Stasis and Stillness: Moments of Inaction in Videogames

Rainforest Scully-Blaker
UC Irvine
rscullyb@uci.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper represents an initiatory investigation into moments of inaction in games. Two particular types of inaction are defined and discussed: stasis, which is inaction brought on by or through a game's mechanics and stillness which is brought on by or through a game's aesthetics. Moments of stasis and stillness are shown to either be designed features of a game that produce a variety of affective experiences or playful subversions that are injected into a game by the player. Through describing stasis and stillness as either designed or injected, these two modes of inaction are compared and contrasted as part of a broader project that interrogates whether play can be a form of critique.

Keywords

Inaction, speed, slowness, mechanics, aesthetics, design, critique, play studies

INTRODUCTION – INTERACTION THROUGH INACTION

When considering the video game as a medium, one defining characteristic is the need for interaction. Most video games will not progress unless a *player* is present to *play* by entering inputs through button presses, controller tilts, and so on. This is likely why much game studies research has investigated games as they are played – what rules govern games, how games are designed with particular player experiences in mind, how characters and story are presented and represented through play, and so on. However, not nearly as much has been said about what happens when the rhythm of play is disrupted, either by the player or by the game itself.

What follows is an investigation into what I call moments of *inaction* in video games, that is to say moments in which a player is either not able to or chooses not to engage with the game in any way that causes the narrative (such as it may be) to progress. I am consciously avoiding the term *non-interaction* for this discussion because, whether we look to Zimmerman's (2004) stratification of interaction into four distinct layers (cognitive, functional, explicit, and meta[1]) or other, more recent models[2], it is difficult to argue that a player can ever not-interact with a game in some capacity.

 Moments of inaction, however, can be experienced in any game and occur for a variety of reasons. In this paper I discuss two forms of inaction in particular, what I call *stasis* and *stillness*, terms that may be similar but connote very different things that are divided along a long-standing dichotomy in game-making and game studies: code and art.

> *Stasis* is inaction brought on by or through a game's mechanics. It can be forced on players by the game's developers to achieve a range of effects or playfully injected by players as a way to subvert the game as it is designed.

> *Stillness* is voluntary inaction brought on by or through a game's aesthetics. It too can be intentionally designed and more often than not is, however since the aesthetic of stillness is subjective, players can both resist stillness where it exists and inject stillness where it does not in ways that undercut a game's overall narrative experience.

Though there are other forms of inaction in games[3], for this initiatory exploration of the concept, I limit myself to these two because they have similarities and differences that I would like to parse out in service to a larger research question that is only gestured towards in this paper - whether play can act as critique.

This paper will begin by expanding upon the concepts of stasis and stillness. Through the use of examples across various titles, it will be shown that stasis and stillness can occur both intentionally (as designed) and unintentionally (as discovered) in games. These 'moments' will be read through the lens of speed, time, and emotion as spaces of potentiality in the case of both designers, for whom moments of inaction can evoke particular affective experiences, and, perhaps more importantly, players, for whom stasis and stillness may be injected as a means to critique a game through the act of play itself. Before moving into examples of stasis and stillness, however, it is necessary to trace the theoretical framework upon which my understanding of speed, time, and emotion, both in natural and virtual space, is based.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the proceeding discussion of the moments of stasis and stillness in games, it is necessary to consider the impact that they have on the player, a body in natural space that is acting on a virtual space by not acting. Much of my academic output prior to this paper discussed speedrunning, the practice of completing a game as quickly as possible without cheating, and how this play practice combined obscure glitches and precise player input into a dismantling of game narrative, among other things (Scully-Blaker 2014, 2016). Although I am now focusing on stasis and stillness rather than velocity and acceleration, my previous framework for discussing virtual speed still applies:

> titles that have a clear 'end' to them are 'conquered' […] through player progress. […] the application of speed [as advancement] to virtual spaces 'reveals' fundamental properties of a game world. At a basic level, movement through a game literally 'reveals' new environments or plot points […and] one measure of how 'well' someone interacts with a game is how quickly a player can string together inputs and advance to the game's completion. If one accepts this, then it stands to reason that speed in games is something that players should generally covet…

> (Scully-Blaker 2016 51)

Through examples at the level of both hardware (Sega's Blast Processing) and software (in-game timers, rewards for faster completion times), I suggest that, "simply put, going fast in games is a good thing" with the caveat that there are exceptions (Scully-Blaker 2016 53). Indeed, there are mechanics in games that slow even the speedrunner down as well as games whose aesthetic suggests that the way to play "is, perhaps counter-intuitively, to slow down and enjoy the game world" (Ibid). As such, where previously I looked to Virilio's (1977) speed theory and the language of acceleration, I now shift to a literature of slowness.

"The very idea of slow living is provocative" – this is how Parkins and Craig begin *Slow Living* (2006), a project to examine social and cultural movements that

champion 'taking time' as a critique of globalization (Parkins et al 1). Citing examples ranging from the slow food movement and the wellness revolution to so-called Slow Cities, Parkins and Craig weave across disciplines to discuss the numerous ways that people deploy slowness to "promote a position counter to the dominant value-system of 'the times'" (Ibid). As will be shown in the particular cases where players inject stasis and stillness into games themselves, I believe that this idea of a 'radical slowness' is not without merit. I share their conviction that "a sense of 'slow time' may interrogate the instrumental forms of social time […] and seek to offer an alternative to speed as the only available temporality" (40). Even so, this does not mean that slow living is without oversights.

For indeed, as Sarah Sharma argues, "these intellectual responses and progressive social movements that respond to the problematic pace of life risk reproducing the very social inequalities they rail against" (Sharma 110). In her mind, many of the same movements praised by Parkins and Craig as spaces of resistance are the exact opposite. For Sharma such movements represent "the multiple temporalities that underlie the social fabric" which demonstrate that slower "experiences of time are not just the outcome of individual choices", but in fact a privilege of class in the larger democratic, capitalist system (Ibid). In the analysis that follows, particularly regarding slower play practices as potential spaces for critique, it will be necessary to keep both Parkins and Craig's optimism and Sharma's caution in mind since games and even the idea of critique come from their own places of privilege. With the theoretical foundations of this paper now laid out, we are ready elaborate upon the definitions of stasis and stillness.

STASIS

As noted in the introduction, *stasis is inaction brought on intentionally by or unintentionally through a game's mechanics*. Put differently, it is any moment in which a game forces the player to stop because of a device that exists outside the game's explicit narrative. In such cases, one or multiple moments within the game are built around inaction as a mechanical option, but it is important to recall that not all moments of stasis are designed.

As James Newman and others[4] have observed, it is not uncommon for players to "seek alternative gaming pleasures" within a particular title in an attempt to "extract as much enjoyment" from the software as possible (Newman 63, 62). Such interactions evoke Suits' notion of those "triflers", who "recognize rules but not goals" when playing a game (Suits 47). People who engage in trifling "can be said to be […] playing another game at the expense of [the original]" (Ibid). This can include an entire range of metagaming practices from searching for glitches to developing optimal strategies for competitive play, however not all such practices have so clear a purpose. In the case of players who inject moments of stasis into a game, one can observe what this paper calls a desire to 'see what happens' when no inputs are made. Like other instances of trifling, the 'alternative gaming pleasure' here is to engage "in something [game-like]" rather than playing the game itself (46). To clarify this point, let us examine some ways that these moments can occur.

Stasis as Designed

At the outset, it must be noted that the examples presented here and indeed throughout the paper are by no means a sum total of all moments of stasis and stillness in games, nor do all instances of one mechanic or aesthetic choice necessarily bring about a moment of inaction in the way that this paper discusses. These examples have been chosen to highlight my present understanding of stasis and stillness rather than to represent the concepts wholesale. With this in mind, two broad

gameplay mechanics that can force stasis on players are quick time events and player death.

Until Dawn's "Don't Move!" Prompt

In Supermassive Games' *Until Dawn* (2015), players control a group of teenagers as they walk through various environments and horror movie tropes jump out at them from the shadows. Much of the gameplay is made up of branching narrative paths that correspond to dialogue choices and other decisions that the player makes, but there are also numerous action sequences that a player can succeed or fail at based on their ability to execute particular controller inputs within an allotted timeframe. The most notable of these for our purposes is *Until Dawn*'s unique 'Don't Move!' prompt (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 - The player character (left) holds still in the hopes that the figure wielding a flamethrower (right) passes her by.

By reading the PlayStation 4 controller's built-in orientation sensor, the game tracks whether the player is keeping their hands steady for hidden length of time. If the player jostles the controller too much, then their avatar might make a noise or otherwise fail at hiding and the narrative proceeds accordingly. *Until Dawn* deploys stasis in a way that evokes horror movie tropes and establishes an affective, haptic link between the player and the fear that is being felt by the player character. Holding the controller perfectly still can be difficult and yet the player must persevere if they wish to protect their avatar. In this way, the 'Don't Move!' prompt is a moment of stasis that strongly implicates the player in the narrative through a combination of inaction and affect. As the next example will show, however, not all moments of stasis demand player engagement so explicitly.

Resident Evil 4 and Player Death

Capcom's *Resident Evil 4 (RE4)* (2005) also uses quick time events as means to keep players in a constant state of uncertainty. The player can be battling a swarm of enemies or walking down a silent corridor when, without warning a flashing prompt pops up on screen that the player must input as quickly as possible. Whether it is as a result of failing a quick time event, or simply from taking too much damage, the way that *RE4* handles player death is another example of designed stasis. For most of the numerous ways that Leon can die, there are corresponding cutscenes that show the consequences of the player's failure to keep him safe, including having his face melted off by acid spitting insects and getting decapitated by a chainsaw wielding foe (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 - The player character (Leon) in a state of mid-decapitation. The camera angle has changed from behind the player's shoulder to better show off the effort put into animating the scene.

As is the case in *Until Dawn*, in *RE4*, the player is engaged in keeping their character alive while dealing with various horrors. *RE4*'s graphic death cutscenes place the player in a state of stasis through being apocryphal disruptions of the canonical plot since, if Leon dies, the player must play the encounter over again until they 'get it right'. Although many games have player death as a mechanic, an interesting feature to *RE4* for our purposes is that the amount of effort put into rendering these over-the-top death scenes performs a dual movement of forcing the player to sit and watch the result of their failure while simultaneously making that failure feel less severe by offering up the gruesome cutscene as a 'reward' of sorts.

Because of these design choices, a temptation can emerge within the player to die in various ways in order to 'see what happens' in all of these detailed vignettes that the player would miss by playing 'correctly'. There are, in fact, entire YouTube compilations devoted to showcasing every possible way to die in *RE4* for this exact reason. Players not only accept that dying is a part of the *RE4* experience, but that these moments of stasis are so successful that people want to ensure that they have not missed any of them. This desire to explore all possible gameplay options is a thread that will run throughout the rest of this paper which is particularly relevant as we move to the notion of player-injected stasis.

Stasis as Injected

In both examples above, moments of stasis were said to occur by design. Whether it was *Until Dawn*'s forcing players to embody stasis by not moving or *RE4*'s forcing and encouraging players to witness the graphic consequences of failure, both games feature deliberate moments of inaction that were rooted in their game's mechanics. This paper will now 'see what happens' when players attempt to playfully inject moments of stasis themselves.

In general, player-injected stasis can occur whenever the player deliberately stops entering inputs in a way that thwarts the assumptions laid out by a game's mechanics. The motivation for inaction is usually to playfully prod at what happens when the player gives up control in moments that would normally demand it. It is worth noting that this is distinct from what Alex Galloway calls the "ambience act", or the state that a game settles into without an operator (Galloway 10). For him, "if the passage of time means anything at all", then the game has not settled into an ambient state, whereas this paper is most interested in moments when a player's inaction means everything and design assumptions are potentially revealed (Ibid). Since examples of *injected* stasis can be difficult to find, I have two somewhat eclectic examples: Scientifically Proven's *Man vs Wild* (2011) and Nintendo's *Mario Party* 2 (1999).

Bear Grylls vs the Volcano

Man vs Wild is a licensed spin-off of a TV show of the same name that involves the host, Bear Grylls, throwing himself into hostile environments to show how one can

survive even Earth's deadliest places. In the game, players take control of Bear and do much the same, however the fact that it is a game allows the survival situations to tread into hyperbolic territory. One such instance that pushes the bounds of believability has the player control Bear as he builds a raft and paddles away from a deserted island while a volcano erupts in the background. A bar at the bottom of the screen depletes almost comically slowly, denoting how long the player has to escape. As one begins to paddle away, a shark attacks the raft for unknown reasons and a quick time prompt appears allowing players to fight the shark with an oar (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 -Bear Grylls sits on his raft unimpressed despite the dangers that surround him.

It was in this context that, during a Let's Play, a pair of YouTubers that are known as the Two Best Friends, decided to let the timer run out since, in their words, it was quite likely that "no one on the Internet has done this yet" (Super Best Friends Play). Instead of responding to the game's prompts, the two sat and watched the timer run out while the shark's short raft-gnawing animation looped for what ended up being so long a wait that they cut much of it out of the final video. Once the timer did finally run out, the raft, with Bear attached to it, flipped over in one clunky movement completely devoid of animation and the game reset the players to the last checkpoint (Fig. 4). After a great deal of laughter, one of them remarks, "They did not spend time on that…" (Ibid). This apparent oversight on the part of Scientifically Proven would not have come to light had the Two Best Friends not wanted to 'see what happens' when stasis is applied in unintended ways.

Fig. 4 - Bear Grylls, still fused to the raft and still unimpressed, sinks to a watery grave. Note that his sprite has not moved at all.

Consider this in reference to the *RE4* example. Here, the player injection of stasis highlights that this vignette in *Man vs Wild* was poorly constructed. The fact that the timer takes so long to deplete, coupled with the poorly-animated death scene that comes after it runs out, suggests that the designers never intended players to reach

this fail state. Compare this to the earlier example of *RE4* where the player has only a few seconds to act and the fail states are so impressively rendered that player death can feel as rewarding as advancing the narrative. In *Man vs Wild*, inaction through injected stasis reveals instances where the development team at Scientifically Proven cut corners.

Still, since this moment occurred in the context of a Let's Play, which is decidedly geared towards entertainment, any argument for intentional critique on the part of the Two Best Friends is perhaps undercut. It may be that the desire to 'see what happens' is all that is at play here. It must also be admitted that this low budget, licensed title is an obscure and not entirely fair example. As will be shown momentarily, however, larger studios with bigger budgets are not immune to player-injected stasis.

Luigi vs Suicidal AI

Nintendo's *Mario Party* series is undeniably better known than *Man vs Wild*. Players select from a cast of regulars from the Mario Bros. canon and take part in a boardgame-style battle to collect coins and stars by winning minigames that range from tug-of-wars to pizza-eating contests. Nearly ten years after the release of *Mario Party 2* (1999), a YouTuber known as KlydeStorm uploaded a video called "Mario Party 2: Luigi wins by doing absolutely nothing" (KlydeStorm). In the video, KlydeStorm plays of a selection of minigames in which, as the title suggests, the player-controlled character (Luigi) is able to win against three 'easy' level AI opponents without any button inputs being made. In the video, the AI players are shown to act seemingly at random, in one instance throwing themselves off of a mountaintop with no interference from the player character (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 - The victory screen for the Bumper Balls minigame. Luigi started in this spot and did not move while the AI-controlled opponents still managed to lose.

By playing in this way and sharing the video to YouTube, KlydeStorm has broadcasted an instance of player-injected stasis to the masses. Their play reveals that the easy AI in *Mario Party 2* is not necessarily programmed to pose any challenge to the player and that in certain contexts, one does not even need to play in order to succeed. This video achieved enough of a following that others have subsequently released videos for later *Mario Party* games as well as games from the *Super Smash Bros* and *Mario Kart* series.[5] These player-injected moments of stasis are clearly not without their entertainment value.

Though there are many other minigames in *Mario Party 2* where inaction is not a path to victory, KlydeStorm's video still reveals certain assumptions and choices made during *Mario Party 2*'s design. Any affective content that one may find in designed stasis is clearly absent here and in its place one finds humour and an

implication that the AI may be taking the term 'easy' too far. Once again, however, the context of these moments of stasis as a curated video that 'sees what happens' when no inputs are made weakens this paper's ability to suggest that deeper critique may be taking place. It is also undeniably the case that most examples of player-injected stasis end up posted online for similar audiences. As a result, the difficulty of ascribing the intent to critique games through play to players is a problem that cannot be resolved by discussing stasis alone, however this section was not without purpose.

We have now seen exactly what this paper means by the term 'moment of stasis'. By tying the discussion to various games' mechanics, stasis has been discussed in two senses: both as a designed feature of a game that produces one or more affects on a player and as something that can be injected into a game by a player to 'see what happens' when no inputs are made at a given time. Moments of injected stasis have also been shown to dispense with affect and instead potentially present a critique of certain design assumptions made by game developers. However the fact that many moments of injected stasis do not seem to go beyond a desire to 'see what happens' undercuts this. In discussing the aesthetic counterpart to stasis in moments of *stillness* particular attention will be paid to whether the tension between critique and curiosity may be better resolved.

STILLNESS

Recalling the introduction, *stillness is inaction brought on by or through a game's aesthetics*. Like moments of stasis, these instances of aesthetic inaction can be intentionally designed, but players can also inject stillness into games in ways that undercut the overall narrative experience. Even so, it must be admitted that, when compared to stasis, it is much more common that stillness is designed (or at least designed *towards*) since games often seek to produce both emotional and ludic responses from players through aesthetics.

Ian Bogost indirectly gets at the idea of stillness in a discussion of games producing reverence. While discussing *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2007), Bogost describes a segment of the game in which the player shoots their way through a meticulously rendered model of Manchester Cathedral. It is not the firefight with aliens that matters most to him, but something that happens after the dust settles, or rather, the lack of something:

> the cathedral empties, and the player is left to spend as much or as little as he or she wants exploring the cathedral's cavernous interior. […] Since *Resistance* is such a linear, scripted game, this open time IS unusual, even excessive. It offers a break from the incessant bombardment of indistinguishable Chimera. It's a time to pause, to reflect, perhaps even to meditate on the relationship between God, human, and alien.

> (Bogost 2011 30)

While it may be argued that Bogost is here giving a deal of credit to Sony's *Resistance* team without any evidence, the fact remains that he clearly experienced a moment of aesthetic pause (he *explores* the cathedral, entering gameplay inputs but not moving to a point in virtual space that advances the game's plot) as a direct result of certain design decisions. A key feature to stillness arises here that one does not find in stasis: it is a subjective experience that players can experience or miss independently of developer intent.

In speaking of the different temporalities that individuals of different privilege inhabit, Sharma raises the example of "express" fitness classes for office workers who "would trade their lunch breaks for yoga" (Sharma 81). She is particularly struck by the rhetoric of the instructor in one such class – "full of aphorisms about the speed of the world 'out there'" as opposed to the decelerated time and space of the mat where one takes pause to practice a form of bodily reverence, a characterization that is mirrored in moments of stillness (82).

If we begin by considering Bogost's feelings of "reprieve for the weary and steadfastness in the face of devastation" relative to the futuristic warzone that awaits him once he advances the plot by leaving the cathedral and use that as a means to explore the larger relationship between videogames as a space for leisure in the face of the 'out there' that is everyday life, the aesthetic of stillness can become central to an understanding of not just games, but of the affective temporalities of a disproportionately moneyed society.[6] It is perhaps no coincidence that one of the best examples of a game that promotes moments of stillness is also one deeply entwined in these capitalist logics.

Stillness as Designed

When discussing Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* series, it is difficult to ignore that it, like *Resistance*, is familiar to Bogost. He has devoted multiple pages to the "animal village simulator", discussing a tension between what he calls "consumption and naturalism" since much of the gameplay juxtaposes the rural charm of small-town life with the capitalist rhythm of work and debt (Bogost 2007 267, Bogost 2013 Web). Indeed, the core 'plot' of each game in the series revolves around slowly developing one's house or even the town as a whole through substantial investments of both time and the in-game currency, bells. And while we will later see that this diagnosis does not effectively consider the range of possible in-game actions, Bogost's 'naturalism' is helpful here for signposting one of the major ways that games produce stillness.

Walk, Don't Run to Nook's Junction

Recalling my work on virtual speed, since 'going fast is a good thing', it makes sense that the ability to run, rather than walk, from point A to point B is a positive feature in most games (including all of those discussed in this paper thus far). However, this is not as clear in *Animal Crossing* games. While the player is allowed to run, each game in the main series is designed such that the consequences of running can outweigh the benefits in a way that is not often seen in other titles. When the player runs, they do arrive at their destination sooner, but other than the town's amenities closing for the night or villagers going to sleep, there are no time-sensitive events that occur with any degree of regularity. The game also runs in real time, so play is seldom a race against the clock. Other than getting somewhere slightly faster and managing one's own (im)patience, there are no actual reasons to run in *Animal Crossing* games, however there are several deterrents.

One of the ways that a player is able to care for and customize their town is by planting flowers. Diverse flora adds colour to the landscape and attracts a number of insects to the town that the player can then catch. The player can walk over flowers, but any time that the player runs over one, there is a chance that it will be destroyed. As well, any insects that one encounters in the wild, whether on flowers or not, will immediately flee if the player runs by them. The same is true of the game's fish, which share insects' dual role of being sold for bells or donated to the town museum. Finally, if a player runs into one of the animal villagers too much, the villager may ask the player to stop and then enter into an angry or sad state, preventing the player from entering into a 'normal' dialogue with them for a time.

By doing so much to disincentivize running while ensuring that these deterrents do not derail one's gameplay in a drastic way, *Animal Crossing* games are arguably designed to encourage stillness. Since these mechanics never force the player into inaction, they do not create stasis, but the connotation of these mechanics as well as the games 'naturalist' setting and narrative all combine to *suggest* stillness to the player.

Another key distinction emerges here between stasis and stillness: one cannot so much design *for* stillness as they can design *towards* it. The second that a game 'forces' a player to stop and admire the scenery, perhaps in a cutscene, a moment of stasis is created regardless of whether it also encourages the player to relish in the game's aesthetic. In the case of our example, at no point is a player forced to walk in *Animal Crossing* games, nor are they ever forced to stop and wait for very long. Instead, the tone set by these games encourages players to find spaces within the virtual world where their avatar *may* stop and a moment of stillness *can* occur. Let us consider some brief examples.

Animal Crossing's Invitation to Stillness

While moments of stillness can be found in any of the main *Animal Crossing* games, this paper will focus on the most recent instalment in the main series, *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012). In *New Leaf*, one can find what is called the town's Main Street, where various shops are located. At one end of the road, there is a bench placed at the edge of a cliff that overlooks the ocean. A player can, if they wish, sit on the bench and wait for nothing in particular. The camera may pan up slightly to show off the sky and a street lamp may ignite as the in-game clock detects the arrival of the evening, but the bench serves no in-game purpose other than a place to sit and listen to the lapping waves (Fig. 6). This is an opportunity that the game presents which, if taken, can bring about a moment of stillness.
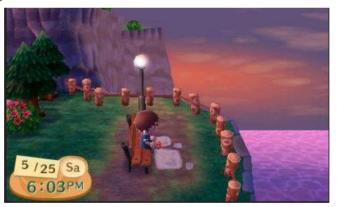

Fig. 6 - The player sits on the bench in question, admiring the ocean as a sunset occurs in the background.

Similarly, there is a space in one's village called the Plaza, a town square of sorts. At the beginning of the game, the player plants a tree to commemorate the beginning of their tenure as a resident (and mayor) of the village. As one's game file ages, the tree grows as well, a metaphor for the player's progress. The tree is surrounded by a short brick enclosure, which can be sat on (Fig. 7). As with the bench on Main Street, there is little practical reason to do so. The camera pans slightly upwards to show off how much the tree has grown and if one waits long enough, the game's credits will play, however the player is free to get up and interrupt the credits at any time. In both of these examples, the player character's facial expression becomes notably relaxed.

When coupled with design choices that discourage running as well as a narrative focus on small-town life, these two vignettes become expressions of the game's openness to unproductive inaction. Despite the fact that the player could be paying off their debt, collecting more bugs and fish for the museum, or even performing the emotional labour of befriending villagers, they instead find respite in a moment of stillness. In the same way that it might be argued that the very act of play, when unfettered from financial incentives, acts as a slow life-esque disruption of everyday capitalist rhythms, so too do these examples allow the player to take shelter from even those pressures of a consumption-based society that are built in to the game.

While the two specific examples raised here do involve a game mechanic of sorts (being able to sit on certain objects), a player could just as easily experience stillness in *New Leaf* by standing in a similar spot in their village and allowing the game to idle so that they can better take in the scenery. Simply standing in place is likely how stillness is more commonly experienced since, as we have seen, such feelings cannot be explicitly designed for so much as designed towards. If stasis is a stop sign, then stillness is a rest stop along the side of the road.

From this it can be seen that moments of stillness can exist in any game whose aesthetic content coaxes a player into inaction. *Animal Crossing* has here been a valuable example since so many design choices were made that orient the game *towards* stillness, but, as will soon be discussed, moments of stillness can occur in any game if player's subjective perception of the game world allows for it.

Stillness as Injected

In the most basic sense, a moment of stillness can be considered injected when the aesthetic content of a player's interaction with a virtual world orients that play *towards* what we might consider rest and reverence. Put another way, one can inject moments of stillness into any game, but it requires, at the very least, a certain amount of effort on the player's part. Just as a speedrunner's self-imposed goal of completing a game as quickly as possible causes them to eliminate as many moments of stasis or stillness from their play as possible, players can equally inject stillness into a virtual world by substituting the game's goals for their own.

World of Peacecraft

One of the best-known examples of this can be found in *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) (Blizzard 2004), a massively multiplayer online game about completing quests and slaying beasts, where several players have garnered attention by reaching the in-game level cap without killing a single enemy. In a discussion of what might constitute "queer-er play", Edmond Chang cites "Everbloom of the Feathermoon" in particular, who "relied on wandering the game world and developing character skills in healing,

herbalism, and mining" to gain experience points and level up (Chang 19-20). This, he argues, is an example of a play practice that is not "grounded in normative ideologies" of, among other things, "speed" (19). Moments of stillness in all forms can be said to bring about 'queer-er' play in this sense.

Everbloom's own thoughts on their play, namely that it "really gives you a chance to see an amazing world up close and personal" and that they "spent hours swimming around reefs and flying to the farthest reaches of the maps...", signpost how alternate modes of play can invite moments of stillness even in a game that emblematizes the grind of performing repetitive, often violent tasks to increase one's power (Sullivan Web). By playing in this way, Everbloom and others inject their own forms of stillness into the game in a way that requires a great deal of time and effort. These players can be seen as supplanting the game's aesthetic and even its suggested way of being with their own. In some cases, this can fundamentally alter how the game treats the player, as is the case with Doubleagent, the Pandaren Shaman.

The Pandaren were a later addition to *WoW* whose unique features included starting the game on their own special island as a neutral party rather than as part of either of the two major in-universe factions (Alliance and Horde). By playing peacefully and not completing the requisite quests, Doubleagent was never prompted to choose a faction nor was he ever able to leave the Pandaren homeworld – his character is forever a neutral party. Over the course of a year, Doubleagent relied on the game's "herbalism" system which "grants a small amount of experience every time a herb is gathered" to reach the level cap all while still remaining in the first area of the game (Bogos Web). As a direct result of this, he was locked out of many basic gameplay features including "dungeons" or "PvP" (Ibid). Unlike other *WoW* pacifists, the specific context in which he chose to play peacefully rendered him partially invisible to the game's underlying logics due to assumptions made on the part of developers as to how the game would/should be played.

In these and many other cases of player-injected stillness, what is most striking is the number of hours that one must invest into their play. To suggest that, as was the case with player-injected stasis, these *WoW* players simply want to 'see what happens' when they play differently is a less convincing argument as a result. While the initial impulse may have been to 'see what happens' if one tries to exist as a pacifist in a world of *War*craft, at some point in the process, this curiosity was sated and yet clearly the desire to continue playing in this way was not. It is in examples such as this, which are admittedly few and far between, that I argue one can most clearly see the potential for alternate modes of play to become something more than a desire to push against the boundaries of a game's rules.

CONCLUSION – THE SLOW BOAT TO CRITIQUE
The question that I am left with is this: is this 'something more' the ability to critique a game through the act of play itself? To simply repeat Parkins and Craig's assertion that "the very idea of slow living is provocative" is not a satisfactory answer here (Parkins et al 1). Stasis and stillness have been defined and explicated because they are moments in which a game can reveal its underlying assumptions, even if stasis in particular seems to be playful exploration rather than an explicit critical play practice.

But why does critique through play matter? And why does it only come up at the end of this paper as something that I gesture towards as 'grounds for future research'? The answer returns us to the beginning of this paper and the medium-specific qualities of games.

It is certainly the case that works of art (including games) have been made that draw inspiration from or seek to directly critique their predecessors. That art can critique art is not a novel claim. But compared to other forms of art, games are frequently interacted with in their own context without one having to make something new. My underlying hypothesis is that players can play with games in ways that one cannot interact with films or illustrations I wish to frame this unique space of playing with games as another form of artistic interaction – one where critique is conducted not through design, but through the act of play itself and I believe that moments of injected stillness may be a site of this. As was mentioned above, however, this is where my research is *going*, not where it *is* yet. And so what else has this initiatory exploration yielded?

The purpose of this paper has been to define and discuss stasis and stillness as two forms of inaction in games that are rooted in a game's mechanics and aesthetics respectively. Through the use of several examples, I have shown that both can either be intentionally designed into a game or injected by player innovation. The moments where players inject either stasis or stillness into a game often emerge out of a playful desire to 'see what happens' when one deviates from a game's intended narrative flow. This paper has also demonstrated that, while it is difficult to ascribe other motivations to injected stillness, in some cases, the sheer amount of time that a player must invest into creating stillness where there is none suggests that there may be more at play than simple curiosity in at least some of these moments of inaction. As noted above, my hope is that this 'something more' is a form of critique through the act of play itself, but the present investigation has also suggested that I must tread cautiously as I attempt to answer this question.

In the same way that Sharma's *In the Meantime* argues that to focus solely on a life of slowness ignores the variously privileged temporalities of our democratic, capitalist society, it strikes me that to focus solely on critique as an academic, capital-D Discursive mode of communication rooted in critical theory risks underemphasizing the significance of critique in popular discourse. There is a high-low discourse tension here. It may be that to approach critique through play as something that can be elucidated through citing earlier academic work is a fool's errand altogether since much of what we consider play exists in a space outside of the Ivory Tower. To resolve this tension is one of my goals as my research into this underexplored form of playful labour continues.

NOTES
1) Within Zimmerman's schema, I am most closely discussing explicit interaction, or instances of "overt participation" (Zimmerman 158).
2) I am particularly thinking of Galloway (2006) and Nitsche (2008), although there are certainly others.
3) I can conceive of at least two others: moments of waiting and the chaining together of moments of deliberate inefficiency one finds in slow play practices.
4) Consider Boluk and Lemieux (2017) or Consalvo (2007), for example.
5) For examples, see YTSunny (2015), Omega Tyrant (2015), or Nintendo Unity (2017).
6) This is a claim that I wish to introduce here, but that likely merits a paper unto itself.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
Bogos, S. 2013. "WoW Player Hits Level 60 Without Picking a Faction." *The Escapist*. http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/126640-WoW-Player-Hits-Level-60-Without-Picking-a-Faction

Bogost, I. 2013. "Consumption and Naturalism in Animal Crossing." *Ian Bogost*. http://bogost.com/writing/consumption_and_naturalism_in_/

Bogost, I. 2011 *How to Do Things with Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bogost, I. 2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT Press Ltd.

Boluk, S. and Lemieux P. 2017. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2004) *World of Warcraft*. Blizzard Entertainment.

Capcom (2005) *Resident Evil 4*. Capcom.

Consalvo, M. 2007. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Galloway, A. 2006. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hudson Soft. (1999) *Mario Party 2*. Nintendo.

KlydeStorm. 2009. "Mario Party 2: Luigi wins by doing absolutely nothing**.**" Video. *YouTube*. 11 Oct. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6PxRwgjzZw

Newman, J. 2005. "Playing (with) videogames". *Convergence* 11, (1). http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/135485650501100105

Nintendo. (2001) *Animal Crossing*. Nintendo.

Nintendo. (2012) *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*. Nintendo.

Nintendo Unity. 2017. "Mario Kart 8 Deluxe - Luigi wins a Cup by doing absolutely nothing." Video. *YouTube*. 4 May.

Nitsche, M. 2008. *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Omega Tyrant. 2015. "Smash 4 - Luigi wins against every level nine CPU by doing absolutely nothing**.**" Video. *YouTube*. 23 May.

Parkins, Wendy and Geoffrey Craig. *Slow Living.* UNSW Press, 2006.

Plunkett, L. 2012. "After Twelve Days, WoW Player Hits Level 90 Without Killing Anything." *Kotaku*. https://kotaku.com/5952018/after-twelve-days-wow-player-hits-level-90-without-killing-anything

Scientifically Proven. (2011) *Man vs Wild*. Crave Entertainment.

Scully-Blaker, R. 2014. "A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space With de Certeau and Virilio" *Game Studies* 14, (1).

Scully-Blaker, R. 2016. "Re-Curating the Accident: Speedrunning as Community and Practice." Thesis. *Concordia University, Montreal*.

Sharma, Sarah. *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 2014.

Sullivan, L. 2011 "WoW Player Reaches Level 85 without Killing a Single Mob." *PCGamer*. http://www.pcgamer.com/wow-player-reaches-level-85-without-killing-a-single-mob/

Super Best Friends Play. 2013. "Two Best Friends Play Man Vs Wild (Part 6)." Video. *YouTube*. 22 Apr.

Supermassive Games. (2015) *Until Dawn.* Sony Computer Entertainment.

Taylor, T. L. 2009. *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Virilio, Paul. *Speed and Politics*. Semiotexte, 1977 | 2007.

YTSunny. 2015 "Mario Party 10: Luigi wins by doing absolutely nothing." Video. *YouTube*. 20 Mar.

Zimmerman, E. 2004. "Narrative, interactivity, play, and games: Four naughty concepts in need of discipline." In *First person: New media as story, performance, and game* edited by N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrington, 154-164. Cambridge: MIT Press.