push games in this direction. While my personal hope is that those involved with games in any capacity share a desire to push games forward not just as entertainment, this must be a shared goal. It is, to my mind, indubitable that games are artistic and cultural objects, but in what way and on what level? Digital games command a massive amount of money in the entertainment industry and occupy trillions of hours of human attention every year. On these bases alone video games have a significance that rivals film, television, and literature. However, it is not enough to say that many people play games, therefore they are must be recognized on the same level. Even art games, as Smith notes, follow recognizable patterns of play and are really among only the first wave of

games that intend to be treated as art (Smith). In his book *Works of Game*, John Sharp points out that art games are much more conservative than contemporary art and that while they can offer open-ended ideas and explorations of the "human condition," they are usually "designed to be fairly specific in their interpretation" (Sharp 54). Compared to literature and film, digital games are relative infants as self-reflective works of art. As such, there is a tendency to apply the same approaches and metrics of artistic and cultural value from literature and film to games. While games do not yet rival film as a recognized form of cultural expression, game designers and players, who are given increasing influence on the direction of game development, must be intentional about understanding the potential of games as more than entertainment.

The Adventure of *The Stanley Parable*

The Stanley Parable notably began as a free modification (mod) for the second game in Valve's signature franchise, *Half-Life 2* (2004). While modding has earned attention in its own right, Valve's willingness to embrace the ability of players to make custom content has been a major contributor to the creativity of game design especially among amateur game designers. It is no surprise that a number of gems in the gaming industry have been mods that transitioned into standalone games, such as *Garry's Mod* (2006) and *Defense of the Ancients* (2003). Designed by Davey Wreden, *The Stanley Parable* exemplifies the story of a Steam Greenlight success. The game achieved ample critical acclaim following its approval through Greenlight and eventual release on Steam in 2013. According to Steam Spy,

which tracks statistics of the Steam store, over two million users own *The Stanley Parable*, with a median playtime of over two hours (steamspy.com). The critical and commercial success of the game is owed to its humorous in-game narrator who comments on the player's decisions and actions and sharp observations about common game design elements of player choice and what it means to "beat" a game. *The Stanley Parable*'s metafictive elements make it a prime example of how games can be used as a form of critique while showing that game developers are thinking about the impact of their own design decisions. I would also like to use Jesper Juul's framework of the art of failure to explore how games like *The Stanley Parable* question ideas about the "end" of a game.

The Stanley Parable subverts two fundamental elements of digital games, interactivity and player choice, through its voice-over narration and minimalistic gameplay. Throughout the game's eighteen unique endings, players are often offered a choice in the game world that is made for them by the narrator. For instance, early on in the ironically named "Freedom Ending" playthrough, which involves the player doing exactly what the narrator says throughout, the player enters a room in which there are two doors. While the narrator states that Stanley entered the door on the left, using past tense to further insinuate that this action already happened, the player is mechanically free to choose either door. Every action in the game is met with a reaction from the narrator, who, in this case, comments on the fact that Stanley knew perfectly well that he had chosen not to go towards the meeting room, as the player had been instructed. The narrator even comments on Stanley's "inability to do anything" when players choose to stand still

for a certain matter of time. Wreden uses his game as the narrator does for Stanley, to comment on behavior and suggest a way forward. While the player is given the freedom to act in the world of *The Stanley Parable*, the available actions are limited to simply movement and a "use" or "interact" option for opening doors, pressing buttons, etc. This style of minimalistic gameplay is typical of walking simulators, but Wreden uses this quality intentionally rather than simply following a pattern. David Myers points out in his article "The Video Game Aesthetic: Play as Form," that play is the videogame's equivalent to reading for books and viewing for film (Myers 45). He moves from this simple observation to the claim that play is more of an anti-form as far as aesthetic experiences are concerned than either reading or viewing, and explores the different types of play users must enact when dealing with different kinds of games and game situations (Myers 47-61). Human play, he writes, always involves imagining that the objects being played with are something that they are not; from here, "all forms of play transmit a self-referential message: 'this is play,' or, alternatively, 'this is not real'" (47). In *The Stanley Parable*, play itself is minimal as players are asked to imagine very little and to perform simple tasks that are not generally considered playful. Wreden breaks down expectations of play and offers users the ability to explore options by breaking the "rules" laid out by the narrator. However subversive or free a player may feel though, the constraints of the game, as all games are at their core systems of rules, will dominate players regardless of their efforts. No matter what "choices" a player makes within the space of play, the user is conforming to a coded, pre-established path that the game made available. This is made more clear by the use of "endings" in the game.

Wreden again plays with conventions of the game industry by incorporating eighteen different recognizable endings. While many games are known to have more than one ending based on the player's choices throughout, Wreden takes this principle to the extreme. However, he pushes the boundaries of this convention in a number of ways. For instance, the game's key tagline that appears during loading screens and was used to promote the game, "The end is never…" is actually quite accurate in describing the game's "ending" mechanic. After reaching an ending recognized by the game, that is, other than simply choosing not to play or turning off the computer, the player is rewarded with the "Beat the Game" achieve from Steam and is then transported to the room where Stanley begins the game. Not only does the ironic achievement punctuate the fact that "beating" the game got Stanley and the player nowhere, but the ending was also not really an end. The game could have easily been designed to reset after each ending by returning users to the main menu screen, but instead they are cast immediately back into the field of play.

Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure* discusses the importance that failure has in every aspect of a game's design. He argues that videogames are essentially an "art of failure" that forces players to learn how to cope with failure, and that the ability to fail is an essential quality of a game. *The Stanley Parable* subverts aspects of Juul's claim by essentially not allowing players to ultimately fail. Becoming locked in the opening room because the player chooses to shut the door could be perceived as a failure to progress in the game. While the failure to exit the opening room is indeed a failure, players are also rewarded with the "Stuck in the Office Ending" if they remain in the room long enough. So while a failure in one sense, players actually

"win" at the same time by getting Stanley stuck in the room. This paradox exemplifies the gameplay of *The Stanley Parable* and further indicates how game designers are pushing the boundaries of gameplay. While it is easy to go overboard with metafictive elements in any medium, Wreden's nuanced depiction of play and its boundaries as well as his exploration of game design as a whole showcase the capacity for games to critique themselves and the willingness of game designers to think critically about their chosen medium.

While *The Stanley Parable* serves as a powerful example of videogames as a maturing medium in its self-referentiality, it also deserves examination in light of one of the larger debates in game studies over the past several decades, that of ludology vs. narratology. In his article on ludology for the *Routledge Encyclopedia to Video Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth details the history of the ludology vs. narratology, beginning with the first application of the term "ludology" to computer games in 1999 by Gonzalo Frasca (Aarseth 185). Ludology, or the study of play, has often been posed as a parallel to narratology, with early comments from ludologists like Juul stating that "the computer game is simply not a narrative medium" in his master's thesis as early as 1999 (Juul, 1999, 1). While Aarseth notes that Juul has since retracted this statement, Aarseth's own assertion in 2004 that "games seldom, if at all, contain good stories," does not indicate much improvement on the narrative front for the medium (Aarseth). However, this perspective has changed since 2004 as Aarseth notes not only that the opposition of ludology and narratology was falsely constructed in part to make room for game studies as a discipline, but also that ludology itself depends heavily on the study of narrative in order to make

claims about the nature of play (Aarseth 2014, 187-8). As Aarseth states, the "ludo-narrative advances" of game designers over time has also diminished the viability and number of attempts to divorce games from narrative potential (Aarseth 2014, 189). So if games are indeed capable of narrative, and the hope in viewing games as a burgeoning artistic and cultural form is that players can appreciate the value of narrative in games, how does *The Stanley Parable* play into discussions of ludo-narrative?

As I discussed above, *The Stanley Parable*'s subversion of traditional tropes in game design is perhaps its most notable feature; this being said, the game's critiques of game design also **question/subvert** recognized narratological elements in games. While the player's freedom of choice to undermine what the narrator has laid out for Stanley is still confined within the rules of the game, as there is a coded response for any decision the player could make, this makes for an interesting challenge to interactivity in terms of narrative. Even though there is a pre-programmed response to any choice the player should wish to make, the game cannot actually predict which one of any available scenarios the player will follow. In this way, despite its attempt to counter player freedom, players actually maintain the ability to force a given response from the game. Furthermore, the game's unwillingness to actually end with any sort of victory or failure creates a narrative that is simultaneously cyclical and abruptly conclusive. Upon completing a single "playthrough," players begin in the exact same place, with the exact same dialogue, from the exact same narrator. The cycle continues as long as the player continues to complete at least one "ending" of the game. However, all good things must come to

an end. At some point the player must end the game with finality by turning it off. While this may seem to be pushing too far, the narrative of actually playing and quitting *The Stanley Parable* is implied by the game's programming because it does not indicate a natural stopping point to the player. Unsurprisingly for a game so filled with meta-commentary, the game operates at several narrative levels by encouraging players to think not only about what occurs within the game world, but also in their own play experience. Finally, the mechanics of narrative in *The Stanley Parable* provide a complicated blend of voiceover narration, a feature common in film and often viewed as a weakness, and intrinsic narrativity. Wreden's game is entirely devoid of cinematic cut-scenes, a common feature of narrative expression in games that takes play out of the hands of players, and which mark a distinction between moments of play and narrative (Klevjer 197). Rather than let clearly segmented moments of narrative guide the player, Wreden embraces intrinsic narrativity; in other words, the game draws its narrative quality from the means of expression, in this case play (Gaudreault 31). By experiencing success and failure at freedom, at ending the game, and at playing by the game's rules, the player encounters narrative more through play than by the ostensibly narrative-focused comments of the unnamed narrator. The ability of *The Stanley Parable* to contest issues of game design regarding both elements of gameplay and narrative speaks to the power of games as a means of expression and the kind of evolution that can take place by utilizing means of digital distribution.

Conclusion

Digital distribution platforms currently act as a major site of interaction between videogame players and developers as well as the digital walls on which to hang interactive, procedural artwork. The tools afforded by platforms like Steam put power in the hands of both developers and players to push videogames forward as a medium in any number of ways. Should users and developers seize the opportunity to embrace digital distribution to an even greater extent, this kind of software has the potential to revolutionize games and gaming. Digital games have the potential to reach new heights as both entertainment media and objects of artistic and cultural expression, and distribution software serves as the foundation for a collaborative frontier where this kind of change can happen. The play between users and developers in the game industry is fundamental to what makes games a unique and evolving medium. As seen with *The Stanley Parable* as an example, games have reached the point where they are able to critique their own conventions and challenge categorical boundaries within the industry. With the burden on players and developers moving forward, the real question is whether the revolution that lies in waiting will find its spark.

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