Assassin's Creed III and the Aesthetics of Disappointment

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ABSTRACT

Using a case example of the cycle of prerelease, release, and post-release commentary, criticism and reviews of *Assassin's Creed III* from June 2012-January 2013, this paper examines how video game players produce a "culture of history" about the game they play through their commitment to commentary and critique mainly found in user reviews in gaming enthusiast press websites. This paper examines how an aesthetic of disappointment generates a comparative sense of gamers' cultural present by framing aspects that should have been improved upon from the series' past as well as in terms of expectations for the future of gaming. This paper concludes by suggesting that part of the pleasure of contemporary gaming for many self-identified "core" gamers is being able to both play games and aesthetically discuss the game being played as part of a culture of history with other gamers, a form of paidiaic play for "gaming capital".

Keywords

Criticism, video games, affinity spaces, neoliberalism, paidiaic play

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how video gaming enthusiast blog sites that cultivate community participation, reviews and forums, are generating affinity spaces (Gee 2005) where video game players enact their identities and construct what Suominen (2011) has called a "culture of history." We argue that the aggregation of these sites may be thought of as a kind of neoliberal archive. By focusing on one particular slice of community participation, reactions and commentary on *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft Entertainment 2012), we analyze how an aesthetic of disappoint contributes to this culture of history. The final section of the paper suggests how these contributions to archival production are generative of a persistent artifactual world where aesthetically discussing gaming is more akin to the forms of paidiaic play.

The genesis of the project that this paper was based happened a few years ago. One author was engaged in casual conversation with some male undergraduates talking about

video games. The topic of discussion was whether *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Software 2008) was a spiritual successor to the other previous releases in the series. Given his age, all of the undergraduates were amazed at his knowledge. He was equally surprised that they even knew about the earlier *Fallout* games given their age. Unlike them, he hadn't grown up on video games. He didn't have a coming of age story about owning his first SNES, Sega Genesis, Dreamcast, PlayStation, or Xbox gaming console, but he did know that these stories were important spaces of memory and identification. He knew the tropes and was most attuned to their references. They told him how surprised they were to find a professor (meaning an older professor) who was a "hard-core gamer." He mentioned that he tended not to play first person shooters because he didn't have twitch reflexes any more. How could he be hard-core? They answered, "You know your shit, dude."

GAMING CAPITAL AND THE PARATEXTUAL

So how did he know and what exactly did he know? As an anthropologist, he had been systematically reading gaming enthusiast press blogs, listening each week to gaming podcasts, scouring the web for tidbits of information on games in sites like 4chan.org, Reddit.com, and Neogaf.com for half a decade. He had been ethnographically immersed in the continually unfolding archive of gaming culture that exists, persists, and sometimes disappears on the internet. He had, as Boellstorf (2012) has recently written, become reasonably fluent in gaming culture, less as a highly skilled player, and more as an aesthetically well versed gamer, as a member of what Gee (2005) has called an affinity space. This fluency was displayed in what Consalvo (2007) suggest as a form of "game capital." For Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009) game capital "is a fluid and always changing currency held by those who have gained knowledge and information about games and game culture and are able to voice their opinions of relate their experiences to others." For Consalvo (2007) the knowledge and information that constitutes gaming capital is not only gained from actually playing a game, but also from player engagement with, what she terms, "paratextual industries" that now surround gaming in general. These consist of websites, blogs, gaming magazines, commercials, podcasts, discussion boards and the myriad of other material both commercially produced and produced by gamers themselves in which knowledge about and descriptions of games, gameplay, and gaming culture occur. Consalvo suggests that these paratexts are not peripheral to the actual experience of playing games, but is central to the gaming experiences. As she puts it: "whether we admit it or not, we have learned how to play games, how to judge games, and how to think about games and ourselves as gamers in part through the shaping of these industries (2007: loc 142 of 2805)."

Consalvo's review of the rise of these paratextual industries stops around 2005 and focuses primarily around gamers' understandings of cheating. Since then, web blogs like Joystiq.com, Kotaku.com, IGN.com, Polygon.com Giantbomb.com among many others, have become central to the production of paratexts, taking the place of the former centrality of gaming magazines outlined in Consalvo's analysis. Therefore as commercial entities, these websites have attempted to construct and manage "community" as a strategy of monetization and commodification of gaming culture. This means providing tools for site users to blog, the creation of discussion forums, and the solicitation of users' responses to articles, features, previews and reviews, as well as Facebook pages and the cultivation of Twitter followers by website podcast hosts. While the paratextual industries have always solicited user content, for example free game walkthroughs available on the internet, increasingly the solicitation of user generated content has become a central strategy in this process of commodification. In turn, paratextual site users are now able to

more directly influence, what one might term following Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009), the currency conversion of gaming capital. Of course, this is why so many sites have rather incendiary debates in which site users accuse each other of being "fan boys" in competition over the worth of their respective gaming capital. Site design, like that of IGN.com, which tends to divide by console platform facilitates this competition between gamers over the relative worth of their gaming capital, leading to what is known as "flaming." While, less commercial sites that are often both fan sponsored, like gamerswithjobs.com, tend to be more centered on serious features and analysis with site user forums being the focus for content generation. Often, podcasts have become central to this strategy of community building. IGN's podcast Beyond being a good example of the strategy to monetize a sense of gaming community through the creation of minor internet celebrities, such as Greg Miller.

All of this has led to a further saturation between the actual playing of a particular game, and the paratextual surroundings of gaming culture and how that particular game is variously apprehended and enacted as an artifact within that culture which changes over time. Yet, we do not want to conflate the actual playing of a game, like *Assassin's Creed III*, with the changing paratexts that surround that game. Rather, following from Boelstorff (2012) see these two domains as separate but inextricably linked by indexicality in which the gap between the two is mutually constitutive to a certain extent. There is always a gap between the actual play of a game, and the how that game and experiences of play around that game are enacted within a virtual archive. However, both serve as respective forms of reference to one another within specific socio-historical contexts. While not reducible one to another, the actual and the virtual serve to indicate each other by giving context to meaning making. This is why, for instance, returning to a favorite old game and replaying it is sometimes so disappointing. The game begins to look dated. But the notion of being "dated" or "looking dated" is paratextually informed. This indexicality is also why, in some instances, gamers will try to avoid any prior paratextual exposure to a game. For instance, with the recent release of *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), many gamers even avoided looking at Twitter so as to have a "spoiler free" experience of the game. Now, this example could be taken as how independent these two arenas are, but, in fact, most gamers who reported being on "media blackout" made this decision after watching, reading or discussing preview coverage. Many of them cited the plot twist in the previous *BioShock* (Irrational Games 2007) game as being reason enough to avoid potential spoilers. So the experience of playing a game doesn't really exist independently for many gamers of their paratextual awareness surrounding the game.

However, we don't want to paint the paratextual industries as being singular or centralized. Rather, to name them as an 'industry' is to recognize that on one side game publishers are utilizing them so as to further their market interest. Many commercial aspects of the industry, thought of as the commercial enthusiast press, are quite dependent on game publishers for information, for preview builds, and for developer access in the creation of content. These commercial enthusiast press sites are in competition with each other, even while a cadre of fulltime journalists and freelance writers often rotate employment from site to site, Polygon.com being a recent example. Commercial sites have attempted to consolidate and find particular market segments to target leading to the cultivation of particular affective strategies of "community" building, maintenance, and management. Simultaneously, gamers may contribute to a number of sites under a variety of user names, enacting various forms of gamer identification in different sites. Independent blog sites, gaming podcasts, are also significant features of the paratextual

industry. Therefore, we see the generation and competition of gaming capital as not a singular process by a centralized paratextual industry, but rather a field effect generated by a loose confederation of, what Jenkins et al (2013) has termed, "spreadable" media. For Jenkins et al (2013) "'Spreadibility' refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes (3)."

THE ARCHIVAL PULSE

So given the increasing spreadibility of this field effect by these paratextual industries, a question arises as to how best conceptually approach this plethora of paratextual materials. It began to occur to us, informed both by prior fieldwork in the Shetland Islands, that our rooting about and forays scouring through the internet on a daily basis, seemed remarkably familiar. Almost all anthropologists have had the anxious pleasure and occasional disappointment of working within different forms of archives. Rooting through government documents, white papers, diaries, collections of photographs, indexes, collections of material artifacts, some displayed some relegated to storage, is a process that often reveals the somewhat improvisational logic of both present and prior knowledge taxonomies.

Informed by Stoller's (2009) sense of the archive as a site of condensed and anxious, often contradictory, knowledge formations, a place that is not a mere repository of dead letters, but has a living pulse regarding governance, technologies of rule and power relations, our project has conceptualized the plethora of web-based information about gaming as a neoliberal archive, as distinct from Stoller's colonial archive. In the neoliberal archive the individual, him or herself, participates in constructing the archive as a way to negotiate subjectivity (the identity "gamer") and compete over gaming capital. As Gershon (2011) has argued regarding neoliberal agency, the self becomes a deliberative and demonstrated construction of skill sets and expertise linked to the potentials of market value. Thus the cultivation by commercial web blogs of "community" as a strategy of monetization around advertising is linked to the individual participation and identification of these affinity spaces as a place to learn, present and compete over gaming capital. This is a distinctly different form of governance than in the colonial past where subject positions were defined by the colonial power (Stoller: 2009) in often idealized typologies filled with categorical exceptions to the actual experience of peoples found out with the actual archive. Therefore, this project is not ethnographic, as such. Rather, this project is based upon a type of work that many anthropologists do along with participant observation, archival research to both gather information, but to also understand the affective contested categorizations and typifications about the social world which informs practice.

The question becomes how to get at this archival pulse? The amount of raw data is overwhelming. Our strategy was to conceive the commercial gaming culture in North America as having a form of annual seasonality, and a kind of pilgrimage cycle of conferences, conventions and exhibitions, like D.I.C.E. (Design Innovate Communicate Entertain summit), GDC (Game Developers Conference), PAX (Penny Arcade Exposition) and E3 (Annual exposition of the Entertainment Software Association) that result in features, previews, and content reported upon by the enthusiast press. We identified the E3 exposition as the beginning of the annual cycle of pre-release hype.

During the 2012 E3 exposition we identified both *Assassin's Creed III* and *BioShock Infinite* as focal points for our archival investigations because of the critical praise received at the expo and the amount of enthusiast press attention.

AN AESTHETICS OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Focusing on *Assassin's Creed III* for the purposes of this article, we examined the cycle of prerelease, release, and post-release commentary, criticism and reviews of *Assassin's Creed III* from June 2012-January 2013 mainly found in user reviews on gaming enthusiast press websites, such as Giantbomb.com, IGN.com, Destructoid.com, and Polygon.com. Hailed as the potential best in the *Assassin's Creed* series at E3 2012, *Assassin's Creed III* released to high expectations and very mixed reviews among professional game reviewers and game players who commented on professional reviews or left user reviews. So while being an overwhelming commercial 'hit' with over 7 million copies sold in the 2012 holiday season (Ubisoft Entertainment 2012a), and currently 14 million units sold, the game was also framed by reviewers within an aesthetic of disappointment. It didn't meet expectations.

Here is one example from our data, a posting from a Giantbomb.com user review:

> *Disappointment is a peculiar emotion. I can be angry without first having felt calm, and I can feel happy without first having felt sad, but to be disappointed, I really need to have experienced something else first, usually "optimism". It is this characteristic that makes disappointment the most insidious form of emotional malaise: we are exposed to it entirely of our own volition, by first allowing ourselves to hope.*
>
> *My friends, readers of my blog, and even strangers with whom I've made accidental eye contact know how uncontrollably optimistic I've been about Assassin's Creed III, beginning with the moment I first saw the leaked box art. It was then that I learned the fifth major installment in Ubisoft's epic action-adventure franchise would take place during the American Revolution, that it would feature a bad-ass tomahawk-wielding Native American, and that it would likely allow me the unique opportunity to scamper around the rooftops of a colonial-era replica of my hometown city of Boston, using British Redcoats as foul-mouthed, tea-swilling archery targets.*
>
> *However, the clever reader will have inferred from my earlier ramblings concerning "disappointment" that this optimism was... misplaced. So what went wrong? How did Assassin's Creed III make the transition from my Most Anticipated Game of 2012 to Biggest Letdown?*

Note how this posting points to an initial paratext, the leaked box art, to establish preliminary expectations. In fact, the post's author points to how paratexts themselves ground an emotional valence around the actual possibilities of gameplay as being a "peculiar" emotion. The establishment of expectations by paratexts suggests that the play of *Assassin's Creed III* wasn't just a happy or sad experience, an emotional opposition proposed by the post's author. Actual play was indexically contextualized by this previous exposure to paratexts. Disappointment is, therefore, an aesthetic standpoint that requires both a currency of gaming capital knowledge through exposure to this paratextual field and an interpretive interrogation utilizing that capital to answer the question – "what went wrong?"

However, disappointment doesn't result in consensus, as much as create discursive space for arguments and indexical references to other games and other moments within gaming history by which to aesthetically judge. So for instance, site users on Polygon.com began a conversation entitled, "Can we please talk about why *Assassin's Creed III* was disappointing?" a month after the game released. The originator of the post framed the issue, "I really wanted to like *Assassin's Creed 3* (sic), I even tried to force myself to like the game -- to validate the $60 purchase. Eventually I had enough." After presenting his major complaints with awkward controls, poor level design, game tutorials that are both too long but don't cover all gaming systems, and a weak narrative, he turned to other site participants, "What do you guys think, am I crazy, or do you agree?" The responses to this query and the discussions generated were quite varied and highly nuanced. Some responded quite critically to the overall game:

> *Shoddy level design throughout, an irritatingly dull protagonist, and the feeling of "why am I even bothering" for all of the game's side missions. On top of all of that, it brings Desmond's story to a ridiculously disappointing close.*

Others responses were much less critical of the narrative and gameplay given both the history of the overall *Assassin's Creed* series and the buildup of fan expectations:

> *The game was satisfying for me in the only regard it needed to be at this point, the narrative. I enjoyed the plot and found the ending satisfactory. There is not much more I can ask for after the expectations put upon the game. I can overlook the bugs. The core game play was as good or bad as it ever was. The naval missions were a fantastic surprise.*

Many responses also linked to paratextual knowledge and speculations about the game development process, resources and budgetary constraints:

> *The story was half-baked at best, and the gameplay wasn't very fun (except the naval battles, those were awesome). It was a very ambitious game on a technical level, if the interviews I've read/seen are right, and I feel like there was a lot more stuff they wanted to include but had to cut at the last minute (gaps in the narrative, better modern-day sequences, etc.).*

> *Maybe if they'd had more time to work on it (they wanted to get it out in time for the Mayan apocalypse), or managed their resources better, it would have been the game we all dreamed of. Instead I see people saying it's worse than Revelations, and Revelations drew a looot (SIC) of criticism.*

What disappointment affords is the space to both address what may have gone wrong, but also to engage in a discussion, usually quite comparative, with how it went wrong. The degree of disappointment given prior expectations both paratextual and experiential is always an open question. Therefore, aesthetics of disappointment is very conducive to generative discussions that both display gaming capital by subtly promoting disagreement.

Let us give three examples that emerged from the overall data. Regarding haptic controls, the game was widely praised for conceptually improving on the control scheme by simplification of button presses, yet gamers argued over whether combat was too simple,

and whether the sheer amount of technical glitches amounted to poor design or an inherent flaw of open world games. It was disappointing precisely because one expected better play, but haptically the game often was much more difficult because of the trend to simplify the controls for a larger market. Second, as an expansive open world game with a myriad of main and side missions the game was widely anticipated, yet gamers argued about the linearity of level design, about the worth of secondary mission objectives, about whether the side missions added any real value and motivation to the overall story. Debate swirled around the anticipation for excellent level design, but disappointment was expressed in terms of other games that had come out during the same time period, *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios SA 2012) and *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft Montreal Studios 2012) which were argued had a better design. So both anticipation and disappointment were not expressions of just the internal mechanics of the game, but also relative comparisons with other games in the series, and other games being sold in the marketplace during the 2012 holiday season. Finally, the narrative ending of the game was a focus for intensive debate. Some argued that all video game endings are disappointing, that it is the nature of the medium at this point. Others, pointed to the controversy that surrounded another video game series ending, *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare 2012), argued that after such wide spread disappointment regarding *Mass Effect 3*'s ending, *Assassin's Creeds III* ending was even worse, and therefore, a much greater disappointment.

The cultivation of expectation in many of the paratextual materials found within the commercialized environments of gaming culture, and responses to that cultivation by site participants leads to this aesthetic of disappoint often having emergent qualities. So for instance, the critical reception to an ending chase sequence in *Assassin's Creed III* where the controls were criticized as being too "sticky" and "clunky" led to a patch update by the publishers to "fix" the game. However, this concluding sequence which had great narrative importance to the game's story was still found to be aesthetically disappointing as the chase ended with a cut scene and not an actual interactive fight sequence.

Therefore, what we have termed "an aesthetics of disappointment" is one of the lynchpin strategies by which "community" is managed, and where the actual play of games is indexically connected to the paidiaic play displayed by gamers in their participation on gaming blogs, websites, and podcasts. We have called this participation paidiaic play so as to recognize both the creative and competitive elements that surround these presentations of gamer capital. Readers of 4chan.org and Neogaf.com will immediately recognize the serious play of "snark" that is demonstrated in postings. The distinction between ludic and paidiaic forms of play is most associated with virtual worlds like *Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008). For Pearce (2009) the difference between ludic and paidiaic environments is marked by design decisions that allow for and facilitate creative contributions by players. A hallmark of paidiaic environments and play is that these environments "usually include affordances for the customization of avatars and environments, and can also contain characteristic Web 2.0 features allowing players to engage in content creation within the parameters of the world's design (32)." Therefore, according to Pearce, paidiaic play is often marked by productive activity and emergent gameplay less marked by clear rules and fail states.

CONCLUSION
Part of the pleasure of contemporary video game playing for many self-identified "core" gamers is to both play games and aesthetically discuss the game being played. Conversations about "what have you been playing" have become so routine and culturally

recognized that these discussion are now thought of as a necessary cliché on many gaming podcasts. However, we would like to be conceptually clear here. This very categorization of a "core" gamer or the cliché of "what have you been playing" are themselves, rather recent and part of the very spreadability of new media and the participation in affinity spaces. In this sense, if gaming culture exists as Shaw (2010) asks, then it exists as a series of lived practices and complex, often contradictory, recursive discourses in the making. That academic analysis of gaming culture may attempt to trump the gaming capital of other participants simply means that older practices of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984) are trying to remediate the contemporary moment by claims of special knowledge and expertise. Academics want to tell them, gamers, who they are. Yet, as ethnographers have so regularly discovered, our informants are routinely more knowledgeable as experts and interpreters of their cultural experiences than are we academics. Certainly, this is evident in gaming culture where gamers, game developers, game publishers, museum curators, bloggers, advertisers, academics, and the press, among others, have a stake in the categorical productions of that culture. At the same time, we don't want to conflate the actual ludic playing of a video game, like Assassin's Creed III, with the participation by those who identify as gamers in what we have called gaming's neoliberal archive. They aren't the same, but they are now indexically related.

Through their commitment to commentary and critique video game players produce a "culture of history" (Suominen 2011) about the games they play. Since the middle of the last decade this culture has taken on a greater persistence and availability through the use of spreadable media (Jenkins et all 2013). As Consalvo (2009) has put it, "there is no innocent gaming" (415). As seen from the example of Assassin's Creed III, an aesthetic of disappointment productively generates a comparative sense of gamers' cultural present by framing expectations of what the present and future of gaming should play like given its past. Enthusiast press websites have cultivated community participation by endorsing blogs, user comments to reviews, and user reviews, games gain a greater sense of temporal persistence that is outside the magic circle (Stenros 2012 and Consalvo 2009) of the traditional ludic play of the game. Games become cultural artifacts as a focus of user interest, reference, critique, and memory through the paidiaic play and competition over gaming capital. We have suggested that this is best thought of as a kind of neoliberal archive linked to the commercial marketplace of community cultivation. Individual participation within these commercialized communities result in a persistent accumulation of artifacts of gaming capital. The conception of this networked space of blogs, podcast, discussion boards, and enthusiast press websites as a neoliberal archive of gaming paratexts is productive to the extent that we don't conceive of this networked space in an idealized image of the archive as magically transparent. Virtual archives are just as well ordered and messy and organizationally chaotic as their brick and mortar counterparts. Archives are culturally informative and constitutive both in how they arrange materials, their logics of categorization, as well as in what materials are immediately available, what is lost, and what is discarded. Our example of analyzing contributions to this archive by focusing on one game, Assassin's Creed III has suggested that part of the categorical logics of contributing to the archive and understanding the experience of playing a game is according to an aesthetic of disappointment. We have suggested that disappointment is particularly generative of gaming paratexts as it allows for the variegated display and competition of gaming capital without coming to completion or resolve. At the same time, disappointment is an affective stance that requires gamers to keep current with trends, with the play of actual games, and with

continued purchasing in the neoliberal marketplace both by clicking on websites and by purchasing games.

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