

Playing *Bastion* as a solastagic game: a case study of Supergiant Games' avant-garde era

Heather Blakey

The University of Western Australia
Room 1.15, Arts Building
35 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009
+61449961993
heather.blakey@research.uwa.edu.au

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INTRODUCTION

The release of *Bastion* in 2011 could be considered the most avant-garde era of Supergiant Game's history. Designed primarily in a Californian living room with audio recorded in New York apartment closets, *Bastion* was developed by a group of creatives that was largely a network of friends and friends of friends from various artistic and technical fields. *Bastion* is an isometric action game in which the player takes the role of the Kid, a soldier of Caelondia. The Kid awakes after a Calamity has fractured civic space into distinct floating islands that collapse and reform as the player moves through the world. *Bastion's* wider narrative arc focuses on an effort to restore Caelondia by use of the Bastion, a sublime machine with the ability to undo the damage of the Calamity. At its release *Bastion* was recognised by game critics for its use of reactive narration, where the narrator responds to the player's interaction and choices within the game world. At the time an unusual design technique, *Bastion's* narration served to define Supergiant's Game's practice and is a device that has appeared in some form across all the studio's currently published games. In this presentation I play and consider *Bastion* as a solastagic game—wherein the narrative, environment and mechanical elements of gameplay express a desire or feeling to sustain a world that is actively disintegrating or being destroyed. I also consider *Bastion* as a game that is critical of solastalgia, specifically when its affects of desire are mobilised to maintain an unjust status quo in the context of an Capitalocene era.

Solastalgia refers to the 'lived experience of the loss of value of the present and is manifest in a feeling of dislocation, of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the immediate and given' (Albrecht 2006 35). Solastalgia is 'a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home' (2006 35) and has been observed in the Capitalocene by various scholars in response to 'any context in which pervasive change to the existing order challenges place identity' (2006 35), including natural disasters and human-induced change, such as climate change, war, and gentrification. In this presentation I discuss how the reactive

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narration and environmental storytelling in *Bastion* creates a solastalgic affect, ‘a strong desire to sustain things that provide solace’ (2006 35). I analyse the narrative role of the found object in the game world, the role of the narrator in establishing the player’s relation to the world, and the way Caelondia continually forms and deforms in response to the player’s interactions with the game. I suggest both these design techniques imbue the game with a feeling of longing to preserve Caelondia. At the same time, I suggest *Bastion*’s design creates a conflict in this longing; presenting a potential critique of the state of stasis that solastalgic feeling might produce, particularly when the place or system that is longed for is systemically harmful or unjust. I discuss *Bastion*’s use of unreliable narration, its limited agential choices, and hyperbolic allusions to class division in Caelondia. I suggest these techniques work to indicate that the specific social formation of Caelondia itself is the cause of the Calamity, so to restore it to its exact previous state is to exist in a stasis where collapse is perennially on the horizon.

This study of *Bastion* forms part of my wider PhD project and contributes to the emergent practice of thinking about the relationship between games, affect and aesthetic philosophy, particularly the kinds of aesthetic experiences video games afford (Atkinson and Parsayi 2021 520). In my thesis I consider video games and aesthetics through an in-depth study of Supergiant Games. Supergiant Games’ works have been generally well-received, moving from a cult following with the release of *Bastion* to the most recent release of *Hades*, a game acclaimed by both the game industry and other established appraisers of non-game art forms; in 2021 *Hades* became the first video game to win a prize for literature. My method involves a close playing and analysis of Supergiant’s Games’ four games released between 2011 and 2021, interviews with Supergiant Games’ development team and considerations of the broader social and cultural context that the games were developed in. I braid this approach with reference to game-oriented aesthetic scholarship as well as with the work of other contemporary aesthetic philosophers—particularly those who consider how our aesthetic relations to the world have changed within the last century. I propose understanding the way *Bastion* uses solastalgic affect is an interesting foundation to understanding the artistic development of Supergiant Games’ body of work, and particularly how the conceptualisation of home evolves as a consistent theme and motif across four works of varied genre and gameplay style. I also reflect on how studies of solastagic narratives in games can be suggestive of broader cultural experiences and ways of reflecting on specific environmental relations in the Capitolocene.

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BIO

Heather Blakey is a PhD candidate in literary studies at the University of Western Australia. Her research focuses on affect and aesthetics in video games and literature of the digital age. Her thesis examines the work of Supergiant Games, and she has

forthcoming publications with *Revenant* and Bloomsbury Academic on contemporary aesthetics and intimacy in video games. Her work has been published by *M/C Journal*, *GamesHub*, *Australian Book Review* and *Westerly*. Heather co-hosts the game studies podcast *Meaningful Play*, and in 2023 was awarded the Matilda Award for Cultural Excellence for her work writing and teaching on video games.

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