Min-Maxxing Relaxing: Playtime and Privilege in the Post-Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how post-pandemic gaming platforms and cultures transform "playtime" into social currency. Grounding our analysis in a collective autoethnography of unfinished *Baldur's Gate 3* playthroughs, we situate backlog guilt and technical upkeep within histories of gendered leisure and argue that platform ecologies—from Steam metrics to Discord social play features—intensify the pressure to optimize leisure as capital. Contributing to critical conversations on digital playbour within the DiGRA community, we conceptualize how these platforms and subcultures produce manifestations of what we term *playtime anxiety*. This affective framework reveals how social playtime obscures the labour of play, narrowing legitimate participation and reconfiguring "not-playing" as a social and moral failure.

Keywords

playtime anxiety, playtime, privilege, post-pandemic, Baldur's Gate 3, backlog guilt, Discord, playbour, gaming platforms, leisure, relaxing, player experience, collective autoethnography

CONTENT NOTICE

This article includes references to, but no detailed descriptions of, abuse and sexual assault.

PRELUDE

I'm curled up at my computer with a glass of wine, gluten-free crackers, and truffle cheese, strings of fairy lights twinkling in my half-empty apartment. My computer is the last thing I'll pack before moving (again). A friend suggests that I distract myself from the breakup with an immersive game.

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I've spent nearly four hours in character creation, refilled my glass, and I'm finally ready to play. My character is gorgeous: a Drow sorcerer with silver hair and vitiligo named Elorah.

Venturing beyond the beach, she finds a white-haired elf. He's posturing and looks concerned; there's a creature lurking "over there." Elorah walks into the grass before he pulls her to the ground, knife at her throat.

"Shh—not a sound. Not if you want to keep that darling neck of yours."

That was the moment. I crumpled in my chair, resolve and composure lost to me: he was naughty and beautiful, and we already understood each other.

- Adeline

It was Christmas of 2023, and in the wake of intense personal-life-upheaval, Adeline found comfort in the arms of the greatest vampire boyfriend to ever exist in a game: Astarion of *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023; *BG3*). She played over 48 hours during that holiday season and became grossly invested in the character: they joined Discord servers dedicated to Astarion stans, hoarded fan art and video edits of game content, and bought a ticket to meet the voice actor, Neil Newbon, at a convention. Adeline understood Astarion's complexities and traumas, for many of them mirrored her own. It wasn't that they wanted to save him—she wanted to help him heal and, in doing so, maybe she could heal too.

And yet, despite this passionate hyperfixation on *BG3* and its Pale Elf… she'd only completed Act 1.

In the two years since that Christmas break, Adeline couldn't seem to return to the game. They had not freed (or ascended) Astarion, and hadn't seen most of the possible romance cutscenes. She thought she would play over the summer or on weekends during the new semester. But the term started, and life happened—Steam updates came, mods moved or changed, online conversations shifted, she started therapy again, found themself halfway through a PC upgrade—and before she knew it, returning to Faerûn felt like an impossible task.

The game had evolved so much that once Adeline finally felt she could *maybe* find time to play again, she realized she would have to transfer everything to the Steam modding system and pray her save file would be safe in the process. They estimated it would take hours to fix everything before they could play again—time she simply did not have as a master's student and sessional instructor.

At least, that's what she told herself. As the months passed, her dread of restarting *BG3* compounded. Despite all their efforts and interest, they remained a lurker in the Discord servers because her lack of playtime made her feel as though she wasn't devoted or experienced enough to participate in community conversations about Astarion.

Why can't I just start a new run—like everyone else seems to be doing? she asked herself. This gnawing feeling ate its way into their academic work. Since Adeline's research revolves around gendered leisure studies, she began to explore why she was

struggling to return to this game (beyond any alleged lack of devotion). Other players in the community were excited over new dialogue options they'd discovered after dozens of play-throughs…

…and she still couldn't start Act 2.

AVERSION IN AVERNUS

"Hardly the time, dear." - Astarion, *BG3*

This essay weaves platform analysis with autonarrative vignettes that reflect the authors' lived experiences of playtime and social life. In it, we explore a phenomenon we term *playtime anxiety*: an affective experience of dread that arises from platform-induced pressures to perform, maintain, and broadcast play activity. Examining our own experiences of playtime anxiety, we illuminate how playtime, as a social currency, is being reconfigured by post-pandemic social media.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, videogaming and the use of game-adjacent platforms like Twitch and Discord increased dramatically, as many folks around the globe found themselves isolated at home with an unprecedented amount of potential playtime on their hands. From social hangouts in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020; Seller 2021; Pearce et al. 2022) to online class meetings in Discord (Johnson and Salter 2022), videogames became an especially crucial component of public sociality. Yet 2025 and the "post-pandemic"[1] era have brought return-to-the-workplace orders from corporations and exacerbated economic precarity, rendering gaming an elusive privilege for many. At the same time, online play spaces and subcultures remain abundant, compounding pressure to stay engaged in play on an ongoing basis.

Critical media scholars have documented how videogaming and playtime are entangled with privilege and leisure (Trammell 2023; Soderman 2017; Chess 2017). Yet we are still reckoning with how our conceptions of playtime and privilege have shifted in recent years. This paper argues that in the aftermath of the pandemic and amid the increasing prominence of videogame influencers, the social capital of playtime has shifted, yet remains exclusionary. Videogame influencers and platforms have cultivated a new imaginary of gaming and relaxation—an emphasis on min-maxxing relaxing—that encourages the public flaunting of digital playtime. Yet this emerging aesthetic obscures the labour of maintaining one's playtime and the value of playtime as social capital. Building on extant theories of leisure, we seek to explore the affective, ludosocial, and lived implications of fetishizing playtime in contemporary gaming culture.

This paper uses collective autoethnography (CAE) and a feminist media studies lens to examine playtime anxiety as a form of social capital, drawing on the authors' experiences playing *BG3*, engagement in Discord communities, and observations of broader gaming discourse. Let us contextualize our experiences:

> Adeline is a master's student who, at the time of writing, had played 45 hours of *BG3*. She has experience with RPGs such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2024) and *Hellblade* (Ninja Theory 2017). Adeline does not have a history of leaving games unfinished, though they will play in bursts over time. Adeline believes in a "work hard,

play hard" philosophy and schedules leisure time into her busy life. Adeline's primary player character in *BG3* is the Drow Sorcerer, Elorah.

PB is an Assistant Professor who teaches and researches videogames. At time of writing, they have played 228 hours of *BG3*, largely during multiplayer runs in *BG3's* Early Access period. She does not schedule play time, and generally plays games socially and/or in sprints during periods of burnout. PB's primary player character is the heavily-modded Aasimar Paladin, Winterbell.

We became interested in exploring playtime dynamics after reflecting on our shared affective experiences of struggling to return to *BG3*. We realized that—despite us having collectively invested hundreds of hours into *BG3*—neither of us had reached the third act. Both of us felt some kind of way about our having "failed" to complete *BG3*: we felt guilty and saddened, but—more importantly—anxious. Both of us seemed insistent that we would *eventually* revisit the title, but had found the idea of returning to the Sword Coast to be utterly overwhelming. We had, for various reasons, deeply personal and meaningful connections to this game, and yet neither of us could bring ourselves to return to our dust-gathering save files. This paper is thus guided by our overlapping perspectives as "Act 1ers," our autoethnographic contributions, and contextual analyses of social media posts and livestreams conducted between Winter of 2024 and 2025.

Figure 1. Left: Adeline's sorcerer, Elorah. Right: PB's paladin, Winterbell.

In this project, we analyze popular gaming discourse and platforms (including Twitch, Steam, Discord, and mod forums) to illustrate how gaming influencers and platforms engender playtime anxiety. Specifically, we attend to how gaming influencers flaunt their playtime as a way of generating social capital, how "playtime" is now embedded in social platforms and the vernaculars of game culture, and how leisure and playbour's murky boundary perpetuates gendered and classist leisure gaps. We contend that, in contemporary gaming culture, to compete in the social capital of playtime, one must lean into a white, classist notion of feminine leisure, which is not

casual and playful but productive or even profitable. In this public discourse, “relaxing” is serious work, and none of us seem to be doing enough of it.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES OF PLAYTIME

Our approach herein draws from CAE—a method that bridges lived experience, cultural analysis, and co-constructed storytelling. As feminist media scholars, we understand CAE as an ethic of relational meaning-making: a participatory process in which scholars act as both subjects and analysts of their mediated lives (Hernandez et al. 2017; Wechuli 2025; Karalis Noel et al. 2023). Autoethnography has long provided game studies with a method for situating play within lived constraints—time, money, energy, care responsibilities—rather than treating “the player” as an abstract unit. Utilizing “experiential play” (Dennin and Burton 2023) allows us to examine what Brendan Keogh calls “the coming together of hardware, flesh, and audiovisuals” (2018). CAE, methodologically, lets us linger in the in-between spaces that conventional player studies or platform analyses often elide: the affective, technosocial, and domestic contexts of play. In this case, CAE allows us to explore *what our games are demanding of us*—time, attention, and emotional energy—and how those demands are unevenly distributed across our lives. We explore how the “cybernetic circuit” Keogh (2014) describes between player and machine is being reshaped by platform- and labour-related shifts amid the post-pandemic. Our approach follows established practices in player autoethnography (Dennin and Burton 2023), but we also document our experiences *avoiding* play.

It was this shared aversion that compelled us into this investigation, as we became interested in understanding how our experiences here reflected a mundane and painful relationship to play, leisure, and time. Over a period of a year, we authored reflective vignettes about our relationships with playtime, then met, discussed, collaboratively annotated and coded our experiences. As our discussions unfolded, we became interested in how backlog guilt and playbour were being compounded by platform pressures, reluctant intimacy with characters/communities, and the infrastructural friction of maintaining our save files. We then extended our analysis with documentation (including screenshots and written notes) of game-related social platforms, attending to how these shaped our relationship to *BG3* and playtime anxiety. This shared reflection on playtime anxiety empowered us to finally return to the game in April 2026. In the conclusion, we share some reflections from this period, particularly concerning how social platforms shared our playtime with others, and how CAE enabled us to process playtime anxiety.

Throughout this paper, we look to explore how contemporary gaming culture establishes *not-playing* as both technically labourious and emotionally draining—like keeping your vampire boyfriend fed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, the ability to invest vast amounts of time into learning complex game systems has functioned as a gatekeeping mechanism for geek masculinity: scholars have argued that the performance of geek masculinity was predicated upon one’s ability to indulge in leisure time (Salter and Blodgett 2017; Soderman 2017; Trammell 2023). In the early 2000s, the “games for girls” movement established a precedent for geek femininity—arising from a socio-economic environment that promoted

computational proficiency for women within the exclusionary hobbies generally dominated by geek masculinity. As feminist media scholars note, tech industry rhetoric in the 2000s framed "games for girls" in their proximity to labour, domesticity, education, and social or collaborative play (Chess 2017; Cote 2020; Chess 2020). Feminist game scholars likewise argue that playtime has been associated with devotion to gaming—often framed through the dichotomy of the "hardcore" and "casual" gamer. Cote (2020) and Chess (2017) highlight how game industries and player culture construct the imaginary of "Player 2" or the "casual" player, who consumes experiences designed to fit into the interstitial moments of a busy domestic life, by contrasting such play with the "hardcore" gamer's prerogative to claim vast, uninterrupted blocks of time. Consalvo and Paul (2019) further argue that this distinction is not merely descriptive but normative; "real" games are culturally codified as those requiring significant temporal capacity and mastery, thereby delegitimizing forms of play that accommodate time scarcity. Thus, the "casual" label functions less as a genre descriptor and more as a mechanism to devalue playstyles that cannot afford the luxury of *hardcore leisure*.

This ethos of social, productive, and collaborative play can be understood as an imaginary of geek femininity. While geek masculinity valorizes players' ability to insulate themselves from work, life, and relationships in devotion to gaming, geek femininity instead celebrates players' commitment to labour and sociality through play. To quote Shira Chess (2020), "leisure for adult men is framed as freer, more allowable, and exploratory. Leisure, when we talk about it for women, is more structured, productive, and constrained" (43). Playtime anxiety, then, may be seen as a symptom of a broader cultural emphasis on the values of geek femininity—play that is social, collaborative, and ultimately labourious. While the "Gamerscore" of the Xbox Live era now feels somewhat antiquated, playtime has reemerged as a persistent, culturally potent, and seemingly innocuous social currency. We argue that the playtime economy not only strips play of its capacity for leisure but declasses those who cannot afford the grind.

Our findings suggest that the contemporary pressures of playtime anxiety can be understood through the cultural values of both geek masculinity and geek femininity: gaming culture and platforms are, at once, encouraging us to claim vast blocks of uninterrupted time for play, while simultaneously encouraging us to participate in increasingly social and labour-adjacent play practices.

Our investigation is also in conversation with broader research into labour, class, and the idea of "playbour"—which describes, to quote Christian Fuchs' original paper, "recreation that generates value, consumption that is productive, play that is labour" (2013, 270). While playbour has often been discussed in the context of esports, gold farming, modding, and fan fiction, we seek to further complicate this concept of playbour by situating contemporary play in proximity to livestreaming, content creator culture, fandom, and platform-facilitated social play. The platforms we use to play and share our games are shifting, and as a result, even casual gamers are subject to consistent upkeep required to manage, socialize, and maintain their digital software. As we demonstrate, there is a tremendous amount of labour that goes into not-playing: downloading and installing patches, fixing broken mods, and keeping up with broader cultural conversations around these games happening on TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and Discord.

HARDCORE RELAXING & PLAYTIME REVEALS

I'm watching lexyttv play through BG3 *again. She spends so much time playing—Honour Mode runs, "Durge" runs, reaction snippets.*[2] *Her VODs are filled with seemingly endless content of Astarion. I'm jealous, wishing I could quit work and life for a while and just play full-time. I have to catch myself; this is her job. She has to record, edit, upload, and manage comments for every video she posts. Still, I find myself yearning for the luxury of leisure she presents.*

- Adeline

In 2024, following the release of *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (BioWare 2024), a clip of Twitch streamer breebunn went viral online, attracting attention from fellow content creators, gaming magazines, and news outlets. breebunn began her stream by showcasing her Inquisitor, revealing that she had spent over 21 hours in the game's character creator. "I needed to get my Inquisitor to look how I wanted her to look…" breebunn says playfully on her stream. "I have my priorities sorted... and they're insane."

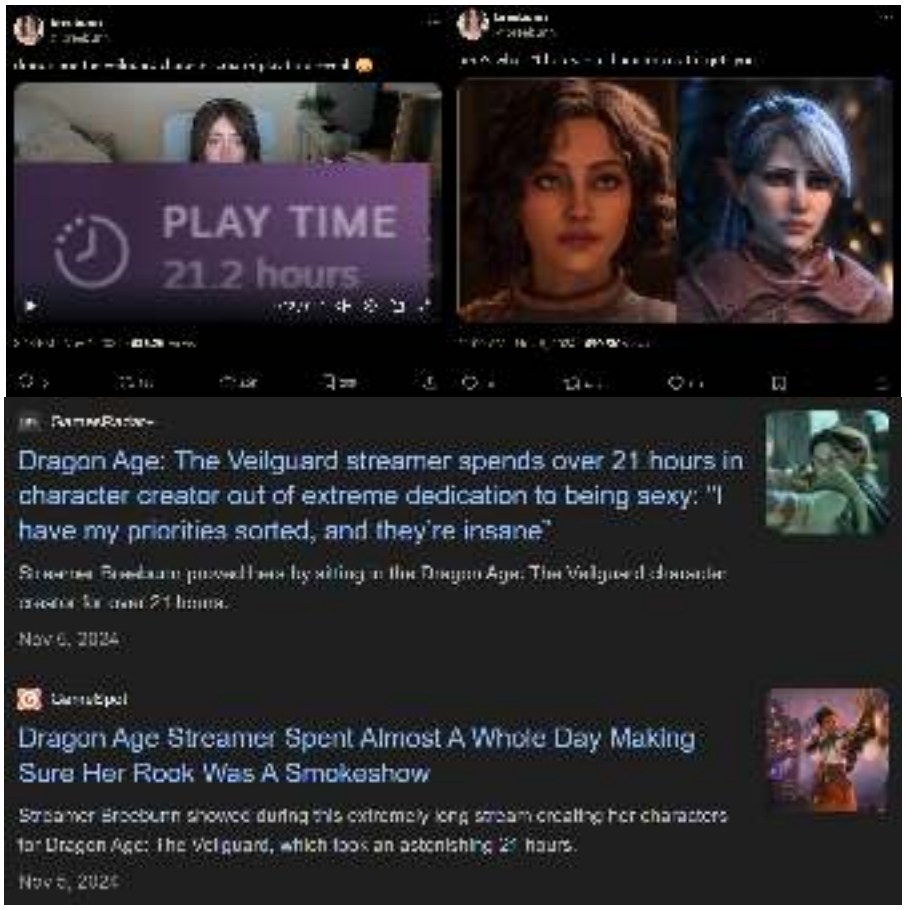

Figure 2: Top-left: breebunn's post to X/Twitter of a clip from her livestream revealing her total time spent in character creation. Top-right: A follow-up post from breebunn featuring pictures of her Inquisitor and the caption "here's what 21 hours in a

character creator gets you." Bottom: Gaming magazine headlines describing breebunn's feat.

breebunn's original post to X/Twitter, captioned "dragon age the veilguard character creator play time reveal! 😜" quickly attracted attention from media organizations. *GamesRadar* and *GameSpot* both published articles covering the post (Figure 2).

At first, it might seem that the coverage of breebunn's "playtime reveal" was poking fun at her. In the clip, she herself jokes self-effacingly, "could a depressed person do this?!" while flailing an image of her Steam "Play Time" statistic around the screen. While there is a playfulness to the content, this moment inspired admiration and celebration from gaming cultural actors. EA Games even recognized breebunn's accomplishment on their official journal (Arts 2024) and invited her to join a stream to celebrate Dragon Age Day. We might read breebunn's post as a specific genre of influencer flex. Having spent over 21 hours in character creation for a game that, in total, averages 30-40 hours of main storyline content, breebunn is boasting her unique ability to play slowly; to invest in the aesthetics and personalization of her character and play experience, and it paid off in popularity and recognition.

Of course, time—leisure time in particular—has always been a form of social currency. As Braxton Soderman (2017) notes, the sphere of masculine leisure in the 19th century was defined largely by the aggressive defence of its boundaries. He discusses how one's capacity for "uninterrupted" leisure became associated with masculinity and high culture. Aaron Trammell (2023) further describes how tabletop gaming and wargaming culture (emerging out of model railroad traditions) in the late 20th century introduced the identity of the "hobbyist" (a hardcore analog to videogaming's "geek") and the imaginary of the "hobby," which, he writes:

> represents the collective sensibilities that gatekeep minoritized people from participation… its gendered connotations stem from a historical expectation that the interests and passion projects of women are trivial, while the work of men is important.

Historically, one's access to playtime (a form of leisure time) became a shorthand signifier of privilege. Not only does breebun have the time to spend 21 hours in character creation, but she uses this privilege as a social positioning tool. This analysis is not intended as an individual critique of breebunn's stream; rather, this viral moment exemplifies a trend where the reveal of playtime statistics is leveraged as a performance of devotion.

Larian Studios has likewise used playtime (individual and aggregated) as a metric of celebration in their official developer blog, Steam updates, and social media posts. For example, Larian announced in a graphic that "Players spent a combined 88 years," and "nearly 10% of characters spent at least an hour," (Salo 2023) in character creation, using aggregate playtime to celebrate players' devotion to *BG3* and to the aesthetics of their characters. The quantified aggregation of player experience into big numbers—"88 years" and "at least an hour"—rhetorically elevates playtime as a monument of player investment, intended to galvanize players towards spending more time playing.

Figure 3: A graphic posted by Larian's community manager depicting statistics from *BG3*'s "opening weekend" (Salo 2023).

At first glance, we might see breebunn's clip as a kind of "queer wandering" (Kagen 2022; Ruberg 2020) or slow gaming—a resistance to the ostensibly fast-paced grindset values of the hardcore. Playtime reveals quantify and valorize "slow play" (Scully-Blaker, 2023) as the gold standard of player engagement, thereby reinforcing the value of playtime as a social currency.

The playtime reveal exemplifies the difference between having and making time for play and having or demonstrating *playtime*. The former describes the designation of literal time in our overwhelming schedules, while the latter represents a performance of one's capacity to engage with play as a discursively, technically, socially, and emotionally complex practice. To these ends, we might understand playtime as:

- a social currency, recognized in gaming culture, that we are encouraged to accumulate and publicly celebrate,
- socially negotiated, subject to inspection by others, and shaping one's authoritative position in ongoing discourse, and
- requiring auxiliary labour of technical upkeep, out-of-game strategizing, and immersion in fan communities.

We authors have both struggled to make time to play and also to resubmerge ourselves in the culture, conversations, feelings, and messiness that come with playing, especially for games that require so much personal investment, like *BG3*. With this disambiguation in mind, we turn now to our own lived experiences of playtime as characterized by the specific pressures of gaming culture and playtime economy.

PLAYTIME ANXIETY AND GAMING PLATFORMS

My phone keeps buzzing. Notifications for a Discord server dedicated to Astarion. It's another hangout. I swipe the notification away. I don't feel comfortable joining in or posting since I haven't finished the game yet. I still want to be a part of this community

that appreciates him as much as I do, but the notifications never stop. Don't these folks work? How is there so much activity? Finally fed up, I mute the server and put it into a folder with the other Astarion servers. I want the fan art and the commentary, but I can't handle the overwhelming barrage. I want access and inclusion without the demand of being engaged all the time.

- Adeline

We will now attend to playtime as "material, locatable, but also ephemeral and subjectively experienced" (Anable 2018, x). Playtime economies exert immense pressure to return to the chair, yet games like *BG3* demand we tussle with challenging themes that force us to reimagine ourselves. In Adeline's prelude vignette, we recognize that there is a specific heaviness to playtime: our refusal to return to a game is fraught with multifaceted pressures, which we term *playtime anxiety*. Our social gaming platforms are active participants in the labourification of our leisure, which exacerbates playtime anxiety. Below, we discuss four different valences of playtime anxiety across discursive, technical, social, and emotional axes. In each, we describe how social gaming platforms shape our fraught engagements with playtime.

Discursive Playtime Anxiety

The first axis of playtime anxiety emerges from the discursive: one's ability to speak within the cultural conversations that surround games is fiercely dictated by the metrics of playtime. Players within the *BG3* community regularly brag about a 300–400-hour investment in the game, but this sort of flex is not limited to social interactions. Gaming systems are becoming increasingly more social: Discord tells your friends what you're playing and how many hours you've played; Steam advertises your hours logged in every title in your library; Twitch livestreams make gaming fundamentally social. Community documentation and playthroughs also factor in, as many folks watch content about the game to help them decide which decisions to make. When players post reviews on Steam, "hours on record" is the metric displayed alongside their recommendation as a signal of the reviewer's credibility.

For us, though we had gone months without touching *BG3*, we found ourselves strategically interacting with the communities on these platforms. Wanting to make the most of our eventual return to the game, we found ourselves in constant, passive planning: Adeline collected dialogue guides and approval tables related to Astarion's narrative arcs. PB tried (and failed) to dodge spoilers with "spoiler-free" threads on social media. We weren't playing, but we felt we needed to keep abreast of community conversations, collect assets, and otherwise prepare for the inevitable time we would play again. For Adeline, who resonated strongly with Astarion's story and background, this constituted reading up on heavy conversations regarding player ethics or post-game content: *Is it ethical to ask Astarion to sleep with you and the Drow twins, even though he will dissociate? What playthroughs should you do in order to get the "full experience" of Astarion, and, if you haven't done them all, do you have any authority to participate in the aforementioned discussions?* Such conversations leapt between Discord, YouTube, and TikTok, leaving Adeline feeling isolated, as she hadn't yet "earned" a place in these conversations.

Technical Playtime Anxiety

In the same way that the cultural conversation around *BG3* shifted while we weren't playing, so too did the game itself on a technical level. Both Adeline and PB originally modded their *BG3* games to support fancy outfits and hairstyles (you know, the essentials). But in 2026, several years beyond *BG3's* release and with sporadic updates and hotfixes from Larian Studios shadowdropping unexpectedly, the stability of these mods—which may not have active developers maintaining them—is always uncertain. When PB tried to return to *BG3* to collect screenshots for this essay, the game would not even launch due to the number of deprecated mods that had been broken by updates—a series of issues that took her four hours to fix (Figure 4). Indeed, maintaining *BG3* required frequent maintenance of mods, patches, and hardware.

Figure 4. The all-too-familiar error and crash windows PB experienced on trying to open her copy of *BG3* following a hotfix patch in March 2026.

This same challenge extended to our hardware systems. What is the point, after all, in returning to *BG3* if we can't get the "full experience" with the limited hardware of our PC setups? After seeing dozens of screenshots of players' graphically-maxxed gameplay, Adeline decided it might be time to upgrade the old machine to see Astarion's pores in 4K. Now, however, the decade-old motherboard can hardly keep up and will no doubt need replacing before long. Indeed, the growing list of prerequisites (to both hardware and software) became a formidable barrier to our playtime.

While modding games has always been acknowledged as a form of playbour (Postigo 2010; Kücklich 2005), our continued maintenance of games (modded or vanilla) was, in itself, a substantial commitment. This technical playtime anxiety was grounded in the knowledge that, because we "let Steam decide" when to install patches and updates, we could find *BG3* unusable at the next start-up (Figure 5). In the era of live

service videogames—where games are infamously considered "dead" when developers stop supporting them with regular updates and patches—the labour required to maintain one's games in a playable state is only becoming more significant.

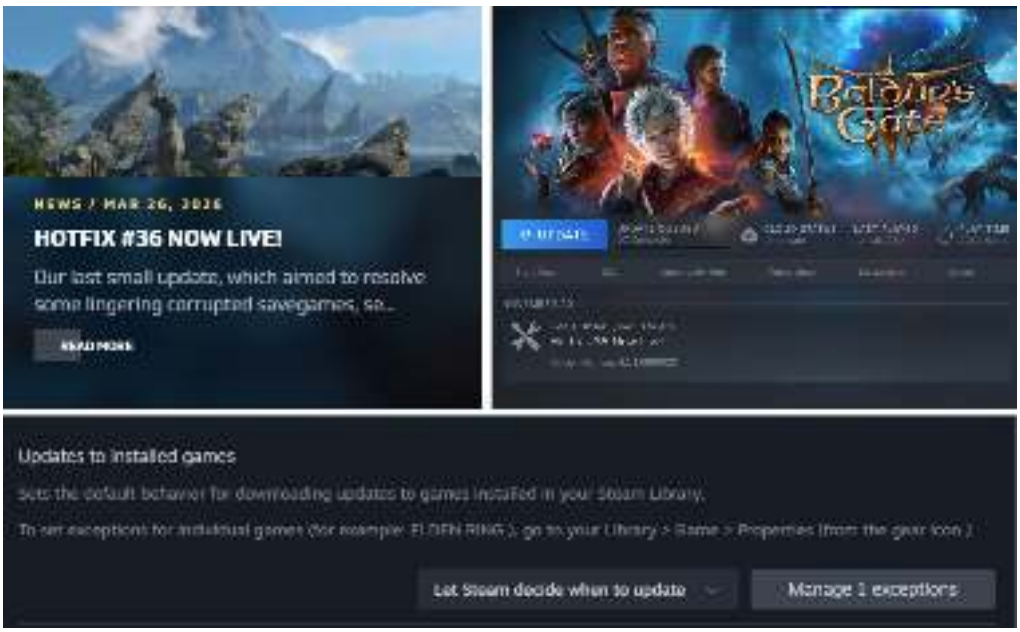

Figure 5: Top Left: Hotfix announcement (Larian Studios). Top Right: Recent *BG3* updates and hotfixes (Steam, December 2025). Bottom: Default Steam download settings.

Social Playtime Anxiety

Much of our anxious perseveration over *BG3* stemmed from social gaming platforms. Steam, Xbox, and PlayStation rely on social features that display the games friends are actively playing. These platforms tout gamified "points," "XP," "Achievements," and "Levels" as indicators of game completion, transforming platforms into playtime leaderboards and reinforcing the sense that time spent gaming is always being ranked and compared. More recently, social platforms have emerged as interstitial infrastructure between game communities, particularly community-driven applications like Discord. While videogame practices have always been shaped by play communities and affinity spaces—from arcades (Kocurek 2015) to model train clubs (Trammell 2023)—contemporary game platforms continue to consolidate social technologies through "Rich Presence" features and cross-platform integrations that exaggerate social obligations and produce social anxiety around the metric of playtime.

Discord exemplifies how platforms extend the demands of playtime, encouraging players to maintain sustained attention across multiple layers of interaction. As game development companies and fandoms increasingly pivot to Discord (Dym and Fiesler 2018; Kennedy and Buchsbaum 2022; Kocik et al. 2024; Wagenaar 2024), gaming-related servers function like ongoing groupchats and social media feeds combined: fast-moving conversations occurring over text, voice, video, and livestream. Activities in these communities are tracked and displayed through Discord's Rich Presence

integrations, which broadcast what other users are playing, how long they've been playing, and what in-game activity they are doing (Figure 6). Discord rewards gamers for livestreaming their play to friends in-server, and Discord's Overlay feature automatically displays messages and calls over gameplay on one's computer. These features establish a social play ecosystem wherein one's commitment to a game—and thus one's cultural legitimacy within a given community—can be casually scrutinized and observed by fellow players.

Such social features (which are exclusively "opt-out") encourage players to keep their playtime activity legible to their peers. To demonstrate this, let us examine how Discord shares information with PB regarding Adeline's time spent playing *BG3* over the course of a week.[3] When PB opens Discord, she is usually shown a list of Discord friends who are "Active Now" (meaning they are in-game and sharing this information with Discord). This time, no other users are online, so Discord instead shows Adeline's profile among "Friends Who Play" with several metrics listed: how recently she was playing, her "Streak" (sessions played in a row), the duration of her longest "Marathon" (consecutive hours playing), and "Returning" (how many weeks later Adeline is returning to the game). This information is likewise highlighted in Discord servers. When PB opens the server for The CRYPT Lab (which she and Adeline work in), PB is shown, above the list of server members, an "Activity" log listing her grad students who have played games recently. Like the home dashboard, Discord shows in-server what Adeline played, how long ago, and the duration of their streak. This time, the banner shows a trophy and a note, "Most Played — 25h this week." Adeline isn't the only lab member playing *BG3*, so this trophy celebrates Adeline having played more *BG3* this week than anyone else in the lab. Later, when PB checks the server again, Adeline is actively playing, and Discord shows new stats broadcasting that Adeline has been playing for roughly seven minutes and is in a solo party in the Wilderness region of the game—information shared from *BG3* to Discord via the Steam API.

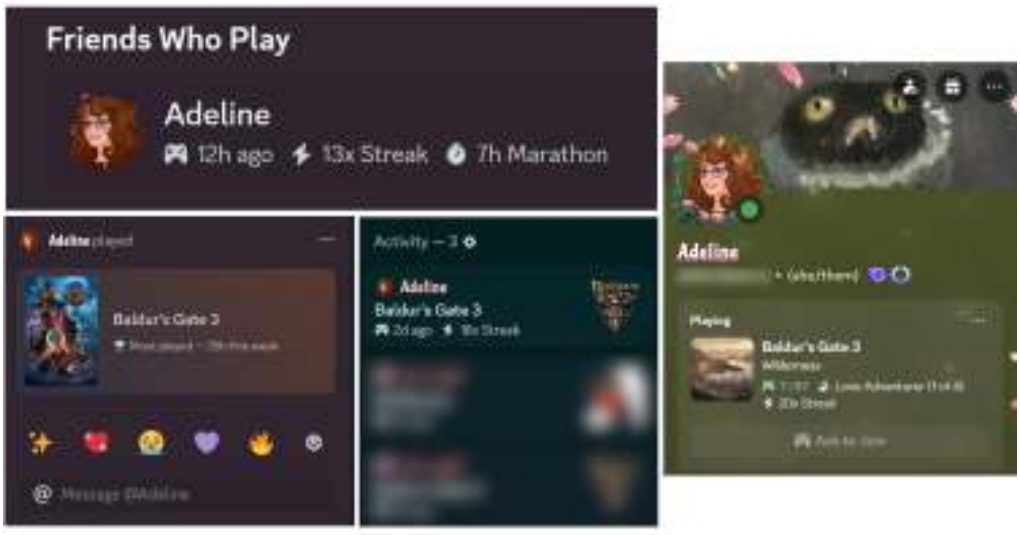

Figure 6: Adeline's time spent in *BG3*, shared with PB via Discord's Rich Presence features.

We have expatiated on Discord's Rich Presence features to illustrate how gaming platforms mobilize playtime for the purposes of motivating players towards social

play. What we find particularly illuminating is both how Discord quantifies and celebrates Adeline's playtime with Streak, Marathon, and Most Played accolades, and how it shapes PB's experience as the non-playing user. When PB pops into the CRYPT server to check messages from the lab, she is confronted by how much her students are playing, and encouraged by Discord to "easily start a conversation or join them!"

Together, these platform features collapse the distinction between gameplay and its social afterlives, demanding constant attention. Adeline felt self-conscious that her play was conveyed to others so readily. PB felt exhausted and envious as these features served as brief, interruptive reminders that she lacks time to play. Attempting to play outside of these socially-engaged contexts requires active work: manually disabling activity sharing in Discord or going offline or "Invisible" in Steam (which, even then, won't prevent others from seeing your past activity). Even if we opt out of these features, if our online friends don't, we will continue to be shown how regularly our peers are playing. Thanks to these new features of social gaming platforms, not-playing becomes fraught with the hypervisibility of playtime.

Emotional Playtime Anxiety

I've watched countless screen recordings of Astarion on his knees, weeping before the corpse of his abuser, liberated from 200 years of mental, physical, and sexual abuse. His sobs echo through the dark, stone chamber, and tears fill my eyes. I know what it's like to finally be free of an abuser—to face what you've escaped. I want to crawl through the screen and hold Astarion as he sobs. I hope that when I make it to this scene, I have enough influence to keep him from ascending. I hope I can help him heal the way I've spent so many years trying to heal from my abusers. But I've only finished Act 1.

- Adeline

Regardless of the mechanical difficulty level one plays at, *BG3* is an emotionally demanding game. Astarion's story is one of tragedy, abuse, and sexual exploitation, and following a character who is pursuing liberation from an abuser is laborious to say the least.[4] Neil Newbon, Astarion's English voice actor, won Best Performance at The Game Awards in 2023. In his acceptance speech, he said:

> One thing I will say, the community has reached out to so many of us and said they were seen and represented by this game when they lost hope, they felt isolated, they felt alone, and this game brought them together and gave them something to push through to help them all (thegameawards 2023).

Sexual assault survivors widely recognize this game as a representative story of abuse, struggle, healing, and liberation (Tomlinson 2024). Astarion's story includes many hallmarks of sexual assault recovery, from reacting with intense emotion such as anger or powerlessness, to mood swings, to eventual reorganization with occasional flashbacks. *BG3's* representation of these issues and symptoms has been described as accurate, carefully handled, and healing for many in the community. Nonetheless, the game is a heavy undertaking, especially for survivors seeking comfort and healing from this story.

Playtime anxiety further burdens an already heavy-investment game, making it that much harder to get back into a game save. The anxious contexts of our play required a significant degree of emotional preparation:

- we had to find a way to immerse ourselves in the game's energy and mental demands, refamiliarizing ourselves with and keeping track of the stories to prepare for emotional investment;
- we needed to situate ourselves and emotionally regulate as we played through intense and difficult narratives; and
- we required a semblance of uninterrupted playtime—needing a few weeks to focus on the game without "life" getting in the way and breaking the immersion.

Playtime anxiety, for us, became a mode of dread that warped our aversion to *BG3* into guilt, apprehension, grief, and disconnection. These anxieties culminated in a feeling of moral failure: PB felt like a bad professor for not playing every game that is relevant to the lessons they teach, and Adeline felt like a bad survivor for not playing through the rest of *BG3* to be part of advocacy conversations. These feelings manifest as a morally-tinged anxiety that further distances us from our ability to re-engage with playtime.

BACKLOG GUILT MEETS PLAYTIME ANXIETY

"Wait… really?!" The student asks, startled.

"Yep. Sorry," I say. "I haven't played it! I want to, though." I'm being honest, but the admission still feels gross.

"But… but it does all the things we're talking about!" the student says. "There's frame narrative and, and—I mean, it won Game of the Year, didn't it?"

"I mean, it's on my queue. I think I even have it downloaded. I just haven't had time."

"Ok, sorry, I just—I don't know," the student says, laughing. "I'm a little shook, I guess."

- PB

It is, as it has always been, impossible to keep up. The credentialing PB experienced with her student is not a unique experience. When interacting with other players, scholars, and developers, we are often called upon to position ourselves in the cultural zeitgeist and to demonstrate our immediacy within popular gaming discourse. There is a specific guilt that comes with studying, making, and teaching games. The "queue" (PB refuses to call it a backlog, which makes her feel more behind) is not merely a list of her deferred titles hogging space on their hard drive. It is a source of professional anxiety. Is she out of the loop? Have they lost the pulse on "the discourse"?

A gaming backlog can be tracked using sites like SteamDB, which calculates the value of your Steam library, the average price per hour played, average playtime, and how many of your games you've actually booted up. Players who push themselves to play through a backlog for the sole purpose of catching up often reported resenting the

"work" of progressing through their queue (Scully-Blaker 2023). This public fascination with the "guilt of the backlog" (Scully-Blaker 2023) is magnified by the sustained popularity of hundred-hour-long roleplaying games that require multiple playthroughs to be experienced "sufficiently." In Adeline's personal experience with *BG3* Discord servers, it was common to find members bragging about 350+ hours of gameplay, comprised of multiple play-throughs with different variations on the player character builds and relationship dynamics with the companion characters. It was commonly expressed that, to experience the game fully, one needs to play through the game multiple times to explore different aspects and dialogue options with companion characters, or to play the companion characters themselves in origin runs.

Rainforest Scully-Blaker's (2023) solution for this problem is to embrace radical slowness: taking your time with games, without guilt, to reframe them as a "stockpile of leisure time and not an investment to be capitalized upon" (2023, 16). While this does resolve some of the financial and personal guilt of a gaming backlog, it doesn't account for the social anxiety and emotional upkeep involved in these games. Indeed, this concept of radical slowness has emerged in resistance to the hypercapitalist acceleration of game consumption; in rejecting industry demands for the automatic uptake of the newest consoles or releases, radically slow play might be seen as an attempt to reclaim the temporalities of leisure. Yet, while slow gaming communities resist consumerist treadmilling, they maintain a moralizing position towards playtime that paradoxically recreates the playtime anxiety produced by infrastructural friction. In other words, radically slow gaming still upholds a moral imperative to be playing and to celebrate and share one's playtime.

Radically slow play illustrates the complexities of challenging social gaming hierarchies in the post-pandemic era: even if we manage to remove ourselves from the hyper-consumerism of game releases and detach from cultural conversations around games, backlog guilt dominates our relationship with play, exacerbated by the digital tools we use. It seems we are gaming too slow and not slow enough.

While scholars have responded to the acceleration of gaming fandom by calling for slower or patient gaming, the dynamics we describe illuminate the double-bind of slow gaming in the playtime economy: when relaxing is itself quantified and socially broadcast, our play is measured against the standards of productivity and privilege. Lurking in a Discord server, maintaining functional software and hardware, and staying abreast of fast-moving fan discourse all require continuous vigilance and upkeep: not-playing, by extension, has become increasingly playbourious.

We must be critical of the way that social media and gaming culture continue to celebrate playtime uncritically. Rich Presence features, unrelenting server discourse, and playtime reveals all create a cumulative sense of urgency: a drive to spend time playing not for play itself, but for the generation of playtime as a social currency. In this system, we as players find ourselves not only rewarded as good consumers for generating playtime but are encouraged to flex, share, and entangle our playtime with others as a metric of cultural worth.

ACT 1ERS, UNITE!

I've pondered starting over—a new save, a new character—but there is something about Elorah and this playthrough that keeps pulling me back. There's a reason I wrote

an entire paper about needing to return to this game and struggling to do so. I need closure for Astarion—I need to set him free so I can feel liberated, too.

I've updated my hardware. The mods haven't broken my save file; she's still there. All I have to do is play.

The Discord servers are muted. All mods are turned off. Three years later, I'm back, just me (healed and healing) and Astarion.

"Hello, darling."

- Adeline

She looks different. I guess she is. Her skin has a new texture. Her face is different than I remember, too. It's been three hours of installing and uninstalling mods, crash reports, and loading in to see Gale and Halsin's floating, disembodied heads. But now she's standing outside of Baldur's Gate where we parted ways almost two years ago. I must seem different too.

-PB

The technocultural shorthand of playtime obscures the technical, emotional, discursive, and social labour necessary to sustain our play, placing limitations on what constitutes "legitimate" participation in games. It also perpetuates a narrative that not-playing is a social and moral failure. As such, the act of not-playing is labour, too, demanding social resilience and emotional space from players who simply can't return to the game due to playtime anxiety. In a gaming culture where our playtime is social capital, simply embracing slow gaming practices is not enough to reframe backlog guilt, maintain technical upkeep, and resist fast-paced creator culture.

Our choice to use CAE clarifies our intervention in the landscape of playtime we are analyzing: if "min-maxxing relaxing" names an influencer-inflected aesthetic that optimizes downtime while obscuring the labour of maintaining it, CAE offers a method for measuring the cost that optimization extracts from us as players. By taking the time to narrate our experiences of backlog guilt, mod friction, and social and emotional demand, we have recharacterized "not finishing Act 3" as an everyday, anxious relationship to playtime engendered by overlapping sociocultural actors.

Authoring these vignettes enabled us to process the internal mechanisms of playtime anxiety: where playtime reveals, streaks, marathons, and aggregate player data quantify our play, reimagining leisure as metric of devotion, our reflections illustrate playtime's fraught affective and technocultural entanglements. CAE has allowed us to sit with these challenging findings, grieve and process our original saves, and name and understand the specific feelings that come with not-playing. By calling out the mundane, often invisible engagements with social platforms that dictate our leisure, we begin the work of de-quantifying our playtime, searching for a way to revisit the games we so desperately want to enjoy again on our own terms.

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“Whispers of the Divine - Aasimar Script Extender Edition” by Trips
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“Tav’s Hair Salon” by Toarie
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“WASD Character Movement” by Ch4nKyy
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ENDNOTES

1 We use “post-pandemic” to reference the rhetoric employed by governments and corporations in the mid-2020s that accompanied “return-to-work” policies, the rollback of PPE requirements, and the relaxation of social-distancing measures. We acknowledge that, at the time of writing, COVID-19 remains a devastating, ongoing global crisis—continuing to cause illness, death, and long-term disability. Our use of “post-pandemic” is not meant to suggest the pandemic’s end, but rather denotes the sociopolitical period in which policy shifts and public discourse framed a collective return to close physical and social proximity after years of isolation and quarantine.

2 “Durge” here being fan slang for the “Dark Urge” origin character.

3 This data was collected separately from our original vignettes, during two weeks Adeline returned to BG3 in Spring 2026.

4 We mean this colloquially but wish to be clear: supporting a character in defeating their abuser is hardcore as fuck.