# The Uses of Ludobiography: Life Writing and Game Studies

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## INTRODUCTION
Videogames and auto/biography are not obvious bedfellows. While the idea that gamers should 'get a life' is not so prevalent as it once was, many would still argue that playing videogames is not really living - or, at least, not the kind of living you would choose to include in an auto/biography, a genre that has tended to dwell on 'the meaning of public achievement' rather than the attainment of Steam Achievements (Smith and Watson 2001, 2). One might equally object that, as a form still widely understood as a vehicle for considered retrospective narratives in which authors account for past actions and assess their significance, auto/biography is fundamentally incompatible with gaming; after all, gaming culture is centred on media that address players on a subperceptual, pre-personal level, resisting 'meaning' (Kirkpatrick 2011, 95). It is also markedly future-oriented (Atkins 2007), perpetually anticipating the next level, the next upgrade, the next generation. The notion of interactive autobiography, meanwhile, poses its own problems. How can a game be a faithful retelling of a life story if players can alter the sequence of events? And how can it be a worthwhile game if they can't?

And yet, gaming culture is incubating new forms of digital life writing and modes 'of mediating the self' (Rak 2015, 161). Platforms like Twitch are fostering novel forms of self-presentation, while games themselves function as what life writing scholar Julie Rak (2015) calls 'life labs', facilitating identity play. Autobiographical videogames have, meanwhile, become something of an 'an emergent "genre" within independent game production over the past ten years' (Werning 2017, 29), part of an upsurge in amateur, indie and DIY game development that has seen designers creating games rooted in personal experience. Compared with other media available to the would-be auto/biographer, digital games lend themselves to 'form[s] of playful identity performance' (idem.), the exploration of 'the self as an active agent' and the 'play between the self and its representation' (Poremba 2007, 707) through 'interactive metaphor[s]' (Chew and Mitchell 2015, 10). Games have also come to figure in a range auto/biographical writing, from memoirs and autobiographical novels to popular histories and academic criticism, where auto/biographical narratives often feature alongside other modes and materials.

## WRITING PLAYFUL LIVES
While this paper touches on all these phenomena, it focuses on such written auto/biographical accounts of digital play, drawing on studies of auto/biography and

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'life writing' to show how 'ludobiographies' can enrich our understanding of videogame history and play's role in player's lives, while also furthering the project of interrogating 'the "givens" of autobiography (literally "self," "life," and "writing")' and looking beyond the 'bourgeois or otherwise normative model of individualist subjectivity' articulated in 'classical' autobiographies (Rak and Poletti 2014, 6; N´ı Dhu´ıll 2012, 280).

## Ludobiography as historical resource

Ludobiographical writing's most obvious virtue for videogame researchers is as a historical resource. The first-hand accounts offered by authors like Sudnow (1983) and Amis (1982), for example, illuminate the contexts in which arcade machines and early consoles were encountered and the responses they provoked. Other texts shine a light on little-remembered corners of gaming culture, reminding us that individuals' memories don't necessarily tally with the rose-tinted visions of the past offered by corporations intent on the 'platformization of nostalgia' (Wershler 2018). Zoé Quinn's (2017) description of a working-class girlhood spent playing second hand 3DO games, for instance, foregrounds a platform often relegated to derisory footnotes in gaming histories, suggesting how myopically canonical many such histories have been.

## Ludobiography and player typology

Ludobiographies also usefully complicate the notion of the 'typical player'. If, as Juul (2010) complains, distinctions between 'casual' and 'hardcore' gamers elide the ways in which individuals may move between these categories, Chess's (2017) autobiographical vignette describing how 'a tenure-track position, a husband, and a child' changed her position within and perspective on gaming culture shows how life narratives can highlight this. Games have always been enjoyed by individuals who do not fit within publishers' preconceived target markets (Shaw 2014, viii); in an era of big data and biometrics – where, as scholars like Cramer warn, bias and bigotry 'creeps in through the back door of analytics' (2018, 36) - ludobiographies put play back in its context.

## Ludobiography and posthumanism

Equally valuable - though perhaps less immediately apparent – is the role ludobiography can play in current efforts to address 'gameplay through a post-humanist lens' (Fizek and Rautzenberg 2018, 5). The benefits are less obvious here because when gaming and auto/biography intersect the onus is often on making gaming more compatible with traditional humanistic values. When titles like *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016), for example, are celebrated by conservative broadsheet newspapers for offering something more 'meaningful' than the 'action and thrills of more regular games' (White 2016), the implication is that videogames providing serious first-person takes on themes like faith, mortality and parenthood possess a cultural legitimacy videogames ordinarily lack. As with framings of autobiographical games as 'empathy simulators' (dissected by critics like Anable (2018) and Pozo (2018)), the assumption here is that videogames should assume the duties that autobiography has been shouldering since it emerged from late eighteenth century Europe, affirming 'the autonomous individual… the universalizing life story' and 'the master narrative of "the sovereign self"' as 'institution[s] of literature and culture' (Smith and Watson 2001, 3).

In interrogating these concepts life writing scholars like McNeill (2012) have looked to posthumanist theory. As ludobiographies like Boluk and LeMieux's (2017) bravura portrait of speedrunner Narcissa Wright show, gaming lives are highly germane here, elucidating how the inhuman timescales of technocapitalism (from the rhythm of the

60hz refresh rate to the cadence of the generational 'lifespan') syncopate with those of biography and biology to reformulate subjectivities and identities.

## CONCLUSION

To live with videogames is to experience technological and commercial timescales rubbing up against the those of day-to-day life. Ludobiographies convey this experience in ways that are relevant to game studies and auto/biography studies alike, suggesting a deeper engagement between these two fields is overdue.

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