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香港城市大學

Workshops of Our Own:  
Analysing Constraint Play in Digital Games  
自製工坊：分析應用於數碼遊戲中的限制性玩法

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## **ABSTRACT**

Players are at the heart of games: games are only fully realised when players play them. Contemporary games research has acknowledged players' importance when discussing games. Player-based research in game studies has been largely oriented either towards specific types of play, or towards analysing players as parts of games. While such approaches have their merits, they background creative traditions shared across different play. Games share players, and there is knowledge to be gleamed from analysing the methods players adopt across different games, especially when these methods are loaded with intent to make something new. In this thesis, I will argue that players design, record, and share their own play methods with other players. Through further research into the Oulipo's potential contributions to games research, as well as a thorough analysis of current game studies texts on play as method, I will argue that the Oulipo's concept of **constraints** can help us better discuss player-based design. I will argue for constraints by analysing various different types of player created play methods. I will outline a descriptive model that discusses these play methods through shared language, and analysed as a single practice with shared commonalities. By the end of this thesis, I will have shown that players' play methods are often measured and creative. Players create play methods not only to enrich their play, but also to enrich other players' play and to create new future ways to approach games, and playing them. Furthermore, I will argue that players realise the productive potential in their play, and they record their play both to preserve their adopted methods, but also to realise the creative aspects latent inside their play.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### [1.1] An Opening

Literature as I knew it was a constant series of attempts to make one word stay put after another by following certain definite rules; or, more often, rules that were neither definite nor definable, but that might be extracted from a series of examples, or rules made up for the occasion-that is to say, derived from the rules followed by other writers (Italo Calvino, 1986, p. 15)

I remember reading this quote in *Cybernetics and Ghosts* (1986), right after reading Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1997) for the first time during my undergraduate degree. There were two aspects that really stuck with me: Firstly, literature's processuality – writing was not a finished book, but a painstaking block by block placed one after another. Secondly, literature's construction – there was nothing set in stone in literature, it was just a series of rules that writers followed because they believed these rules were definite, because they were following convention, or because someone told them to.

I also remember feeling a bit annoyed with that quote.

I was not annoyed because I felt that Calvino was wrong. I was annoyed because he made sense of *something more*, and then placed it onto literature. The rest of the essay somewhat assuaged this annoyance (I will be returning to it in this this thesis). However, there was some work getting there

I could see that literature was a process. I could see that his writing was following rules of each type: definiteness, in language; convention, in the novel, and arbitrariness, in the weaving chapter structure. Calvino's statement was placed in the contemporary tradition of post-structuralism, which featured Calvino and the Oulipo, alongside similarly inclined authors such as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. His view of literature fit like a glove within this literary tradition.

However, Calvino's statements on literature were also true of Venice in *Invisible Cities*. Marco Polo rebuilt Venice stone by stone, memory by memory. He followed rules of each type: definiteness, in maintaining citiness; convention, in the story formats as told

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to Kublai Khan; and arbitrariness, in a woven reconstruction of memories of a home city, classified by metrics that cities are never classified by.

At the time when I read Calvino's two works, I had felt somewhat jaded by literary theory. I did not care about the book's rules, because I felt that the rules of literature were largely inconsequential. However, I did care about the Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities* and his homesick wanderlust. I felt that exploring the world did not matter much to him, because he had not yet come to terms with his home city of Venice: parts were forgotten, parts were lost, and parts were never understood. Each retelling tried to remember, to recover, or to understand.

I wrote both my undergraduate and eventually my masters theses on games. I cannot say that this doctoral dissertation has been building up from the moment I read that quote. However, whenever I read game studies scholars talk about Calvino (and the Oulipo) in both my undergraduate as well as my masters degree, this annoyance resurfaced. They were applying Calvino's discussion on literature's rules and literature's processuality to games' rules and game's processuality. Yet they still had not resolved the *something more*.

This thesis came about as an attempt in finding the *something more* in games. In literature, this something more was the fictional Marco Polo (perhaps Calvino himself) making sense of Venice through short retellings of the city, each of which focusing on something different from, something similar to the next. In games, the *something more* is the players, making sense of games through variations on their play, each focusing on something different, something similar.

### [1.2] Hypothesis

In this thesis, I will argue that players design their own play methods, record these play methods, and share them with others. Through further research into the Oulipo's potential contributions to games research, as well as through a thorough analysis of current game studies texts on play as method, I will argue that the Oulipo's concept of **constraints** applies much better to player-based design than to formalist analysis of games as interactive texts. I will do this by looking at the various different types of play

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that players have created, and arguing that these play methods can be discussed using similar language, and analysed as a practice with shared commonalities.

### **[1.3] Thesis Overview**

In this subchapter, I will briefly break down the thesis' make-up. This thesis will be divided into eight chapters, corresponding to three parts. In the first part in **Chapters 2 and 3**, I will look at previous literature on both the Oulipo and game studies, while setting up constraints as a theoretical output. In the second part in **Chapters 4, 5, and 6**, I will look at player adopted constraints, presenting a holistic view of various play methods while also corroborating the claims in the first part through specific examples. **In Chapter 7 and 8**, I will look at how players record their play methods, how academia has approached recordings, then conclude through a reflection of the overall thesis and the next steps forward.

#### **[1.3.1] Oulipo, Game Studies and Constraints**

In the subsequent two chapters, I will be focusing on introducing the theoretical background and framework for this thesis' main contribution.

In **Chapter 2: Oulipo and Play**, I start by looking at the **Oulipo's** discussions on play, games, and constraints. After opening the chapter by discussing who the Oulipo are, I follow up by breaking down the Oulipo's theories and works into three parts. First, I look at Oulipian writing's lusory aspects. I start to do this by looking at how they constrained themselves in order to be able to play with text, and then follow up into how this translated for two specific authors, Italo Calvino and Georges Perec, as illustrative examples. Secondly, I move into the Oulipo's relationship to the digital, by looking at both the Oulipo's attempts at digitising their texts, but also by looking at offshoots of the Oulipo's relationship to the digital, as well as how non-Oulipian authors approached the Oulipo's digitisation. Finally, after covering both the digital and the lusory, I follow up by approaching how game studies scholars used the Oulipo in their works. I break

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down multiple key texts to show how game studies' relationship with the Oulipo shifted over time, building up to this thesis.

In **Chapter 3: Constraining Play**, after having explained how the Oulipo used constraints, I explain how I will use the term constraints throughout my thesis. I introduce three types of constraints: material constraints, imperative constraints and potential constraints. **Material constraints** are the constraints that players adopt in response to the impositions of the game's material. **Imperative constraints** are the constraints that players adopt in response to the game's conventions and suggestions. **Potential constraints** are the constraints that players adopt in response to neither. I explain that each of these three different types of constraints can either be **upheld**, which means that players understand and realise these constraints, or **flouted**, which means that players understand but try to subvert these constraints.

I explain that play methods form around players adopting a combination of these constraints, intentionally or unintentionally. I argue that when players adopt constraints without consideration towards their own play method, they are adopting a prototypical play method. However, players often form their own play method by carefully considering which overarching choices dictate their play method.

By the end of these two chapters, I will have introduced the Oulipo, looked at how their works have influenced game studies research, and proposed a further way of considering the Oulipo's research in game studies: by analysing their work on constraints within play methodology.

### [1.3.2] Creating Play Methods

In the first two chapters, I focused on creating language to describe how constraints work, and how this language can be applied to play. In these subsequent three chapters, I provide three different reasons why players might play: they constrain themselves to be able to explore, they constrain themselves to iterate on previous constraints, and they constrain themselves to be able to express themselves. More importantly, with each section, I will look at how players play – and how we can distinguish between different exploration, iterations and expression through the methods players adopt.

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In **Chapter 4: Explorative Play**, I will look at how players explore games. First, I will look at how players learn about the game they have chosen. This includes exploring whether their preconceptions of the game match the game, whether new constraints emerge from existing within a game for a long time, or whether games change in ways that allow for new constraints to emerge. Secondly, I will look at how players explore games' boundaries. I will look at power-gamers exploring optimising upheld constraints, as well as routers exploring optimising specific sets of constraints. Finally, I will look at players exploring games for its own sake. I will explore players looking for very specific objects such as dogs or soda machines, as well as exploring actual world facsimiles within games.

In **Chapter 5: Iterative Play**, I will look at how players iterate on previous play methods. I will start by looking at speedrunning, both to address an ever-present topic throughout my thesis, but to also make note of the parallels between the way players already discuss playing, and the language I have adopted in this thesis. Then, I will look at iterative play that complements pre-existing play methods, such as play-styles, playing in sandboxes, challenge runs as well as competitive gaming. After this, I will look at iterative play intent on disrupting pre-existing play methods. This will include playing to lose, breaking game sequences, as well as griefing in multiplayer games. Finally, I will look at iterative play which is disruptive of the play setup, where I will discuss controller and hardware choice as a way to iterate on play.

In **Chapter 6: Expressive Play**, I will look at how players express themselves by adopting specific play methods. I will first look at transformative play: play which intends to elicit profound changes in the players which engage in it. In this section, I will look at both academic examples of transformative play, as well as players actively engaging with their play's transformative potential. However, I will also look at play which is not meant to be directly transformative, but ends up being potentially transformative. I will also look at play which is intended to help players express themselves: I will first focus on play which expresses identity, including gender, nationalism, and sociocultural positionality. However, I will also look at players expressing personal narratives through adopted play methods, where I will focus on narratives of loss.

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This is of course not exhaustive as to why players play, and these chapters will also have overlaps. However, dividing play into three overarching reasons serves two purposes. Firstly, it allows us to discuss how even within one motivation, such as exploration, the constraints that players adopt can be very different. Motivations are not sufficient in describing the way players play. Secondly, it allows us to discuss how similar constraints can have different motivations for application. Simply describing the method will not give us all the answers to why players play. This thesis will overwhelmingly focus on how play methods are formed – dividing these aforementioned chapters based on play motivations allows for a more holistic approach to play.

### [1.3.3] Post-Play and Post-Thesis

Having looked at the various different ways in which players play, in these final two chapters, I will discuss how players share these play methods, and why it is important that these play methods are shared. I will also conclude the thesis.

In **Chapter 7: Recording Constraints**, I will look at how players record their play methods, both to preserve them but also so that others can access them with greater ease. I will first start by looking at the ways popular play communities record their constraints. This will include written formats, such as articles, rulebooks, and wikis. However, it also includes visual means such as photo blogs, as well as multimedia forms such as videos and save files. I will then look at how game scholars record their play methods. After briefly referring back to antecedent work to explain why I feel academic play methods should be recorded, I proceed to look at some of the ways that such play has been recorded. Finally, I look at creative output that stems from play methods, even if it is no longer directly tied to the play method itself. This includes play methods serving as secondary to entertainment, whether it is through streaming practices or through comics and machinimas. I will also very briefly look at play methods that become presets, or even their own games.

In **Chapter 8: Conclusion**, I will conclude the thesis. In **Section 1.5**, I will outline the projected thesis outcomes. In the conclusion, I will look back at these outcomes, discuss where they went well and why, and also look at future potential avenues for enquiry.

## **[1.4] Approaches and Definitions**

### **[1.4.1] General Approach**

#### **Approach to Game Studies**

In this thesis, I will largely be building on game studies' theoretical considerations. Game studies is a field predominantly concerned with looking at games from a humanities oriented perspective. The questions I will ask throughout the thesis will be overwhelmingly informed by close reading game studies texts within a humanities framework. Rather than performing a traditional literature review of everything that game studies has to offer, I will be approaching game studies research on an *ad hoc* basis.

In **Chapter 2**, I will discuss how the Oulipo's concepts and theories have already informed game studies even before this thesis. I will be dissecting most of the works within game studies that have referred to the Oulipo, and drawing out common trends between them. Meanwhile, In **Chapter 3**, when I introduce constraints in play, I will be looking at how a constraint-based approach fits within knowledge already created in game studies research. As I discuss each of the earlier listed constraints, as well as when I discuss how players execute them, I will be discussing this in reference to academic works that inform the game studies field at large. In **Chapters 4, 5, and 6**, when I give examples of the different ways in which players constrain themselves, I will be drawing references both to popular game culture, such as youtube videos, forum posts, comics and the like, but also to how game studies scholars have played, have recorded other people playing, and have discussed players' recordings of their play methods. Finally, in **Chapter 7**, when I am discussing how works are created out of play methods, I will be separating it into two types: creative works that come from popular play communities, and creative works that come from game studies scholars.

#### **Previous Research and Method**

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While I will be approaching specific games studies texts whenever necessary to supplement this thesis' argument, there are still some academic works that my thesis will be in constant communication with, either because they define my object of study, or because there is an overlap between the topics of study.

For starters, I will be generally analysing the way players play, which is hardly a new avenue for study within game studies. Academic works such as Espen Aarseth (2003), Frans Mayra (2008), Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca (2013), as well as Clara Fernandez Vara (2014) all explain very well that there are various ways to study both games, and the way players play. However, not all these research methods are appropriate. This is because, I will be more specifically looking at the specific ways in which players play, over a general way to play, which already rules out some methodological approaches, such as game formalism.

There is also breadth of research on specific play methods. For example, this includes popular play community research. For example, Mia Consalvo (2007) has researched cheating as a specific type of play, while T. L. Taylor (2006) has researched power gaming as a type of play. What these methods have in common is that their object of study includes players' recordings and discussions of their own play, which they do through various means. This includes ethnographic methods such as participant observation, and qualitative research such as interviews. My chosen method, which is also widely adopted in these works, is content analysis. I will look at players' previously recorded play sessions, along with previous descriptions and analysis of these methods, and discuss them within a larger framework. I feel this is the most appropriate method since I am casting a large net. Since, I am discussing generalisable aspects of play-based creativity, content analysis will allow me to look over even more examples.

This topic has also been discussed through academic play research, where playing in a particular way can render specific research result. For example, Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton (2006) discuss different ways academics can play to analyse games: one method is the gameplay log, where academics are encouraged to log the choices they made and why. Another method they detail is the object inventory where academics are encouraged to note down the objects they see in the game, describing their use, their



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transience, their emergent qualities and so on. Meanwhile, Jesper Van Vught and René Glas (2017) discuss different methods to play as a research method: these include instrumental play, where academics play the game the way it was intended to be played, but also going native, where academics play a game so much, it becomes akin to anthropological participant observation, where the researcher themselves is the participant. While these are all valid methods to analyse academic play, they do privilege academic play over popular play, despite there being clear differences between the two (which they note). While I will be referencing all three of these academic works in subsequent chapters, it will not be to advocate for their approach to understanding play, but to discuss their approach as another method to play – in their case, to play with an academic scope.

Finally, there will always be game design research mulling in the background. Mary Flanagan (2009) describes how for games to be critical, the play has to be adequately shaped to also be critical. Jesse Schell (2008) describes how game designers both design games but also try their best at creating an experience – a set way to play a game. Meanwhile, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) discuss how many games and many ways to play are metagames: games we design to respond to previous games. All of these works do well to describe how play is also a designed activity. Firstly, my work will follow in Boluk and LeMieux's footsteps in giving more agency to players in designing play. However, differently from all the above texts, I will isolate designing play away from designing games in an effort to create language that is specifically appropriate to play, rather than language that situates play as a part of designing games. This will be informed through the Oulipo's concept of constraints.

### **Further Approaches**

While I have explained how I situate my text within the field of game studies, there will be a further triangulation alongside game studies texts to make this thesis possible. Firstly, I will be looking at the Oulipo's work: approaching the Oulipo's work by close reading specific texts is not sufficient, since so much of the Oulipo's method was applied, rather than written down as pure theory. Instead, I will combine a close reading approach of specific texts along with a cultural-historical placement of the Oulipo's

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work, especially in relation to game research. This will be predominantly done in **Chapter 2**, with specific works revisited in subsequent chapters.

Secondly, I will also perform play-based analysis of my own play methods in **Chapter 3**. While I am setting up my constraint-based approach, I will be using my own personal play to illustrate how such an approach could be conducted. I will be especially focusing on detailing my choices in my play, my perspectives of play and my desired play outcomes.

Thirdly, I will be also drawing from popular play discussion: since I will be arguing that player create play methods, and that some play methods are relatively under researched within game studies research, I will be drawing directly from players' methods, even when these methods are placed outside of academic consideration. In **Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7**, I will be looking at the way other players play as applied to the constraint framework established in **Chapter 3** especially. These texts will be considered within an anoulipian perspective. Anoulipian texts were found 'Oulipian' texts, rather than works specifically made with/for the Oulipo. Similarly, these works will be found 'constraint' play, rather than play specifically made for constraint-based approach.

### [1.4.2] Defining Core Terms

Approaching game studies work whenever necessary is perhaps the most prudent way of organising this thesis because game studies research permeates throughout the entirety of the thesis, and informs the majority of my thesis' discussion. This said, since I am both informed by and informing game studies, there is some conceptual leg work that I need to perform before I get any further into this thesis. In this subchapter, I will briefly address some definitions that I will make use of in my thesis. I will not tackle the discourse that is currently happening on these topics. Above all else, I solely want to define them so that when I use these words in subsequent chapters, there will be little to no confusion to what I am referring to.

#### **What I mean by game**

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In game studies, the discussion around what a game is has been amongst the more hotly contested issues. Early game studies took a very formalist approach to defining games. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman had defined it as “a system in which players engage in artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (2004, p.80). Meanwhile, Jesper Juul defines it as a

“rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the out-come, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.” (2005, p. 36)

Amongst other things, both of these definitions see games as systems governed by rules. They both also have some sort of valorisation of outcome. While these definitions have their critics (Andreas Gregersen, 2005; Espen Aarseth and Gordon Calleja, 2014), there is clearly a referent object being defined.

However, on the other hand, authors such as Thomas Malaby (2007) defined games as “A game is a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes” (2007, p. 96). Meanwhile, Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä (2005) stated that “If we want to understand what a game is, we need to understand what happens in the act of playing” (2005, p. 16). In this subset of definitions, games are no longer systems, but something that players perform.

Aarseth and Calleja (2015) note that this ambiguity lies as two different things are being discussed. On the one hand, there is a “composite entertainment product”, which they refer to as game as object. On the other hand, there is a “socially negotiated activity such objects can support,” which they refer to as game as process (2015, p. 2). Juul, as well as Salen and Zimmerman combine these two aspects of games together in an amalgamated definition. Meanwhile, Malaby, as well as Ermi and Mäyrä describe games’ process, while perhaps not giving enough heed to the specific objects which support these processes’ contrived contingency.

Taylor (2009) also notes this issue. She argues that early games research was divided into different camps each defining games on their own terms. One approach focused on the “rules, mechanics, and the deep structure” (2009, p. 330), as I have shown in Salen

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and Zimmerman as well as Juul's work. Another approach focused on games as social practices, where she also cites Malaby's work along with many other authors. She cites a third approach that saw games as "narrative structures, story worlds to be inhabited and explored" (2009, p. 331). She proposes that instead of trying to come up with a game definition that incorporates all these aspects, as well as potential forthcoming angles into one cohesive whole, it would be better to see games as an assemblage: a framework which amalgamate actors, systems, materials, narratives, cultural expectations and many other things into a single lived object.

When I discuss games, I will be taking a similar approach. Firstly, I will be approaching games as a lived object: something that only comes to be when players bring them to life. I will not be discussing games as systems divorced from actors, as objects divorced from players. Secondly, I will also view games as an assemblage defined by its interrelations. I'll specifically be focusing on the interrelation between players, material, encoding, convention, as well as play and gaming cultures. I will make this relationship between actors clearer in **Subchapter 3.1**, as I define constraints and how they relate players and a second aspect within the game's assemblage.

Of course, game studies researchers use the word 'game' particularly often. When I am quoting or paraphrasing other researchers, I will maintain their usage of game without delving into whether their definition completely fits my own. Additionally, there will also be a few situations, where the word 'game' is being used outside of the critical scope of game studies research. This includes when the Oulipo use it, as well as within phrases such as 'game development', 'game design', and 'game franchises'. Hopefully, these instances will be clearly delineated.

### **What I mean by play**

Playfulness exists outside of games. As we shall see in **Chapter 2**, the Oulipo often talked about playing when referring to their literary experiments. In this vein, Aarseth (1997) referred to the Oulipo's literary experiments as cybertexts – texts which require non-trivial input in order to be traversed, a term which also happens to include digital games.

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This relationship between non-trivial input and playfulness is further expounded in Aarseth and Calleja (2015)'s cybermedia model. There is an explicit association between play and the *game as process*. However, this play could equally belong to any cybermedia as process. For example, I could play through Photoshop's layering system. This thesis will only focus on play performed in games. While players can adopt lusory perspectives within Photoshop, I will not be analysing any play performed predominantly in Photoshop. I will be focusing on cybermedia predominantly used for lusory purposes.

Additionally, this thesis will only focus on lusory effort. While arguing for a universal definition of games, Bernard Suits came up with the lusory attitude. He defines this as a state "where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity." (1978, p. 55). At the risk of sounding tautological, lusory effort is effort performed specifically so we can play. Olli Tapio Leino expands the lusory attitude, and helps sum up our concept of play, through the gameplay condition where he states that the "materiality [...] imposes on me a freedom of choice of which I am responsible in my actions" (2010, p. 134). When we play, lusory effort is the combination of accepting the limits placed on us by the game we choose, while also being freely responsible for the constraints I set.

When I use the term **play**, I will be referring to this non-trivial lusory effort. In this vein, players are the people who perform this non-trivial lusory effort. Equally, a play session is any contiguous event where players perform non-trivial lusory effort. As with games, I will maintain other scholars' usage of play when I am quoting or paraphrasing them. There will also be specific situations where the word play is used in non-scholarly contexts, such as when the Oulipo use it (sometimes). Later on, I will also define the term play method as the way in which players perform non-trivial lusory effort. However, this will be tied with my discussion on constraints in **Subchapter 3.1**, so I will return to it in that instance.

#### **[1.4.4] Further Understandings**

In an interdisciplinary field such as game studies, cross-pollination and perhaps even cross-contamination from other fields is inevitable. Whenever I refer to other fields of study, I will make explicit mention of where these theories come from and how they can inform the thesis. This said, I will not be attempting to contribute to other fields directly, although there will hopefully be some knowledge to be drawn for even scholars from other fields. The following short paragraphs are disclaimers for any recurring knowledge production throughout this thesis, which I might fail to adequately place within a different practice.

Firstly, this thesis obviously includes the Oulipo's theories and works which will feature throughout the thesis. **Chapter 2** features the Oulipo most prominently, as I shall briefly discuss their origin, their forays into the digital, as well as their forays into games. However, they will also be haunting the rest of the thesis through their writing on constraints, on play, on labyrinths, on puzzles, on works, as well as on the infraordinary.

There will also be direct references to philosophy. On the one hand, I will make brief references to continental philosophy through authors such as Jean Paul Sartre, whose writing will inform my playing in good faith; as well as Hans-Georg Gadamer, with his writing on (and against) free play. I will also make brief references to philosophy of language, largely through Grice's analysis on conversational maxims – whenever I use the words uphold, flout, violate and maxim, his theories will be informing this writing. Additionally, there will always be echoes to Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn Mervis' cognitive linguistics work on prototype theory whenever I use the term prototype, a term which I have written about in previous works (Harrington 2017). However, I am not using this term within their theoretical placement.

#### **[1.5] Thesis Takeaways**

By the end of this thesis, I will have made the following arguments. The first three points the core arguments proposed in this thesis, while the latter two are secondary arguments that emerged from this thesis' writing process, and could be worth looking at

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in further research. I will revisit these points in **Chapter 8**, as I conclude the thesis and reflect on how successful I was in driving these points across.

- 1 The process of play necessitates adopting constraints. Players constrain themselves by playing within a particular digital materiality (material constraints), by acknowledging that this digital materiality comes packed with conventions and expectations (imperative constraints), and by further limiting themselves because they want to and because they can (potential constraints).
- 2 The language around play methods is lacking. While there is a lot of work discussing the different ways in which players play, as well as descriptions of different play methods for specific types of play (such as cheating, or playing ‘transgressively’), there is still space to create generalisable language for the methods players adopt through play, especially when these play methods span over different games. While this thesis will not solve this issue outright, it will provide much more granular language to discuss players’ relation to their play sessions.
- 3 While the process of game development and game design is a creative endeavour, it is the creative endeavour of making games, not play methods. Players are the ones responsible for creating play methods. The creative output can be, and often is, “playing by numbers”, as players follow the prototypical play method to achieve a predetermined experience. However, it is always up to the players whether to line these dots up, and how they eventually do so. It is important to acknowledge players’ creative labour behind their play. The creative output of play is not limited to creating play methods for ourselves to play. Play methods are a way of creating other creative works. At the very minimum, it can mean creating constraints for others to play. However, play methods also lead to papers and articles, videos and comics, and occasionally even come full-circle, as play situations end up leading to a new process of game development and design.

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- 4 There is a wealth of untapped knowledge that game studies can still utilise in the Oulipo's body of work, both theoretical and creative. Early game studies did well to exhaust the formalist considerations in their work, and current game studies research is doing well to analyse the participatory creative considerations. As I point out in **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3**, this thesis should slot well in the latter half. However, there is still more knowledge to be gleaned from the Oulipo, and I hope this thesis is an impetus for their reconsideration within game studies.
- 5 Certain play methods are still somewhat under-theorised, despite having a lot of theoretical knowledge to contribute to game studies research. For example, this thesis' knowledge on constraints has already been somewhat anticipated in the language the speedrunning community has adopted, as I shall note in **Chapter 5**. While research interested in speedrunning has recently increased, there is still space in game studies to consider the knowledge that speedrunning communities, as well as other play communities, produce. While I tried to give this knowledge production some space in this thesis, this thesis was not the space for it. Additionally, there are undoubtedly other communities with their own language to describe their play which I might have hardly even acknowledged.



## CHAPTER 2: OULIPO AND PLAY

The Oulipo, or in full the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (French for workshop of potential literature), are a group of experimental writers that originated in the early 1960s in France. They are mostly known for their constraint writing. Their most recent inductee to the group states that the Oulipo's work

is concerned with literature in the conditional mood, not the imperative, which is to say it does not purport to tell anyone what literature should or must be. What it does is tell anyone who cares to listen about what literature could and might be, sometimes by speculation, other times by demonstration. (Daniel Levin Becker, 2012, p. 7)

Before establishing their own literary group, the Oulipo started off as an offshoot of the school of pataphysics, itself a subgroup of surrealist inquiry that dealt with solving nonexistent metaphysical problems using imaginary solutions. The school of pataphysics boasted a large range of members, including the founders of the Oulipo: François le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, well-known Surrealists and Dadaists such as Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst, as well as the infamous Marx brothers. While the Oulipo reported their work to this informal school a year after their inception, as well as published their works within the school of pataphysics collections, they fully grew into their own by the mid seventies with their own published ontology *La Littérature Potentielle* (1973).

They were at their most prolific in the seventies and eighties. Apart from releasing the aforementioned book, they also released a second compendium known as *Atlas de Littérature Potentielle* in 1981. Moreover, the people affiliated with the Oulipo kept increasing – from the founders Queneau and Le Lionnais, they recruited authors such as Georges Perec, Italo Calvino and Harry Mathews, but they also recruited further mathematicians such as Pierre Rosenstiel, cartoonists such as Etienne Lécroart, as well as a host of translators including Ian Monk, Levin Becker, and Oskar Pastior (Levin Becker, 2012, ch. II).

The Oulipo are probably best known for their mathematical experiments on literature, such as the S+7, in which they would grab a text and substitute every word in that text with the seventh closest word in a dictionary (or any other lexical corpus). The Oulipo

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are also associated with lipograms, where a letter(s) is excluded from a text, among the most famous example being Perec's *La Disparition* (1969) which is a *lipogram on e*; as well as textual iterations, in which a singular text is repeated multiple times yet retold with new variations in its style, such as Queneau's *Exercises in Style* (2015, trans. Wright), which had 99 variations of a minor altercation on a train, and Mathews' *Singular Pleasures* (1983), which had 61 iterations on recountings of masturbation.

If there were to be one adjective that recurs consistently in describing the Oulipo, it would most likely be *playful*. In the Oulipo's most recent memoir, written by Levin Becker, the word play recurs 19 times, while game recurs 29 times. Writers interested in the Oulipo such as Warren Motte, who wrote one of the most comprehensive Oulipian compendiums in English, also wrote *Playtexts* (1995) a book about play in literature. David Bellos, who wrote the quintessential biography on Perec, also notes that Perec was also absolutely obsessed with games (1993). In **Subchapter 2.2**, I will be exploring this relationship. I will first do this by exploring the recurring idea of constraints in the Oulipo's work. Then, I will follow up by discussing how constraints tie to the playful. I will then look at how two particular authors, Perec and Calvino, see the relationship between constraints and the playful, where it differs yet still remains true to an Oulipian ethos.

The relationship between the Oulipo and game studies did not come unprompted. In **Subchapter 2.3**, I will look at what is mostly a clear historical line. It starts with the Oulipo's increasing interest in the digital, through work such as the *Oulipo et L'Informatique* section in the *Atlas de Littérature Potentielle* (1981), as well as Paul Braffort and Jacques Roubaud's forays into the ALAMO, an Oulipo offshoot interested in the digital. In turn, this led to more interest from scholars outside the Oulipo, especially within the then nascent field of digital media. As games became more and more part of this conversation, the Oulipo and games often found themselves in the same sentences.

Considering this intertwined relationship between digital literature and early games research, it is no wonder that the Oulipo have kept rearing their heads within game studies in many authors works. In **Subchapter 2.4**, I will look at these works: this includes Aarseth (1997), and Ian Bogost (2006, 2008) in the field's early days; Thomas

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Apperley (2017), as well as Boluk and LeMieux (2017) more recently; as well as many others, as we shall see throughout this chapter. However, in this subchapter, I shall note that these aforementioned references to the Oulipo within game studies, outside of their primordial vestiges, seem to be disconnected from each other, not making much cross-referencing to each other. Additionally, their use of the Oulipo seems to be limited, which I would argue is mostly due to their references' origins. In this subchapter, I will argue that there is still more game studies can make use of from the Oulipo's body of work.

### **[2.1] Oulipo on Games and Play**

Writing down every mention of games and play in the Oulipo's work would be a task and a half, as they spoke of both games and play quite often. Moreso, it would be a futile task as far as our thesis is concerned, as they used both these words very loosely. On one hand, this is related to French' linguistic particularities, where both games and play are bound to a singular lexical unit – *jeu*. However, it is also because they did not particularly care about theorising on games, but rather used “games” to explore their true interest – constraining literature.

This said, there is still material to be gleaned from their work, especially for amongst the first claims at the end of this chapter; that early game studies research's relationship to the Oulipo is not actually stemming from the Oulipo's relationship to games and play. In this subchapter, I will look at the Oulipo's writing vis-a-vis current game studies questions, rather than by taking their claims of what games and play are at heart. I will first start by looking at some preliminary texts on constraints, in which I will show the relationship between constraints and play. I will then follow this up by going through some of their theorisation on labyrinths, which will help us discuss why we use constraints in labyrinths, and thus why we play in digital spaces. These two subchapters will lead us into two parallel considerations of where the Oulipo's work might fit within studying play: Calvino's adaptations of ready-made constraints and Perec's exploratory play within unexhausted systems.

### [2.1.1] Constraints

The Oulipo's discussion about games and play is probably at its most pronounced when they're discussing constraints (*contrainte* in French). Constraints as a concept are not unique to the Oulipo. Using constraints to be better able to create works predates them, exists besides them, and succeeds them. The most recent outright definition of constraints has been given by the Oulipian member Mathews, who defined it as follows

The strict and clearly definable rule, method, procedure, or structure that generates every work that can be properly called oulipian. (Mathews, 2005, p. 131)

However, this definition clearly leaves a bit to desire, as it serves as a wide net onto which Mathews could discuss everything that the Oulipo does.

Levin Becker (2012), who wrote the Oulipo's most comprehensive English language biography, gives a much more detailed rundown in his book. He starts by providing three quotes on constraints: the first one chronologically is from Igor Stravinsky, who sees constraints as that which "frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit" (Levin Becker, 2012, p. 13), a call to authorial inspiration. This leaves a bit to be desired from an Oulipian perspective. As we shall later see, the Oulipo often served as a secular movement away from inspiration of genius. Calvino discussed this lucidly when he described the Author as "that spoiled child of ignorance" (1986, p. 16), who could only be replaced by the thoughtful writing machine, who knew how it itself worked.

In opposition to Stravinsky, the second quote comes from Paolo Sorrentino, in which he discusses constraints as the destroyers of "inspiration, and its idiot brother writer's block" (Levin Becker, 2012, p. 14). This does not necessarily fit the Oulipo either. As the French poet and Oulipian member Jacques Jouet had stated, the view of the constraint as a "pharmaceutical affirmation", "as a vitamin or a vaccination against writer's block," while not necessarily incorrect, is rather simplistic (2001, p. 4). The constraint does not create an oeuvre, but it is rather an illusion to keep us busy, which is remedied by creating the text.

Finally, at the same time is Perec's simpler quote where he stated "I set myself rules in order to be totally free" (Levin Becker, 2012, p. 13). All these quotes see constraint as something positive, but it is only Perec's which sees constraints as something not

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necessarily productive. It is within this context that the Oulipo's constraints have been discussed as playful, while the classical constraints of the sonnet have not.

Continuing off Levin Becker's work, he proceeds by discussing the evolution of constraints in the Oulipo's work. He states

First came thinking about constraint, then the actual production of texts reflecting that constraint, then the actual production of texts whose constraint is their production. (2012, p. 73)

The aforementioned constraints that Stravinsky and Sorrentino discuss both mostly fall within this second part of this quote. Constraining ourselves to write a sonnet does not involve making up the rules of a sonnet, nor does it create a situation where the constraint engulfs the text's production. The Oulipo's constraints fit in all three sections: they came up with their own combinatorial constraints such as the aforementioned S+7, lipograms and so on. They created texts which used the constraints, such as *La Disparation* using the lipogram on e. Finally, they create texts where the constraint dictates the work's existence, such as Jouet's *Poèmes de Métro* (2000), a work in which Jouet forced himself to write each line of a freeform poem every time the Parisian metro came to a stop. Another example would be Perec's infraordinary works, in which Perec very comprehensively wrote about the features of a particular square as well as his daily meals. In both these cases, the constraint didn't influence the textual output, but rather the textual output can only exist because of the constraint's creation.

Later on, Levin Becker cites the Oulipo's founding mathematician Le Lionnais who had stated that potential is not found within a text, but rather within its "procedures and protocols", that is constraints. Jacques Roubaud, another resident mathematical poet, furthers this with "Constraint is a principle, not a means." (Oulipo, p. 87) This idea was taken up much more in depth in Jouet's paper *With (and Without) Constraints* (2001, trans. Lapidus) in which he argues that the Oulipo do not "write literature under constraints," but rather "seek out usable constraints so that literature is written" (2000, p. 5). He continues by stating that the Oulipo produces tools above producing texts. Perhaps the key quote from this paper though is "The constraint is the problem; the text

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the solution” (2000, p. 5). The Oulipo’s texts happen because they want to deal with constraints.

To recap Jouet and this section, the constraint exists for and in itself, as the Oulipo are in the business of creating constraints, not texts. The constraint is productive, in that it can produce texts meant to be read, interpreted or acknowledged, but it does not have to. Constraints exist both as something conceptual, as well as something artisanal. Finally, the constraint is “ludic and therefore serious” (2001, p. 5-8). While this last quote creates a clear line back to our original topic, there are clear ports of call throughout to theories of play. I will be returning to this in throughout this chapter and the next, as I show how play in games follows a similar conceptual make-up as Jouet’s constraints. Play can be productive, in that it can produce something that others can consume, interpret or even simply acknowledge, but it does not have to. We set up our own play simply so that we can play.

### [2.1.2] Labyrinths

In the previous section, I have started showing how there is a strong correlation between constraints and play within digital games. These ideas can be further seen elaborated in the Oulipo’s writing about labyrinths, both as structures which give control over the uncontrollable as well as structures which give a liminality to the inexhaustable. Labyrinths are one of the game motifs that constantly come up within the Oulipo’s body of work, starting all the way from what is probably their most famous quote where they describe themselves as “rats who build the labyrinth from which they will try to escape.”

A good start is looking at how the labyrinth has consistently cropped up within the Oulipo’s work. One such cropping can be found in *Many Subtle Channels*. Levin Becker quoted Roubaud, who was apparently quoting one of the founders of the Oulipo, who had said the following

in the world we live in, we are beholden to all manner of terrible constraints – mental, physical, societal – with death the only way out of the labyrinth. The least we can do is mark off a little section where we get to choose the constraints we are mastered by (2012, p. 148)

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The contrast to early philosophical writing on games, such as Roger Caillois' (1961) games as societal order is striking, and while the Oulipo do not seem to have ever cited Caillois' work, it would be difficult to imagine they were not aware of this contemporary writing. On the one hand, Caillois saw play as separate, civilising, yet superfluous to that which is outside of it. Yet Roubaud's above quote seems to mark play, that is choosing constraints, as part and parcel to that which is outside, serving above all else to help us regain control. Perec seems to affirm this in a response to critics stating that his novel *La Disparition* was playful, ergo not serious and worth of critical review. He stated the following

In this sense, the suppression of the letter is [...] something constraint degree zero, after which everything becomes possible. (in Motte, 1999, p. 13)

In terms of the lipogram, but perhaps even play at large, as soon as we constrain ourselves in a decisive way, then everything merits a second look.

This contrast between the Oulipo's and Caillois' views on play has also been noted by play in literature scholars discussing the Oulipo such as Motte (1995, 2009) and Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja (2007). Motte and Bohman-Kalaja largely agree in their rejection of separateness of play. Both argue that Jacques Ehrmann's (1968) criticism of Caillois still stands – play cannot be both a civilising force within society yet having use only within itself. Both also argue that writing in a constrained and playful process can be a “transformational process” (Bohman-Kalaja, p. 26). Bohman-Kalaja extends this further by stating that Motte stops short, since his view implies that the transformation is “a decidedly material product of the text”, as she argues that readers are also part of this transformational process, which she argues through Reception Theory.

Coming back to our eponymous topic, labyrinths are such a core motif to the Oulipo that in 1992 they even inducted their own maze theorist. Rosenstiehl's contributions to the Oulipo's affair with labyrinths include an optimised route for Jouet's ultimate metro poem, a novel-essay about Ariadne's myth called *Le Labyrinthe des jours ordinaires* (2013); but also his own quote about literature and labyrinths to add to our collection. He states “I have thought of literature as an art of struggle inside a labyrinth.” (Levin Becker, p. 222) The usage here does not seem to differ too strongly from Roubaud's. However, it is interesting to see the same motif I have just discussed used in the same

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way. Rosenstiehl replaces Roubaud's "mastered by" with "struggle", but the agonistic sentiment is still there. Moreover, reading "art" in Rosenstiehl's quote in the classical sense, literature as an art here functions both as an object of readerly consumption, but also in its scope for production.

Perhaps one of the more interesting pieces concerning labyrinths is Calvino's essay *Cybernetics and Ghosts* (1986), which he released six years before he joined the Oulipo. In it, he dedicates an entire subchapter to labyrinths. He starts off by citing Enzensberger's works on labyrinths in literature as published in a then-current periodical. Enzensberger had written that "Every orientation presupposes a disorientation" (in Calvino, 1986, p. 23). Enzensberger further muses that labyrinths' fascination lies within this dichotomy. As soon as you enter a labyrinth, your first task is to get lost. However, as soon as you figure out your bearings, its power is completely lost. Enzensberger takes a rather dour turn, when he states that labyrinths in literature are not the same. Physical labyrinths are topological structures, while literature is a metaphysical structure. While the topological comes with a promise by passing through it, the metaphysical does not by virtue of it being something we cannot physically traverse.

Calvino cites his proposed solution in *t zero* (1976), his most recent novella at the time, which comes with a slightly more positive solution to this problem than Enzensberger. In the book, two characters, Faria and Dantès, are trying to escape a prison. Faria tries to take the Enzensberger way, and tries to escape an inescapable prison – each turn coming close, but never quite succeeding. Dantès instead tries to construct an inescapable prison, reasoning out two possible results: first, he builds the exact same prison they are in, in which case he knows that this prison is truly impenetrable. The second result is that he builds a prison even more impenetrable, in which case he knows that Faria's attempts are not in vain. Dantès serves as Calvino's envisaged role for the writer-reader, as they constrain themselves in different ways until the readable text becomes exhausted.

When we find ourselves in labyrinths, a structure that seems infinite, yet necessitates boundaries, we can try approaching it as it is. However, we will almost certainly find ourselves paralysed by its potential. Constraints will not help us exhaust the labyrinth;



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Exiting the labyrinth might not even be the end goal. However, constraints do help us interpret the labyrinth one edge at a time, by setting our sights on those edges. Play in games follows a similar logic: being placed in an inexhaustible game is overwhelming. We devise methods of play so that we can make sense of these digital labyrinths we have been placed in.

### **[2.1.3] Calvino's adaptations**

Luckily for us, Calvino continued this thread of thought not just through labyrinths and prisons, but also through much more precise literary theory. In the same essay, Calvino further talks about exhaustive play as a reading method. Calvino posits that the true value of literature does not lie in new writing, but rather in reading texts in different ways. He opens the essay by extolling the future possibility of a literature machine, a machine that not only recombines texts within the confines of the rules it is given, but also feels the need to break free from these shackles, producing new combinations of text and form, eventually even surpassing the need for an author. He asks himself the rhetorical question as to why he celebrates the demise of the author. He states that "Writers [...] are already writing machines", further stating that "genius or talent [...] is nothing other than finding the right road empirically, following one's nose, taking short cuts" and that if we remove the human element, what we will have is someone, or something, that knows that "the author is a machine, and will know how this machine works" (1978, p. 15-16).

Calvino follows on by exploring where the value of literature lies. He states that

literature is a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit in its own material [...] but it is a game that a certain point is invested with an unexpected meaning, a meaning that is not patent on the linguistic plane. (p 22)

The literature machine would slowly and readily, free from the shackles of author-hood, give us all these literary permutations. The takeaway from this quote is the relationship envisaged for the reader participating in this combinatorial game – the literary materiality, the text on the page – does not contain the whole meaning, but rather meaning is gathered through us reading it. While this is not a new thought within his

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contemporaries, such as Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* (1967), what Calvino nails is this process' playful nature as an exhaustive endeavour. Reading is not enough, we can add constraints to our readings to glean more than we otherwise would.

Calvino's relationship to games does not stop here. His novels are constantly adopting playful methods of writing, to varying degrees. Stefano Bartezzaghi (2017) provides a very comprehensive analysis of games in Calvino's literary works. First, he discusses Calvino and verbal paidia<sup>1</sup>, the latter word of which is taken from the earlier cited Caillois (1961). He also cites two interesting Oulipian constraints in Calvino's work, the best of which being Calvino's homage to Queneau in which vowels always follow the particular order of a, i, u, o, e. Interestingly, Bartezzaghi also reveals his lack of affection for the Oulipo, stating that Calvino's membership "did not produce very substantial textual results" (2017, p. 127). However, I suspect this stems from Bartezzaghi reducing the Oulipo's constraints to a very mathematical *ludus*, such as the S+7 examples that follow this quote – their works, including Calvino's, were much more than that as his following examples clearly show.

The next section quickly contests this characterisation. Bartezzaghi then moves onto what he terms narrative games, where instead of the micro-play present in wordplay, he instead discusses macro-play done on Calvino's works at large. For example, *Mr Palomar* (1985) was sorted into a 3x3x3 grid, with chapters numbered around this grid. The number one (on any axis) relates to phenomenological descriptions, the number two relates to culturally heavy stories, and the number three relates to speculative meditations. Chapter 1.1.1 would be the most physically grounded, while chapter 3.3.3 would be the most experimental.

Bartezzaghi also notes that Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1981) replicates Queneau's variations on theme in *Exercises in Style*. However, while Queneau started with a base material and iterated on it in 99 different ways, Calvino seems to have been varying on a plot idea. The narrator finds himself in stylistically different situations. However, the constraints in this works' writing were not limited to

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1 Verbal paidia loosely works out as wordplay, which is not a concern for this thesis. However, for the sake of comprehensiveness, this verbal paidia includes wordplay in *The Argentine Ant*, the writings and lectures Calvino gave on the Italian writers Vittorio Scialoja and Gianni Rodari, as well as Calvino's penchant for Giampaolo Dossena's anagrams.

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just retheming. Levin Becker rightfully notes that behind the novel, there is complex algorithmic work, governed by an “elaborate Eulerian matrix” (2012, p. 49).

One final example is *Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1997) wherein Calvino writes draft chapters, but then has their retelling shaped by fixed draws of a tarot deck. While he originally started with the Marseilles tarot, he eventually switched to a Visconti deck, as this suited his pre-drafted writings better, allowing the chapters to have an order dictated by the tarot’s underlying narrative.

What these works seem to often have in common is Calvino’s constraint style. He would first write snippets of text, then find a constraint to work with, be it *Mr Palomar*’s 3x3x3 grid, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*’s Eulerian matrix, or *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* Visconti tarot cards, and implement these writings into this larger calculated macro-structure. In a way, Calvino organised his readings of his own texts under a diagrammatic formula, that allowed for the next readers to encounter them under similar circumstances.

### [2.1.4] Perec’s transgressions

While Bartezzaghi’s theoretical usage of Callois’ notions is theoretically suspect, it does offer a very neat contrast between Calvino and Perec’s relationship to their self-imposed constraints. On the one hand, Calvino wrote stories, tried to make them fit a Tarot deck, saw they don’t fit, so he grabbed a different Tarot deck – he constrained himself in very loose ways, with materiality that readily shifted to his preferred playstyle. On the other hand, Perec was much more rigid in his constraints – while he did break the rules, he did so with intent and purpose.

The clearest examples of this are Perec’s writing on the infraordinary. In a previous paper (Harrington, 2018), I explain how the infraordinary is that which is not written about, or rather not read. While extraordinary events, being events out of the ordinary, pull our attention encouraging us to read them, whether first handedly (through our observation) or second handedly (through writings, or filmed footage and so on), the infraordinary lies forgotten. The weathering of the cobblestones on the pavement outside my office is left unexplored.

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Perec decided that he was to be the one to write about the infraordinary. In *An Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and the Solid Foodstuffs Ingurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy Four* (Perec, 1997, p. 244-260; hereby referred to as *An Inventory*) he listed everything he ate in 1974, sorted by foodstuff. While Calvino worked the constraints around what he wanted to say, Perec lived for the constraints in line with Jouet. The text only happened because Perec wanted the infraordinary to be read, not because he wanted to write it.

The relationship between Perec and constraints in games is made clear in the oft-cited *Life: A User's Manual* (1987). In this work, which I shall return to relatively often, Perec still abides to the penchant for detail seen in his infraordinary works, as he describes a block of Parisian flats in great detail. However, *Life: A User's Manual* is mostly well known for using the knight's tour constraint. The knight's tour is the set of moves that a knight piece in chess can take to cover every space on the chess board without repeating the same space twice. It was a constraint that the Oulipo had discussed before, but never quite put down to a text, until Perec did it in this work.

What's interesting in this work is that the stickler for rules and details is the one who breaks the rules. While a knight's tour should have 100 moves (as Perec's modified chess board is a 10 by 10 grid), the book itself has 99 chapters, missing one. In a narrative parallel, the book's protagonist Bartlebooth, never quite finishes the last puzzle he commissioned from the puzzle maker Winckler, not due to his failure as a puzzle solver, but because of his death. Perec was willing to flout constraints, but only after he fully showed that he could master them – if anything, flouting the constraint at the end showed how truly free the constraints made him.

To conclude these last two sections, Calvino and Perec are obviously not the only two members of the Oulipo, nor the only ones to make reference to play. Cataloguing every reference to play would be its own work. However, these two authors do provide two different ways to approach constraints, that still remain true to Jouet's earlier discussion. On one hand, Calvino approached constraints as a way of realising the patterns he had already noted, as a way to make cogent the world's logic. Calvino's constraints were tailor made for him and his needs. On the other hand, Perec approached constraints as a new way of cataloguing that which already exists, it is walking on stilts to imagine how

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a giant would live. Perec's constraints existed outside of his needs, he was just very good at applying them in very interesting ways.

This said, in both these authors' work, the focus still remains on the constraints themselves. The labyrinth that the Oulipo will never escape is one they built for themselves. Their works come secondary to their constraints. The Oulipo's primary relationship is above all else to constraints. They devised new ways to write, it just so happens that they sometimes use them. Researching play in an Oulipian way needs to be focused on the constraints players make for themselves, rather than the rules that they are otherwise bound by.

## [2.2] The Oulipo and the Digital

### [2.2.1] A Digital Oulipo

Considering the Oulipo's propensity for combinatorics, their spill into the digital is hardly surprising, with the earliest attempts dating all the way back to the 1960s. The French poet and Oulipian member Jacques Bens (2005) writes about how the Oulipo recruited Dmitri Starynkevitch, a then well-known computer programmer, to render *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* onto the CAB 500, an early computer. While Starynkevitch managed to do this without much issue, Queneau himself was not too pleased with the result, writing back stating "we hope that the verse choice was not left to chance" (Bens, 2005, p. 79). He had an issue with the lack of real-time user input. Queneau felt that the relation between the machine and the reader had to be simultaneous, with the reader feeding the machine inputs in order to be able to escape the machine's construction.

However, the Oulipo's interest in the digital really kicked off in the early 1980s. First off, their second major collection *Atlas de Littérature Potentielle* (French for *Atlas of Potential Literature*) was released in 1981, which found itself having a much stronger focus on the technical. Levin Becker (2012) discusses that this happened in two ways – on the one hand, "the theoretical consideration [were] undertaken much less flippantly" (2012, p. 216). On one hand, this was done through a more thorough consideration of their work: works such as Queneau's *Classification des Travaux de L'OuLiPo* (French

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for *Classification of the Oulipo's works*) (in Oulipo, 1981, p. 74-77), which classified the Oulipo's works: the columns divided the constraints by how they influenced the text: length, number, order or nature, while the rows divided their constraints by what they influenced in the work, starting from syllables, moving up to paragraphs, all the way to the text's semantics.

On the other hand, there was also a developing realisation that “many Oulipian analyses could be done much more efficiently by computer” (2012, p. 218). The Atlas had an entire section called *Oulipo et Informatique* (French for *Oulipo and Computer Sciences*) (Oulipo, 1981, p. 297-336), which had five works about the relationship between the Oulipo and the digital. This included an authorless section justifying their choice to include this section, as well as an essay by Calvino about prose and anticombinatorics.

However, the most interesting part of this section is written by Paul Fournel, one of the Oulipo's resident digital enthusiasts. He wrote the essay *Ordinateur et Écrivain* (French for *Computer and Writer*) (in Oulipo, 1981, p. 298-313), specifically the *La Création Assistée* (French for *The Assisted Creation*) section. In this section, he divides the relationship between the writer and the computer into three ways:

- 1 **the 1<sup>st</sup> type: writer → computer → work**: Fournel describes this type as one where the writer puts text into the computer, the computer follows constraints, and submits work after work, as an efficient version of Calvino's earlier mentioned literature machine.
- 2 **The 2<sup>nd</sup> type: writer → computer → work → computer → reader**: the first part of this type is the same as the above, the author makes use of a computer in order to create a text. However, Fournel follows this by explaining that the same work would then be re-inserted into a computer for the reader to be able to read it. He gives an example of Roubaud's *La Princesse Hopper* (1990), in which one of the chapters was (mildly) generated by a computer and readers / players can only solve its puzzle by reading it using the same computer.
- 3 **The 3<sup>rd</sup> type: writer → computer → reader → computer → work**: in 1981, Fournel described this type as the most distant and the most technically complicated. It is also the one he writes the most about. He uses Marcel

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Bénabou's, a then recently inducted Oulipian member, *Aphorismes Artificiels* (French for Artificial Aphorisms) as an example, where the author places fillable forms in a computer, with possible words to fill them with, and the reader goes onto the computer and fills those forms out to create a work.

While the 3<sup>rd</sup> type felt like a distant future for Fournel, current games fit the bill perhaps beyond Fournel's comprehension. Games are developed onto computers with fixed materialities, players place themselves in these games and create works through them. Starting from the next chapter, this is the relationship between players, games and their works that I will be exploring: players as creators of work.

Meanwhile, ALAMO, *Atelier de Littérature Assistée par la Mathématique et les Ordinateurs* (French for *Literature Workshop Assisted by Mathematics and Computers*), was formed at around the same time as *Atlas*' release. Following discussions between Braffort and Roubaud, they decided to establish a branch of the Oulipo that was focused on how Oulipian constraints and experiments could be aided by technological improvements. ALAMO started from known values, such as using software to create rimbaudelaire, substitution exercises where vocabulary taken from Baudelaire's work was applied to Rimbaud's poems – 1<sup>st</sup> type works in Fournel's typology. However, they had a vision for software with an implicative text-generation method. This means that their *littéraciels*<sup>2</sup> would eventually create their own work, by choosing their own constraints. The ALAMO eventually spawned many other acronymistic groups, such as PALAP, LAPAL, CLANT, SELTS, MAOTH, TALC, and LAIRE, all of which focus on realising Oulipian works using digital means. However, they have all shared the same amount of success in this implicational text-generation method; as Levin Becker generously put it, they “have yet to find total traction,” (p. 219) while Marc Lapprand playfully noted that these groups are all “les rejetons de l'ALAMO (French for *the ALAMO's rejects*)” (p. 60). This all said, both these authors note that the ALAMO, along with the *Atlas* and other Oulipian endeavours, increased the Oulipo's research contributions within digital literature and electronic literature. For example, Lapprand's (1998) book on the Oulipo notes at least two then-recent academic contributions in the

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2 French for literature programs, formed through a portmanteau of *littérature* (literature) and *logiciel* (computer program)

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French journals *TEXTE* and *Littérature*. They were pushing the envelope on technology's role in creating works.

### [2.2.2] Beyond the Oulipo: Game Research and Digital Literature

This interest in a digital Oulipo extended outside of the Oulipo itself. For example, as often happens with forays into the Oulipo's work, Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* (1985) took an early centre stage, with various authors from outside the Oulipo rendering it into a digital format. Gordon Dow (2002) provides one of the earliest examples of a digital adaptation of this work, which to this day works quite well on modern browsers using Flash. It has a playful mechanic where whenever you move your mouse over a particular line on the poem, that line changes to one of the nine other options. Bev Rowe (2012) has also created her own version, with a side by side comparison of the original French as well as Stanley Chapman's English translation. Her webpage allows the user to either see ten base sonnets, or to see a never ending slideshow of newly re-generated versions of the sonnet. To this day, she has released 5 different versions, each more functional than the last. Stanley Chapman himself seems to have also had an online version of this work. However, as of the writing of this thesis, this seems to no longer function, and now can only be found as a footnote on Dow's original page. Finally, Natalie Berkman (2017) also made her own version of Queneau's work. However, she decided to take the Oulipo's apprehension with lack of user input to task – her version generates only a single poem for the user, based on their age, location and a unique computer generated ID (which changes every time, allowing them to get more than one sonnet). She herself admits that this does not fully solve the Oulipo's issues with the computer's role in reading, but her playful approach is a welcome addition to the many versions of Queneau's poem in digital form.

Berkman did not stop at just Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*. She also created a program for Queneau's *Un Conte à Votre Façon* (2017), as well as a program that creates  $S+7$  substitutions, a constraint in which typically each noun in a work is substituted with the seventh closest noun in a dictionary or corpus. Apart from letting users choose their own path as was the case in Queneau's prototypical choose your own adventure, it also allows users to visualise the path created through a graph where each



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selected node is highlighted in green. As she notes, she was not the only person to attempt such a task; Dominique Bourguet created his own *littéraciél* as part of the A.R.T.A<sup>3</sup> project. Sadly, this digital version has been lost. On the other hand, Berkman's S+7 program, through advances in computers and Natural Language Processing, created a new version of Starynkevitch's experiments in the early sixties, with much less dissatisfaction. In her version, she used a dictionary of nouns collected from Poe's complete works to modify *The Declaration of Independence*, hoping to create a text that is at the very least amusing, at most critically engaging literature's potentiality.

This list is definitely not exhaustive, but sufficiently comprehensive to illustrate a crucial point - a lot of these aforementioned Oulipian computer generated texts have not made it to game studies researchers' arsenal, and it is clear why. These works are at best marginally ludic, and as such, do not lend themselves so easily to game studies inquiry. This said, early game studies researchers interest in the Oulipo was still deeply intertwined with turn of the century electronic literature research, wherein academics interested in the Oulipo's works were also writing about digital games, all within the scope of where they fit within this then-growing spectrum of digital interactive playful works. For example, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort's *New Media Reader* (2003) had an entire section dedicated to the Oulipo's works and some of their theoretical output, while also having a few sections dedicated to video games, all under the umbrella of one book, discussing how all these examples constitute a single conglomerate that fits under the term *New Media*.

A more pointed example is in *Hamlet and the Holodeck* (1997), where Janet Murray discusses both games and the Oulipo as examples of digital narratives: on the one hand, she discusses digital games as symbolic dramas, with her famous example discussing *Tetris* as a digital abstract reenactment of American's overtasked lives (1997, p. 142-144). On the other hand, she discusses Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* as sharing the same problems as digital narratives - delivering a non-linear experience to readers who are expecting a linear form (1997, p. 189). Similarly, she discusses Queneau's language substitution in *Un Conte à Votre Façon* and games' branching

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3 A.R.T.A stands for *Atelier de Recherches et Techniques Avancées*, French for Advanced Research and Techniques Workshop. Berkman argues this was the final group effort by the Oulipo to digitise their work.

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choices as two different sides of what Alfred Lord had described as the bard's "substitution system" (1997, p. 198). In this inceptory period, discussion about the Oulipo and digital games found itself intertwined under digital literature concerns.

These parallels between digital literature, the Oulipo and digital games even spilled onto journals, making games research' entry point to the Oulipo even more apparent. For example, Murray and Aarseth held a particularly spirited exchange on *Electronic Book Review*, an online journal, in which Aarseth argued that not all games are stories, and Murray argued that not all digital stories are games. This online journal was the place for many of these discussions which arguably worked as a proving ground for game studies. While there is much to say about this debate, this thesis' interest lies in the fact that the Oulipo's work was not used particularly comprehensively in these exchanges. Instead, it acted as either a proxy for continuing a strong digital literature tradition in the narratological camp, or serving as the structural primordial successor for the new field of digital games research in the ludological camp.

On a small side note, the American Oulipian member Mathews also often submitted to *Electronic Book Review*, submitting a total of four times. He did not take part in this online discussion.

Despite the Oulipo's role in the middle of this discussion, it still comes as no surprise that the missing play between reader and machine that caused the Oulipo to dismiss Starynkevitch's efforts in digitising *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*, Fournel's earnest hope for a digitisation that renders the reader as the creator of a final work, as well as Jouet's discussion of the Oulipo's main role as constraint creators rather than textual producers, are all somewhat lost in these early game studies discussions. These discussions were primarily focused on whether games can be analysed in the same way as other digital interactive playful works.

The interest within these early discussions was squarely on the game as an artifact: did games' unique positionality require a different method of reading, and subsequently academic critique, or were previous methods sufficient? However, there is a breadth of discussion outside of these considerations that was not happening, because game research was still at a very early stage. At the time, there was still a dearth of questions around how players play games. By the time these questions started rearing their heads

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in game studies, with authors such as Ermi and Mäyrä (2005), Consalvo (2006, 2009), and Taylor (2006, 2008) amongst others, the Oulipo's opportunity window to contribute to the discussion had been somewhat closed. In this thesis, as well as in other works that preceded it which I will discuss in the next subchapter, I will reopen this window.

### **[2.3] Oulipo in Game Studies**

I concluded the previous section by stating that there is still more to learn from the Oulipo. However, the window of opportunity where game studies scholars were both interested in the Oulipo as well as asking important questions about how players play games did not overlap. However, in recent years, these two windows seem to be regaining some overlap. In this section, I will be looking at what academic work has studied, made use of, or simply referred to the Oulipo within the large reaches of game studies.

Since the field's inception, game scholars have spoken sporadically about the Oulipo and their work. However, the Oulipo has rarely been acknowledged as the overarching method of thought underlying their research work. Rather, the work often focuses on particular members or particular works, framed only briefly as belonging to a larger group called the Oulipo, and framed even more briefly as part of a conversation informing current game studies.

This is partially due to the Oulipo not formalising their methods, their approaches, or even their thoughts under the banner of the Oulipo. Grouped up Oulipian works have largely been either collections (Mathews and Brotchie, 2005; Oulipo, 1998), or a particular member's insight into the group (Levin-Becker, 2017). However, it is also because game scholars have been using the Oulipo illustratively, rather than informatively. Games research utilising the Oulipo has often been looking back at them as preceding the current, rather than establishing research pediments.

Through the following analysis, I found three reasons that game studies scholars found to use the Oulipo's works. Firstly, throughout the entire shared history of Oulipo and game studies enquiry, game studies scholars have utilised the Oulipo to discuss rules – the evolution of this shared history developed a need for a distinction between what I

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will term presets, things that the player does before the game is played, and constraints, things that the player does as the game is played. This leads into a second concern where both presets and constraints change how a game is read: modifying a game for our subsequent play or considering the way we play a game will in turn change what we take from any individual play session. Thirdly, what we take from play does not have to solely stop as just a personal experience – the texts below indicate that they often develop into something more. We will return to these three questions in the final section to summarise how the below texts explored these questions through the Oulipo, and what I will be taking from them in this thesis.

### [2.3.1] Cybertext

Aarseth's (1997) work is amongst the earliest, and arguably most seminal works, to reference the Oulipo's work in game studies. He mostly utilises Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* (1985) as an example of a cybertext.

Before moving into how Aarseth placed Queneau's work into a longer tradition, it is necessary to briefly define what a cybertext is. Aarseth defines cybertext as having two core properties: on the one hand, cybertext works take a media-formalist approach: Aarseth states that "cybertext focuses on the mechanical organisation of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange" (1997, p. 1). On the other hand, the user's role in a cybertext is wholly integrated in the way the text works, to the point that the user's non trivial effort is necessary for the final materialisation of the text, where Aarseth states that cybertext "centres attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure" (1997, p. 1).

Aarseth uses this definition to place cybertext in conversation with traditional literature. While traditional literature has form, he states that this form is not as essential as it is amongst cybertext works. Additionally, while the reader's role is important to the way traditional literature is read, the role does not manifest itself extranoemically, in the way the final text is produced. Aarseth places Queneau's work (and other Oulipian works) squarely as cybertext fiction, with the properties in form and extranoesis that this entails.

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*Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes'* placement as cybertext accomplishes two things for Aarseth's discussion. Firstly, it untangles cybertext from the implications of *cyber* – that it must be digital. Queneau's work exists as one of the closest precursors to digital games that exists within analog textual production, making it a valuable asset. He returns back to Queneau a number of times as it's a great non-digital pedagogical example of many terms and neologisms he would later discuss, such as non-linearity, ergodicity, textons and scriptons, and so on. This also ties him to other game studies authors who discuss Queneau's work as a precursor to game studies. We will mention these works briefly later on in this chapter.

Secondly, and more pertinently, it opens up the discussion of the Oulipo and game user as creators beyond reader-response theory. While defining cybertext, Aarseth states that "the user of cybertext also performs in an extranoematic sense" (1997, p. 1), a well substantiated but under-explored claim. This means that cybertext happens both noetically, that is in the user's thoughts, but also extranoetically, which means outside of the user's thoughts: in this case, it has a material output. He uses cybertext's extranoesis to argue for ergodicity: the idea that the user's non-trivial actions have an active effect on the text. While reading traditional literature's effect is largely immaterial, in that it stays in the head, each action within a cybertext changes the cybertext's make in some way.

Aarseth uses Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes'* as an example of this: users grab the book, and their choice of each verse from the ten per sonnet verse provided changes how the final poem is read. The user's noetic reading takes an extranoetic form through verse page flipping.

However, he does not really discuss what happens afterwards. What of the poem created? It is there, it can be read and reread, it is no longer cybertextual, and it exists both as a product of the textual labour performed on the cybertext, but also as its own individual textual output. Games share the same issue – players are required to traverse them as cybertexts, but there is also the post-play text that can be read independently of cybertextual considerations. The player's role is not only the non-trivial effort required to substantiate the work, but also producer of specific substantiations.

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In the following chapters, I will argue that text's extransothesis is what sets Oulipian theory, such as Calvino's *Cybernetics and Ghosts* (1986) and Perec's *Species of Spaces* (1997a) apart from the reader-response theory of the time (Eco, 1994; Iser, 1974). However, I will further argue that Oulipian theory can further contribute to game studies through the post-ergodic text material created – through Fournel's 3<sup>rd</sup> type. The Oulipo's ergodicity is simultaneously playing with structures as well as creative method. It subverts literature's monostability while reaching back towards it. Aarseth's work contributed an important first push, yet there is still more to be gained.

Aarseth's work has shaped other scholar's usage of the Oulipo. Bogost (2006) also similarly identifies *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*' strategic placement in Aarseth works. He states that Aarseth is careful to include Queneau's work as a functional precursor to digital games. However, he criticises Aarseth's lack of focus on the material, historical or aesthetic continuation in the tradition from the non-ludic to the ludic, arguing it is a core problem in early game studies. He states that Aarseth's work "privileges the material at the cost of the expressive" (p. 53). While my discussion above leans towards this viewpoint, it is not solely in the same argumentative vein as Bogost's comparative tradition. Bogost finds use for Aarseth's comparison between configurative texts (such as the Oulipo) and games, but argues that this comparison can (and should) be further extended to historical and aesthetic traditions. I add that while Aarseth's comparison between the Oulipo and games is useful, Oulipian theory is also valuable for the post-ergodic textual production – what exists after the player plays.

### **[2.3.2] The Rhetoric of Video Games**

As far as the Oulipo and game studies connection is concerned, Bogost does not stop at just criticising Aarseth. He himself also referenced the Oulipo in his work. In 2008, Bogost presented another seminal game studies paper that utilises the Oulipo's work. However, unlike most of our other examples, Bogost utilises their methods as a group, rather than using individual examples to illustrate a specific point. Bogost focuses on the Oulipo's most common academic entry point; that they used constraints heavily in their writing to stimulate creativity, what he calls *possibility spaces*. He uses this as a connecting thread between child's play, literary form, and eventually digital games.

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Bogost's paper overall deals with procedural rhetoric. As the name implies, this term denotes that the step by step procedure of executing a game's rules is in itself a form of argumentation; by limiting, encouraging or outright enforcing specific types of possibility spaces within games, you can deliver rhetorics that stand as the core argumentative tools within games, above other tools such as visuals, music, theme and so on. He uses *Animal Crossing* (2001) as an example: the game's procedural rhetoric emphasises a capitalist subsistence model; you earn money to pay off debt, so you can buy new things with debt that you need to pay off. Despite the fact that game's visuals and themes betrays this underlying rhetoric, players still lean into the procedural rhetoric of capitalist consumption.

Bogost divides his introduction into three sections: play, procedure, and rhetoric. The Oulipo feature in the first section. After denouncing the general reductionism of play as non-productive and antithetical to work, Bogost refers to Zimmerman's definition of play as the "free space of movement within a more rigid structure" (2004). He explains that this possibility space is restricted by constraints of all kinds, further expanding this by explaining that this "more rigid structure" is enforced by a set of rules. He later uses this definition to explain how digital game rules take form as procedure and the way they influence the possibility space creates a particular rhetoric.

The Oulipo feature in his digital game precedents to rules shaping possibility spaces. According to Bogost, the rules in child's play shape possibility spaces through the physical properties of the playground, the equipment, the time allowed and the children's quality and quantity. The rules in traditional literature shape themselves through "rules of composition, form and genre". He argues that the rules in the Oulipo follow traditional literature in form, but do not follow in development – while literary canon developed over time guided by aesthetics and cultural practices, the Oulipo developed from possibility spaces aimed at creating new forms of expression. Finally, he continues by stating that the rules in digital games shape possibility spaces by exhibiting the processes inscribed in the system, and the "gestures, experiences and interactions a game's rules allow" (2008, p. 121).

The clearest issue with Bogost's conception of play is his demarcation of what rules are. Starting with child's play as an example, he states that the possibility space is constantly

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being renegotiated through the flux of rules such as “Now you be the monster!” (p. 121). However, the playground as a physical space is never changed by children, is not determined by children, and yet still demarcates the possibility space. There is a clear difference between player enforced rules, such as who the monster is, and pre-player rules, such as the playground they are in. Discussing both these concepts using the word “rules”, is at best, reductionist. Even Queneau himself had realised this in his aforementioned delineating table (Queneau, 1981, p. 74-77): the rows divided constraints on the text (such as lipograms on e), from constraints on semantics (such as making a text read like a crime novel) – being bound by a language constraint is different than choosing a literary style.

This distinction is not as important when discussing procedural rhetoric. Bogost’s procedurality is coming from Murray’s (1997) procedure, which she specifies as computer’s “defining ability to execute a series of rules” (1997, p. 71). Procedure is then clearly a pre-player rule: computers are executing the rules in a sequence – players simply have response spaces within these sequences. However, for our purpose, this is at best reductionist to the Oulipo’s possibility space within game studies – the ever returning self-defining quote of Oulipians as “rats who build the labyrinth from which they will try to escape” shows that the Oulipo were fully in control of the constraints they chose. Works such as Calvino’s *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973) or Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual* (1978) show this quite well: they chose their constraints (following a Marseille tarot, knight’s tour subsequently), then subsequently broke those rules (switching to a Visconti tarot, leaving out the last move in the tour). Earlier on, I also spoke about the Oulipo’s reaction to losing this control in Starynkevitch’s computer program. It is for this reason that I feel it is much more productive to discuss the Oulipo as player-based constraints: if the monster in the playground cannot change, then there is something missing from an Oulipian approach.

### **[2.3.3] Georges Perec: A Player’s Manual**

Early game studies texts’ usage of the Oulipo already started to shine a light on the questions I posed in the beginning of this subchapter. Bogost tries to tackle the first question, by questioning what rules are, with the playground example. Aarseth leads us



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to the third question by talking about digital games' potential for extraoematic output. However, after these early game studies authors, it would only be until the 2010s that game studies scholars gave the Oulipo the second look that they deserved, making the questions raised through the Oulipo's intervention more evident.

Apperley (2017) wrote about Perec's relationship with playfulness and the ludic, where he immediately brings to the fore an important point present in Perec's (and I would argue generally in the Oulipo's) works at large. Through the common discussion of constraint as a playful practice, he argues that Perec's work allows game studies scholars to look at the "contentious role [between] digital coded algorithm [and] player agency" (p. 190).

Apperley follows this by making considerable ground in discussing Perec's relationship to games, play, and algorithms, through a game studies focused reading of Perec's works, with *Life: A User's Manual* at the forefront. However, he returns to the aforementioned discussion by introducing discrepancies in game studies' scholarship in the relationship between play and games. On one hand, he cites Alexander Galloway (2006) to show that the player's actions are limited to the algorithm that pre-exists within the game. Games can only understand the player's input mathematically. On the other hand, he cites Malaby (2007) to show that play generates new meaning within the digital algorithm, altering the way games are played – kids can't change the playground that they are playing on.

Apperley returns to this later on when he compares Winckler's puzzle-making artistry to the act of "conceptualising digital games". He states that there is a similarity between the necessity of integrating "audio, narrative and visual information" from a digital game and making cohesive the puzzle piece form, picture fragment and picture as a whole in a puzzle. He argues that this gives credence to Galloway's claim that the game's structure as a whole, whether it is a jigsaw puzzle or a digital game, shapes the experience that stems from it. Apperley continues to state that that puzzles, and Perec at large in his novel, do not try to hide the structure's role in shaping the experience – he concisely states that "process and product are not necessarily tidily discreet" (p. 197).

On the other hand, Apperley explains that Perec defeats this experiential determinism through realising the *mistake*, the inevitably changing circumstances in his work.

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Apperley shows this through analogising Winckler (the puzzle maker) and Bartlebooth (the puzzle solver) in *Life A User's Manual* with the game maker and the game player. In the novel, Winckler wins his small competition with Bartlebooth because the latter approached puzzles as something to be solved mathematically, something Bartlebooth excelled at. However, Bartlebooth's death, Bartlebooth's loss of sight, and Winckler's increasing absurdity in his puzzle making made this mathematical approach eventually impossible.

Similarly, Apperley argues (and I fully agree) that players making their own practices in games is a remedy to games' algorithmic leanings. By making "mistakes" in the way they play, by approaching games as not something to be solved, but something to be played, players create alternate readings and experiences. Bartlebooth and Winckler provide a welcome addition to the aforementioned issue present in Bogost's explanation of rules, play and the Oulipo.

### [2.3.4] Unraveling Braid

Before we look at other more recent contemporary works discussing the Oulipo, Luke Arnott had also released a paper that made reference to Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, as well as Galloway's pre-encoded algorithm, yet went on to draw different conclusions than Apperley did.

Arnott (2012) makes two separate arguments utilising the Oulipo in his paper. Arnott's first contribution in his paper introduces storytelling in the *imperative mood*. Situating his paper in game studies' post-narratological fold, Arnott argues for an interpretative turn towards understanding puzzle games and their narratives. Drawing from *Braid's* (2008a) game designer Jonathan Blow (2008b) and his presentation on puzzles in his game, Arnott argues that there is often a divide between a game's "story meaning" and its "dynamical meaning": a game might be relaying a particular narrative, yet the player's digital existence belies this narrative. Considering Blow's example of *Bioshock* (2007), there is a clear connection between Arnott's story / dynamical meaning tension and Clint Hocking (2007)'s ludonarrative dissonance, a term Hocking used to argue that *Bioshock's* self-interest centred gameplay opposed the selfless narrative it advocated

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for. Arnott's larger contribution is not this debate's reintroduction, but rather his proposal in how to solve story / dynamical meaning discrepancy. He suggested looking at puzzle literature, mainly Perec's *Life A User's Manual*, to show that this is not an issue that is inherently new to games.

Arnott states

[*Life A User's Manual*] is perfectly intelligible as a conventional narrative; however, it derives far deeper significance from the role of puzzles both within the diegetic world of *Life* and in the creation of the text itself, especially the authorial position Perec assumes as a puzzle-maker (2012, p. 434)

He then follows this by stating that the rhetoric Blow adopts in *Braid* and the rhetoric Perec adopts in *Life A User's Manual* are similar. Both works communicate meaning both on a diegetic level, through the textual elements (such as Tim's story in *Braid*; the occupants of Rue Simon-Crubellier in *Life A User's Manual*), as well as extra-diegetically, through the meta-textual (such as the extra-diegetic pictographs in *Braid* and the chapter arrangement around the knight's tour in *Life A User's Manual*). He extends this to not just puzzle games, but games at large – extra-diegetic elements inform how we read the diegetic text.

He astutely concludes the first argument by stating that puzzle literature, puzzle games and games at large are set apart from non-puzzle literature as they communicate meaning not only through the *indicative mood*, by presenting text to be interpreted, but also through the *imperative mood*, by presenting a necessary method to interpret these texts. He states that literature does have some semblance of *imperative mood* through literary conventions (reading left to right, chapter headings and page numbers as extra-diegetic); but puzzle literature is different as its readers know they have to learn the new rules as they go through the text to figure it out.

Arnott equally states that playing a game also requires learning its rules. While early games had written manuals, modern games are more likely to have tutorials, due to their increasing complexity. Yet *Braid* mostly belonged to the former: it has pictograms which are easily accessible through the UI, a time-rewind mechanic which is learnt 'naturally' and maintains previously established puzzle game conventions to steady this learning process.

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Arnott then moves to Perec's preamble, where Perec had discussed the art of jigsaw puzzles. Perec had stated the following.

Despite appearances, puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle-maker has made before; every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every combination he tries, and tries a second time, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated, and decided by the other. (Arnott, 2012, p. 435)

Through this, Arnott argues for designer determinacy. He states that games are not about player agency, but are rather predetermined by the designer's constructions, especially puzzle games. He continues that games can never achieve real life's freedom as the player's decisions are trumped by designer's authorship.

This second argument draws back to Apperley's understanding of Galloway, an author that Arnott also cites, yet I feel Apperley tackles with greater tact. Arnott uses Galloway's work to state that digital games are enacted by players, only insofar as to get where the designer intended them to. A digital game is "not a solitary game", as players are meant to defeat the designer by playing through the motions that the designer has made before. However, by introducing Malaby into the conversation, Apperley makes a very important distinction between the pre-programmed and the played.

In the previous section, Apperley introduced the idea of the *mistake*: that even the determined, or in digital games' situation their pre-encoded material, has the potential to be playful through the insertion of non-determined actions or actants, such as players, to redetermine them. Apperley's *mistake* explains how Perec could find joy in the infraordinary, such as *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010) and *An Inventory* (1997b). Apperley's *mistake* allows the Oulipo to construct the labyrinths from which they aim to escape. Apperley's *mistake* reconciles the ill-fitting Alison James (2009) citation in Arnott's work; that Perec's writing was a constant balance "between two extremes: the excessively aleatory and the excessively determined." (p. 436).

Games are only determined after their final aleatory element, the player, is resolved. Perec played by heavily restricting himself. He came up with heavily deterministic constraints, and then made their output aleatory by inserting the one aleatory system that

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the deterministic constraints would always allow – he, himself. Earlier on, I discussed Arnott’s *imperative mood*, rules (in puzzle literature) and encoding (in games) that users have to stick to. Arnott’s argument for the *imperative mood* is a very worthwhile addition for a completely different reason. In the linguistic imperative mood, if I say “jump!”, you do not have to. You can always say “how high”, “no”, or “hump, stump, lump, rump, trump”. Imperative constraints are still, nevertheless, just heavily suggested constraints. Being able to flout linguistic notions is an incredibly important part of language. Submitting to imperative constraints is a self-imposed constraint intended to reduce our presence’s aleatoricism from the equation.

For comprehensiveness’ sake, Arnott’s Oulipian citations do not end here. During his textual reading of *Braid*, Arnott cites Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1974), specifically the city of Tamara. Tamara was a city in which everything is semiotically once removed. Buildings’ functions are not denoted; but are rather connoted by the building’s form and position. Vendor displays do not have value in themselves, but are only valuable because of the things they signify. Arnott links this to games’ semiotic renegotiation; where keys are valuable not because they open doors, but because they signify that there is a door to be opened. Arnott uses Calvino to further support his claim for the *imperative mood* in design.

Arnott’s work has also shaped other scholars’ understanding of the Oulipo. Dušan Stamenković and Milan Jačević (2015) see Arnott’s understanding of Perec as building on proceduralist discourse: understanding that narrative, mechanics, and objects all work together to deliver the final game discourse delivered through procedure. Meanwhile, Kristine Levan and Steven Downing (2016) propagate the claim that “player decisions are confined only to the parameters set by the game developer” (2016, p. 54) quoting Perec’s “puzzling as a non-solitary game” as their reference. Levan and Downing’s work is perhaps the more interesting of the two as it uses Perec’s quote to discuss games about escaping prisons, with prisons and labyrinths being a recurring motif in Oulipian literature, such as in Calvino’s *t-zero* as we earlier noted. However, they did not draw this recurring motif in their writing.

### [2.3.5] Meta-Gaming

Boluk and LeMieux's (2017) *Meta-gaming* is a work that I will return to several times over the course of this thesis. It is not only game studies' most recent allusion to the Oulipo, but also a great case for the modern knowledge production that can stem from the Oulipo. It is also a good book to end this subchapter's on as it indirectly addresses both the early Oulipo and game studies concerns we have seen in Aarseth's work, as well as the more contemporary arguments that seen in Apperley's work. While it is not a work about the Oulipo, they do refer to two different Oulipian works in their book, as well as devote an eponymic chapter to their work.

Boluk and LeMieux's first allusion to Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* comes in this eponymic fourth chapter *Hundred Thousand Billion Fingers*. They introduce Queneau's work in a similar vein to earlier games research such as Aarseth (2003) and Bogost (2007) above; as a precursor to digital media (and digital game) production strategies. Unlike Aarseth's cybertext, they address it as an aesthetic strategy, rather than a form strategy. However, it is unlikely that this is an active choice to enter the earlier games research conversation through this discursive lens, as they make no active reference to it.

That said, Boluk and Lemieux continue by reiterating several of Aarseth's points about cybertext in their comparison of digital games and Queneau's work. They lead by discussing both digital games and *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* as being impossibly large to liminally read. Continuing in line with Aarseth, they state that *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* foregrounds this impossibility of complete access. However, while Aarseth states this is a feature of cybertext at large, Boluk and Lemieux state that games don't share this feature – instead they isolate a single perspective.

They use *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) as an example, where the incredibly vast probability space for the game is backgrounded by Mario's perspective. As you make the choice to move forward, that which is behind you is no longer accessible or worth considering. While their example of *Super Mario Bros.* does lean towards this isolation, I would argue that this is moreso a feature of *Super Mario Bros.* intentionally constricted (or constricting) design space rather than a feature of games at large. Games foregrounding

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the impossibility of complete access is never as prominent as while making a playable character in *Skyrim* (2011) or even when drafting a specific card in *Artifact* (2019).

They use this argument to enter a discussion about serialising a game's output; around historicising what came before. While I disagree with their association between serialisation and foregrounding complete access, I would definitely agree that there is value in historicising specific play sessions. Boluk and LeMieux argue that digital games are ahistorical: the second time I play *Level 1-1* in *Super Mario Bros.*, there is no causal historical link to the first – whether I win or lose, whether I follow the implicitly designed constraints or whether I stand still until the timer runs out; *Super Mario Bros.*' second playthrough is undiscerning of the first. Even save states are ahistorical; loading a saved game state generally generates a new play sequence based on pre-established parameters – when I save my progress in *Skyrim* (2011), it is not remembering my previous keystrokes or paths, but rather specific values: my position in the game-world, my character level and skill levels, whether I have been to specific place markers, and so on and so forth. Boluk and Lemieux make an astute comparison to Queneau's work, saying that it is equally fatalistic. As games do not save or generate new histories, neither does *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* with its prewritten strings attached in predetermined orders. Boluk and Lemieux argue that historicity is not created *inside* the game, but rather *around* the game. Examples ranging from arcade machines' scoring systems all the way to Steam achievements create this sense of historicity that games lack.

There are clear port-of-calls to what Apperley was discussing earlier. The conflict waged between Winckler and Bartlebooth, between Malaby and Galloway, is once again found here between the within-game and around-game. While there is no clear notable difference between Galloway's predeterminism and Boluk and LeMieux's fatalism, there is definitely a key distinction between Apperley's *mistake* and Boluk and LeMieux's around-game. Apperley discusses the *mistake* as something inherent to the game itself: he describes invariably changing circumstances tied to people (such as Bartlebooth dying) as intrinsic to the game as played. Boluk and LeMieux see similar value in what they discuss as the *around-game*, but they do not see it as something necessarily intrinsic to games. Instead, they discuss it as “a culture of play and unique metagaming practices [that] can form around [...] *Super Mario Bros*” (2017, ch. 4).

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This distinction rears itself very presently in *99 Exercises in Play* (2017b): an around-game to *Super Mario Bros* that they created. Before we move any further, it is important to note that the name is clearly allusory to a second Oulipian work: Queneau's *Exercises in Style* (2015), in which Queneau recreates the same story in ninety-nine different styles; ranging from literary genre changes (such as a detective novel) to structural form changes (turning it into a monovocalic story). Similarly, *99 Exercises in Play* has different styles for *Level 1-1*, ranging from an incredibly slowed down *Super Mario Bros.* play session to a sixteen screen *Level 1-1* simultaneous play session, with Mario starting at different points of the level. Moving away from Queneau, but harping back to their association between seriality and foregrounding the impossibility of complete access, every time you play any of the different level styles, Mario's path is recorded by a dotted white line, which remain present even when you switch to a new level style.

While *99 Exercises in Play* sparks a very important discussion, the relationship between liminality and *around-games* still remains somewhat problematic. The changing phenomenological perspectives; from super slow Mario to super fast Mario, are bound by a single historicization; the ever present white dotted line. In this sense, there is a call towards the invariably changing circumstances I discussed in Apperley's work. However, each of these phenomenological perspectives are still pre-encoded, fatalistically bound to each style iteration.

Turning a puzzle piece round in my hand changes how its phenomenologically perceived without changing the puzzle's pre-encoding; it is still the same puzzle piece. Cutting a puzzle picture in a different way changes this puzzle's pre-encoding; it is no longer the same puzzle piece. In the same vein, speedrunning *Super Mario Bros* still leaves us with *Super Mario Bros*; the pre-encoding is still fatalistic. However, enforcing *Super Mario Bros* in double-speed is no longer *Super Mario Bros*; Boluk and LeMieux changed the pre-encoding to force an interesting fresh perspective. Historicising half-speed and quarter-speed under the same dotted white line ignores this shift in the pre-encoded. An Oulipian remedy to this fatalism would be recording individual play sessions, acknowledging the historicity behind our play, acknowledging the communal *around-game* of people playing with the same constraints, while also creating new creative works.



### **[2.3.6] Other work**

Before, I move into the conclusion, it is important to note once more that this subchapter has not delved into every work that falls under the realm of the Oulipo and games. There is still a large amount of work that I will not delve into as it will not contribute to this thesis, despite being in some capacity about both the Oulipo and games.

For starters, there is a subset of works dealing with games and play's role within Oulipian works. This includes works such as the earlier cited Motte (1995), and James (2009), along with other authors such as David Gascoigne (2009), Peter Consenstein (2002), all of which deal with the Oulipo perhaps even more comprehensively than any of the authors in the previous section. There are also works which deal with specific authors within the Oulipo and their relationship to games, such as Tommasina Gabriele (1994), and Bartezzaghi (2007) on Calvino's relationship with games, as well as Bohman-Kalaja (2007), and Bellos (1993) on Perec.

These works all help better our understanding of how the Oulipo utilise games to further the literary and aesthetic devices in their work, as well as to show the underlying current of play and constraints in literature. I will sporadically make references to these works in further chapters as they poignantly point at these aspects better than I can. However, for a thesis aiming to contribute to game studies, their theorisation of games is often heavily dated. For example, I have already looked at Motte (1995) and Bohman-Kalaja's (2007) work earlier on. While their claims on games are not necessarily incorrect, they are not au fait with current game studies conversation, instead referring back to the works of authors such as Caillois and Ehrmann.

There are also narrative adventure game specific writings which discuss the Oulipo which I also have not included, as the larger aim was to create a historic timeline of advancements in this specific genre, rather than discussing how, whether and why these help us understand game studies better. While Aarseth's aforementioned work fits quite well here too, there are also other works present including Montfort (2005) and

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Jonathan Lessard (2013) who have discussed the Oulipo's positioning in the narrative adventure game genre timeline.

There are also authors such as Murray (1995) and Montfort (2003) who make reference to the Oulipo in relation to games, which I cited in the previous subchapter. As our earlier discussion showed, they are clearly still an invaluable part of early games research. However, I will not be making further references to these works in my thesis, simply because their question of enquiry does not align with mine.

Finally, there is also McKenzie Wark (2007), who takes a different angle, discussing the Oulipo, more specifically Perec, in terms of heterotopic game spaces. She states that in *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (1975), Perec conceives of a marginalised heterotopic space – she finds this interesting as while contemporary artists resisted the marginality that heterotopic spaces, the Oulipo revelled in it, as it allowed them to set their own rules of play. Despite writing some very interesting scholarship within game studies, her mentions of the Oulipo were in this instance placed within art history rather than games research.

### **[2.3.7] Unspoken Conversation**

In the above sections, I have shown three main arguments presenting and representing themselves in these works. Firstly, a question that has been somewhat present in every work presented above is whether there is a distinction between what I termed presets and constraints: that which is established before the play session and that which players bring about during the play session. Bogost discusses both presets and constraints together under *rules*, and Arnott argues strongly for presets through the designer determinacy of the pre-encoded. Apperley gives the best way out of this through his discussion of the *mistake* and *invariably changing circumstances* as a remedy to games' algorithmic nature, although Boluk and LeMieux also offered an alternate route out through *within-games* and *around-games*.

Secondly, this first question invariably lead to a discussion on how presets and constraints change how texts are read. Arnott's *imperative mood* sees presets as influencing the bulk of the reading. Bogost's *procedural rhetoric* also leans this way,

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but leaves space open for other textual elements, as well as players' constraints. Similarly, Boluk and LeMieux's around-game *99 Exercises in Play* put the relationship between presets and constraints under test, by underlining how even a small preset numerical change can create a perceptual gulf in the player experience, while also showing how players' constraints are worth historicising through the white line leaving each individual play session foregrounded.

Finally, there is also a budding discussion of play as a method of textual output. Aarseth leads this discussion when he states that "the user of cybertext also performs in an extranoematic sense", although he only leads it towards a post-reader response conclusion, rather than as a valid creative method. However, Boluk and LeMieux speak about this for chapters on end in their work, discussing alternate cultures of play, fan creations, outside-game achievement structures and so on. In subsequent chapters, I will be exploring how play sessions lead to these communities as well as works.

I have shown that the Oulipo has worked as an entry point, as a supporting point, or even as a core focus to illustrate these three arguments listed above. While the Oulipo was not often the main focus, or sometimes even acknowledged as a theoretical debt owed, the fact that these specific topics kept rearing their heads in the same conversation as the Oulipo shows that there is merit in studying the Oulipo further. In this chapter, I have briefly summarised the conversation between the Oulipo and game studies that has been happening, although rarely actively acknowledged. In the next chapter, I will add my contribution to this conversation, using further game studies scholarship as well as the theoretical knowledge I've built in the rest of this chapter.

### **[2.4] Recapping the Oulipo**

After a brief introduction to the theoretical starting point, I analysed how the Oulipo found itself inside games research's corpus. I started by analysing the Oulipo's discussion about constraints, finding that many of the Oulipo's members discuss constraints not as something exhausted by a text, but as a personal limitation that could lead to a text, but does not have to. They see themselves as producers of methods, over producers of work. I showed how the motif of labyrinths extended this idea of constraint

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as a personal method, and analysed two Oulipian's authors output to explore how they constrain themselves in different ways.

I then looked at how the Oulipo's work has permeated into digital research. I first looked at the Oulipo's interventions into the digital, especially in the early 80s with *Atlas* section on informatique, as well as Braffort and Bénabou's ALAMO (and the countless permutations). In turn, these made it into electronic literature and eventually into game studies, feeding into early game research scholarship. However, this digital thread of Oulipian works has always been primarily focused on digital explorations of literature, not on the role of constraints. This means that game studies' research, up until recently, has been particularly lacking in its exploration of the earlier mentioned productive elements.

This created two distinct movements within game studies writing about the Oulipo. On the one hand, there were early game researchers, including both those approaching it from a digital literature perspective, such as Murray and Montfort, as well as those more solidly in the games research tradition, such as Aarseth and Bogost. These analysed the side of the Oulipo that deals with computability, with continuing a digital literary tradition, as well as textual analysis. On the other hand, recent researchers have started looking at how constraints are applied by players, seeing them as a performative aspect separate from the final text itself. Apperley, as well as Boluk and LeMieux, have started carving this path. This thesis will further progress within these steps.

In the next chapter, I shall set up the groundwork on how players constrain themselves. I will define three different types of constraints: **material constraints**, where players constrain themselves based on the impositions present through the material, **imperative constraints**, where players constrain themselves based on play suggestions permeated through both the material and extra-ludic convention, as well as **potential constraints**, where players constrain themselves based on their own personal playful impeti.

## CHAPTER 3: CONSTRAINING PLAY

### [3.1] An Introduction to Constraints

#### [3.1.1] The Next Step

Levin Becker states the following

The line, in effect, is this: writers are constrained whether or not they acknowledge it—not just by the structures of poetic forms like the sonnet or the haiku, but also by the conventions of their chosen genre, the format in which they publish, even the grammar and lexicon of their native (or adopted) language. (2012, p. 12-13)

Levin Becker correctly identifies that the Oulipo, and writers at large, adopt constraints at different loci of writing. He identifies structures of poetic form, conventions of genre, publishing format, as well as grammar and lexicon. Implied, there is a further locus for constraints: the ones they actively choose because they can. The knight's tour in *Life A User's Manual* does not fit under any of the above loci. In **Subchapter 2.2.1**, I also pointed out Queneau's *Classification des Travaux de L'OuLiPo* (Queneau, 1981, p. 74-77), which identifies the above loci of constraints in much more detail. The Oulipo were keenly aware that writing is a process of choosing the right constraints. It just so happens that they often did not like the current constraints all too much, so they switched to creating constraints instead.

Works only happen after writers choose, implicitly or explicitly, which constraints they are adopting. By the time Shakespeare wrote *Sonnet 18*, he had chosen to constrain himself in many different ways: using iambic pentameter as the verse's meter, writing a poem, writing specifically a sonnet, writing specifically a Shakespearean sonnet, using English, exploring the conventions of the love poem (and flouting them by not extolling his love interest's virtues). Shakespeare, to my knowledge, never called any of these choices constraints, but they were nonetheless choices he made to render a specific work.

The Oulipo similarly write under constraints. However, they are interesting for this thesis not because they write under constraints, as interesting as many of these constraints are, but because they are in the business of making constraints. In **Section**

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**2.1.1**, I discussed how Jouet views the Oulipo as primarily a group which creates constraints, not texts. I have quoted him stating that the Oulipo “seek out usable constraints so that literature is written” (2000, p. 5), as opposed to writing literature under constraints.

The question that follows is where would constraint creation and constraint adoption present itself in games research. I argue that part of the frustration that the Oulipo has had with digital works, as well as the Oulipo’s disappearance up until recently from game studies discourse, lies within the Oulipo’s constraints being applied to the wrong part of games research.

### Fournel’s Three Types

Let’s return back to the Fournel’s three types of digital Oulipian works (Atlas, 1981, p. 298-313) that I outlined in **Section 2.2.1** and translate them to digital game equivalents.

- 1 **1<sup>st</sup> type:** writer → computer → work (**game maker** → **hardware 1** → **game**)
- 2 **2<sup>nd</sup> type:** writer → computer → work → computer → reader (**game maker** → **hardware 1** → **game** → **hardware 1** → **player**)
- 3 **3<sup>rd</sup> type:** writer → computer → reader → computer → work (**game maker** → **hardware 1** → **player** → **hardware (n)** → **work**)

Let us start by looking at the first type: Game makers adopt constraints on their grammar and lexicon, by choosing to write in a particular coding language or game engine. They also adopt constraints on convention, by choosing to make games of a particular genre. In between, game makers also limit themselves in creative ways. Game jams are a great example - a clear comparison can be drawn between Jouet’s *Poèmes de Métro* and Adriel Wallick’s *Train Jams*, where game makers take a train ride together and create a game in less than forty eight hours. Presetting practices also fit under this first type: for example, modders chose a very specific grammar and lexicon, by choosing to modify a particular game under its terms. Pierre Corbinais, the curator of the French language website OuJeViPo<sup>4</sup>, also has a website called *Shake that Button*

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4 Stands for *Ouvroir de Jeu Video Potentielle*, French for Workshop of Potential Games. Corbinais chronicles conceptually interesting games and reviews them

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where he chronicles games designed with constrained controllers. There is even an offshoot of the Oulipo called OuBaPo<sup>5</sup> which designed the language-based board game *Scrouabble* (2005), a constrained remaking of the popular family game *Scrabble* focused on making comic strips instead of words.

This is the conventional way that the Oulipo's constraints have been approached in games research. Arnott (2012) uses the Oulipo to advocate for a designer determinacy, Bogost (2007) gave the example of the kids playground as pre-set constraints that create possibility spaces, Boluk and Lemieux discuss these as a type of *around-game*, where they even made their own games to illustrate the point. However, I do not think this is the space where discussions of constraints can truly shine and provide meaningful discursive growth to the field. It has been covered by many authors already, even outside of the Oulipo's terms.

The second type is also not where I would like to place my research. The second type comes from a lived reality that is not as prevalent any more: computers were much more expensive, and much more scarce in the late 70s. While there is space for exploration here, perhaps through a comparative analysis between digital Oulipian works and early games culture through arcades, it is not where discussions on constraints shine either, because the second type still has constraints as something between the game maker and the final work. In Fournel's equation, before the work, there is still only the writer.

Finally, there is the third type, which Fournel saw as the most ambitious yet also the one with the most potential. Yet again, the first two steps of the equation remain the same: game makers make something. However, Fournel does not acknowledge this part as the final work. The work only emerges after the readers' (or in our thesis' case, the players') intervention. I argue that the Oulipo's research can shine in this scenario: as we create the language to discuss how players constrain themselves to create works, as we move from game design to play design.

### [3.1.2] Constrained Play as Works

#### Three Types of Constraints

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5 Stands for *Ouvroir de Bande Dessinée Potentielle*, French for Workshop of Potential Comics.

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So how do players constrain themselves to create works? As Jouet stated – the Oulipo’s works were their constraints. Our next step should then be to identify the types of constraints that players can create. While Queneau’s classification in **Subchapter 2.2.1** identified 4 columns and 9 rows, I will limit myself to three different types of constraints: material constraints, imperative constraints, and potential constraints.

**Material Constraints** are constraints that players adopt in response to the material reality of their play sessions. The Oulipo never wrote a work with a lipogram in H, as there isn’t a Maltese speaking Oulipian member. They also never wrote a reverse lipogram in a bilabial sibilant fricative, even if they exhaust every language, because such a manner of articulation cannot exist – there is not even a glyph to represent this manner of articulation. Instead, Perec adopted the material constraint of a lipogram in E in *La Disparation*, because French’s lived reality includes that glyph.

Similarly, as soon as players choose a game, they exist within a material reality where certain things are possible while others are not, both because of their present limitations within their chosen game, as well as the physical materials which enforce it. No matter how hard a player presses any button on their keyboard, they will never perform a roll in *Skyrim* (2011), because such a manner of articulation is impossible. Equally, no matter how much I try to press the space key to jump, I can never quite do that while I am playing *Skyrim* on the Nintendo Switch, set up with its joycons. Players adopt material constraints within similar lived realities, realities bound by the game they choose to play in.

**Imperative Constraints** are constraints that players adopt in response to conventions and conversations occurring within their chosen game. The Oulipo cannot write a sonnet with 10 lines. They can, but by most measures, that sonnet will no longer be a sonnet. Instead, Queneau adopted the imperative constraint of the sonnet in *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*, because abiding by the sonnet’s convention allowed him to express poetry’s potential multitudes.

Similarly, players exist within a game with an *imperative mood*, a space where they are told to do specific things and that specific things already have preset meanings. It is arguable whether you have played *Skyrim* if you never finish a single quest and just stay in Helgen watching the dragon burn the city to the ground. You can do this, but by some



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measures, you will not have played *Skyrim*. Player adopts imperative constraint as Queneau does, because abiding by instructions, by conventions, by lusory expectations allows themselves to create interesting play situations.

**Potential Constraints** are constraints that players choose because they can, not because they are abiding by material or imperative constraints. The *OuLiPo* called themselves the **W**orkshop of **P**otential **L**iterature because they wanted to explore what they could potentially do. Whether they chose to use the knight's tour or Eulerian matrices, 3\*3\*3 grids or tarot cards, they often did this simply because they wanted to see what happened. Some Oulipians like Perec liked making up these constraints themselves. Some Oulipians like Calvino liked adopting others' constraints to explore specific angles.

I argue that players share a very similar curiosity, and often adopt constraints simply because they can. Sometimes these constraints have been tailor made just for them, such as streamers performing challenges suggested by viewers on *Twitch*. Sometimes, players take up other player's constraints to challenge themselves, such as choosing to any% speedrun *Skyrim*. Sometimes, they come up with your own exhaustive constraints just to see what happens, such as trying a pugilist build in *Skyrim*, just so they can say that they were the ones to punch a dragon to death or even following a chicken in *Skyrim* to really exhaust how a *Skyrim* chicken thinks.

This breakdown is still very limited. If Queneau could make a 9\*4 for writing, there is probably space for a much larger breakdown in a medium which includes writing. Additionally, as I shall show throughout this thesis, these divisions are often not necessarily mutually exclusive. Moreover, just like the Oulipo, players adopt multiple constraints at any given time to create a **play method**. However, this thesis' aim is not to create a neat typology, but rather to recognise the design work that players labour into their play sessions. This tripartite division will allow me to begin to discuss these designs in much greater detail.

### [3.1.3] Chapter Breakdown

This chapter will have two movements. In the first movement, I will start by describing what material constraints (in **Subchapter 3.2**) and imperative constraints (in **Subchapter 3.3**) entail, by looking at similar theorisations throughout game studies. Throughout the thesis, I will be overwhelmingly focusing on the constraints that players actively choose, by creating them themselves or pilfering them from other players. However, in this movement, I will take the time to explain the material and imperative constraints that players intentionally or unintentionally adopt. I will do this through the concept of the prototypical play method (in **Subchapter 3.4**), the default constraints that players adopt through material enforcement, heavy suggestions, and a longing for a shared common experience.

In the second movement, I will move into framing my thesis' main object of enquiry – the constraints players actively adopt to design their own play. I will start by discussing what potential constraints entail (in **Subchapter 3.5**). Yet again, I will draw from research within game studies to support my argument. Following this, I will explain flouting constraints (in **Subchapter 3.6**). While potential constraints focus on adding something not bound by previous constraints, flouted constraints focus on reacting on previously established constraints.

Finally, I will spend clarify a couple of concepts within my constraint model. Firstly, I will explain that I will be discussing constraints in relation to previous constraints, as this will allow me to show how a particular play method is interesting. Secondly, I will explain that I will be exclusively looking at constraints that players actively choose, to be in line with the way the Oulipo approached constraints. Finally, I will explain that constraints are communal as much as they are individual, as the Oulipo formed a like-minded communities, so do players. This will allow me to move into the conclusion and set up the following chapters, where I will be looking at specific examples of interesting play methods.

As a small side note, in this chapter I will predominantly be using two games to illustrate my example. The first game is *Tetris* (1984), an arcade and handheld classic where players have to turn and shift four-piece blocks called Tetronimos within a 2D plane as these blocks fall from the top to the bottom. Whenever ten Tetronimo pieces

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form a horizontal line with no gap, these pieces disappear and the player gets points. The second game is *Skyrim* (2011), a roleplaying game where players assume the role of the dragonborn, a person foretold in legends as they who will save the world from the return of dragons. Players are encouraged to follow the game's storyline while exploring various locations, completing quests and growing stronger. In the following chapters, I will look at a lot of different examples. However, in this chapter I will mostly stick to these two games just to reduce the onus of specific game knowledge while I tackle this thesis' theoretical output.

### **[3.2] Material Constraints**

#### **[3.2.1] Players' Materiality**

Before I start discussing how players create and adopt material constraints, it is important to first look at what a player's materiality incorporates. I have already begun to show some examples of players' material reality in the previous chapter. For example, Galloway (2005) had stated that player's actions within digital spaces are limited by the code. Tetronimos will not move back up in *Tetris*, as there is nothing in the game's code that allows it. The player's actions are only understood in a strictly mathematical sense. Players lack complete control over the game world they inhabit. This pre-encoded determines the material constraints players can choose from.

Encoding does not necessarily necessitate being actively coded into a computer. In the previous chapter, I looked at Calvino's *The Castles of Crossed Destinies* (1973). Calvino's tarot deck was already pre-encoded with specific possibilities. This is why Calvino decided to switch from the Marseille tarot to the Visconti tarot. The original Marseille tarot's pre-encoding was too limiting for the material constraints he wished to uphold, or rather it limited him in the wrong way.

However, in this thesis I will only study digital games to restrict non-digital encoding out of the question. In some way or another, everything in a specific game has to be digitally encoded, which is not the case with non-digital games. As Boluk and Lemieux (2017) point out, Major league Baseball never feels the need to define "mass, gravity, friction or momentum", as they exist within the realm of encoding that goes beyond

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human capability. Juul (2005) makes a similar argument when he argues that all types of games have immaterial support: sports have physical laws, such as mass, gravity, friction and momentum, while digital games have computation. Both of the above examples would still need to be defined and digitally encoded within *MLB The Show 19* (2019), which in turn creates particularities specific to this encoding. While I can reasonably expect momentum to always work in the same way while playing baseball, I cannot expect the same while playing *Skyrim*. When a dragon hits the player, the player hardly moves, yet when a giant hits the player, the player is flung unreasonably into the air, despite giants being generally smaller than dragons. While this might create problems for a physics based analysis of *Skyrim*, it also leads to interesting games, as players get to explore how they can adopt material constraints.

This said, it will still serve us well to explore what this encoding entails within the digital. Espen Aarseth and Calleja (2014) argued for cybermedia objects, a category of encoded objects which includes games. Without delving too deeply into what constitutes a cybermedia object, Aarseth and Calleja come up with three categories that each cybermedia object has to have: signs, materiality and mechanics.

The **sign** is the object's methods of signification, such as the familiar four piece tetronimos in *Tetris* as well as the equally familiar chip-tune sounds. The **materiality** is the hardware through which the cybermedia object is being realised, such as whether I'm playing *Tetris* on my MSI GT72VR laptop or on my Samsung S8+, as well as whether I'm using a keyboard to play it or a touch screen. Finally, the **mechanics** is any operation with active processual consequences, such as pressing the left button to turn a tetronimo.

When players adopt material constraints, they are acknowledging and responding to one of these three aspects. When I played *Skyrim* and I came across a mammoth for the first time, I let it hit me and I died. When I played *Skyrim* and I came across a mammoth for the fifteenth time, I did not. The same mammoth **signs** indicated a parallel materiality for the object. This knowledge leads me to uphold the material constraint of not being removed from the play session, through mammoth mauling.

Equally, whenever I play *Skyrim*, I plead my instructions at the screen. Despite being deeply cathartic, I understand that voice commands are not part of *Skyrim*'s **materiality**.

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This knowledge leads me to uphold the material constraint of using accepted input devices to maintain a contiguous play session.

Finally, whenever a mudcrab attacks me in *Skyrim*, I hold the left mouse button to shoot my *Flame* spell at it. Pressing this button is creating an active processual consequence in *Skyrim*'s **mechanics**. After holding the left mouse button for a few seconds, the mudcrab keels over – it turns from an active threat to a loot container. This action happens every time. The action leads me to uphold the material constraint of not being removed from the play session, through mudcrab pinching.

First, players choose a game. From here, the material constraints that players adopt try to make sense of their position as a player in this game. This includes the hardware and peripherals they choose to constrain themselves with (through Aarseth and Calleja's materiality), as well as the means by which a game emerges from this materiality (the signs and the mechanics). These choices are players' material constraints.

### [3.2.2] The Base Material Constraint

#### The Gameplay Condition

The base material constraint that every player has to make is whether they want to be a player or not. A core difference between material constraints in writing and players' material constraints is that the player's material constraints can be existential. There is no material constraint that a writer upholds to remain a writer. If I fail to uphold the material constraints of my chosen language, then I will be writing gibberish, but I will still be writing. However, if a player does not acknowledge the cliff, or lets the mudcrab wail at them in *Skyrim*, then they will cease to be a player, at least for a short while.

Olli Tapio Leino (2009) has previously looked at player's uphold the minimum material constraint of maintaining any given play session, where he suggests looking at gameplay from a phenomenological perspective. He states that there is a difference between the ideal game and the player's experience of their material reality (2009, p. 1). He states that phenomenological analysis of games is interested in the experience's "invariant structures" (2009, p. 6), and these invariant structures are found in something all players are subjected to: any given material reality. There's a clear port of call

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between player's upholding necessary material constraints and player's phenomenological experience of these invariant structures.

Leino continues by stating that analysing games as processes is useful, especially within socially upheld situations (such as in multiplayer contexts), yet also finds its limited. He compares *Tetris* to *Qelat*, an East African variant of *Mancala* played using goat dung, and states that shifts in materiality affect these two games in different ways. He argues that in *Qelat*, any shifting materiality is an unintended consequence which can be remedied by fixing that materiality – if you destroy a game piece, you use a substitute game piece and nothing of significance changes. However, the materiality in *Tetris* shifts in a way that can kick you out of the play experience (2009, p. 7). Firstly, this shifting materiality is not limited to digital games, as legacy board games are becoming increasingly popular: legacy board games involve material changes to the board which make the game unplayable again within its current iteration – this includes tearing cards, writing on cards, sticking things on boards and so on. However, his general point still stands – just like a terminal processual consequence in Aarseth and Calleja's work, Leino's argument that materiality influences the constraints you can and will adopt stands true.

He states that players are bound by the *gameplay condition*, the acceptance that they might be removed from a game outside of their own accord. He gives a further example by discussing two different failure outcomes in *SimCity 4* (2003). In the first, he tries to replicate his real-life neighbourhood, but fails. In the second, he runs out of cash and fails. The first one still allows him to remain within *SimCity 4*, while the second ejects him from it. Players who do not want to be removed from the game must adopt the material constraint of maintaining their cashflow, but not their neighbourhood replication.

While Leino does well to make us consider the effects of materiality on play methods, he does not spend any time discussing what players are doing in these spaces, and how they are constructing their own play experiences. Ultimately, Leino's analysis is still focused on analysing games, albeit as lived objects dictated by a player experiencing them.

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Leino is also slightly too readily dismissive of the ‘processuality’ of how materiality is experienced. He brings up the example of rocket jumping in shooting games such as *Quake* (1996), where players use their weapons' recoil to propel themselves in the air, higher than the material seems to allow (2009, p. 7). While he rightfully states that the conditions by which rocket jumping is possible did not change, the knowledge of these conditions did change. As the knowledge of material changes, so do the material constraints that players adopt: nobody tried to be hit by a giant in *Skyrim* until they learnt that the ragdoll physics were worth replicating for humorous effect.

He continues by stating that "players merely became aware of new ways around the restrictions imposed by the game artefacts" (2009, p. 7), which I find a rather negative way to discuss adopting material constraints. The invention of airplanes is not discussed as finding a way around the restrictions imposed by the physical laws, but rather as an active exploration of the universe's material capabilities. Yet players who explore what material constraints they can adopt are unfortunately perceived as transgressive, both in Leino's paper and other works I will later return to. Rather than discussing the possible intentions behind material, I argue that it is much more interesting to discuss the definite intention behind players' chosen material constraints.

This said, there is still one important takeaway from Leino's work. All players have to at the very least acknowledge their *gameplay condition* – that each specific game might impose one (or many) different ways in which they might be ejected from that game. Players overwhelmingly adopt the material constraint of maintaining their presence in that game. Later on, I will show how players occasionally flout it instead. However, whether they uphold or flout it, each play method necessitates acknowledging it.

#### **The Material Condition**

I would go one step further from Leino in arguing that the *gameplay condition* is not limited to what Leino describes as “gameplay”, but extends to the material at large. In Apperley's (2017) *mistake* in **Section 2.4.1**, I argued that while neither the material nor the knowledge of the material changed, the access to this material changed. Winklebooth's increasing blindness (and eventual death) did not change the puzzle or

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what he knew of it, but it did change how he accessed it. In this thesis, I will not look at players' physical changing circumstances, such as blindness or death. However, accessing games through different means influences the material constraints that players adopt.

For example, when I had bought my new PC, my graphic card's BIOS was automatically 'updated' after a few days. While I could play *Skyrim* without issues in the first two days, on the third day, it would consistently crash my entire PC within fifteen minutes. While Leino would not describe this as the *gameplay condition* (as it is an unintended breakdown, similar to a crushed game pieces in *Qelat*), I would still argue that it influenced how I upheld the material constraints of maintaining my presence in the game.

The first time *Skyrim* crashed, it was an unintended breakdown. However, I kept opening *Skyrim* up. At first, it was out of curiosity. I wanted to understand what caused the consistent crash: it was not exiting buildings (it crashed in open space), it was not heavy particles or renders (it crashed with a low rendered distance setting), it was not time spent (sometimes it did not crash for thirty minutes). During this period, I was exploring the game's materiality. I was finding the rocket jumping equivalent in the intersection of my crashing PC and *Skyrim*. However, I eventually started opening *Skyrim* up just to play *Skyrim*. This material constraint served as a way to restrict my playtime when I should have been writing academic papers instead. As soon as I accepted that this automatic end-state was part of my play method, there was no longer a clear distinction between upholding this end-state and running out of space in *Tetris* for me as a player.

One advantage of this thesis' player-oriented method is that it accounts better for the player's role in maintaining their presence in the game. Running out of space in *Tetris* happens to everyone eventually, the *Skyrim* crash happened to an overwhelming minority – just me. However, it is unclear at which point the *gameplay condition* becomes an unintended breakdown in a game-centered analysis. If a crash happens at a specific point to a majority of players executing a specific mechanic, is it an unintended breakdown, or is it the *gameplay condition* if players know this crashing sequence could (or would) happen? Through this discussion on upheld material constraints, I can both



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account for my very personal material constraint in *Skyrim*, as well as the for the prototypical material constraint in *Tetris*.

### [3.2.3] Prototypical Material Constraints

In the previous section, I have argued that there is one material constraint that players consistently uphold – maintaining themselves as players, realised through their choice of the mechanical systems’ processual consequences as well as their choice of materials. It would then follow to look at any other material constraints that players generally uphold.

Chris DeLeon (2013) gives us a great no-nonsense start with a five point list of what it means to play a game in a standard way

Rule 1. The game is to be interacted with only by standard input controllers [...]

Rule 2. The physical integrity of the hardware is not to be violated [...]

Rule 3. The player should be directly and independently responsible for the actions made during the game [...]

Rule 4. If playing against other players, the other players should not be disturbed outside the game [...] nor unfairly distracted within the game by meta commands that are not part of the core gameplay

Rule 5. The computer game should be played as released and/or patched by the developer. (2013, p. 7-8)

I have already argued against some of these points. For example, Rules 1 and 2 claim a material standard that does not exist. In my previous *Skyrim* example, would maintaining the “physical integrity” of my PC involve allowing *Skyrim* to continuously crash? Notions such as ‘standard’ hardware and controllers are nominal, when such hardware and controllers can respond in ‘non-standard’ ways.

However, Rules 1, 2 and 5 also show us that even in non-academic approaches, players see value in ensuring shared material constraints. That as soon as input controllers are ‘changed’, hardware is ‘violated’, and games are ‘modded’, then players are experiencing different material constraints. While DeLeon might have written down

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these rules to ensure fairness in gameplay, there is definite academic merit in discussing an ontologically contiguous set of constraints that a given play community can collectively understand.

While DeLeon's *standard* play method does not tell players how to play, it does vaguely tell players what play methods are excluded from it. To play *Skyrim* using DeLeon's *standard* play method, I need to have standard hardware. While it is not explicitly clear in DeLeon's rules, I would feel comfortable arguing that my *Skyrim* play method and DeLeon's standard play method are most likely incompatible.

So I argue that while DeLeon's standard play method is nominal, it is also generally understandable without defining standardness. Jennifer Whitson (2010) explains how this is possible. She takes Latour's network theory to ask who makes the rules in games. She argues that developers take the role of shepherds, those who Latour states "define the network [...] mark its boundaries and render them fixed and durable" (in Whitson, 2010). However, she also acknowledges that these networks and boundaries are not immutable. They are still actively influenced by other actors within this network, such as through players' chosen play methods, a position which Taylor (2009) shares. The shepherds can set prototypical material constraints, which they try to enforce through their marked boundaries: their signs, their materiality and their mechanical systems.

I can understand DeLeon's *standard* play-method because I also understand which material constraints the shepherds intended for adoption. What makes DeLeon's *standard* play-method different than the prototypical material constraints is that he actively set them himself as a player – they are material constraints that he chose to adopt, to ensure fairness during play.

These prototypical material constraints are often what leads players to choose one game over another. In the previous chapter, Bogost argued that "while we often think that rules always limit behaviour, the imposition of constraints also creates expression" (2007, p. 7), which reflects precisely this point. Procedural rhetoric hinges on players realising that the prototypical material constraint will allow for a specific rhetorical expression, and then subsequently adopting these material constraints as their own to encourage this expression.

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However, through all of this, it is still important to maintain that the prototypical material constraints are still nonetheless constraints. Earlier on, I criticised Leino's description of explorative material constraints as finding ways around the restrictions. This time, I can also hold mild issue with DeLeon's description of prototypical material constraints as the standard. Maintaining that there is a standard way that players should use to engage with material is arguing against constrained play as a creative endeavour. Upholding prototypical material constraints can lead to creative expression, in the same way painting-by-numbers can. What I will be thoroughly arguing is that further creativity can occur outside of the prototypical too.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, players start by choosing in which game they will be players. As soon as they choose the game, they need to at the very least acknowledge one material constraint: that they have to assume control of maintaining their presence in that game.

After these prerequisites, players start adopting material constraints. Each game comes with its own set of prototypical material constraints, enforced by the game's creators. Aarseth and Calleja explain that these prototypical material constraints are encoded through signs (you cannot change the way a mountain is rendered), materiality (you cannot play *Skyrim* on your toaster) and mechanical systems (you cannot pass through mountains in *Skyrim* because of collision detection). Players often adopt some, or most, of these prototypical material constraints uncritically, as these constraints are often the path of least resistance.

However, players also often do not adopt the prototypical uncritically. Sometimes, these prototypical material constraints are not enforced all that well – glitches, bugs, and crashes might make players question what it means to uphold the prototypical. These prototypical material constraints are often considered undesirable. I did not want to stop *Skyrim* from crashing, I did not want to stop rocket jumping. On the other hand, sometimes players adopt these prototypical constraints critically – the choice of not using a bug when you could is an active interesting choice. It is within this context that I will be discussing material constraints later on in this thesis.

### [3.3] Imperative Constraints

#### [3.3.1] An Introduction to Imperative Constraints

In the previous chapter, I discussed Arnott's (2012) *imperative mood*, which he had used to argue for designer determinacy through Perec's oft-quoted line on puzzling as a non-solitary activity. Arnott argued that as players play a game, they are retracing the same moves that the designer had made before. I retorted with a small caveat: that players do not have to abide by the imperative mood. If a player is told to "jump!", they might not necessarily follow through with a jumping action, no matter how convincing that command was. Imperative constraints follow this understanding: quest lines, genre conventions, reward systems and many other things readily direct players towards adopting certain imperative constraints. However, as with material constraints, whether they adopt them still remains player-centric.

Jaakko Stenros and Annika Waern discuss something similar as they state that games are “in the sweet-spot intersection between *designed activities* and *enacted experiences*” (2011, p. 16, emphasis mine). On the one hand, *designed activities* fit under games' material realities: dragons appearing out of nowhere is part of *Skyrim*'s materiality. If I do not like the overabundance of dragons attacking me in *Skyrim*, there is not much I can do about it. However, *enacted experiences* fit under imperative constraints. I understand that dragons appearing out of nowhere to kill is intended to create challenge and intrigue: it is a convention *Skyrim* and other roleplaying games have established. However, it is an *enacted* experience because I also realise that I do not have to rise up to this challenge. I choose to uphold the imperative constraint of slaying dragons because I want to advance a quest line, to get dragon bones, or solely because I find dragon slaying enjoyable.

Stenros and Waern continue by stating that games “are consciously designed activities that we engage in purely in order to experience something” (2011, p. 16). This is what separates them from material constraints. No matter how much I do not like *Skyrim*'s mountain render, that mountain render is there to stay. Meanwhile, imperative constraints are heavily suggested, but readily ignorable. I can choose to not uphold the

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dragon slaying imperative constraint by going inside a building and waiting the dragon out. Sometimes, the dragon will have already been slain through the efforts of righteous guards, and sometimes the dragon will disappear because all the righteous guards have been killed. Sometimes, the dragon is still there. I could let the dragon kill me, flouting the earlier stated material constraint of maintaining my presence in that game. At the same time, I would also not be upholding the imperative constraint of dragon-slaying established through genre convention, a quest line, or *Skyrim*'s reward systems.

### **[3.3.2] Establishing Imperative Constraints**

So far, I have covered what imperative constraints are on a general level. I have stated that games have suggestions infixed in them. Players can readily choose to take on or to ignore these suggestions, in turn imposing imperative constraints on themselves. In this section, I will explain look at some of the different ways possible imperative constraints are expressed to players.

#### **Implied Designer**

Nele Van de Mosselaer and Stefano Gualeni (2020) already provide a comprehensive discussion into how players experience digital gameworlds through what they term the implied designer. While I will not delve too deeply into this concept, one important point they bring up is that in each individual playing of a game, players construct such an implied designer through whom they base their interpretative experiences in the gameworld. In this way, this interpretative construction is similar to imperative constraints: for an imperative constraint to be as such, players have to acknowledge that they are being told, in some way or another to do something, yet doing it remains within their agency of how they want to respond to what they are being told to do.

They bring up five different ways in which players are told to do something: expressed intentions (explicit and implicit), and the cross-ludic (transludic, interludic, and metaludic.) While I find this categorisation very useful to discuss imperative constraints, I would not necessarily place everything in their categorisation as necessarily an imperative constraint.

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First are expressed intentions, which come in two shapes and sizes: explicit and implicit. Explicit expressions in *Skyrim* would include quest markers which you can check by pressing the TAB key, NPCs (non playable characters) explaining what you should be doing, cut-scenes, experience point rewards for particular actions, and so on. Meanwhile, implicit expressions in *Skyrim* include reduced visibility in more dangerous areas, unlit torches delineating potential hidden rooms by pulling on them, map markers for points of potential interest. Acting upon these expressed intentions is establishing and upholding imperative constraints.

Then there's the transludic and the interludic, which Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni draw from Peter Howell's (2016) previous research on the topic. Transludic knowledge is knowledge gained from relating "to multiple other games that an individual may have played in the past." For example, the first time I went into *Skyrim*, I knew that if the game autosaved out of sequence, I knew that the situation might suddenly become dangerous, and the autosave acts as a lifeline.

Interludic knowledge is knowledge "contextualised within a specific game series or franchise, or applicable to a small subset of games rather than many different games." For example, the first time I played *Skyrim*, I knew that if I wanted to use spells often, it would make sense to choose a High Elf or Breton race. Since I had previously played *Morrowind* (2002) and *Oblivion* (2006), I knew that these races are the most adapt at using spells within the Elder Scroll franchise, which includes *Skyrim*.

Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni also introduce their own term outside of Howell's previous exploration, the metaludic. They define this as "knowledge about a game that can be gleaned outside of its gameworld". For example, I knew that *Skyrim* would feature dragons as sentient enemies from the metaludic: the game trailer, game images, interviews with the designers and so on really emphasized battling smart dragons many times your size as the game's selling point. Utilising all the above three knowledge points is essential to establishing imperative constraints.

### **Clashing Constraints**

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While I would also classify these divisions as a possible source for imperative constraints, as I have shown through the above examples, I would argue that they can also be a source for material constraints. For example, in *Skyrim* I had the interludic knowledge that I can climb mountains using horses, from having previously played *Oblivion*. I can also scale mountains using horses in *Oblivion*, since these two games share a game engine. Here, I have an understanding of the material reality of *Skyrim* – that the physics in the game differs from actual physical laws. So when I am scaling mountains using horses, I am flouting a material constraint gained through interludic knowledge.

When two constraints' clash, it is hard to argue that the player is simultaneously upholding and flouting two clashing imperative constraints. For example, walls in games are clear examples of expressed intentions, explicitly expressing that you cannot pass through them. However, *Skyrim* routers<sup>6</sup> have interludic knowledge that when you reload a save file, the player instantiates in the game before the walls, allowing you to pass through walls without issue for a very short period of time. It would be unreasonable to state that if I passed through a wall, I would be flouting an material constraint (through the expressed intentions of walls) and upholding an imperative constraint (through the interludic knowledge of the game engine)

There are two ways of remedying this. Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni give one remedy. In an example in their paper, when less experienced players played *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), they upheld an imperative constraint (as seen through a semi-explicit expressed intentions) that more experienced players would not: they stopped at stop-signs. On some level there is clashing information, stop signs do give instructions – if there were not a stop sign, the less experienced players would not have stopped. However, there is also explicit expressed intentions (quests telling you to go fast, hit other cars, break traffic laws), interludic knowledge (you are almost never punished for not stopping at stop signs in *Grand Theft Auto* franchise games), as well as metaludic knowledge (the game is called *Grand Theft Auto*; stealing cars is already a flagrant violation of traffic laws) that suggests not stopping at stop signs is fine. In this situation, the remedy is to accept that there will be intentional or unintentional noise in the *implied designer's*

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6 Routers are players who prepare routes for speedrunners. I discuss them in greater detail in **Section 4.2.2**

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communication. In this situation, upholding the imperative constraint means breaking traffic laws.

However, that remedy is not always sufficient. In the two above *Skyrim* examples, when two knowledge bases clash so severely, I would argue that one knowledge base encourages the adoption of a material constraint, while the other knowledge base equally encourages an imperative constraint. The *Skyrim* routers' interludic knowledge allowed them to play with the material constraints of the *Creation Engine* (both *Skyrim*'s and *Oblivion*'s game engine), while at the same time encouraged them to actively ignore the imperative constraints presented through explicitly expressed intentions, such as the horses acting all weird about scaling a mountain.

### [3.3.3] Prototypical Imperative Constraints

Certain imperative constraints present themselves as prototypical due to how overwhelmingly they are suggested to the player. There is no doubt that players are encouraged to slay dragons in *Skyrim*. There are explicit expressed intentions (the character Irileth tells you to slay a dragon), implicit expressed intentions (the dragonbane weapon does twice as much damage to dragons), interludic knowledge (the *Elder Scrolls*<sup>7</sup> lore establishes dragons as an existential threat to the world of *Tamriel*, the fictional world *Skyrim* is set in), transludic knowledge (dragons are generally enemies in role playing games), and metaludic knowledge (*Skyrim*'s promotional material emphasised dragon slaying as a selling point). All these suggestions are very clear, and there is little to no noise in these messages. It would be a very safe bet to say that *Skyrim*'s prototypical imperative constraints include slaying dragons.

However, prototypical imperative constraints can also be established through their relationship to the prototypical material constraints. Referring back to Aarseth and Calleja's (2014) work, within their cybermedia model, they discussed mechanics in terms of mechanical systems, rather than through individual examples. While players uphold a material constraint whenever they execute an individual mechanical action in the overall system, these individual material constraints often lead to a set of constraints

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<sup>7</sup> *The Elder Scrolls* is the collective title given to games within the same franchise as *Skyrim*, such as the aforementioned *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*



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with implied prototypical imperative constraints. Equally, Whitson (2010) showed us how the shepherds dictate the material boundaries. The setup of specific material boundaries will invariably establish certain imperative constraints as *seemingly* natural.

For example, *Tetris* has both a space mechanic (there are a total of 200 spaces), as well as a score mechanic (forming a 10 by 1 line gives you points). Players uphold the material constraint of maintaining their presence by trying to not run out of space. The longer they maintain this material constraint, the higher their score will likely be. There is nothing forcing players to get a high score – this is an imperative constraint. However, in this case upholding the prototypical material constraints goes hand in hand with getting a high score. Getting a high score sets itself as a prototypical imperative constraint.

### **[3.4] The Prototypical Play Method**

In **Section 3.2.3**, I discussed prototypical material constraints: the material constraints that players generally unconsciously uphold because of the game's material. In **Section 3.3.3**, I discussed prototypical imperative constraints: the imperative constraints that players generally unconsciously uphold because of the game's convention. In this subchapter, I will address the amalgamation of these constraints together under the prototypical play method. The prototypical play method would then be the set of constraints that players generally, consciously or unconsciously uphold.

Jasper Van Vught and René Glas (2017) introduce the somewhat similar instrumental play. They describe this play method as one in which players can "take the route of least resistance and follow the game's lead" (2017, p. 215). They argue that while smaller games might have allowed scholars to exhaust all their computational possibilities, the larger games get the exponentially harder it is for play to be exhaustive, a point brought up by other researchers in the previous chapter (Aarseth, 1997; Boluk and Lemieux, 2017). Instead, they argue that one way that researchers can conduct play as research is through their charted course, with the knowledge of the limits that this approach might create.

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Van Vught and Glas do very well to divide play from the artefact. They understand that any play method is a set of choices that players adopt. One core difference is that Van Vught and Glas' research is focused on play as a research method. Meanwhile, this thesis is focused on play as constrained design. Instrumental play as a research method has known advantages and limitations, which I mentioned in **Subchapter 1.4** and will discuss again in **Section 7.3.1**. In this subchapter, I will instead look at what constrained design upholding the prototypical play method can render.

### [3.4.1] Player Experiences

In *The Art of Game Design* (2008), Jesse Schell approaches this topic from the lens of a game designer, in the process making a couple of crucial observations. The first important observation that he makes is that game designers' goal is not to design games, but to design experiences. He continues by stating that games without players playing them are just "clumps of cardboard, bags of bits" (2008, p. 10). He later follows this up by sadly admitting that "we cannot touch experiences. We cannot manipulate them directly. What [we] can control [...] is the game" (2008, p. 24).

This distinction is supported by other game designers turned game scholars. Brenda Brathwaite and John Sharp (2010) state that the most important role that game designers have is to create the rules of the game. They state "The pieces, the parts, the board? [...] They are all there for one reason only – to allow us to play out the rules. [...] They are not the game. The rules are" (2010). Brathwaite and Sharp's rule-focused approach is shared by other designers such as Rod Humble (2006), Jason Rohrer (2008) and, as we have seen earlier, Blow (2010). I will be sticking with Schell's account as the term *experience* lacks the agency-conundrum that rules have. Rules are ambiguous as they could be both the encoded parts as well as the player upheld parts. An experience clearly belongs to a person.

The second observation that Schell makes is that defining a game is a largely useless activity for the purposes of designing a game. He argues that definition work is mostly proliferated by academics that are far divorced from game design processes (2008, p. 24). While this is not a completely unfair categorisation, he still follows this up with a

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largely uninspired definition of games, with ten key points from a mostly formalist angle. While these ten points have a clear pedagogical use, they are insufficient because they do not include the two things he poignantly mentioned before. That games *require* players (not just engage players), and that games are *clumps of cardboard, bags of bits*, that is, a found object on which we etch play experiences.

These two important points are much more intrinsically linked than Schell gives them credit for. In the introduction, I argued that games have eluded easy definitions as they are often part of a bipartite compound definition: a definition of an object, and a definition of a process. This is not an interesting quandary for game designers because the distinction between the two is obvious during the design process. Yet Schell still realises that this distinction exists, although ends up phrasing it awkwardly. He rightly states that game designers.

1. fail as best as they can at designing experiences; and
2. design games.

His self-reflective writing about designers as failed experience designers is still deceptively poignant. His chapter about *Indirect Control* (2008, p. 283 – 298) (in which he curiously also uses the word constraints, albeit in a different way), shows how game designers can try to subtly lead experiences, encouraging players to uphold specific imperative constraints. For example, quest markers and quest paths encourage players to adopt the imperative constraint of “resolving quests whenever amenable”, an encouragement that many players take to heart (2008, p. 289-291). Furthermore, the other lenses in his book also *encourage* specific imperative constraints. A game following a particular setting encourages players to set constraints that follow that setting (2008, p. 47-56), compulsive game mechanics encourage players to repeat specific constraints that activate these mechanics (2008, p. 129-170), an engaging story encourages players to set constraints that let it unravel (2008, p. 261-282), and so on. If you make a game where you are a person who absorbs dragon souls (theme), by shooting pointy arrows at dragons (mechanics), which in turn leads you to discover more about the world around you (story), chances are that players will shoot arrows at dragons. However, anything that’s not *clumps of cardboard, bags of bits* can only

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encourage, directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly, the play of specific constraints. You could always run away from these dragons.

### [3.4.2] Prescribed Ontology

C. Thi Nguyen (2019) tackles Schell's quandary within a philosophical discourse from a different angle. He argues that games have a *prescriptive ontology*, setting three goals for his paper. The first one, abridged and emphasized by me, is as follows

First, I will [...] defend the importance of prescriptions for structured play [...] Games, I will claim, have a very distinctive ontology. They [...] *are a set of materials as approached in some particular, prescribed, way* (2019).

On a surface level, it might seem that this thesis disagrees heavily with Nguyen's argument. Nguyen argues that a game has to be approached in a particular way for us to be able to state that we have played a game. The disagreement is truly only in one aspect – where the prescriptive ontology lies. Firstly, I will not call them games, I will call them the prototypical play method. More importantly, I would rephrase the emphasised part of the quote above as follows: *Prototypical play methods are a prescribed experience as set on a particular set of materials*.

I have just argued that Schell does a great job of delineating how game designers and/or developers both design the materials, while also failing as best as they can to design the experience. Nguyen places these two aspects somewhat intrinsically together by arguing that prescriptive ontology belongs within a combination of both. For example, he states the following about books

The Brothers Karamazov is not this physical set of pages, but the more abstract entity which I can only access when I read these physical in a certain way: by reading all the words in order (2019).

He also rightly argues that if I eat the pages of a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*, I have not in anyway experienced *The Brothers Karamazov*. Therefore, he is right in arguing that 1) the experience of *The Brothers Karamazov* (as a proxy of games) necessitates a prescriptive play, and 2) the materials by themselves do not constitute *The Brothers Karamazov* as an experience. Yet what happens with an audiobook, or an

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ebook? Am I not experiencing *The Brothers Karamazov*, or am I experiencing *The Brothers Karamazov* in a radically different way? Should I read *Oliver Twist* within its original material intention, monthly broadpage newspaper articles, for me to really experience *Oliver Twist*?

Play methods are very similar. Proxying books for games to use Schell's earlier language, Dostoyevsky was not a writer of a book, but rather he failed as best he could to write an experience for readers, which readers agree to take part in. Players uphold the prototypical play method in *Skyrim* because they want to experience *Skyrim*. However, *Skyrim* is big enough for more than one prescriptive play, the one set by its designers. Which is why I can also state "I speedran *Skyrim*" and players will equally understand that I stood by a different play method, a different prescribed ontology, which is equally meaningful, with equal scope for attention, and equally shareable.

Nguyen acknowledges this towards the end of his paper as follows

So, in the end, is there a right way to play a game? The answer is complicated. Literally and narrowly, yes [...] In a larger sense, however, we are not always bound to experience particular bits of material under the regime of the artist's intent. We also have reason to experiment, to re-mix and re-shuffle, to try out various artifacts under various different prescriptive regimes, and so generate new works. [...] And creating new practices will, in turn, create new possibilities for new types of works and new forms of communication – which we can receive only by playing the game the right way (2019).

Nguyen argues that new practices emerge after playing a game in the right way. Speedrunning would definitely fit here. After playing *Skyrim* using its prototypical play method, I added a potential constraint to *Skyrim*'s prototypical play method. I tried to beat it as fast as I could. However, if I decided to speedrun collecting every flower in *Skyrim*, it would not necessitate having ever upheld *Skyrim*'s prototypical play method. Maybe I am not 'playing *Skyrim*', but *Skyrim*'s set material is clearly still being used to discuss something communicable, something shareable.

Discussing *Skyrim*'s prototypical play method allows me to place *Skyrim* both in relation as well as in opposition to other play methods. On the one hand, just as I can skip a few lines of *The Brothers Karamazov* and still state that I have experienced *The Brothers*

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*Karamazov*, likewise I can ignore or actively flout some prototypical constraints and still state that I have experienced *Skyrim*. The prototypical play method allows me to discuss a variable play, by discussing play as a conglomerate of choices, most of which are insignificant in the entire play method's scheme

On the other hand, placing play methods at the forefront allows me to more actively discuss the choices players do make. If I am 'playing *Skyrim* the right way', except I crouch next to every Daedric statue to mimic saying a prayer. It is a lot more productive to discuss that one specific choice, rather than discussing if I am still 'playing *Skyrim* the right way'. This will especially be the case when non-prototypical play methods (speedrunning the flower collection play method) refer to other previous non-prototypical play methods (speedrunning the prototypical play method) – the focus should always be on the new choices, on the self-imposed constraints.

Which brings us to the following two points that Nguyen's paper addresses, with which I fully agree:

Second, I will show that those prescriptions serve a very particular purpose: they undergird the possibility of stable communication. Shared prescriptions enable shared experiences. [...] Finally, I will argue that games have their own special sorts of prescriptions [...]. (2019)

Prescribed play sets a shared common focus of attention, it sets a manner of communication with others, and it also allows us to have a shared experience of play. If I say "I beat *Skyrim*", then other people will rightfully assume that I executed the prototypical play method as best as I could so that I can discuss this common experience with them on common terms. It allows them to assume that I developed some sort of prerequisite skills, followed a prerequisite narrative sequence, and so on. However, if I say "I collected every flower in *Skyrim*", with some further communication about the prescribed play I set for myself, then I can equally share that play. They can equally assume some sort of prerequisite skills, albeit perhaps not a prerequisite narrative sequence.

### [3.5] Potential Constraints

In the previous subchapters, I explained that players often adopt prototypical constraints while playing. Players know that adopting these constraint allows them to recreate a specific play experience. This is a perfectly valid way to play. However, I do not think it is one the Oulipo can particularly contribute to.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the Oulipo were not well known for adopting normative constraints in their writing. They were known for creating their own constraints, and using these to dictate their writing. While the previous subchapters were essential in order to frame our object of study, these following subchapters are important as they shift play from a reconstructive method, where players take the prototypical play method and recreate it somewhat uncritically; to a creative method, where players adopt their own constraints and create their own play methods.

In this subchapter, I will start by discussing potential constraints: the constraints that players adopt simply because they can. The knight's tour has no inherent relevance to novel writing, however Perec found a way to integrate a set of chess moves into a writing method in *Life A User's Manual*. I will be looking at similar constraints in play; constraints that are created outside the reference to the prototypical play method and inserted into play sessions on their own terms.

Moving forward, I will tackle constraints that are overwhelmingly intentional. While potential constraints include all the constraints that players adopt outside of the prototypical, many constraints are not adopted for creative reasons. Deciding to go to Bleak Falls Barrow before going to Riverwood in *Skyrim* could be a potential constraint, but it is often not a particularly interesting one to discuss. Players often adopt this potential constraint unintentionally when they encounter the game's first crossroads. The Oulipo were not known for their constraint of writing *The* before they wrote *A(n)* in a book, even though they often did. Similarly, I will focus on constraints with a clear intention behind them.

Additionally, I will defer to constraints that overarch entire play sessions over hyperspecific constraints. If going to Bleak Falls Barrow before Riverwood is an important *Skyrim* speedrunning technique, then I will be discussing the potential

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constraint of "finishing the main quest as quickly as possible", over the potential constraint of "going to Bleak Falls Barrow before Riverwood". Yet again, when discussing Perec's *La Disparation*, it is more often constructive to discuss Perec adopting a *lipogram in e* throughout the book rather than discussing specific word substitutions. Similarly, I will be focusing on constraints that inform as much of a play session as possible.

### [3.5.1] Normalising Potential Constraints

The language that game studies scholars have used to discuss non-prototypical play methods has often been phrased as transgressive, when adopting potential constraints is anything but. Adopting potential constraints happens in most play methods to varying degrees.

Jonas Heide Smith (2006) had argued that game studies scholars use four types of player models to analyse players. He stated that while these four models on occasion go along with each other, the final two models: the active player model and the rational player model necessitate being in opposition. He described the active player as the "player [...] engaged with the game in ways often not prescribed or predicted by the game designers." Meanwhile, he described the rational player as the "player [...] optimising her outcome within the game as defined by the objective goals" (2006, p. 24).

As Aarseth (2007) rightfully notes, Smith does not outright criticise the active player model, but he is clearly somewhat resistant towards game studies' research bias towards it. In his thesis, Smith argues that despite the fact that the majority of players opt towards rational play, not enough game studies research focuses on the rational player. On this basis, he highlights different research angles that engages rational play research.

I would argue that the active player and the rational player are not necessarily different players. This issue stems from discussing adopting potential constraints as "the unexpected, the complex and the resistant" (Smith, 2006, p. 39), or as "innovative, subversive, and transgressive play" (Aarseth, 2007, p. 182). In truth, players are adopting potential constraints during each and every play.



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The issue of transgressive play comes up time and time again to different extents. Flanagan had stated that she is looking at “the way in which participants engage in acts of subversion of many computer systems” (in Boluk and Lemieux, 2017). Earlier on, Leino also discussed how “players merely become aware of new ways around the restrictions imposed by the game artefact” (2009, p. 7). Meanwhile, David Myers (2010) discusses transgressive play as ‘bad play’, in opposition to the ‘good play’ gained from mastery of play. Firstly, discussing prototypical play methods as non-transgressive is unnecessarily privileging them. However, more important for this chapter, potential constraints do not necessary come as rejection of prototypical constraints, they can very often as a supplement or an enhancement to them.

### [3.5.2] Negotiating our Games

Players often adopt potential constraints not as a way of transgressing a system, but rather to create a personalised way of fitting into a game. Each player is unique, and games do not necessarily account for this uniqueness. Each player needs to find ways to adapt into the predefined spaces in games in their own way.

In **Subchapter 3.2.3**, I discussed procedural rhetoric as a means of upholding material constraints. While Sicart (2011) agrees that procedural rhetoric is a facet of expression within digital games, he continues by stating that “proceduralism often disregards the importance of play and players as activities that have creative, performative properties” (2011). Meaning is not only created through upholding material constraints.

Instead Sicart continues that players often “negotiate rules, [and] adopt new ones” (2011). While his use of “rules” still has some definitional ambiguity, Sicart does importantly point out that play does not only exist within the realms of instrumental play, such as procedural rhetoric, but also outside of it. He states that instrumental play leaves out “play as negotiation, play as appropriation, and play as expression” (2011).

In Sicart’s discussion, players do not fully understand their desired position in the game. Sicart’s instrumental play offers a prescribed placement which often works out, however the one-size-fits-all approach often leaves a bit to be desired. Potential constraints, as discussed by Sicart as play as negotiation, appropriation, and expression,

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allows players to make this prescribed placement work for them without necessarily actively rejecting the prototypical play method. As I play *Skyrim*, I find myself using shields less and less, because I do not enjoy engaging with enemies with such physical proximity. It is not because I think shields are a bad weapon / armour, or because I think I can realise a game's rhetorical argument better without shields. For me, I like adopting the shieldless potential constraint because it helps me make better sense of the game as myself.

On a similar note, Consalvo explains that "cheating can be an excellent path into studying the gameplay situation, because it lays bare player's frustrations and limitations" (2009, p. 415). While discussing why *World of Warcraft* (2003) players use MMOGlider, she states that players tried to avoid *World of Warcraft's* "carefully structured paths" (2009, p. 413) to do the things they find personally enjoyable within the later parts of this path, such as end game raiding. Players did not have an easy way to execute their desired constraints in the game, so they took matters into their own hands by installing a mod to get them there. Consalvo rightfully points out that players' frustrations were not necessarily with the initial path, but rather with their lack of control over it.

Yet even after installing this mod and gaining access to their desired constraints, players still added further potential constraints. For example, they attempted world-first bosses potential constraints, where players try to be part of the first team to defeat a particular enemy. Being first does not actively uphold or flout prototypical play method – it shares no relation to it. However, this potential constraint holds a lot of meaning to the players themselves. This group of players have a very specific understanding of what they want to do in *World of Warcraft*. In Consalvo's case, they achieved it through a combination of presets (an installed mod) and potential constraints (being the first to do something). Now that MMOGlider has been banned from *World of Warcraft*, this similar placement is often achieved only through new potential constraints, such as min-maxing mob kills (defeating the enemies which give the most experience), as well as getting carried (getting help defeat high experience enemies which you would not be able to defeat by yourself).

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Both Consalvo's *WoW* example, as well as my shieldless potential constraint in *Skyrim* show that even players often adopt potential constraints in order to be able to better uphold prototypical constraints. I was not enjoying playing *Skyrim* 'the right way' as much until I dropped my shield – the shieldless potential constraint enhanced my enjoyment of the prototypical constraints because it reflected my general aversion to close personal contact. *WoW* players adopt min-max potential constraints that lead to end-game content, as well as world-first boss potential constraints when they reach the end-game content to stretch their enjoyment of the prototypical constraints further.

### [3.5.3] Enhanced belonging

In the previous section I argued that players adopt potential constraints so that they can fit better in their chosen game. Moreover, once they have figured out their preferred placing, they add further potential constraints to replicate their favourite positionality as best they can. Then what? Players clearly do not leave games as soon as they fit in: while turning a hostile world into an inhabitable one is a common formula, players still like to linger a bit longer once the world is calm. Potential constraints go beyond solely creating a belonging to a particular game. Players adopt potential constraints to renew their interest in the game they are inhabiting.

One of Van Vught and Glas' (2017) types of free play was going native, in which players spend so much time within a game that they can be considered part of its culture: they know all the ins and outs of the system, they are likely the ones to call for patches and updates, and they have largely exhausted its prototypical play method. When players go native, they start flouting prototypical constraints not because they want to transgress or subvert anything, but rather because they know very well what potential constraints they want to adopt. For example, routing a speedrun necessitates native knowledge. A router might be in a situation where glitching through a door might save some time. Therefore, they flout that material constraint to achieve their desired potential constraint – finding the most optimal route. However, they might eventually find an alternate pathing which no longer requires using this door glitch. In which case, they would no longer flout that material constraint, as their play method hinges on the potential constraint, rather than resistance to the prototypical constraints.

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Whitson (2010) follows this line of thought as she argues that games' instability is a key aspect in their active governance. She argues that mastering gameplay necessitates testing a game's boundaries. Going native requires at the very least pushing the material constraints to their limits. She argues that emergent gameplay, being players adopting their own potential constraints, comes from the newly found knowledge created through pushing further and further. Meanwhile Sicart makes a great case for potential constraints as a way of figuring out the unknown, Whitson sees them as a way of learning the knowable.

Van Vught and Glas (2017)'s explorative play offers a counter perspective to the mastery oriented theorisation of going native. Just like going native, in explorative play, returning daily to *Animal Crossing* (2001) is building an understanding through repeated continuous exposure, even though there might not be much to master. Potential constraints are added to daily play sessions not to master the game, but rather to experience further play methods in a game with very weak prototypical imperative constraints. Is there any imperative constraint encouraging me to redesign my house? Not necessarily. However, a native might adopt and readopt this potential constraint, whether to be able to share new creations with their friends, create narrative situations, or simply to create something aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, *Animal Crossing's* prototypical constraints encourage this explorative play, as items to redesign houses are locked behind time mechanics, making the redesigning potential constraint more rewarding over time. As more items are unlocked, retrying the old potential constraint renders new results.

#### **[3.5.4] Constraints with Potential**

In the previous subsections, I have been looking at potential constraints through which players are trying to make their play more meaningful, which is not necessarily a new avenue in game studies research. Consalvo had described games as "a contextual, dynamic activity, which players must engage with for meaning to be made. Furthermore, it is only through that engagement that *the game is made to mean*" (2009, p. 411, emphasis mine). Equally, we earlier saw Malaby (2007) state that "One of the first things we must recognize is that games are processual. Each game is an ongoing

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process. As it is played, it always contains the potential for *generating new practices and new meanings*” (2007, p. 8, emphasis mine).

However, earlier on in this chapter, as well as in the previous chapter, I have also shown how (for some Oulipians) constraints are created simply because they can be created. They created constraints because they wanted to make constraints, above resolving a work through a final text. There were occasions where they also created constraints because they wanted to produce meaningful output, significant analysis, or individual challenge. However, it did not always have to have a reason.

Sometimes players create potential constraints for the sake of their own creation. Not to make sense of the game, not to enhance a personal belonging, and not to further propagate previously exhausted game methods. Play belongs to the player, and as I have argued and I will further argue, constraint creation does not need any explicit meaning or direction to be worth researching.

Potential constraints help deal with this issue. Potential constraints allow us to divorce the reason why players play from the methods they take. If we approach play from a reason based perspective, then we are very likely to overlook play which does not fit into the reasons we set up. For example, it would be hard to catalogue a play method involving cataloguing *Skyrim*'s flora and fauna, or a play method focused around chasing a rabbit for as long as possible in *Skyrim*, because the reason might not be as clear-set as speedrun or min-maxing play methods.

### [3.6] Flouting Constraints

#### [3.6.1] Why Flouting

##### Grice and Constraints

In this thesis, I have discussed players acknowledging and maintaining constraints as **upholding constraints**. Meanwhile, I have discussed players acknowledging but going against constraints as **flouting constraints**. Before I delve further into how game studies theorists have been discussing flouting constraints, it is important to briefly explain how I arrived at the word itself.

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While this thesis is not dealing with language philosophy, I have found Paul Grice's cooperative principle useful in discussing constraints adoption. Within language philosophy, Grice (1975), detailed the cooperative principle in which he stated that in order for a conversation to be successful, speakers unknowingly decide to cooperate by following four maxims: the maxim of quality, where they decide to make sure that the information is true; the maxim of quantity, where they make the conversation as informative as required; the maxim of relation, where they state things that pertain to the conversation; and the maxim of manner where speakers try to be as fluid as possible.

While Grice did not prescribe that people should speak like this, he found it interesting that people often do. However, he also noted that people do not always follow these maxims. On occasion, they either violate these maxims or they flout them. When speakers violate a maxim, the listener would not be able to follow the conversation. For example, if someone attractive asks "Do you think I am pretty?" and I answer "banana", each maxim is violated – the information does not have a truth function, it lacks quantity, it is irrelevant to the conversation and there is no appropriate answer. The other party is probably confused, perhaps even a bit worried, and the conversation ends. However, when speakers flout a maxim, their aim is to have the listener still be able to follow the conversation despite the maxims not being upheld. For example, if someone attractive asks me "Do you think I am pretty?" and I answer "You're an utter lost cause," while smiling, I would be flouting the maxims of quality and manner, yet the original speaker will most likely still understand my meaning – that I am using sarcasm to say that they are attractive. In fact, the further I flout the maxim of quality, the more likely the other person is to understand my meaning.

#### **Conversational Play**

Grice's terms work quite well to discuss player activity in games. Material constraints are not conversations, yet when I **flout material constraints**, it likewise stems from me knowing the maxims of a specific material constraints, deciding to go against it, yet still expecting a processual response from the material. For example, if I glitch through the mountains in *Skyrim*, I am flouting a prototypical material constraint. I know that the prototypical play method intends mountains to be impermeable, yet I perform the action

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anyway, and I am greeted by *Skyrim*'s skybox, half obscured by the backside of the mountains' textures. However, if I (knowingly) play *Skyrim* using a disconnected controller, I would be **violating a material constraint**. I cannot reasonably expect a response from the game material under any play method – the conversation would end.

Equally, imperative constraints work in the same way. If I know the maxims of a specific imperative constraint, decide to go against it, yet still maintain a relatively unscathed prescribed experience, then I would be **flouting imperative constraints**. For example, after leaving Helgen in *Skyrim*, I was told to go to Whiterun. However, I decided to go towards Riften instead. I am (minorly) flouting the prototypical imperative constraint set through the main quest to experience something else, whether it is a different imperative constraints out of sequence (such as starting the Thieves Guild quest early) or upholding a potential constraint (cataloguing the Black Marsh' unique fauna). It is trickier to **violate an imperative constraint**, since this would entail making a decision that would render a prescribed experience untenable through a non-material action. Standing still in a corner in *Skyrim* could be as close as we can get. There is no reasonable way to expect the proliferation of further constraints. The 'conversation' with the rest of the play method would effectively end.

Finally, when I am know and adopt the potential constraints within others' play method, decide to go against them, and expect arbiters of that play method to respond to these constraint amendments, then I am **flouting potential constraints**. For example, if my friends and I all decided to race through *Skyrim*'s main-quest as a pugilist, and I use dragon shouts (special abilities in *Skyrim* activated by shouting) during the race, then my friends and I would have to see where this stands in the race's terms. Pugilism clearly excludes weapons, shields and magic, but where does shouting stand? Are dragon shouts fine if they do not inflict damage that does not stem from my palms? Yet through this entire conversation, there is no question as to whether I still raced.

**Violating potential constraints** happens when I play in a way in which my potential constraints no longer fit within a communally upheld play method – they end any possible conversation. For example, if in the middle of a speedrun I decide to slow down, I am clearly no longer following the communally agreed upon potential constraints. I would be violating the maxim of manner within that community: if I

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submit a 55 hour *Skyrim* any% speedrun to speedrun.com, it would not be put on the leaderboards. It would be discarded. It can no longer be understood as upholding a conversation with the speedrun play method.

### **Sole Arbitration**

The above constraints are all conversational: players are either responding to the prototypical play method or communally agreed upon play methods. This said, constraints are often created by us, for us, and entirely upheld by us. I am the sole arbiter of whether any shift in constraints I create myself are

1. not a shift at all
2. a newly adopted / modified constraint; or
3. flouting my own constraint.

For example, if I decide to beat *Skyrim* using a pugilism potential constraint, but pick up brass knuckles halfway through, then I am the judge of whether this is acceptable

1. I can believe that brass knuckles have always been acceptable extensions of the pugilist's hand
2. I can say that from then on, I would be doing a hand-based personal constraint, rather than a pugilist constraint, since I had no idea brass knuckles existed in *Skyrim* and I believe my intention was largely to punch things, or
3. I can believe that I broke my own potential constraints by using brass knuckles, and I would have to start over (from the beginning or a previous save point).

However, I am equally the arbiter of whether the shift in constraints also matches my perception of that same constraint. I might judge that using brass knuckles flouts my own potential constraint, but arbitrate that breaking it once is fine, because I do not want to judge my current play session as invalid. I can also judge that brass knuckles are an extension of the pugilist's hand, but find myself bored of this personal constraint, so I



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arbitrate that I have flouted my potential constraint and I might as well continue doing it from then on. Sartre, a French philosopher, would argue that I would be then playing in bad faith (1943): instead of accepting the consequences of my judged choices, I arbitrate that it is better to continue playing inauthentically by convincing myself that my arbitration is the only reasonable course of action.

Grice and other linguists have covered why speakers flout conversational maxims, such as sarcasm, exaggeration and humour. In the following section, while I will not exhaust every reason players flout constraints, I will look at how previous game studies research has already provided comparative points that would be worth looking at.

### [3.6.2] Against Transgression

#### The Implied Player

In **Section 3.5.1**, I have already shown how Aarseth (2007) has chipped into this conversation. He notes that while the “implied player” gives us a grounding into understanding the player’s material existence within a game-space, this is not sufficient in explaining what a player actively does within a game. He states that players often perform things that are not “explicitly forbidden”, but would not be part of the game “if the game designers had been able to predict them” (2007, p. 185).

He gives a few examples, one of which being the death of Lord British in *Ultima Online* (1997). In this example, Lord British is a recurring character in the *Ultima* franchise. Finding a way to kill Lord British in each iteration had been a running joke, with *Ultima Online* being no exception. Killing Lord British in other *Ultima* games is possible while playing prototypically as there were clear processual actions players could take that would lead to Lord British’s death. *Ultima Online* was different – Lord British had an immortality tag hardcoded into him. However, after one particular update, Lord British’ immortality tag was mistakenly toggled off. Rainz, the first player to attempt to kill him after this update, killed him with great ease.

This particular example is interesting because the *Ultima* franchise has a running kill Lord British play method. It usually involved upholding imperative constraints in a very specific way. However, in *Ultima Online* this play method could only be realised by

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flouting a material constraint at a very specific time. Rainz's kill would never be possible again in *Ultima Online*. Previous *Ultima* franchise games set interludic imperative constraints that players could not easily realise. Flouting the material constraint allowed them to finally do so.

This example somewhat contradicts his own statement. Game designers could absolutely predict that players would try to kill Lord British – they set up this imperative constraint through interludic knowledge. What designers could not predict is when and how it happened. Killing Lord British would require flouting material constraints. However, considering the general community response, players saw killing Lord British as a matter of *when*, rather than a matter of *if*. Lord British' death in *Ultima Online* is a rare example of a prototypical play method which requires flouting material constraints.

Barry Atkins (2007) also brings up *a priori* knowledge of gameplay to discuss players flouting imperative constraints. He states that players approach new games with a feeling of nostalgia. However, while players might enter a game expecting the prototypical constraints to match their desired play method, this might not be the case, leading players to flout constraints instead, to match the material and imperative constraints that they had envisaged.

Aarseth gives a few other personal examples of his observations in *Oblivion* (2006). In the first event, he witnessed two NPCs fighting it out to the death, despite this not being in any way a scripted event. In the second event, he replicated an item duplication trick where swapping out an arrow mid-draw with another item created an additional instance of that item. Aarseth would argue that both of these are examples of designer oversights, in which he would be right. However, I would argue that only the second one involves flouting material constraints, as it is the only one where his play method actively causes a result. Rather than discussing material intentions through an “implied player”, I think it is more valuable to discuss what players are actually doing (personal play methods) in comparison to what players were told to do (prototypical play methods). There is no way to argue that random NPC battles are not intentional material processes. However, in **Subchapters 3.2** and **3.3**, I have shown how there are clear indications on how players are told to play – and item duplication would fail most of those indications.

### **Transgressive Play**

Earlier on, I explained how Van Vught and Glas (2017) built up from Aarseth's work on free play, as they advocate for "exploring, pushing, bending, deviating from and transgressing" (2017, p. 220). They went on to describe this as "gaming" a game, as opposed to playing it. Other game scholars have also come up with similar formulations (Stenros, 2015, *playing with the game*; Leino, 2010 *playing with the game*). Van Vught and Glas divided free play into three distinct categories: explorative play, transgressive play, and going native.

First of all, I do not necessarily agree with their distinction between playing and *gaming* a game – it seems counter productive to discuss free play as a type of play, then describe it as “gaming” over “playing”. I have also already stated my objection to the notion of “transgressive play” in **Section 3.5.2**. However, Van Vught and Glas’ tripartite division is still useful as it is amongst an uncommon class of research which centres itself on player’s chosen play, rather than what the material affords. I already looked at explorative play and going native in **Section 3.5.3**, discussing both as using potential constraints to further exhaust a game. In this subchapter, I will look at their transgressive play.

In Van Vught and Glas’ transgressive free play, they include adopting play methods that were not necessarily intended by the game developers, such as rocket jumping, just like Aarseth, which I have already addressed. Van Vught and Glas also include cheating through presets, such as editing a game's files and installing mods. This goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Julian Kücklich (2005), Hanna Wirman (2009) and Peter Nelson (2018) tackle this topic in great detail. They show how presets also have communal negotiation, and often involve unacknowledged labour, both points that are also prevalent in constraint creation, which I will address again in **Chapter 7**.

Van Vught and Glas also include pre-encoded cheat codes, which can be argued as flouting imperative constraints: I would argue that inserting the contra code in *Contra* (1988), or similar early game console commands, could be argued as flouting an imperative constraint, as there was considerable effort in obfuscation this type of access.

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However, games like *The Sims* (2000) are clearly accounting for variable play methods through the ‘motherlode’ command, which gives players access to a lot more money they would not otherwise have. *The Sims* prototypical play method includes house building and interior design, which are much harder to access without such pre-encoded cheat codes. In specific circumstances, *The Sims* prototypical play method encourages flouting material constraints.

Finally, they also include disobeying socially negotiated play etiquette, such as by influencing virtual markets in MMORPGs, or by farming new players in a player versus player (PvP) areas in similar games as transgressive play. These examples are interesting as players are flouting constraints in second order play methods. In online games, play methods are formed beyond the prototypical play method. End User License Agreements (or EULA), as well as proper play etiquette, are codified outside the suggestions of the encoded. In this case, Van Vught and Glas’ transgression is not towards the prototypical, but towards these communally created play methods. Any ‘transgression’ here is towards other players’ newly minted play methods, rather than the conceptual prototypical one.

Earlier on, I have already stated my appreciation that Van Vught and Glas centre play methods as the centre of their research method. I would argue that my larger issue with Van Vught and Glas’ work lies using attitudes to describe player choices, rather than breaking down the choices players are making and how they realise them. For example, glitch hunting could be an example of explorative free play, as players look at every nook and cranny for something new. However, they might be looking for something new in order take advantage of other players, in which case it becomes transgressive play. Meanwhile, if mastering this ‘glitch’ becomes an essential part of a play method, such as rocket jumping did, it could be argued as going native.

Rather than trying to place glitches as an example of any of Van Vught and Glas’ three types of play, I argue it is much more productive to look at how players use glitches to realise their specific play methods; whether it is routing or speedrunning, finding belong or min-maxing. It is much more important to explore how players play, before we start making claims as to why.

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The move away from transgression, and towards flouting allows us to better discuss the relationship between different players and the game they are inhabiting. In transgression, there is no distinction between transgressing a material, by abusing the horse mountain glitch in *Skyrim*, transgressing an imperative, by illicitly skipping a part of a quest, and transgressing other players, by abusing a glitch in an online game to their detriment. By discussing flouting, I can dismiss any agency being set on the *game as object*. The only thing you can flout is something players set up, whether Whitson's (2010) shepherds creating the prototypical play method, communal constraints other players set up, or even the constraints you placed on your own play.

### [3.6.3] Flouting as a Rich Practice

There are many other reasons why players might want to flout specific constraints. Flanagan (2006) sees flouting material constraints as not necessarily communicative, but rather as part and parcel of the play condition. She states that "Play is a social act, and computerised play makes actual technologies into "locations" for play [which allows players to] perform and play with, in, and on them" (in Boluk and Lemieux, 2017).

Boluk and Lemieux rightfully point out that players might also flout material constraints in order to be able to play. They explain that disabled people will often employ alternative control methods from the ones prescribed by the digital space they inhabit – for example, on-screen readers are being used even within 3D games to help the less-sighted navigate their chosen game. Controllers with macro-buttons (buttons that perform more than one command at a given time) also help users with impaired limb mobility. In these cases, flouting material constraints is a necessity just to exist in a hostile digital environment.

Authors such as Consalvo (2007, 2009) and Taylor (2006) had also rightfully pointed out that prototypical constraints may be set at the expense of players. Rather than making the experience more engaging, imperative constraints can be made, for example, to artificially extend play beyond the desired amount, which in turns makes players adopt constraints as a way out of it. For example, *World of Warcraft* (2003) heavily

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gates content, in order to limit people from end-game content, to maintain a healthy digital market, as well as to pace player's 'sense of achievement'. Practices such as account boosting are a clear example of flouted constraints: account boosters flout the secondary-level EULA play method, account buyers flout the imperative constraints dictated by gameplay progression. Both flout constraints to take control of their own play. As play becomes more commerce-facing, constrained play as resistance becomes more important and more expressive.

The word 'flouting' might not completely take away the negative connotation that exists with not 'playing the right way'. However, it should hopefully discuss this relationship's boundaries. When players flout constraints, they are only breaking other players rules. Sticking to other players' rules is often a good thing, as it sets up common experiences that players can share. However, when these rules come at a players expense, there is definite value in renegotiating this intra-player relationship, by creating your own play method or by flouting the existing play methods.

### **[3.7] A Couple Clarifications**

In the above subchapters, I have looked at game studies scholarship to help me place and analyse my constraint based model. I have defined the three types of constraints: material, imperative and potential. I have introduced play methods, including the prototypical play method. Finally, I have also explained the difference between upholding, flouting and violating constraints. All these topics have been compared to previous conversations, and argued for based on their strengths and merits.

This said, there are still a couple of issues that I have briefly made reference to but I have not elaborated on. Firstly, how to frame constraints, and secondly, the communal role behind making constraints. In this subchapter, I will analyse these topics a bit further and place them into the field's discourse.

### [3.7.1] Framing Constraints

As I mentioned in the beginning of **Subchapter 3.5**, each play method has a whole host of adopted constraints. However, I will be focusing on the 1) constraints players actively and intentionally uphold, or flout, and 2) adopted constraints that overarch an entire play method.

For the sake of an example, I decided that I want to blind speedrun Skyrim's subquest *MS13 S60 O40*, starting from the blacksmith in Whiterun. The prototypical play method would involve me upholding the material constraints of using my WASD keys to walk, upholding the material constraint of opening doors using the E key, upholding the material constraint of interacting with Lucan Valerius using the E key (again), upholding the imperative constraint of accepting the quest, upholding the imperative constraint of even going into that house in the first place, and many more. By talking about the prototypical play method, we can implicitly discuss all of these without having to unnecessarily move into their specifics.

However, it should be immediately clear that in the speedrunning subquest *MS13 S60 O40* play method, I am foregrounding the potential constraint of "going as fast as possible." One of the ways I can go as fast as I can is by jumping sideways, as it covers a larger amount of distance in a shorter amount of time, which means that I am (arguably) flouting material and imperative constraints. However, I found a quicker way – If I press the tilde key, and then write "setstage ms13 60", I would automatically finish that subquest. So the speedrunning subquest *MS13 S60 O60* play method became a typing challenge. I did it in three seconds (from the moment I gained control after loading the save state). I am quite happy with this world record in this speedrunning subcategory. However, I did not find speedrun typing enjoyable, so I changed my play method to "go as fast as possible without using the console." I named this the consoleless speedrun subquest *MS13 S60 O40* play method

In this short exercise, there are three play methods.

1. Prototypical play method
2. Speedrun *MS13 S60 O40*
3. Consoleless *MS13 S60 O40*

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In **Subchapter 3.4**, as well as in the beginning of this explanation, I explained that the prototypical hosts a large array of constraints. However, what is important about the prototypical play method is not the constraints that I adopted, but that I could adopt those constraints readily and uncritically. The prototypical play method sets itself as a backdrop for the constraints that I actively adopt in further play methods.

Equally, when discussing the second and third play method, I could once again reiterate all the constraints I did not actively adopt. However, what sets these play methods apart are the newly adopted / flouted constraints. In the speedrun subquest MS13 S60 O40 play method, what sets this play method apart is the active choice to adopt the potential constraint of “going fast”. In the consoleless speedrun subquest MS13 S60 O40 play method, what sets this play method apart is the active choice to not allow flouting a specific imperative constraint by using the console.

While there is a temptation to fall into discussing specific actions, this would be missing the point. Constraints should be there to celebrate how players play in creative ways, turning a game into a playful canvas. Pointillism does not discuss each dot, but the conglomeration of dots on a canvas. Novel writing does not discuss each word, but how each word ultimately falls after another in an entire paragraph, chapter, or book. If we are to productively discuss play methods, then the constraints should be leading towards overall methods, not specific one-time events.

### [3.7.2] Communal Constraints

I have referred to Perec’s quote on puzzle-making a number of times, here is one final time. Perec had stated

“puzzling is not a solitary game: every move the puzzler makes, the puzzler has made before. Every piece the puzzler picks up, and picks up again, and studies and strokes, every blunder and every insight, each hope and each discouragement have all been designed, calculated and decided by the other.”  
(Perec, 2009, p. xviii)

Arnott (2012) had taken this quote to refer to designer intentions, seeing puzzle games’ procedural rhetoric as complementary to this quote. This interpretation is entirely valid,



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especially considering the ending of the quote, when Perec states that the puzzle has been “designed, calculated and decided” by the puzzlemaker. However, there is also cause to see the puzzlemaker as an exhaustive constraint player, testing all the constraints possible, rather than a prescriptivist coder, creating the pre-encoded. The Oulipo shared their constraints with each other for this very reason – they were curious to see the many ways in which a puzzle could fit together. Likewise, players share their constraints with each other to find the many ways that they can play.

In **Subchapter 3.4**, I argued that when players enter a digital space with little *a priori* knowledge, they usually inadvertently uphold the prototypical play method. The material facilitates its upholding, and the expressed intentions consistently suggest its upholding. However, players also uphold the prototypical play method because they know that other players have found this play method, generally upheld it, and found the experience it created amenable. A community intuitively forms around the prototypical play method, as Nguyen (2019) also argued.

Sicart (2009) discusses this within the context of game ethics. He states that the first level of the ludic hermeneutic circle involves the player as the zero-subject; while they do not enter the game as a blank state, as they are still beings within a cultural context, their first level of ludic interpretation stems from their own being, their individual values and their presence within a very specific type of game. However, the second hermeneutic level is the player’s realisation that they belong to a larger community of players, where even a single-player game exists within a community with shared values. He argues this is the reason why players do not cheat in single player games: it is ethically wrong within this second layer of ludic hermeneutics. He also argues it is the reason why players try to complete 100% of a game; it has value within the second layer of ludic hermeneutics.

This second hermeneutic level does not need to remain within the prototypical play method. Players create communities to go along with their play methods, or join communities from where they adopted their play methods. Consalvo (2009) also discusses this aspect in terms of gaming capital: borrowing from Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, Consalvo argues that gaining and expressing this capital helps delineate people that exist within specific communities. While gaming capital includes many

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knowledge bases such as paratextual knowledge (knowing references made within a game), contextual knowledge (knowing the lore of a game), as well as metatextual knowledge (knowing about lots of games in general), it also includes playing games *the right way*: adopting the dominant play method within specific play communities.

For example, Consalvo discusses early magazines such as *Nintendo Power* instructing players how to play as a form of gaming capital. Nowadays, metapicking<sup>8</sup> and netdecking<sup>9</sup> are both examples of gaming capital gained through cultural consumption, which in turn collectively influence players' adopted constraints. In a previous paper, I had also argued that having knowledge of the necessary gaming capital required to repeat specific communally negotiated constraints, while failing to consistently execute these constraints would label you a *tryhard*, as you would be judged to be emulating a community you do not belong to, causing you to hypercorrect your adopted constraints (Harrington, 2015).

As groups of players start adopting constraints that they enjoy, they often adopt these constraints and then forget about them. I have never told anyone about my *Skyrim* crash play constraint until this thesis. However, players often share these constraints within their communities: they explain them, they formalise them, they organise around them. The Oulipo have mathematicians to calculate the logic behind constraints, as well as a dedicated labyrinth scholar in Rosenstiehl, who were not even close to the most prolific users of their own constraints – they preferred making constraints for others to use. So do these play communities: some players find more joy in creating constraints for others to use than using them themselves; as not only does it create play sessions they enjoy seeing, but it also creates communities of like-minded people all of whom are invested in proliferating new ways to play.

Some communal constraints are specific to a game. For example, players attempting to jump on top of dragons is a very *Skyrim* unique set of constraints. While dragons exist in other games, the material allowances in *Skyrim* make employing this potential constraint very particular to this game. Other communal constraints span across franchises, or games related to each other in some way or another. For example, before

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8 Metapicking can be briefly described as choosing the best heroes or champions in MOBA games, in order to win as many games as possible.

9 Netdecking can be briefly described as choosing the best deck in trading card games, in order to win as many games as possible.

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players tried using their horses to climb mountains in *Skyrim*, they had already enjoyed this experience in *Oblivion* due to the two games' shared engines. Finally, some communal constraints can span across games at large. There are entire websites built around the premise of speedrunning every game possible, including *Skyrim*.

### [3.8] From Method to Play Method

#### [3.8.1] Revising the Chapter

In this chapter, I have delineated the constraint language I shall be using in the rest of my thesis. I have explained three different types of constraints: firstly, there are **material constraints**, which are the constraints players adopt in response to the material reality imposed by their chosen game. Players can uphold material constraints: not passing through a mountain in *Skyrim* is generally upholding a material constraint. Players can also flout them: using the console to remove collision so as to pass through mountains would generally be flouting a material constraints.

Secondly, there are **imperative constraints**, which are the constraints players adopt in response to the conventions and conversations that have already been preset. Players can likewise uphold them: they can slay dragons in *Skyrim*. Or likewise, they can flout them: they can hide from dragons in a tavern waiting for them to go away.

Finally, there are **potential constraints**, where players realise that they are their own personal tailors for their play experiences. Whether these potential constraints are subtle, such as choosing to only use a bow and arrow in *Skyrim*; or more determinative of our play, such as making a catalogue of all the flora and fauna within *Skyrim*, they all stem from players' desire to design their own play methods. Potential constraints can likewise be upheld, such as playing a speedrun play method as fast as possible; or flouted, such as playing a speedrun play method while taking a few breaks in the middle.

I have argued that players adopt different constraints to form **play methods** – a conglomeration of constraints combined together for a specific play objective. There are many reasons why players adopt specific play methods: to create a standard when there

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is none, to fit better in a game that is not particularly welcoming, to make more out of a game that they have exhausted, and many more. I will continue exploring these reasons in the following chapters.

I have argued that each game comes with its own **prototypical play method**: a play method devised from what is amenable in the game's material and established convention. Not only is this the play method that a lot of players generally adopt, it is also very often the play method that future play methods are derived from. The prototypical play method allows players to focus on what is new in their play method, whether they are adopting new constraints or flouting previously established constraints.

### [3.8.2] Further Chapters Breakdown

In the Oulipo's first manifesto (1973), Le Lionnais noted that the Oulipo's works could be divided into two: *anoulipo* (analysis + Oulipo), which focuses on discovery of past texts that could be seen as having had Oulipian constraints, and *synthoulipo* (synthesis + Oulipo), which focuses on invention of Oulipian constraints. In the following chapters, I will not be inventing constraints in the *synthoulipian* tradition. I will be looking at previously established play methods that use interesting constraints, as in the *anoulipian* tradition. The following chapters will come as a set of three, each detailing a different reason why players create constraints, or even create using previously established constraints.

In this vein, I will be following van Vught and Glas' (2017) precedent, by setting up different reasons why players might play. However, there are a couple of essential differences. Firstly, as I pointed out earlier in **section 3.6.2**, while acknowledging why players use constraints to shape their experiences is valuable, looking at the different methods they use is equally important. Secondly, my categorisations will have a different focus. While their work was focused on play as a research method, I am focused on play as a creative method. My categories are chosen to reflect this. However, as with van Vught and Glas' work, these lists will have overlap and they will not be exhaustive.

### Chapter 3: Constraining Play

In **Chapter 4**, I will look at how players explore games. First, I will discuss how players learn about their chosen game. This includes reconsidering their previous knowledge, exploring knowledge that emerges from playing for a substantial amount of time, and exploring how game changes affect previous knowledge. Secondly, I will discuss players mapping games' boundaries. This includes power gamers optimising the prototypical play method, along with routers optimising tailor made constrained play. Finally, I will discuss players exploring games for exploration's sake. This includes looking for specific objects such as soda machines and dogs, digital flaneurs, and how their existence in a game affects its process.

In **Chapter 5**, I will look at iterative play. I will start by looking at speedrunning, as I argue that play communities are already very aware that there are specific methods behind their play, and speedrunning makes for a compelling study. I will follow this up by looking at play-styles, sandbox games' creative creations, post-exhaustive play methods as well as competitive gaming as examples of iteration that complement previous play methods. After this, I will look at flouting our presence in the game space, challenging imperative constraints' rhetorics, as well as griefing in multiplayer games as examples of iteration that disrupts previous play methods. Finally, I will look at iterative play which complements or disrupts play while it is being set up, rather than during the play method. Here, I will discuss controller and hardware as active choices in the creation and adoption of specific play methods.

In **Chapter 6**, I will look at expressive play. I will start by looking at transformative play, where players intend to elicit profound changes through the play methods they adopt. In this subchapter I will start by looking at academic examples of transformative play, such as veganism play methods. However, I will also look at examples of players creating play methods which are directly meant to be transformative, by advocating for specific political positions through play. I will follow this up by looking at play methods which were intended to be critical, but ended up having transformative impetus anyway, where I will look at a couple interesting case studies of varying intensities, including ethics of harm discussed through no-kill and pacifist play methods. I will then conclude this chapter by looking at players using play methods not to transform, but to express themselves. I will look at a few different examples, including gender, nationalism and sociocultural expression.

## **CHAPTER 4: EXPLORATIVE PLAY**

In this chapter, I will be looking at examples of constraints that revolve around exploration. As with each chapter, this list is unlikely to be exhaustive, and the category of “exploration” could be claimed to be somewhat arbitrary. I have chosen exploration as the first category for two reasons. Firstly, it places a variety of radically different play practices that still merge under a common theme: players wanting to learn more about the game they now inhabit. Secondly, it is also a category that van Vught and Glas (2018) had chosen for their play research methods. Choosing a similar category will show how discussing play in terms of constraints can produce necessary distinctions that would not be possible under a themed play-based analysis. Exploration can happen in many different ways: each way attracts its own types of players, includes unique constraints, and produces distinct play methods for the communities that adopt it.

First, I will looking at players trying to develop as part of their chosen play method. First, there is initial exploration: players enter games with partial knowledge. In this section, I will look at the constraints players adopt to negotiate the knowledge they have with their knowledge they need to exist within the game with minimal friction. Secondly, there is emergent exploration: players explore game qualities that do not happen at the initial entry. Constraints are created to better explore situations that are contingent on time, on action, and on varying circumstances. I look at the ways players have dealt with these changes. Finally, there is renegotiated exploration: despite players sufficiently exploring a game, sometimes these games change. In the age of updates and patches, renegotiated exploration is not only a common type of exploration, but often a welcome one. In this section, I will show how players explore games’ shifting boundaries when these boundaries are immaterial to players’ input.

I will then look at players adopting more constraints to further push their current constraints. This will include power gamers, players that focus on maximising the maximums and minimising the minimums of their adopted play method. I will look at examples of power gaming in both single and multiplayer games, considering each of their unique constraints. This chapter will also include knowledge producers, such as routers, labbers, theorycrafters and others. While power gamers explore boundaries in

## Chapter 4: Explorative play

order to maximise themselves, these knowledge producers often explore these same boundaries in order to make future play methods for specific play communities possible.

Finally, I will look at players adopting constraints that have little active consideration for the prototypical play method, whether by upholding or flouting it. First, I will look at a few play methods where players adopt constraints leading to a sedentary play-method, and the resistance they encountered to such play. I will also look at players adopting constraints to explore game aspects that do not make active reference to pre-existing play methods, such as looking for soda machines or trying to pet dogs.

### [4.1] The Multiple Steps to Learning

In this subchapter, I will look at constraints and play methods where players explore because they want to learn more about a game. I have divided this section into three parts: **initial exploration**, **emergent exploration**, and **renegotiated exploration** which I have explained above. By the end of this subchapter, I hope to have shown how learning through exploration is part and parcel of all kinds of play. In the first section especially, I will show how prototypical play methods can encourage learning through exploration. However, in the following sections, I will show how not only does exploration not have to belong to the prototypical play method, it often ignores it or actively flouts some of its constraints. Exploration often stands as its own constraints, which players readily adopt, readily define, and readily play.

#### [4.1.1] Initial Exploration

##### Exploring the Prototypical

As I discussed in **Subchapter 3.4**, games often come with their own prototypical play method: a play method that players deduce from the material's immediate allowances and the conversations established through game's means for suggestions. While the prototypical play method is often readily available, it might not come as immediately obvious. Some players might lack specific knowledge, some players might be unsure

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whether their knowledge relates to that specific game. Players often adopt potential constraints that aim to explore how to generally uphold the prototypical play method.

In **Section 3.3.2**, I have shown how players adopt constraints based on transludic knowledge. For example, the recently created Twitter page *Is Something Behind the Waterfall* (2020) chronicles players checking in-game waterfalls for secrets, which they often have. This potential constraint is only adopted because previous games have established that there might be something worth exploring. Checking waterfalls is often part and parcel of the prototypical play method. It also entails a prototypical set of constraints which occasionally encourage flouting the same material constraints that the prototypical play method had already set up, as players have to find a way to clip through waterfalls in order to reach hidden areas. There is a game design convention that creates a pattern of play, which is complex but precedented.

I have also shown how players adopt constraints based on interludic knowledge. As Consalvo (2009, p. 410) notes, players do not move into a franchised game not knowing what to expect. If I pick up a *quake*-like, I fully expect that bunny-hopping and rocket-jumping are upholdable material constraints. Players set their own potential constraints upon entering a game to make sure that their transludic and interludic knowledge still holds true.

As I have shown in **Section 3.2.3** especially, this early exploration of the prototypical constraints also presents itself through games across a singular platform or its peripherals. For example, across most PS4 games, the PS4 symbol in the middle of the PS4 controller between the two analog sticks will pause the game. Equally, the left analog stick normally controls avatar movement, while the right analog stick would control secondary movement schemes, such as head control, camera control, or aim control. Before players start routinely upholding these prototypical material constraints, they often adopt short lived potential constraints to confirm whether their expected knowledge holds true.

### **Extending the Exploration**



## Chapter 4: Explorative play

The prototypical play methods often account for the explorative constraints that players will adopt alongside them. The prototypical play method becomes a method acquired through play, rather than only through pre-established knowledge. For example, *Skyrim* (2011) has four means of traversal between distant in-game locations. Firstly, players can walk: this takes time, but it also allows players to explore the game's virtual space in great detail. Secondly, there are carriages: these are placed outside of every major city in the game, cost a nominal amount of money, but only take player to other cities. Thirdly, there is fast travelling: this takes players to any location that they have travelled to before. Finally, there is the console, where by pressing the tilde key and typing "coc <ID>", where <ID> is anywhere that the players want to go, they can teleport to any location in the game: this is generally hidden from players' view and implicitly discouraged, as it gravely flouts the prototypical play method. The game developers could have immediately unlocked every location for fast travelling, or extended carriages to any location. They could have also disobfuscated the console commands. They did neither. By encouraging players to adopt a specific prototypical constraint (walk from place to place) in the early stages of their play, the players are then further encouraged to adopt more prototypical constraints, such as performing side quests and slaying errant dragons, turning a single prototypical constraint into an overarching prototypical play method.

In an interview with Christian Nutt (2012), Koichi Hayashida, who has directed and developed various games in the *Super Mario* franchise, makes an interesting allusion to literature, by comparing level design with *kishotenketsu*. *Kishotenketsu* describes one method of narrative formation in East Asian literature: *kiku* (起句), the introduction; *shoku* (承句), the development; *tenku* (転句), the twist; and *kekku* (結句), the conclusion. As Mark Brown (2015) later further explains, Koichi Hayashida explains that he approaches introducing imperative constraints in the same way. Brown uses the example of *Cakewalk Flip* 5-6, a level in *Super Mario 3D World* (2013).

- 1 *Kiku*: The main prototypical imperative constraint of the level is established – if players want to traverse the level, they should **jump on coloured panels**, not the clear ones. If they flout this imperative constraint, do not execute it correctly, or do not understand this imperative constraint, then they cannot go further, but for now can still maintain their presence in the game.

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- 2 *Shoku*: the imperative constraint is developed by adding the *gameplay condition* (refer to **section 3.2.2**) to it. If the imperative constraint is flouted, not executed correctly, or still not understood, then the players will lose a life. Not upholding the imperative constraint also means not upholding the material constraint. The prototypical play method is further established.
- 3 *Tenku*: the prototypical play method is further complicated. The main imperative constraint of jumping on coloured panels is now accompanied by shockwaves, lasers, enemies stacked on each other, and many more hazards.
- 4 *Kekku*: the main imperative constraint is re-introduced by itself as a way of showing the players what they have learnt. Players can uphold this imperative constraint to reach the top of the flagpole (giving them more points), or they can readily flout or ignore this imperative constraint with no repercussion.

The jumping on coloured panels constraint appears later on in *Super Mario 3D World*, and even in future *Super Mario* franchise games. Players that have upheld this constraint in the beginning of *Cakewalk Flip* 5-6, and then had it infused with the *gameplay condition* in the middle of the level, will be much more likely to establish potential constraints in subsequent levels, in further *Super Mario* games, as well as in other platformer games that test whether similar revolving panels are hinting towards a prototypical play method. They will do this both out of fear that it is necessary to maintain their presence, but also because they internalised this play method and are curious to compare experiences delineated through this method in other games.

### [4.1.2] Emergent Exploration

#### Prospering onto New Means

In the previous section, I have shown that as players enter games, their play revolves around making sense of this new space they find themselves incorporating. Players do this by adopting potential constraints to tie their previous knowledge with the play method they will eventually adopt, as well as through adopting prototypical constraints to allow the entire play method to unfurl in front of them. The next step is realising that

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this relationship between players' knowledge and the constraints they adopt is not static – as the game shifts, so do the constraints players adopt change.

Yet these newly adopted constraints are still moulded through players' desire to further make sense of the digital space they have made their own. Players maintain their presence in the game both so they can continue performing their current chosen constraints, but also because they know that there might eventually be an opportunity to create new ones. In **Section 4.1.1**, players maintained the prototypical play method to explore that current moment. In this section, players maintain a sustainable play method to discover future emergent practices.

In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) players can accumulate *bells*, one of the game's de facto currencies. One way players can acquire bells is by selling resources, including fish and bugs. Zach Soares (2020) found that he could turn any *Nook Miles Island*, small islands in the game with varying resources, into island full of tarantulas, which apart from being rather scary, are also amongst the most profitable resources in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Soares did this by chopping down all the trees, removing their stumps, picking all the flowers, removing all the rocks, and removing any semblance of other critters on the island, amongst other things. By turning the *Nook Miles Island* into an island inhospitable for any other bug, Soares found that tarantulas would reign supreme (along with wharf roaches and tiger beetles). After this discovery, many players starting adopting the create tarantula islands play method, which included the following constraints

1. **Adopt Potential Constraint:** Manipulate the randomness in Nook Miles Island by removing resources in a very specific way.
2. **Flout / Uphold Imperative Constraint:** Collecting bells is a prototypical imperative constraint. However, this new play method allowed it to be done at alarmingly fast rates.
3. **Uphold Imperative Constraint.** Catching tarantulas is a minor prototypical imperative constraint. Catching tarantulas is also quite fun. They jump and attack, which most other bugs do not, making catching

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them trickier. Players adopted this play method to be able to try and catch tarantulas more often.

This play method became so popular that Nintendo, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*'s publisher and developer, changed how often tarantulas appear, even after the randomness has been sufficiently manipulated. While the create tarantula islands play method is still technically possible, it is much slower and monotonous to execute, as other bugs had their spawn rates increased, as noted by the player Ninji (2020).

The creating tarantula islands play method could only be discovered by maintaining the gameplay condition long enough to end up on a *Nook Miles Island*, and then adopting potential constraints oriented around exploring that specific part of play. Soares moved away from exploration as a way of activating the prototypical play method, and moved towards exploration as a way of finding new play methods, or simply learning more about the game's space. Constrained play feeds and is fed by emergent exploration.

### **Stumbling onto New Ways**

Another interesting example is Leino's (2011) *Death Loop as a Feature*. While I will not delve into the philosophical premise that he elucidates from his play, he does illustrate a clear example of what happens when the player constraints and an emergent game situation feed each other and create an untenable play method. *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) is a post-apocalyptic game set in Las Vegas. Players are tasked with surviving an incredibly hostile environment while negotiating the politics that define New Vegas. Leino describes how while he was playing *Fallout: New Vegas*, he saw a group of guards and rebels fighting each other, and so he decided to take shelter in a nearby abandoned motel. In this motel, there was a scorpion that stung him, and its slow moving poison started killing him. While the poison was ticking down, the game autosaved. *Fallout: New Vegas* has an autosave feature whenever someone exits a building, as he did. Then he died. He loaded the game to his last autosave, not too long before his death. And he died again. He test this loop several times, each time trying to alter his play. However, he maintains that he was stuck in the cycle of death and rebirth. Firstly, there were solutions to this play method that did not result in death, even though

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Leino states he did not find any bar reloading another save file very far back in the past which he was not willing to do (such as using console commands). More importantly, by making the mistake of exiting a building while heavily poisoned and triggering an autosave, Leino unwittingly created a new Death Loop play method that revolved around finding a way to survive a poison destined to quickly kill him.

There is one clear difference between Soares and Leino. Soares clearly had some intention of adopting constraints that shifted the island's production, with the intention of spawning more tarantulas, and in turn collecting more *bells*. Meanwhile, Leino changed his play situation in a less intentional manner. However, in both situations, the players' play shifted their play's conditions, which in turn allowed for new constraints to be adopted, for new play methods to be created.

Being in a game is a state of constant exploration, and players adopt constraints to create new venues of exploration, as well as to explore afresh previously realised spaces. Sometimes players do this willingly and knowingly, as Soares did. Sometimes players do this unwillingly and unknowingly, as Leino did. Yet in both cases, it was a series of choices that the players made that led them to that point, and it was the choices they continued to endure that kept them there, playing in a new constrained way.

### **[4.1.3] Renegotiated Exploration**

In the previous two sections, I gave examples of exploration that contiguously happens within a single play session. However, over multiple play sessions, whether due to updates, patches or how the encoding is read, the same game might be worth re-exploring. In **Section 3.2.1**, I stated that cybermedia objects, as presented by Aarseth and Calleja, can be broken into three components: materiality, which is the hardware which realises the cybermedia object; the sign, which is the way the cybermedia object is signified; and mechanics, which is the processual consequence of input into the cybermedia object. In this section, I will argue as these three components change in a chosen game across multiple play sessions, players adopt constraints oriented around renegotiating the knowledge they held into their usually upheld play methods. Each of these subsections will deal with one of these components.

### **Renegotiating Material**

The first component in Aarseth and Calleja's model was the materiality. In **Section 3.3.2**, I have already explained how *Skyrim* consistently crashed on my computer because of an update to my graphic card's BIOS. The first time *Skyrim* crashed, it was an unexpected surprise. The few times after that it became an unwelcome surprise. However, beyond that point, it became something I structured my play around. As I learnt that the materiality shifted, my exploration of *Skyrim* changed not to be focused on learning *Skyrim*, or finding emergent knowledge in *Skyrim*, but to learn how the hardware's finiteness could be incorporated into my general play method. My curiosity shifted from figuring out how many hits I can take before I die, to learning how long I could play *Skyrim* before my computer got stuck, my graphic card did a weird buzzing noise, and I had to force restart my PC.

A perhaps slightly more illustrative example is *Kingdom Hearts 2.5* (2014, 2017, now called *KH 2.5*), in turn a remake of *Kingdom Hearts 2* (2005, now called *KH 2*). *Kingdom Hearts* is a game franchise where Disney characters are incorporated into a hostile fantasy world. The main character Sora has to help the Disney characters restore peace to each of their fantasy worlds by defeating the shadows that have taken over. When *Kingdom Hearts 2.5* came out on the PS3 console (2014, now called *KH 2.5.3*) and subsequently on the PS4 (2017, now called *KH 2.5.4*), old time fans of the series were keen on sticking their thumbs back into the game. While some players were longing for the nostalgia of a game already played, others were largely curious about one aspect. They wanted to know how the game runs on newer hardware.

Youtube user Bizkit047 (2017) released a video talking about precisely this issue. He starts by describing some differences between *KH 2.5.3* and *KH 2.5.4*. He first described how *KH 2.5.4*'s loading screens were much faster, as the PS4 console is a significantly faster console. However, he also notes that since the PS4's console's processing power was so strong, the developers allowed for *KH 2.5.4* to be locked at 60 frames per second (now called FPS), as opposed to *KH 2.5.3*'s 30 FPS. This means that *KH 2.5.4* looked much smoother than *KH 2.5.3* as animations had more frames for leeway. The controls were also smoother, as while *KH 2.5.3* responds to the player

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inputs 30 times a second, *KH 2.5.4* responds twice as many times. However, the hardware also caused mechanical issues. For example, a particular enemy had their attacks charge at a rate per frame; this meant that while this enemy would launch a powerful attack after a designated amount of time in *KH 2.5.3*, in *KH 2.5.4*, the same attack came out almost immediately, making this particular fight much harder.

Bizkit047 provides a host of other issues related to which materials were used to play *Kingdom Hearts 2.5*. For example, using a particular move in a particular boss fight crashed both *KH 2.5.3* and *KH 2.5.4* in their English physical release, but not in the Japanese one. One particular crash persisted amongst all the versions, including the original *KH 2*. To bring this example back to this subsection's main point, Bizkit047's video shows perfectly how he was playing each *KH 2* version. He was playing the same game across different consoles to explore how a change in material influences the constraints he could uphold. He adopted a potential constraint of testing any differences between versions and seeing whether they could be attributed to the material, while not being actively tied to an overarching play method.

### **Renegotiating Signs**

The second category Aarseth and Calleja mention is signs. *Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines* (2004) is a game in which players assume the role of a fledgling vampire. They are tasked with surviving a hostile Los Angeles, while circumventing the politics that being in an immortal being brings with it. It is also a game with a very common visual glitch: if you have been playing *Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines* within a single contiguous play session for long enough, the game suffers a memory leak. This means that an object that was saved in the game's temporary memory infects other parts of the temporary memory. Then, when the other memory parts are called into the game, the leaked object appears instead. Restarting the game fixes the issue completely.

Simply put, this leads to situations where random game objects are replaced with equally random game objects such as fridges (Figure 1) and bookshelves (Figure 2). The most common victim is the humble doorknob, which we can see replaced with bidets (Figure 3) as well as lewd images (Figure 4). The memory leak is so prevalent that it is partially



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seen as a rite of initiation for new players, as well as an inside joke that players welcome for sharing purposes. Three of the original posts featured in the four figures even make mention of the *Malkavian* bloodline in *Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines*. They are a vampiric bloodline known for their mental acuity, which sometimes displays in very unpredictable ways such as hallucinations. The reference to the *Malkavian* bloodline places these posts in an interesting position were they can be true initiations, or long-term players playing along with a very well known issue.



(Figure 1: ee ramone's fridge glitch)



(Figure 2: Nikki's bookshelf glitch)



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(Figure 3: Wib 'Chainsaw' Johnson's bidet glitch)



(Figure 4: Coma\_girlfriend's lewd picture glitch)

While for new players, this glitch does not mean much other than a temporary setback, as well as a humorous situation, for old timers it is something more. It is a play method that is only partially replicable. Playing for a long time, going to a location called

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*Skyline Apartments* (all the above images are from that location), leaving and entering other locations over and over are all known to trigger it. However it does not happen consistently. It is a joke with a very thorough set-up. Jan Švelch (2014) discusses how players adopt similar contingent comedy across games – players want these visual glitches to happen to them (2014, p. 2546), as these glitches defamiliarise and refamiliarise players' knowledge, a point which Gualeni (2019) further makes. After it makes them laugh, it makes them also think “what will happen next?” and their subsequent constrained play follows suit.

Apperley joins in on this discussion, when he states that glitches show how “play traverses and joins the creative and curatorial in one mode of activity” (2015, p. 240). He gives the example of glitches in *Minecraft*, a survival game oriented around building things by combining different items in creative ways. Floating islands are a common sign-based glitch in *Minecraft* (islands are not known to generally float mid-air). However, they are also a welcome one, as players started sharing and comparing fantastic landscapes with other players.

### **Renegotiating Mechanics**

The third category Aarseth and Calleja mention is mechanics. Adopting constraints to renegotiate mechanics is not only commonly present, but often a welcome feature. For example, *Dota 2* (2013) is a multiplayer battle game where players choose one of over a hundred heroes, join in a team of five, and battle another team of five for map supremacy. While winning is the ultimate goal, players often include personal improvement at executing the prototypical play method as a worthwhile endeavour. The game developers often change parts of the games' mechanics through updates. Sometimes, they do this to make the game more balanced, while other times they simply want to shake things up. While specific individual changes might not always be completely welcome, changes in principle are welcome because they level the playing field. Part of personal improvement is exploring certain mechanics, and learning how to best execute constraints that take advantage of them. The better a player knows the game's mechanics, the better a player is at *Dota 2*'s prototypical play method. However, razing the field of knowledge lays new soil to bear. With every update, the less

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knowledgeable have a chance to bring their knowledge to a more equal playing field with other more knowledgeable players. Players once more find value in executing constraints oriented around knowledge production.

For example, in a particular update called 6.78, a player named *AdmiralBulldog* was seen as the best offlaner (a particular role in *Dota 2*'s team structure) in the world. He had learnt every nook and cranny of his role, and mastered the best heroes to perform this role. His knowledge partially led to his team winning *The International 3*, *Dota 2*'s most prestigious tournament in 2013. Without a subsequent update, it would have been hard to imagine a world where *AdmiralBulldog*'s dominance in his role would not persist for years. However, the subsequent patch 6.79 aimed at resetting this knowledge. Players were encouraged to learn new things. Since then, while he has not become a bad player by any means, it is widely uncontested that he has not reached the same peaks he reached at *The International 3*, with the title of the best offlaner shifting to new players with each update.

### **Three Methods**

Play is consistently a process of renegotiation. In this section, I have tried to show that even when this renegotiation happens because of a non-static material, players respond to it in creative ways. The first subsection showed how players renegotiated their knowledge of a non-static material through a thorough curiosity, carefully chronicling each change. The second subsection showed how players renegotiated their knowledge of non-static signs through humour, using social media to share what came out of their play. The third sub-section showed how players renegotiated their knowledge of non-static mechanics through reinvigorated interest, maintaining the constraints they had before with a blank slate on results.

Each of these sections could easily cross-pollinate. Materiality can lead to humour in the right situations. Mechanics can equally lead to a thorough curiosity. What remains consistently interesting in each situation is how players respond. Even if they were upholding a prototypical play method, when presented with these unfamiliar situations,

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players often adopt new constraints where exploring becomes either part of their previous play, or the overwhelming focus of a new play method.

### **[4.2] Mapping Boundaries**

In the previous subchapter, I have shown some ways in which players constrain themselves to learn and relearn. In this subchapter, having discussed players learning about a game they know relatively little about, whether due to a lack of knowledge or because of the boundaries shifting, I will instead discuss players' attempts to learn everything about a game they already know very well. The exploration moves from learning to mastery.

#### **[4.2.1] Power Gaming**

##### **The Shared Boundaries of *Norrath***

In **Section 3.5.2**, I had briefly made mention of Taylor's (2006) work on power gaming. In this section, I will look at power gaming, as an example of play that maps boundaries. Taylor performed a qualitative analysis of *Everquest* (1999) players in an effort to understand what a power gamer is.

Taylor explained that power gamers in *Everquest* poured over the details of loot, discussing their statistics and properties in great detail. They consistently compared their current character build with prospective builds based on currently won loot and possible loot in the future. She also notes that they had a website where they chronicled all of these details, both for posterity, but also for even future efficiency. For these power gamers, enjoyment came from exploring every avenue for self advancement, measuring it, comparing it, and bringing it to its absolute pinnacle (2006, p. 68).

While she notes that other players often categorise power gamers as subversive to an intended game experience, associating them with activities such as cheating or ruining the fun of the game by breaking it, she found that power gamers' play methods did not align with this categorisation. Instead, she states that she found that power gamers'

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biggest ‘sin’ would be that they “seem to be at times too focused, too intent, too goal-oriented” (2006, p. 71). She also states that while other players might focus on role-playing or casually levelling up at their own pace, power gamers have their own “dynamic goal settings” (2006, p. 73) to regulate their own idea of fun.

Taylor’s dynamic goal setting is an example of another potential constraint. The power gaming play method player sets themselves the constraint of being as efficient as possible, following any prototypical imperative constraints oriented around goals, currency, scores and levels to their maximum degree. Moreover, Taylor also rightfully notes that power gaming play methods are only legitimised if the players do not unjustifiably flout the prototypical play method. If they ‘cheat’, then they will be further ostracised – power gaming can only remain a legitimate play method because it is participating in an overall similar play method as other players. Power gaming players just add a further constraint to their play.

### **The City Boundaries of *Magnasanti***

Vincent Ocasla is a different type of power gamer. Ocasla is well known for his magnum opus *Magnasanti* (2010) in *SimCity 3000*. *SimCity 3000* is a city building game, where players have set money and set space to make a functional city. For most players, *SimCity 3000* leaves them with a lot of liberty past these opening instruction. Beyond citizens and advisors telling you what they wish the city had, and game tips in the top corners giving you suggestions, the prototypical build a great city imperative constraint is genuinely nary more than a light suggestion.

This left power gamer Ocasla much more liberty in interpreting what it means to be efficient. Apart from drawing from numbers and metrics, Ocasla also drew inspiration from Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi*, the Buddhist concept of Bhavacakra, the ordered chaos of Kowloon’s Walled City, as well as his personal beliefs on sacred geometry and his personal training in architecture, as he notes in his esoteric youtube video (2010), as well as an in an interview with Vice magazine’s Mike Sterry (2010). His final city had a resident population of 6 million people, a number which has not been surpassed since. He notes that this came at the expense of many metrics the game calculates, such as

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health (all residents died at 50 years of age), pollution, education, employment rates, fire safety, roads and so on. Yet the citizens of *Magnasanti* tolerate it because of a constantly present police force, low education, low health, all contributing to making rebelling harder. In a gushing interview, Sterry declared that Ocasla had beaten *SimCity 3000*, even though there is nothing in *SimCity 3000* to support such an assertion.

Both examples of power gamers are players who acknowledge the prototypical play method, uphold it as best they can, and in turn add their own potential constraints focused on efficiency, single-mindedness and thorough instrumentalisation and systemisation.

While *Everquest*'s role-players sometimes flout prototypical imperative constraints (ignoring levelling, sometimes do not fight enemies) to focus on their own potential constraints (roleplaying a specific character), it is power gamers who are accused of being unfair and unfun. Meanwhile, Ocasla pushed *SimCity*'s prototypical imperative constraints to their limits, maybe even flouted some of them, yet the articles written about him are ones of awe, pride and perhaps even a bit of fear, rather than the disdain that power gamers received in Taylor's work.

I would argue that this distinct characterisation between the two does not stem from adopting a specific potential constraint. Rather, it is because Ocasla's *Magnasanti* play method clashes with no one else's. Meanwhile, the *Everquest* power gaming play method clashes with another community's play method. The general *Everquest* community wants to maintain the intended experience created by the prototypical play method. Part of this play method is the prototypical imperative constraints of competing with other players to have the most skilled character, to collect rare items nobody has collected, and so on. The power gaming play method is not flouting these imperative constraints, but they are making it impossible for other players to uphold them, even if they want to. The general *Everquest* play community was promised an experience that they cannot experience, because other players experienced it before they were even in the running. In **Section 5.3.3**, I will look at other general play communities denied their experience, this time focused on griefing play methods.

### **Oblivion Under-Leveling**

In my analysis of both Ocasla's *Magnasanti* play method and Taylor's *Everquest* power gaming play method, both methods overwhelmingly upheld prototypical imperative constraints. In *Everquest*, players levelled up, defeated monsters, worked in teams and so on. In *SimCity 3000*, Ocasla built a city which functioned, earned money, and had no revolts. However, not all power gaming follows this play method. My personal favourite example of power gaming is levelling up in *Oblivion*, where actively flouting the prototypical levelling imperative constraints is almost necessary to power game.

In order to explain *Oblivion*'s three distinct levelling play methods, it is necessary to look at two systems at play: dynamic world levelling and the levelling up system. The first one is relatively easy to explain: whenever a player levels up in *Oblivion*, everything in *Oblivion* levels up with them: the enemies get harder, NPCs get stronger, rewards become more plentiful and items' bonuses becomes better. This would let players explore any part of *Oblivion* that they wish at any given time – a true open world experience.

Levelling up is slightly more complicated. *Oblivion* has twenty-one skills, and eight attributes. Using a skill will improve it: for example, if a player runs for a couple of minutes, their Athletics skill would improve from 5 to 6. Attributes can only be improved when players level up, which I will return to soon. Each player character has seven major skills and fourteen minor skills of their choosing. Additionally, each attribute governs three skills: having a higher Speed attribute will make the player's base Athletics skill higher, so both the Speed attribute and the Athletics skill make players go faster. If players improve any combination of their major skills ten times, they can level up. Minor skills do not influence whether players can level up or not. So if Athletics is a major skill, as soon as it is improved from 5 to 15, the player level up from level 1 to level 2. Whenever a player levels up, they can choose three attributes to increase. Players can increase their attributes equal to half the amount of skills points gained governed by those attributes, up to a maximum of 5 and a minimum of 1. This means that players can increase a maximum of fifteen attribute points over three different attributes. This would necessitate increasing thirty skill points, ten for each attribute. If this system is still unclear, that is more than understandable. David Stewart



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(2019) does a solid effort at explaining how it works in a perhaps more accessible fashion.

Dynamic world levelling alongside this levelling up system creates a bit of an issue. Let us look at the above example. The player ran for half an hour and increased their Athletics skill from 5 to 15. Then, they levelled up which allowed them to increase their Speed attribute by 5 (ten Athletics skill points divided by 2), and any other two attributes by 1 (since they did not improve any other skill). This would net the player just seven of the maximum fifteen attribute points they could have gotten. Additionally, while levelling up does increase the player's health, they are still not any better at defeating enemies. Meanwhile, everything in *Oblivion* is getting stronger. Players are not getting the most of each level, their characters are not becoming better at fighting, but everything else is becoming stronger and scarier.

*Oblivion* power gamers devised three levelling play methods to address this. One of them is efficient levelling play method. Players count up how many skills they increase and making sure that in each level they increase as close to thirty skill points as possible, ten from each of three different attributes. This means players get fifteen attribute points each time. At least ten of these skill points are suggested to be of any single active combat skill, so that players can get stronger. The others are meant to get players across the level up line in a controlled way. Additionally, at least ten points need to be in a major skill so that players can actually level up.

The other two methods, which I favour, are under levelling play methods. One method is the never sleep under levelling play method. In *Oblivion*, players level up when they wake up. If players never sleep, they never level up – problem solved. The other method is the never use under levelling play method. Players do this by choosing seven major skills that the players never use. For example, it is more than possible to play *Oblivion* without ever casting a single spell, and six of the twenty one skills are spell related: add another throwaway skill into the major skill mix, and then players can sleep with no issues, while consistently becoming stronger. Stewart (2015) yet again explains *Oblivion's* different levelling play methods very eloquently.

In Taylor's example, players simply wanted to uphold the prototypical imperative constraints as efficiently as possible. The closest parallel would be *Oblivion's* efficient



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levelling play method, which involves counting your skill usage along the way, while generally upholding the prototypical play method.

However, both of *Oblivion*'s under levelling play methods encourage players to actively flout imperative constraints. First of all, players are explicitly told to go to sleep whenever they can level up. Both of these play methods flout this imperative constraint. However, players are also explicitly told to place the skills they use the most as their major skills. Players are also encouraged to choose their major skills as a way of making a thematic character, such as an Assassin with Athletics, Sneak and Archery among their major skills. The never use under levelling play method flouts all of these too.

### [4.2.2] Labouring the Uncharted

In the previous section, I explored three different examples of power gaming, all of which were done in the name of personal fun. All of these power gamers were creating constraints that they intend to use themselves. However, it is undeniable that behind these rigorous explorations, there is a large amount of labour being done. For example, while Ocasla's *Magnasanti* is undoubtedly a very personal play method, it did also show other *SimCity300* players, such as sn0wsh00 (2013), new possibilities for their own play. Meanwhile, under levelling efforts in *Oblivion* could even be said to be primarily made for other people to consume, for other people to be able to power game efficiently, without having to perform the labour of understanding the labyrinthine levelling up system in the game.

Hanna Wirman (2007) notes this relationship between fandom, power gaming and labour. She states that power gamers and game fans have different types of pargame productivity. The game fan might tend towards expressive productivity, revolving around characters and narratives through fan fiction and machinimas. Meanwhile, the power gamer might tend towards instrumental productivity (following from Taylor's (2006) *instrumental play*) through walkthroughs and databases. I will return to this in **Chapter 7**, where I will discuss how players record the constraints they perform. For now, the most important thing to note is that players' adopted potential constraints often

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leave behind valuable labour for other players who want to eventually adopt these same play methods.

While the above power-gamers performed instrumental productivity to be able to better enjoy their chosen play method, there are a lot of players performing instrumental productivity so that other players can enjoy their own future chosen play method. In **Section 2.1.1**, I discussed how Jouet saw the Oulipo as a group that “seeks out usable constraints so that literature is written” (2000, p. 5). Sometimes this meant that they came up with a constraint, and then used it for writing, as Jouet did in his original metro poems. However, sometimes other Oulipians made up these complex constraints so that someone else could realise them in text. Jouet’s final *Poèmes de Métro* could only be realised because Rosenstiehl spent fifteen and a half hours creating the most optimal route to traverse the Patisian metro just so Jouet could write this work as he passed every single metro stop (Levin Becker, 2012, p. 69).

### Routing

As Rosenstiehl routed Jouet’s *Poèmes de Métro*, what routes do players route? Routing is an established term in speedrun play communities – it is the exploration that makes speedrunning possible. While I have already talked about speedrunning in previous chapters, as the constraint in which players try to finish a game as quickly as possible (which I will return to again in the next chapter), I did not talk about how these players *know* how to finish a game as quickly as possible. This is where routing comes in. Routers look for material and imperative constraints to flout, while also optimising what remains of the prototypical play method.

Matt Sayer (2016) rightfully notes that there is definite overlap between speedrunners and routers. For example, the player Eric ‘Jamacanbacn’ both routes as well as speedruns *Tron: Evolution* (2010). However, some routers are solely focused on the routing aspect of this collaboration. For example, chunkatuff is a known router for *Ori and the Blind Forest* (2015). However, his name is nowhere to be found on *Ori and the Blind Forest*’s speedrunning leaderboard on speedrun.com, the definitive website for chronicling world record speedruns. Even when players overlap these two play

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methods, routing and speedrunning never happen at the same time. They happen in separate play sessions. The routing play method is focused around a slow exploration: does a particular situation allow for shaved time, how long does a route take to execute, is there a risk that attempting this route might end a run, and so on. It is a gradual and calculated process. However, the single constraint that ties all speedrun play methods together is overwhelmingly focused on execution – speedrunners try to finish a preplanned route as quickly as possible, ideally quicker time than their last attempt. They constitute radically different play methods that cannot be performed at the same time. This explains why some players are better routers, and why others are better speedrunners.

### **Labbing, Theorcrafting and More**

Similar knowledge production exists outside of speedrunning communities. For example, fighting game communities have the labbing play method. Stemming from experimenting in a lab, labbers explore by limiting the many variables that can exist within an actual fight, instead replicating very specific circumstances within a test setting over many different iterations, whether in a training mode or with another willing labber.

For example, in the fighting game *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (2018), moves have knockback and staling, while characters have weight and rage. Knockback is how far a particular move sends another character, while staling is a move getting worse the more it is used. Meanwhile, weight is how much a character weighs which affects how far they can get knocked back, while rage increases a character's knockback based on how much damage they have taken. With all this in mind, a string of moves which cannot be responded to by other players, known as a *true combo*, will not always work. Rage might send a character too far, a particular character might have a low weight so they go further, and so on. Labbers, whether for the glory of their favourite character or their favourite players (including sometimes themselves), try string of moves in as many circumstances as possible, so that players who perform competitive fighting play methods can use this knowledge to maximise their eventual output.

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Different gaming communities have different terms to refer to the labour behind enhancing other play methods. The routing play method is one example, The labbing play method is another, but many others exist including theorycrafting, metagaming and min-maxing play methods. Theorycrafting is amongst the most often cited, being used by Taylor (2006), as well as other authors such as Glas (2010), Cynthia Haynes (2013) and Karin Wenz (2012) to talk about about this explorative play method focused around enhancing power gaming play methods in online roleplaying games such as *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*.

I argue that each community uses its own terms because each community is exploring different types of constraints for adoption. Routers are enhancing the speedrun play methods, where flouting constraints is not only accepted, it is actively encouraged. Meanwhile, labbers are enhancing competitive fighting play methods, where flouting imperative constraints is generally disallowed, but flouting material constraints is allowed in certain situations. Meanwhile, theorycrafters are enhancing roleplaying power gamer's play methods – and I have already shown through Taylor (2006) that power gamers are oriented towards upholding most constraints. While all these groups' constraints are oriented around instrumentalising other players' play, they do so in different ways, and the different terms reflect this difference.

### **[4.3] Exploring the Inbetweens**

Players have also often adopted potential constraints to explore that which is often neglected, if not even forgotten, in plain sight. To create play methods where there are none. In **Section 4.1.1**, I discussed how transludic knowledge led players to look at waterfalls expecting there to be something – yet how many waterfalls had to be checked for this potential constraint to often become part of a prototypical play method?

In *Approaches to What?* (1997, 209-211), Perce had detailed the idea of the infraordinary, that which we do not actively notice, or take note of, during our daily comings and goings. I have previously written of how this notion can be applied to digital games (Harrington, 2018). Perce applied constraints to study the infraordinary in multiple works, with *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010) being the most

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commonly cited. In this work, he sat down in a square in Paris and noted all the things he saw over the course of a few days, including things he would not normally make a point out of, such as a little girl, menus outside of a bistro, as well as street signs. This set of playful constraints on writing inspired other people, across different media to conduct similar works. He created a potential constraint from a desire common to many people: to truly understanding the world around us. This interest extends to virtual worlds too.

### [4.3.1] A Flouted Existence

*Sleeping Dogs* (2012) is heavily based on Hong Kong, with street stalls selling 咖喱魚蛋 (curry fishballs, transliterated as *Gaalei Yudan* in Cantonese); several locations named after and directly inspired by Hong Kong locations, such as the Night Market; a very rich soundscape that is reminiscent of Hong Kong streets, and many more. It also has some less faithful elements, such as the ubiquity of an energy drink called *Dragon Kick*, a much denser centre to Hong Kong island, and a suspicious lack of investment bankers.

Riley MacLeod admitted he had never been to Hong Kong, so he naturally settled for the next best thing. He adopted his own play method centred around a specific potential constraint. He set on finding a local attraction that piqued his interest: the Central mid-levels escalator, while playing as a virtual tourist. In an article for Kotaku (2016), he detailed his entire journey, including trying to use real world maps to find the general location of the virtual location, his clothing choices, while also upholding a few imperative constraints along the way (such as avoiding the police, and fight rival triad gang members).

Eventually, he successfully executed his play method: he found a landmark which closely resembled the start of the Central mid-levels escalator. Some details were off: for example, the escalators start on a road called SheShe Street / 些些街<sup>10</sup>. Meanwhile, the central mid-levels escalator in Hong Kong starts on the intersection of Queen's

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<sup>10</sup> These characters approximately translates to “some some street”, with some meaning “a few”, not “nondescript” - this would fit with the less faithful parts of *Sleeping Dogs*.

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Road and Cochrane Street. Nevertheless, MacLeod rightfully felt that his goal was adequately met (Figure 5).



(Figure 5: Central Mid-Levels Escalator Comparison)

Unfortunately, he was largely disappointed with the digital landmark. Where he expected scale, he got a very short experience. Where he expected bustling crowds, he got a handful of passers-by. Where he expected an escalator, he got stairs. What did not disappoint him is the way in which the world around him was unreceptive to his adopted potential constraint. Finding a digital landmark as a tourist made him have to reconsider other constraints that he had not even thought to consider.

As he was walking to the Central mid-levels escalator, he noticed a hit and run. Simply standing still to watch paramedics take care of an injured pedestrian caused at least another five casualties by my count (Figure 6). *Sleeping Dogs*' car AI did not know how to navigate through a street where previous occurrences had not despawned, with each occurrence leading to exponentially more chaos. Equally, the Central mid-levels escalator were littered with a particular NPC: a woman wearing a short black skirt, a white fitted tank top, and a sweater being used as a scarf (Figure 7). There were likely NPCs bound to specific locations. However, *Sleeping Dogs* did not account for someone spending so long at one specific location: a slightly long stairway cum escalator. In *Sleeping Dogs*, potential constraints revolving around pedestrianisation meant flouting some unconsidered material constraints, like not standing in one place too long.



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(Figure 6: Riley MacLeod's Casualties)



(Figure 7: MacLeod's Single-Faced Friends)

Simple existence as a way to flout material constraints is something I briefly mentioned in **Section 3.6.2**. While playing *Oblivion*, Aarseth noted that two imperial guards started fighting with each other in the world's bid to create chaos. In **Section 6.1.2**, I will be returning to stasis and stillness as potential constraints in a bid for personal expression. Simply existing in a game is becoming a more and more popular potential constraint, as players are becoming aware that existing flouts material constraints. One of my personal

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favourite examples is Youtube user ThingsWePlay (2016) standing still in the middle of the street in *Just Cause 3* (2015). In less than two minutes of existing, they chronicle multiple deaths, traffic problems of all sorts, gunshots, civil unrest, a panicked nun, and car-surfing. It seems that the best way to explore certain games is by simply being inside them. Galloway (2006) describes the happenings around players' stillness as "ambience acts" - *Sleeping Dogs*, *Oblivion*, *Just Cause 3* all share an ambience of chaos and violence.

### [4.3.2] Opportunistic encounters

#### On Soda Machines

Jess Morrissette (2020) created a potential constraint, which he also encouraged many players across the world to pick up. Morrissette launched *the Video Game Soda Machine* project (2016), in which he invited players to help him chronicle whenever they came across a soda machine within a video game, as the name implies. Since this potential constraint was intended for more than just his own personal usage, he made sure to define the constraint very carefully: he defined soda machines as "a self-contained automatic machine that dispenses soft drinks in exchange for payment", and then subsequently recorded play sessions that adopted this potential constraint.

Morrissette acknowledges that part of this project was "making a game out of it", even citing this project as an example of *metagaming* (as used by Boluk and Lemieux, 2017). However, Morrissette also presents his paper as an example of ludic enquiry through play. He cites Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) object inventory as inspiration. Through his and other players' collective play efforts he was able to unearth the various different ways in which soda machines are presented to the player. Soda machines in *Dengeki Bunko: Fighting Climax* (2014) were there to be telepathically thrown, in *City Shrouded in Shadow* (2017) to save progress. More commonly, they are used to dispense liquid power-ups, as I have already shown with *Sleeping Dogs*' Dragon Kick energy drink.

Morrissette's research also shows how soda machines are used to delineate prototypical imperative constraints. For example, in *Pepsiman* (1999), you are told that in order to finish a level you have to get to the soda machine. While most other games are not as on



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the nose, they do still present interactions through soda machines, such as advancing a side-quest in *Fallout 3* (2008) by interacting with a *Nuka Cola* machine.

Most importantly, the *Video Game Soda Machine* project shows how methodologically chronicling a potential constraint as adopted through various games is a legitimate method of theoretical enquiry on games. Morrisette, and his fellow player-researchers, created a very specific play method: adopting find a soda machine potential constraint, with any other constraint coming as secondary. Through this dedicated play method, Morrisette was able to draw some interesting insights on soda machines as objects of ludic enquiry.

### **On Petting Dogs**

Morrisette is not the only player to chronicle various instantiations of a single object through different games. The unnamed curator of the twitter account *Can You Pet the Dog* (2019) has been collecting player's attempts to pet dogs over scores of games. In an interview, Patrick Lum (2019) writes that the curator had originally created the account because they were "frustrated that [The Division 2] purposely put dogs in a poor situation, meant to evoke empathy from the player, but there was no way to comfort or care for these hungry, frightened creatures" (2019). From then on, the curator has been posting pictures of dogs within games, shared within their community, along with the sole judgement of either "You can pet the dog" or "You cannot pet the dog." Just like Morrisette's research, the curator encourages players to perform the potential constraint of looking for in-game dogs and trying to pet them.

Since *Can I Pet the Dog?* is not an academic work, this communally upheld potential constraint is not as rigidly defined, which in turn allows the curator some liberty in what they collate. The "dog petting" play community quickly grew, and the community's interests started expanding and diverging. The curator allowed for one day of leeway on their twitter page to better maintain their community. The curator came up with "Casual Fridays", in which the potential constraint changes from "can you pet the dog?" to "is there an animal in this game, and does it do something interesting?" On casual Fridays, we can see posts such as "You can ask the dog to sing your island tune" (Figure 8),

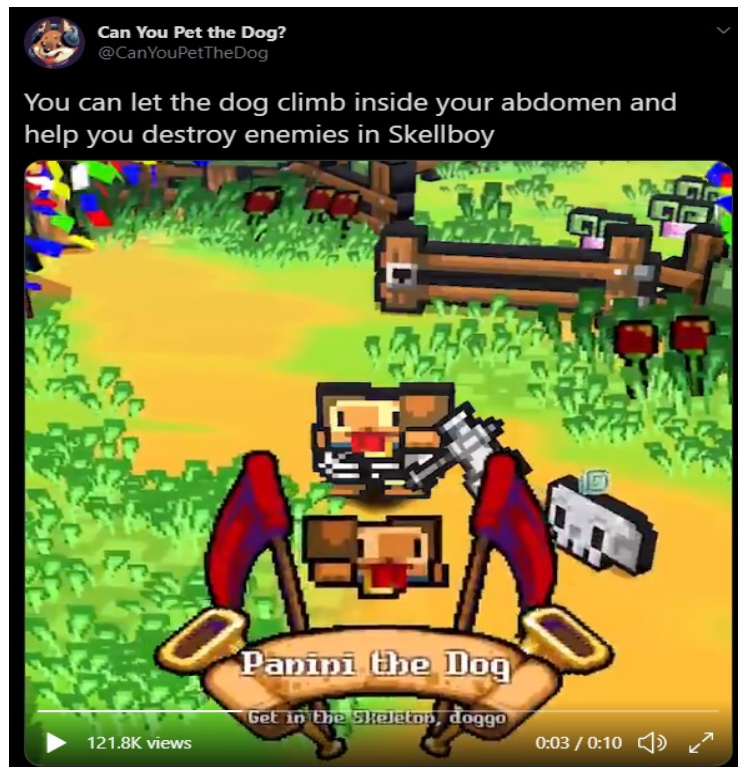
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“You can let the dog climb inside your abdomen and help you destroy enemies” (Figure 9), and curiously even “you can command the dog to finish off your enemies” (Figure 10), which goes somewhat against the original ethos of the twitter page, yet acknowledges that the play community’s interests had gone beyond the curator’s original interest. The curator has also started collating a list of petting other animals (2020), although it seems that for a certain cat-lover, this was not early enough as *Can You Pet The Cat?* (2019) splintered off soon after the original account’s creation, to lesser success.

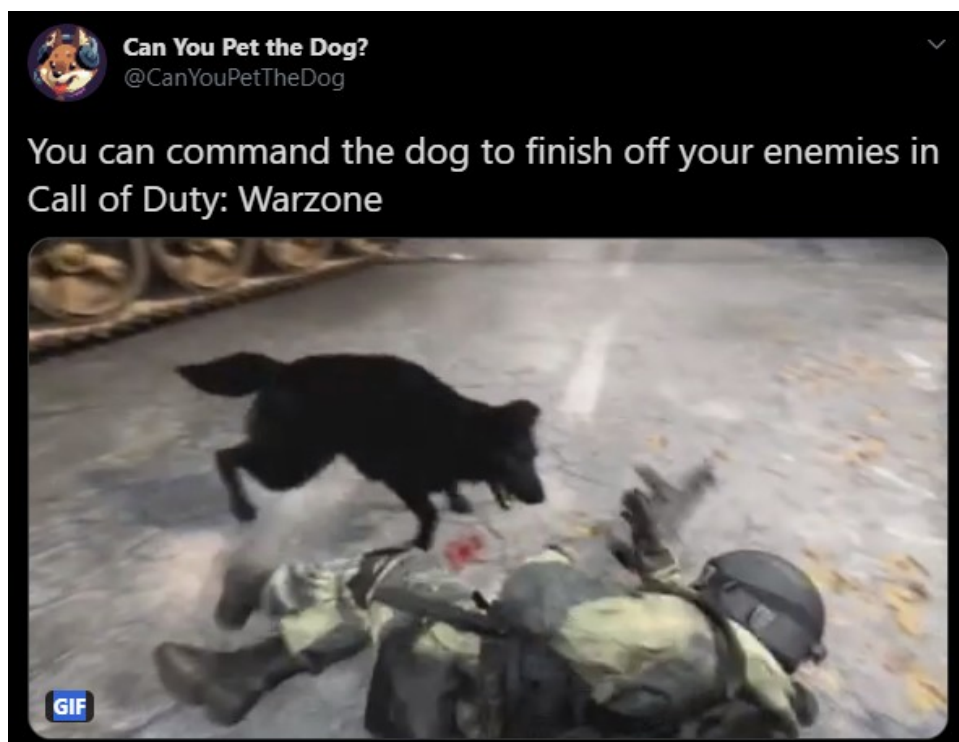


(Figure 8: Singing island tunes)

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(Figure 9: Climbing Inside Abdomen)



(Figure 10: Finishing Off Your Enemies)

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Additionally, since the curation is not oriented around solely finding an object (a soda machine), but doing something to it (petting a dog), players have taken it upon themselves to realise this personal constraint by flouting imperative constraints to various degrees. For example, *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (2019) is not known to innately have any dog petting actions. However, this did not stop the “dog petting” play community. Using the stage builder, which is an in-game tool used to create battle arenas, players created a large platform which resembles a hand, and an even larger platform which resembles a dog. Upon hitting a lever on the hand platform, the hand platform starts performing a rotating motion over the dog platform (Figure 11). When the players were told to build a battle arena, the players built a dog petting landscape instead.



(Figure 11: Creative petting)

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Since the account's creation, the curator has not only amassed a community of 400,000 players interesting in following this play method's development, as well as occasional participation, but also led developers to incorporate petting dogs as a readily adoptable constraint in the game. For example, game developer Dan Marshall set up a long string of dialogue between the protagonist and a dog in his most recent point and click game *Lair of the Clockwork God* (2020). It is only after countless attempts at petting the dog can you eventually do so. However, dog petting play method player @SantaMaria\_Fco was determined to pet the dog, and eventually found this hidden interaction which by the designer's own admission was meant to trick the dog petting play method community into thinking they indeed could not pet the dog (Dan Marshall, 2020).

### **Methodology from Play Method**

What gathers the *Video Game Soda* project and *Can You Pet the Dog?* together is that all the associated play methods are often opportunistic: players do not often set out to find soda machines, dogs, or waterfalls, but they execute these constraints when the opportunity presents itself. However, even here there are exceptions: Morrissette (2020) recorded himself doing a first soda machine speedrun of *Doom Eternal* (2020), I have also already explained how players set up *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* to have a visual representation of a dog, just so that they could pet it.

While all the above examples detail a potential constraint which focuses on one type of object's instantiation over multiple games, similarly minded research has also done the opposite, studying many objects within a single game. Morrissette's inspiration is a clear example of this: Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) object inventory had them listing down every item they used in games, then asking pointed questions about these objects, such as these objects' uses, their costs, their temporal status and what they seem to be. They argued that asking these questions comprehensively over many objects would generally give researchers an idea of what games' objectives are.

In a previous paper, I also conducted a somewhat similar experiment, drawn by inspiration from Perce's *infraordinary* experiments (Harrington, 2018). Perce had sat down on a street in Paris in an attempt to exhaust everything he saw, especially focusing



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on what he would have otherwise missed. Similarly, I also stood my character still in *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* (2017) and created an inventory reminiscent of Perec's. Instead, I argued that chronicling in such a manner could reveal some of the underlying politics of games, as studying the *infraordinary* did in the actual.

Unfortunately, I feel that both my experiment, as well as Consalvo and Dutton's experiment, share one common issue – they do not make for good play methods for other players to adopt. Morrisette's research, as well as the unnamed curator of *Can I Pet the Dog's* collection, are more interesting as players can more readily pick these methods up. The more people execute their play methods, the further they enrich their results. Play methods can create large valuable communal works, and Morrisette's research, dog petters, as well as the aforementioned routers and labbers all find a way to collectivise their works for the betterment of their play communities.

### **[4.4] Conclusions on Exploration**

In this section, I have explored a variety of constraints under the banner of exploration. I first started by looking at exploration oriented around learning about the game's space: this included learning the prototypical play method through pre-established conventions as well as controlled play, learning about aspects that have emerged after playing for a while, as well as relearning about game aspects that have changed.

Then, I moved into exploration oriented around mastery and boundary pushing. I first started by looking at power gamers, players who want to make their chosen constraints as efficient as possible: this included Taylor's (2006) power gamers in *Everquest*, Ocasla's *Magnasanti* (2010) in *SimCity 3000*, and *Oblivion's* under-levellers. This allowed me to move into the play method that precedes the power gaming play method, the players who want to make the chosen constraints for other players as efficient as possible. Here I discussed routers, the players who create routes for speedrunners; labbers, the players who create techniques for competitive fighting players; and theorycrafters, the players who crunch the numbers for power gamers on role playing games, and described how each term comes with its own play method stemming from different communities' wants and needs.

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Finally, I moved into exploration oriented around non-directed discovery, where players wanted to explore something just because they could. I looked at players exploring what it means to be inactive in games. I started this exploration through MacLeod's exploration of *Sleeping Dogs*, and then referred back to Aarseth's encounter in *Oblivion* as well as ThingsWePlay's placement in the middle of the street in *Just Cause 3*. Then I moved into more object-oriented exploration, where I discussed Morrissette's analysis of soda machines across different games as well as *Can I Pet The Dog's* analysis of dog petting, and discussed them as potential object oriented collective research methods.

In **Section 3.6.2**, I had shown how Van Vught and Glas argued that analysing why players play games might lead to different play methods being adopted – exploring requires different play methods than going native. This has been evident in this chapter as well, even while remaining focused on exploration. In *Is Something Behind the Waterfall?*, exploring behind a waterfall is the player showing that they understand the prototypical play method, even if it requires flouting material constraints. While a quest might tell the player “Go to this city”, a waterfall rarely has a written invitation – but players' shared knowledge within play communities makes it worth checking. However, players adopted the Tarantula Island play method, because they want exploration that was divorced from any previously established conventions. There are ‘correct’ ways to get bells in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, and turning a Nook Miles Island into a spider hell-scape is arguably not one of them. However, it is one of the most efficient ways to get bells. Exploration in *Is Something Behind the Waterfall* confirms knowledge, exploration in *Tarantula Island* creates it.

However, I have also shown that even when the why is the same, it also matters how these constraints are being adopted and executed. The power gamers in *Everquest* and the power gamers in *Oblivion* both wanted the same thing: to have a fantasy character who's statistics were impeccable. This makes it tempting to discuss them under the same breath. However, their play methods are somewhat different. Taylor (2006) has shown how *Everquest's* power gamers are under constant pressure to prove they are playing inside the law, so their power gaming needs to be oriented around upholding the prototypical play method as cleanly as possible. However, *Oblivion's* players are under no such pressure – these players are consistently flouting imperative constraints by not sleeping, not levelling up skills and fighting under-levelled enemies with over-powered

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abilities. By looking at the how, it becomes much easier to note the distinct play methods that different power gamers adopt. We can, and should, go beyond discussing their similarly oriented goals.

Finally, I have also shown that constraints might change based on for whom they are being developed. In **Section 4.2.2**, I looked at various types of players focused on enriching future play methods: routers enrich speedrun play methods, labbers enrich competitive fighting game play methods, and theorycrafters enrich power gaming MMORPG play methods. All three of these types of players want to make the subsequent play methods more efficient, more successful and more enjoyable. However, the play methods they are improving have radically different needs. Speedrun play methods are open to flouting constraints, so routers' exploration is very vast. On the other hand, I have explained that power gamers' legitimacy is contingent on them maintaining the prototypical play method, while causing other communities' play methods as little friction as possible. This makes the theorycrafter's role much more concentrated. If we only discuss the why, the distinct labour each community requires might be overlooked.

In this chapter, I have looked at players playing to explore. This has allowed me to discuss how the reason why, the method how, and the players for whom constraints are created all contribute to the play methods that players adopt. In **Chapter 5**, I will look at a different reason as to why players create play methods: they create play methods to iterate on previously established play methods. This will allow me to better discuss how play methods develop one degree, two degrees, and even more degrees removed from the prototypical play method, as communities form and diverge, and the requirements for their play become more refined.



## CHAPTER 5: ITERATIVE PLAY

In the previous chapter, I looked at players exploring the games they have chosen. In this chapter, having learnt as much as they want to learn about their chosen games, I will look at how players iterate on the prototypical play method to create communally acknowledged methods of play, and how they then even go one step further by iterating on the iterations.

I will first start by looking at speedrunning for two reasons. Firstly, it is long due – I have been mentioning speedrunning in this thesis from the first chapter. There is a large overlap between constrained play and discussions in the speedrunning community, and it is time to acknowledge the overlap between what I am advocating and what the speedrunning community has been promoting for a long time. Secondly, there is further knowledge that I have not yet explored. The speedrunning community has come up with their own terms of their player iterations. These terms do not work for this thesis, or for the larger study of play within games, for reasons that I will make evident. However, they do neatly set up the different ways in which players iterate in speedrunning play methods.

One way in which players iterate on play is by adding constraints that complement pre-existing play methods. In this section, I will start by looking at play-styles: nominal potential constraints where players place minor limitations on themselves to enhance previous play methods. I will then look at sandbox games, where I will discuss how loose prototypical play methods lead to a rich culture of diverse play methods. Thirdly, I will also look at post-exhaustive iterations, where players adopt constraints meant to reinvigorate a previously exhausted play method, by making it harder or allowing it to be seen in a new light. Finally, I will look at how players introduce play methods that seek to limit the possibility space of previous play methods, to ensure notions such as fairness or even watchability.

The second way players iterate is by disrupting pre-existing play methods. In this section, I will start by looking at play methods that challenge the ever-present material constraint in games: trying to stay in them, which we discussed in **Section 3.2.2** as the gameplay condition. I will then move into play methods that disrupt the prototypical

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play method by rendering its constraints impossible to uphold, whether by disrupting their sequentiality or by doing something that is directly contrary to them. Finally, I will look at disruption to communally upheld play methods in multi-player games, through activities such as griefing and cheating in competitive scenarios.

The third way players iterate on their play is by disrupting their access to pre-existing play methods. In this subsection, I will be predominantly looking at controller and hardware choices as a way of iterating on play. I will first look at disruptive set-ups including non-standard control schemes, imperfect response, queering game feel. I will also argue that controllers and hardware have build in rhetoric, and even standard choices directly influence the play that follows.

By the end of this chapter, I will have shown how one of the main reasons that players constrain their play is to iterate on play that already exists, which was either insufficient, exhausted or still has possibility space that can explored. From here, I will move away analysing play methods focused on explaining how our constrain model works. In **Chapter 6**, I will instead discuss how players adopt play methods to shape themselves, their identities, the communities around their play, and even social structures at large.

### [5.1] Speedrunning

Looking at speedrunning communities language around their play methods is a good start for this subchapter. Firstly, it is perhaps one of the better known alternate methods of play: speedrunning initiatives such as the *Games Done Quick* series, a charity marathon where players speedrun their favourite games, have raised over 3 million dollars in donations in their most recent iterations. This large size behind the community also leads to a very developed language discussing the each iteration, each permutation behind speedruns.

In this subchapter, I will first start by looking at the language they have developed and incorporating it into this thesis' language. I will then follow this by looking at some of the academic discussion that has taken place around speedrunning, negotiating it with the knowledge produced in the previous section. Finally, I will conclude by showing how speedrunner's previously established language's concerns predate the constraint

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model I have adopted in this thesis. While their language is not necessarily as accurate as possible, speedrunning provides an interesting case study for play methods derived from previous play methods.

### [5.1.1] Cataloguing Routes

The most common definition of a speedrun is playing a chosen game as fast as possible. However, this definition is above all else describing speedrunning's main potential constraint. All speedruns have this one constraint in common, yet the rest of the adopted constraints change what type of speedrun is being performed. These constraints change not only across different games, but also within speedruns of the same chosen game.

Speedruns ultimately often end up being a collection of different play methods focused on two aspects

- **uphold potential constraint:** execute a play method as fast as possible
- **uphold potential (set of constraints):** follow a pre-decided optimised route

In **Section 4.2.2**, I looked at the routing play method. I discussed how apart from adopting specific constraints oriented around exploring a game's liminalities, routing also has a projected outcome: improving speedrun play methods. These optimised routes are their outcome. Speedrunning and routing play communities have collectively given names to these different types of optimised routes ([speedrunlive, 2019](#)). In this section, I will discuss some of them in terms of our thesis' language.

The most common type of route is the any% route. In this set of constraints, players still uphold the prototypical imperative constraint of arriving at reaching a designated end point, usually before credits roll or the main menu pops back up. Along the way, there might be prototypical imperative constraints that designate mid-way points. Any% means that these mid-way points can be actively flouted. 100% routes are the opposite – these designated mid-way points must be upheld in the same way the end point is upheld. Sometimes, games might have compromised middle grounds between any% and 100% routes. *Super Mario 64* (1996), the first 3D game in the Mario franchise, has 0 Star (the any% route), 120 Star (the 100% route), and 70 star, 16 star, and 1 star as

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middle ground compromises. This said, in the above constraints, any other material and imperative constraints that does not relate to these designated points can be flouted as long as it further optimises the route.

Optimised routes where players are generally discouraged from flouting material constraints are called glitchless routes. In practice, this usually means that players instead are not allowed to flout specific material constraints. For example, *Pokémon Blue* (1996) is one of the earlier *Pokémon* franchise games released, where players are encouraged to catch monsters called *Pokémon*, train them, and use them to battle other trainers. Two of *Pokémon Blue*'s routes are called any% and any% glitchless. As explained above, any% allows any constraints to be flouted as long as it gets to the designated end point, *Pokémon Blue*'s Hall of Fame. This route is practically never run: it is a very complex run which takes just over a minute and a half, as players corrupt their save file in a way that takes them directly to the Hall of Fame. One would assume that any% glitchless would not allow any constraints to be flouted. However, it does allow certain material constraints to be flouted – such as digging inside buildings, and instant text. However, it does not allow save corruption and a host of other glitches which make the run much shorter – this run takes an hour and 45 minutes if performed optimally.

There are also routes that add further potential constraints along with the speedrun constraint. These are usually called challenge runs. One of my favourite challenge runs that went somewhat viral recently is *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*'s (2017) All Dog Treasures route. *Breath of the Wild* is the most recent Legend of Zelda franchise game, where players play as a young hero tasked with defeating an evil ruler bent on taking control of the mythical land of Hyrule at all costs. In the All Dog Treasures route, players have to feed every dog in Hyrule three pieces of fruit, which in turn gives them a treasure. The route is complete when all the dogs have been fed, and every dog treasure has been opened. Unlike any% routes, the designated end point is ignored.

Segmented routes also partially ignore the designated end point. In routes that take a particularly long time, players might decide to play only a segment of that route, with these segments decided partially nominally, partially by the same mechanisms that

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separate any% and 100% routes. Segmented routes are usually done to practice problematic parts of a longer route. However, some players also like to compete for the best time in specific segments.

Earlier on, I defined speedrun play methods as a collection of play methods that 1) uphold the potential constraint of executing a play method as fast as possible, and 2) uphold a specific set of constraints called a route. However, there is one type of speedrun play method that is an exception, and does not follow the second rule. In the blind speedrun play method, players play a game they have never played before, ideally with as little research done about it as possible. The optimised route is replaced with a new potential constraint: quickly synthesising knowledge from the game to create a route on the fly.

There is a final type of speedrun called a tool assisted speedrun (now called TAS). In this run, the second rule of the speedrun play method is rigidly followed, as the player is replaced by a pre-programmed robot which inputs perfect controls. On the one hand, since the player is supplanted by a machine, I do not want to spend too much time on this constraint. However, on the other hand, it also shows the careful consideration behind each route in this section. Each singular input is known, making the speedrunner's role is trying to execute these constraints as efficiently as they can. In **Section 2.1.2**, I discussed Calvino's *t zero* (1976): TAS would be a successful Dantès, having built the most impenetrable prison they could devise. Speedrunners would be a constantly frustrated Faria, trying to break out of the prison they find themselves in, with the knowledge that freedom is still possible.

### [5.1.2] Discussing Speedruns

#### **Speedrunning in Academic Discourse**

Previous scholars have already discussed speedrunning, even overlapping with some of the topics I have discussed in the previous section. For example, David Snyder (2017) discussed different types of speedruns in his book on the topic. He takes a play community approach in his book, opting to interview a host of different speedrunners on the way they play, in turn overlapping with the concerns I have brought up regarding

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the delineation between routing and speedrunning. Boluk and Lemieux (2017) also conduct their own interview with acclaimed speedrunner Narcissa Wright, who had held one of the most prolific speedrunning world records – the *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) (then) any% route record. They discussed speedrunning as an example of a metagame, a topic I have addressed before in **Section 2.3.5** especially, as well as **Section 3.1.1**, and **Section 3.5.1**.

Rainforest Scully-Blaker's (2014) takes a more philosophical approach to speedrunning. He defines two types of runs: finesse runs and deconstructive runs. He also created a distinction between two types of rules: implicit rules and explicit rules.

Starting with the latter part, since it is easier to explain within my constraint model. Implicit rules are floutable constraints, while explicit rules are determined game aspects which fall out of the players' control. For Scully-Blaker, if I were to state that in *Tetris* the tetronimo never goes up, this would be an explicit rule – there is no way in any *Tetris* game to make the tetronimo go up. However, if I were to state that a tetronimo is always going down, this would be an implicit rule: Players can uphold this material constraint by letting the tetronimo move downwards. However, in some *Tetris* games, players can flout this material constraint by spamming the rotate button when the tetronimo is above a stack of previously placed pieces. However, for Scully-Blaker, if I were to state that tetronimos always go down unless I am spamming the rotate button over a set of previously placed pieces, then it would once again become an explicit rule. At least until someone finds another exception.

He then moves on to give an example of finesse runs and deconstructive runs. He presents Andrew Gardikis' (2011) 4 minute 58 second world record of *Super Mario Bros* as an example of a finesse run. In this run, he argues that Gardikis predominantly upholds implicit (and by virtue explicit) rules, focusing on executing the run as perfectly as possible. While he does acknowledge that the runner makes use of “some design oversights”, he argues that “they do not threaten the physical boundaries of the gameworld as established by the game's narrative.” (2014). A finesse run is a speedrun where the route predominantly upholds the prototypical play method.

On the other hand, Scully-Blaker describes FunilaSM64's (2011) 0-star run in 6 minutes and 41 seconds as an example of a deconstructive run. The run actively tears down any

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notion of a “narrative boundary” as the runner clips (moves through solid objects, like walls) and sequence breaks (skips quests denoted to them by the game, like collecting at least 1 star), to their hearts’ content. A deconstructive run is a speedrun where the route includes copious flouting of material and imperative constraints.

I would argue that Scully-Blaker slightly understates the violence done to the physical boundaries in Gardikis’ *Super Mario Bros* finesse run. Gardikis’ route had been flouting the material constraint of not walking over gapped spaces, which can be considered a cornerstone of platformer games. However, since Gardikis’ run, the world record has been lowered by a further two and a half seconds, and is currently held by the speedrunner Kosmic (2020), mainly through deconstructive practices, such as the warp glitch, where players clip through a specific block early on in the route; as well as the bullet bill glitch, which skips a flagpole sequence by hitting a moving object at the right frame. Would Kosmic’s run, having turned at least two explicit rules into implicit rules, become a deconstructive run? It is interesting to note that both Gardikis’ route, as well as FunilaSM64’s route are both examples of any% routes. What Gardikis was lacking was the right route, rather than a specific frame of mind, as Gardikis happily returned to *Super Mario Bros* with the new and improved any% route, along with its deconstructive practices.

Bonnie Ruberg (2019) describes speedruns as both queer and not queer. They had first argued that “speedrunning itself can be considered a queer form of play because it resists the chrononormativity of video games” (2019, p. 3). While games might often present themselves as straight narratives with clear beginnings, and defined end points, speedrunners queer this normative perception of time through sequence breaks, along with a general disregard of how the game should be played. However, Ruberg also argues that speedrunning straightens *Gone Home* (2013), a walking simulator focused around exploring a spatial narrative. They argue that speedrunners adopt a specific route and stick to it, taking out the queer movement present in *Gone Home*’s prototypical play method. Speedrunning’s focus is executing a clearly delineated route as efficiently as possible, which Ruberg considers a straightening of queer gameplay.

Ruberg’s analysis might seem slightly contradictory, as speedrunning is situated as both queer and not queer. However, I would argue that the answer lies in Ruberg’s

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description of two different play methods: speedruns' play methods requires rigid straightening: queering off the prescribed path will result in a failure of execution – the run will be slow. However, routing's play method is decidedly queer, queering not only games' chrononormativity, but every other type of normativity that allows itself to be queered. While it might be tempting to argue that speedrun play methods straightens the queer labour present in the routing play method, the fact that I am speaking about speedrun play methods over a singular speedrun play method shows that while speedrunning straightens exploration, it still leaves space for a lot of non-normative play methods to be adopted.

Nguyen (2019) also mentions speedruns when discussing prescriptive ontologies. He argues that speedrun players are prescribing a new ontology from the same material. While they are engaging with the software of a specific game, they are creating something that is outside of the original ontological make up of the game work. I have already dealt with my agreements and disagreements with Nguyen in **Section 3.4.2**, and they still follow here. The *Super Mario Bros* materials do not belong to the *Super Mario Bros* work, it just so happens that the *Super Mario Bros* work makes use of those materials consistently and best. Yet speedrunning also uses those same materials for an equally valid work. However, I also agree with his assertion that speedrun play methods and *Super Mario Bros*' prototypical play method are two ontologically different types of play. If someone invited me to play *Super Mario Bros*, then got annoyed when I was not done in 5 minutes, I would very likely conclude we were adopting two different play methods.

### **Speedrunning Outside of Academic Discourse**

There has also been discussion about speedruns outside of academic discourse. Joey Yee (2017) in a video opinion piece, highlights speedrunning's communal aspects quite well. He points out speedrunning's grass-roots origins, with volunteers running and maintaining *Speed Demos Archive*, the first website to curate speedrunning world records. He also points out the aforementioned *Games Done Quick*. More importantly, he also discusses how speedrunning is more like a marathon than a race, as players consistently share their routes with each other. While speedrunners often want to be the



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best, they also often want to be bested, as that often means the route has evolved, as I have shown in Gardikis's example.

Karl Jobst (2020) does a great job of highlighting how evolving routes shift different speedrun play methods, while moving away from Yee's slight romanticisation of the speedrunning play community. Jobst explains how up until January 2020, the Norwegian speedrunner Torje seemed to have the undisputable best possible execution of *Ocarina of Time* (1998), being the only speedrunner to have a time of under seventeen minutes. However, in January, MrCheeze, a Canadian router, discovered how to utilise arbitrary code execution (now called ACE) to bring this record down even further. In very simple terms, ACE tricks the game's code into thinking that specific button presses in a very careful order are actually important pieces of code which it needs to execute. Router Glitches0and0stuff (2020) explains ACE in greater and more accurate detail.

However, the reason I cited Jobst over Glitches0and0stuff originally is because he brings forward an important discussion that was happening within the *Ocarina of Time* community. Jobst states that he started to lose interest in *Ocarina of Time* speedrun play methods even before Torje's groundbreaking record. For him, the earlier cited Narcissa Wright 2015 *Ocarina of Time* world record defined his peak interest. He argues that back then the speedrun had a narrative structure of sorts, as well as some variety in its execution. The *Ocarina of Time* speedrunning community themselves do not altogether share this sentiment, as Torje's run is held to high regard. However, they were divided into what should be and should not be allowed going forward. The ACE run skips straight to the middle of the final cutscene (skipping the final boss completely), which means that even the previously designated end point had been skipped. It also requires notching a third controller before the run even starts. Both of these were contentious, so the compromise was accepting two routes. One route is the any% route, which allows ACE: this meant that the route now flouted a material constraint (notching a controller), a further material constraint (executing random code execution in game), and an imperative constraint (skipping the designated end point). The second route is the No ACE route, which does not allow ACE, in turn not allowing the above constraints to be flouted. Any recorded run before the ACE discovery would be moved from the any% route leaderboards to the new No ACE route leaderboards.

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As of April 2020, the speedrunning community includes Jobst who's interest in spectating *Ocarina of Time* speedruns is waning even with these separate routes. It includes router MrCheeze, who's interest in routing play methods forced a new route to be acknowledged. It includes speedrunner dannyb21892 who is currently holding the new world record of the Any% route after three years of relative inactivity on the No ACE route leaderboard. It even includes Narcissa Wright, who developed a reinvigorated interest in the any% route, claiming the current fifth place on the leaderboard. Interestingly, it also includes Australian speedrunner RichardSage, a relative newcomer to the top spots of the *Ocarina of Time* leaderboards, who beat Torje's NoACE route record by 9 seconds, while showing no interest in the any% route.

Some players want to experience a narrative, some players want a new challenge, some players want to create a new challenge, while some players simply want an excuse to return to an old love. *Ocarina of Time*'s speedrunning evolution in the first half of 2020 shows how the diversity behind speedrun play methods. It shows how players have varying reservations in which constraints they want to flout: modifying a controller went a bit too far for certain speedrunners. Meanwhile, it also shows how for some players, their interest is in the play method, above playing a chosen game. Speedrunners like dannyb21892 and Narcissa Wright, while never having abandoned *Ocarina of Time*, have a renewed presence in the leaderboards because they now found a new play method they can adopt.

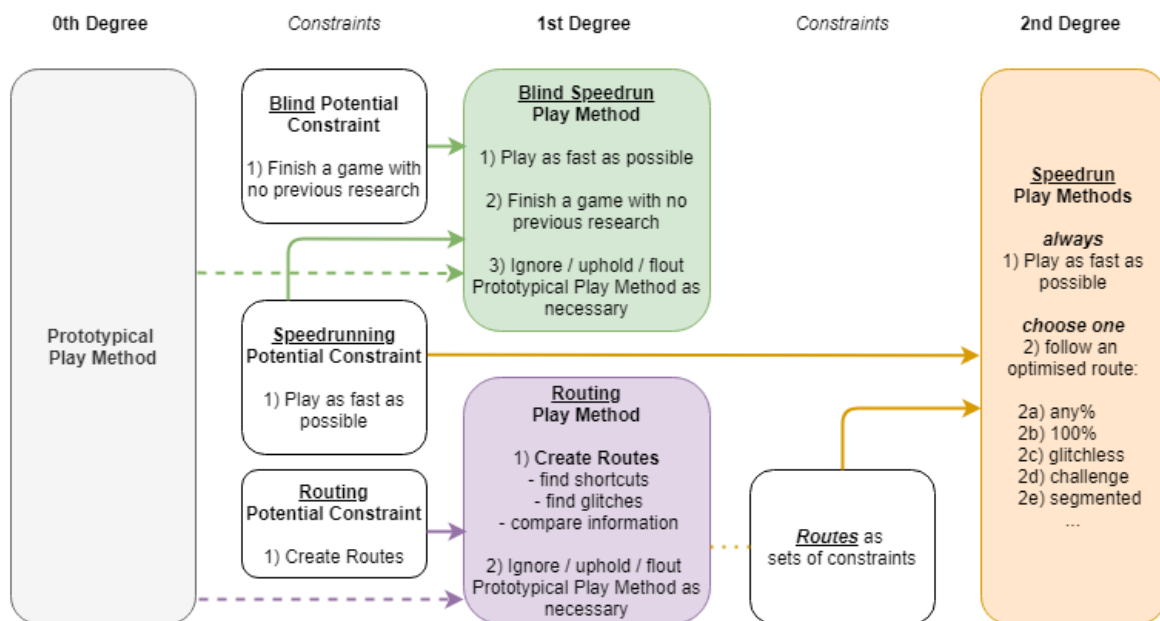
### [5.1.3] Slow Steps Forward

I started the chapter by discussing how speedrunning is interesting because it is not a monolithic activity, but rather collects a wide variety of sets of constraints aka routes, and then binds them under the promise to execute that route as fast as possible. As I have shown, these routes are so varied that in order to discuss them, the speedrunning community has had to come up with a lexicon of terms. In this thesis, I have been advocating for creating and utilising terms that describe the different play that players perform, but in some ways the speedrunning community has already preceded my work. While I will not be using their terminology, as it is specific to their play concerns and

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not altogether academic, it does show that they realised the need to describe the different ways in which speedrunners play.

However, while the terms they use will not make a direct contribution to my constraint model, the way they negotiate many speedrun play methods under one umbrella, while also simultaneously acknowledging the various sets of constraints that underpin speedrun play methods is something essential to especially this chapter, but also the thesis at large.



(Figure 12: Degrees of Play Methods)

Speedrun play methods presents themselves as a second degree play method. In most of the examples in the previous chapter, when I discussed upholding and flouting constraints, it was mostly being done in relation to the prototypical play method. For example, the routing play method adopts a potential constraint: to create routes by exploring the game's boundaries and liminalities. In turn, this often means upholding some prototypical constraints, flouting others, while altogether not considering others. However, speedrun play methods find themselves in the second degree, as their considerations are overall towards the first degree play method, towards routing. Deviating from a route in speedrun play methods is more noteworthy than deviating

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from the prototypical play method. The latter is often expected, as routing had set new play considerations.

Not every example of iterative play I will explore in this chapter will be a second degree play method. However, all iterative play comes with this same understanding: creating play methods is an exercise in building. It is the realisation that players' current play methods build from previous constraints, while also building future constraints. Sometimes, the new constraints are applied on the first degree. Other times, it means constraints that can only be understood if they are done in reference to other first degree play methods.

### **[5.2] Complementary Creations**

In this subchapter, I will look at players iterating: creating new play methods using previous play method as their starting points. In the first section, I will look at iteration that is meant to focus and enhance previous play method, by creating play methods for specific types of players. In the second section, I will look at iteration in sandbox games, where players realise that the possibility space is actively made for them to iterate on and create their own play methods. In the third section, I will look at iteration meant to refresh a previously exhausted play method, where players come up with new constraints that make previous play more challenging or simply shined in a new light. Finally, in the fourth section, I will look at iteration where players limit the prototypical play method, by restricting themselves from upholding specific constraint play in order to render a very specific shared experience across players.

By the end of this section, I will have shown that taking previous play methods and adopting a single potential constraint is enough to turn previously known values into new avenues for play. I will have also shown how this process of iterating is not something which happens once: play methods are in constant iteration, as previous play methods are exhausted, new players join the fray, and new communal situations emerge.

### [5.2.1] Flair Play

On one hand, players iterate through largely nominal means – players might enjoy upholding some constraints more than others, so they adopt potential constraints that allow them to further uphold their preferred constraints. In other words, they have a playstyle. Richard Bartle's (1996) famous taxonomy of player types already describes this in so many words. Bartle describes four different types of players: killers, achievers, socializers and explorers, which are fairly self descriptive. Killers enjoy beating other people in games, achievers like exhausting a game's accomplishments, socializers enjoy the social aspect of games, while explorers like discovering more about the game. Bartle states that these players will generally enjoy different games. However, he also states that players may enjoy the same game for different reasons. For example, a socializer might enjoy an MMORPG for its social content, such as joining a guild, doing raids with friends, and so on. Meanwhile, a killer might enjoy an MMORPG for its confrontational content, such as player versus player (now called PvP) combat. Players uphold different constraints to complement what they want out of their play. Furthermore, some players might add potential constraints, such as joining the biggest guild or being at the top of the PvP leaderboard, to yet further iterate on their preferred play method, and enhance what they want from their play.

Mark Rosewater's and Matt Cavotta's player taxonomies (2002, 2005, 2007) are similar to Bartle's, however they bring a further two perspectives worth considering. Firstly, they created a taxonomy specific to a single game called *Magic: the Gathering* (1992), a trading card game that has since been digitised multiple times, with the most recent and most popular being *MTG Arena* (2018). This allowed them to cater their taxonomy much more carefully to players' potential constraints within a single game. Secondly, Rosewater and Cavotta kept revisiting these taxonomies to add new player types, acknowledging the constant renegotiation of play happening as players iterated on their play methods.

Rosewater's (2002) first typology included three different player types: Timmy, Johnny and Spike. Timmy enjoys adopting potential constraints that lead to big bombastic and often confrontational effects; Johnny enjoys adopting potential constraints that links his play in complex and creative ways; while Spike enjoys adopting potential constraints

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that increase their chance of winning. Cavotta (2005) later introduced Vorthos, who enjoys adopting potential constraints that emphasize creating a game narrative. Finally, Rosewater (2007) revisited Vorthos and added Mel, who enjoys adopting potential constraints that make the game's underpinnings work in elegant and innovative ways. Since they made these player profiles, Rosewater, Cavotta and others (Digges, 2009; Tom LaPille 2009) have continued revisiting, amending and expanding these player types. They understand that potential constraints, even within a subset of play, continue evolving through conversation and iteration. Their player subsets are descriptive responses to current play methods, rather than descriptions of different ideal players.

### [5.2.2] Making Sandcastles

In the previous section, the iterations are still somewhat minor: designer described play-styles are above all else accounting for either upholding specific prototypical constraints at the expense of ignoring others, or at their very best adopting minor potential constraints that enhance the play possibilities present within the prototypical play method. There is iterative play which makes much more substantial changes from its inceptive play method.

The games that allow best for players to adopt such substantial potential constraints would be games that allow for some level of sandboxing. Sandboxing is the play situation where the prototypical play method can be upheld without too many impositions on the players. Games with significant sandboxing include *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), *Minecraft* (2009), *Garry's Mod* (2004) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). Not every game with sandboxing is a sandbox game: *Grand Theft Auto V* has a very structured linear play method that players can choose to follow. However, it does allow players to readily remove all the limitations that come with this play method, for a more open play session. From here on, I will call any game that allows sandboxing a sandbox games for convenience's sake.

Sandbox games are popular for creating iterative play methods because the prototypical material constraints are above all else there to allow the player to maintain their presence in the game, while the prototypical imperative constraints are low to non-

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existent, such as in *Garry's Mod*, or suggestive of what play can be created, rather than explicitly telling people how to play, such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. This allows players to implement their own potential constraint without much resistance, leading to a play culture rich in diverse play methods. Players' potential constraints are not only easy to implement, but also easy to share, improve and iterate upon.

For example, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is a sandbox game where players can populate their island with items, decorations, paths and anthropomorphic friends to their heart's content. Content creators 马来虾综合游戏频道 (now called MLXGame, their chosen English channel name) took this freedom as an opportunity to create an obstacle course. They used the island shaping tools, implicitly associated with making the island more aesthetically pleasing, to instead make the island hard to traverse. After they made the course, three players met on the island and iterated a further potential constraint. They tried to traverse the island as quickly as possible, which they screen-recorded and uploaded on their Facebook page (2020). While MLXGame have their own significant following on Facebook of just under 4,000 fans, their recording went viral after game variety journalist Patricia Hernandez (2020) wrote an article about it on gaming website Polygon.

Players now have two new play methods they can adopt. First, MLXGame encouraged the create obstacle courses play method. A cursory Youtube search will lead to many other players' very own obstacle courses. It also encouraged the second degree race through obstacle courses play method, following the create obstacle courses play method. As with routing and speedrun play methods, these play methods will have a necessary overlap of players. However, they are still distinct play sessions with different motivations and constraint play. Some players prefer making obstacle courses, some players prefer racing through them. Moreover, players do not make obstacle courses at the same time that they're racing through obstacle courses (unless this becomes its own new play method).

*Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is currently lacking a way for players to share their obstacle courses<sup>11</sup>, making the aforementioned player overlap more pronounced. However, previous *Animal Crossing* franchise games, such as *Animal Crossing: New*

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11 There is a project update scheduled for August 1<sup>st</sup> to introduce the *Dream Mode* in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

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*Leaf* (2012) had a *Dream Mode*, which allowed anyone to visit a particular island as long as they have a particular code. For example, the player ガラック (transliterated as Garakku) made an *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* village called とびだせ どうぶつの森 アイカ村 (now called *Aika*, its alternate name). *Aika* is a horror-themed village, which players can walk through to enjoy the spatial narrative that it presents. Players could enter *Aika's Dream Code* in order to experience the village. The village's popularity exploded as popular youtubers such as Emile “chuggaconroy” Rosales ([2014](#)) shared his tour of the village, amassing over a million views. *Dream Codes* allowed for a smoother transition from the first degree making themed villages play method, to the second degree Animal Crossing tourism play method. In turn, the player overlap between these two activities was much smaller, clearly cementing them as individual play methods.

### [5.2.3] Game Version Plus

This said, iterative play does not need the blank slate that sandbox games provide. Sandbox games simply make a wider array of iterative play possible. There are still various games with much more rigidly defined prototypical play methods with active communities iterating on play. This happens especially once players have exhausted the original play method.

An example I have made use of in previous work (Harrington, 2019) is *Nuzlocke* challenges in main *Pokémon* franchise games. For better or for worse, all main *Pokémon* franchise games have largely the same prototypical play method which I described in **Section 5.1.1**. This leads players who have been playing main *Pokémon* franchise games for a long time, such as Nick Franco, longing for something more to their play. In 2010, Franco released a crudely drawn comic listing his two newly chosen potential constraints, which he adopted in his *Pokemon Ruby* (2002) playthrough. These two constraints would come to be part of the *Nuzlocke* play method.

Firstly, if a *Pokémon* fainted in battle, Franco would have to release it. Normally, players can revive fainted *Pokémon* – there are prototypical imperative constraints explicitly encourage this. However, he decided to flout this imperative constraint, instead releasing his fainted *Pokémon*, as though they were permanently deceased.



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Secondly, main *Pokémon* franchise games have paths called routes (not to be mixed up with routing play methods). Each route has specific Pokémon that can be caught in it. While there are prototypical imperative constraints explicitly encouraging players to catch as many Pokémon as they can, Franco limited himself to catching only the first Pokémon he saw on every route.

Since then, the Nuzlocke play method has grown significantly. Just as with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*' obstacle courses and themed villages, players record their *Nuzlocke* runs and upload them on YouTube, have forums discussing this play method, and so on. Since Franco's comic, the play method has been iterated upon and adopted a few extra semi-official potential constraints: each Pokémon caught needs to be given a nickname (to further the emotional bond), explicitly forbidding save-scumming (saving before the player sees the first Pokémon in each route, then reloading if it is not the one the player wants), and explicitly forbidding trading (getting Pokémon from other people). I would argue that this Nuzlocke+ play method is currently the more widely upheld play method, surpassing Franco's original play method.

Furthermore, Bulbapedia ([2020](#)), one of the biggest *Pokémon* wikis, also lists a host of other potential constraints that play can adopt within their Nuzlocke play methods. Some of them are there to make the Nuzlocke+ play method more diverse: for example, one potential constraint allows players to catch the second Pokémon in a route if they already have the first Pokémon they have encountered. Others want to further emphasize the machinations of fate present in the Nuzlocke+ play method, by randomising players' starter Pokémon, which is normally left to choice. Each of these added rules is a potential constraint, creating many variations on the Nuzlocke play method that players have, and will continue, to iterate on.

Franco adopted this play method largely for two reasons. Firstly, he wanted to create a personal connection with his virtual Pokémon: he used the game as a means to grow his empathy for digital agents, a type of play I will explore in greater detail through different examples in **Chapter 6**. Secondly, and arguably the more common reason players adopt the Nuzlocke play method, is to shake up the known formula that is *Pokémon*'s prototypical play method. Not only do players want to experience something new, they also want to experience something more challenging.

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The Happy Hob's Soulsborne No Hit play method falls under Nuzlocke's new and challenging play method umbrella. *Soulsborne* is the collective title given to the games *Demon's Souls* (2009), *Dark Souls I* through *III* (2011, 2014, 2016), and *Bloodborne* (2015), all of which have two things in common: they have been largely developed by FromSoftware, and they are all known to be incredibly hard to beat. The Happy Hob, who exclusively plays *Soulsborne* games, devised a play method with two potential constraints. Firstly, he would play the five games back to back from beginning to end without sequence breaks. Secondly, he would not allow himself to be hit by an enemy even once. In May 2019, he successfully executed the Soulsborne No Hit play method

Just like the Nuzlocke play method, the Soulsborne No Hit play method is meant to allow The Happy Hob a new take on the play method that he had previously exhausted, through adopting a new potential constraint. However, unlike the *Nuzlocke* challenge, while the potential constraints are easy to comprehend and adopt, they are nowhere as easy to execute. This does not mean that no other player has attempted these constraints that he has set, but it does severely limit interested parties. This said, The *Soulsborne No Hit* challenge has still garnered a large following, whether it is through game journalism (2019), by following The Happy Hob's personal twitch channel where he has streamed and recorded his attempts, or through discussion boards on forums. The Happy Hob's play method has equally been shared not as a play method to be adopted by other players, but as a terminal work that originated from play methods that spectators can enjoy.

### **[5.2.4] Fair Play**

In the previous sections, I explained how iterative play often stems from wanting to grow something from arable ground. For example, sandbox games have a minimal prototypical play method, creating space for a lot of different play practices. However, some iterative play stems from the need to prune overgrown land: when the prototypical play method allows for diverse play at any given moment, players restrict the ways they can play so that they can discuss common play.

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A good example of this would be competitive gaming: most esports establish a play method that every player has to adopt. For example, in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (2019), between two to eight players are placed onto a stage with platforms, and are then encouraged to throw the other players off the main platform. Each player can choose any one of over 70 characters. The game ends either when the timer reaches 0, when each player but one is thrown off the main platform a number of times (called stocks), and/or when their health reaches 0. There is a selection of over a hundred stages, and most stages might or might not have moving platforms. Equally, players might have items that assist them (or hinder them) during the battle. Equally players can be divided into teams or the battle might be left as a free for all. One prototypical imperative constraint is clear: players are meant to throw other players off the main platform. However, the many other prototypical constraints have variance, which necessitates including some while neglecting other constraints.

In order to remedy this issue, *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* competitive players have come up with a few widely accepted competitive SSBU play methods. Competitive SSBU play methods can be gathered together as a first degree play method as they all share a group of common potential constraints focused on limiting which material and imperative constraints should be actively upheld. This includes allowing only for a specific subset of stages, often-times with hazards turned off, how long the battle timer should be (the most common play method dictates 7 minutes), how many stocks each player should have (the most common number is 3 stocks per player), as well as completely banning items from use. These are amongst the communally agreed constraints that players feel are necessary to turn *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* into a fair competitive fighting game. SSBWiki (2020) provides a few further clarifications.

However, before these constraints can be executed, there needs to be further demarcation of which competitive SSBU play method will be adopted. The most popular competitive SSBU play method is the singles competitive SSBU play method. It includes all the constraints of the competitive SSBU play method, except it limits the number of players to just two – one versus one.

In the competitive SSBU play methods, players are still generating new forms of play through iteration. However, rather than adopting the ground-up approach that sandbox

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games take, it is down from a top-down approach, minimising the possibility space to ensure a shared play experience. Players reduce this possibility space for notions of fairness – if items are removed, hazards are reduced, and how players can win is regulated, then the metrics that are being used to test players are much more streamlined. The competitive SSBU play method largely foregrounds how well players execute specific material constraints, such as pressing the right buttons at the right time to have their chosen character do specific moves.

However, fairness is not the only reason players adopt competitive play methods. In *Super Smash Bros Melee* (2001), a technique known as *wobbling* has been occasionally banned. *Super Smash Bros Melee* was an earlier installation within the *Super Smash Bros* franchise. In this game, a character called Ice Climbers, based off of the eponymous game, could keep hitting their opponent's character without giving their opponent the opportunity to respond in any way. This technique is known as *wobbling*, named after Wobbles, the player who discovered it. This has led the competitive play community to adopt three different variants within the competitive Melee play methods, each with a constraint relating to wobbling:

- let players wobble,
- let players wobble only until they can freely knock a player off a stage (they cannot wobble to let the timer run out), or
- do not let players wobble.

The first variant is the least popular for reasons of fairness – if an Ice Climbers is ahead in the game, then they can keep hitting the opponent until the time runs out. Meanwhile, opponents of the second variant usually oppose it out of enjoyability to watch and / or play against. Despite this overpowered technique, Ice Climbers are not close to being considered the best character in *Super Smash Bros Melee*. If anything, *wobbling* gives Ice Climbers players a fighting chance against stronger characters like Jigglypuff and Fox. However, most spectators, as well as players, do not enjoy watching or dealing with *wobbling*, since they have to wait for half a minute for a largely predetermined outcome.

## [5.3] Disruptive Interventions

In the previous subchapter, I looked at iterations that were developed to complement previous play methods: often times, they complemented the prototypical play method, making it harder, or more tailor-made, or even attached meaning where there was very little. However, they also iterated on other previously established play methods. In this section, I will look at iteration that necessitates upending previously established play methods, by flouting constraints in previously established play methods, whether prototypical or communally negotiated.

### [5.3.1] Living within the Condition

One way in which players' iteration directly interferes with previously established play methods is by prematurely causing themselves to terminate their play session. In **Section 3.2.2**, I discussed Leino's *gameplay condition*, in which he argues that all games have one thing in common: players can be removed from games outside of their own accord. In turn, I extended it by arguing that this condition is not limited to just gameplay, but also how this gameplay is realised, through a *material condition*. In the following example, players take their lack of agency over their removal from games and make it part and parcel of their new play methods. They either try to actively eject themselves, or make their final ejection part an essential part of executing and upholding their own potential constraints.

Pippin Barr's *Let's Play Permadeath Speedrun* play method is a great starting example for this. In this play method which, he actively flouted the material constraint of maintaining his presence in the game, adding the speedrun constraint of going as quickly as he possibly could. One example of this play method is his VVVVVV (2010) run. VVVVVV a platformer game in which jumping is replaced with shifting gravity. In Barr's recording ([2019](#)), he records a personal record of twenty-nine seconds. However, I feel he is selling himself short – speedrunning convention normally times games from the moment the player gains control (to minimise the effect of starting load times on variant machines. This means he managed to do it in an impressive three seconds. Funnily, the only comment on the video already has routing suggestions to this three

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second speedrun – the routing play community never ceases to innovate.

In a journal article, Barr (2017) argues that this series is not only a “new approach to play”, but it also makes players “contemplate the potential narrative framing of such play”, “highlight the conventions” and “tell us something about mortality in [...] videogames.” (2017, p. 12). Meanwhile, in an article on Boingboing, an online magazine, Barr (2019) also admits that “Mostly I just think they're kind of hilarious though.” For now, the reason does not matter too much. What matters is that Barr iterated on his play by flouting the most core constraint of games – maintaining our presence as players in them.

Jesper Juul (2009) interestingly does a similar mini experiment in his book *A Casual Revolution*. He tries to flout the gameplay condition of the arcade game *Scramble* (1980). He argues that hardcore games such as *Scramble* have a large array of rules. Since hardcore players are compulsive and focused on improvement, the rules heavily delineate how players can play, so that they can make sure their compulsion is satisfied and they can feel improvement. He found one alternate play method in *Scramble*. He tried to lose as quickly as possible, his very own *Let's Play Permadeath Speedrun*. Unlike Barr, Juul did not find it particularly funny or satisfying. Perhaps Juul is a hardcore gamer, while Barr is a casual player. However, Juul did identify an important aspect. As the uniting material constraint across games is upholding our presence in them, then the iteration common to all play methods would be a disruptive one, by finding a premature ludic ending to our gameplay condition, by flouting this core material constraint.

### **Premature Ends in Liberty City**

However not every iterative play on the premature end condition does it explicitly with the intention of leading to such an end. Some iterative play just tends to lead players to this end condition quicker due to the constraints they have adopted. For example, *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) had the Swingset Catapult play method. In *Grand Theft Auto IV*, one particular swingset had a very particular collision detection glitch. When players drove into the swingset at particular angles, it would cause them (and their car) to fling

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into the air, leading to their untimely death. Players saw this glitch as an opportunity to create a new communal play method. Players executing the Swingset Catapult play method should try to fling themselves as far as possible – the further they sent themselves, the better. While there are currently no official leaderboards online to my knowledge, many users such as Dash Renard (2010) made compilation recordings of players' attempts to fling themselves using the swingset.

Equally, some iterative play tries to delay the premature end condition, but accepts that their play method necessitates that they eventually terminate their play session. Another common play method in *Grand Theft Auto IV* was the Six Star play method. In *Grand Theft Auto* games, committing crimes gives players stars, which indicate players' notoriety with the police. One star is minor notoriety, which players can drive off fairly quickly. Six stars means that the player is so notorious, police will not leave them alone until they are apprehended, or more often killed. In the Six Star play method, players first get six stars. After that, they try to stay alive as long as possible. Again, while there are no official leaderboard, players have uploaded their play sessions online. Youtube user xery555 (2018) has one of the more impressive play sessions, surviving for almost three hours.

### [5.3.2] Mario's Non Compliance

However, not every intervention disrupts the players' gameplay condition. Other play methods instead iterate on other aspects of the prototypical play method. In this section, I will look at iterations on play method that make it impossible, to varying degrees, to uphold the prototypical play method within the same play session.

One such example is the Minus World play methods in *Super Mario Bros* (1985). When players are near the end of "World 1-2", there is the Warp Zone. This is a hidden "secret" area that players can use to skip levels. Since players could not save their progress in *Super Mario Bros*, this was a quick way to access harder levels after losing all three lives. The data for these levels is loaded as soon as players pass over the path leading to the Warp Zone. However, as Nathan Altice (2015) describes, players found a way of accessing the Warp Zone before the data for the other levels, by flouting

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material constraints such as tricking collision boxes, playing the collision failsafe and preventing the data from loading.

Since there was impartial and corrupted level data, the game would try to load something as best as it could. This led to the infamous minus world, named as such because the load screen only displayed “World -1”, rather than the usual “World 1-1”, “World 1-2” or so on. (Altice, 2015, p. 157-160)

Players first discovered this glitch on the *Nintendo Entertainment System* (now called *NES*), where it led them to an underwater level, which finished with a pipe. This pipe led them straight back to the beginning of the level. Players could only exist in this world for the 300 seconds that *Super Mario Bros* world allocates them, looping back from beginning to end, until Mario gives up and dies. Players would execute this glitch to live through Mario’s existential crisis, going from beginning to end over and over, until their end finally comes. If this play method ended here, this example would have been a strong contender for the previous section, where the chosen play method leads to a premature end condition.

However, players discovered that executing the same glitch on the *Family Computer Disk System* (now called *Famicom*) led to a different minus world. The *NES* operated using cartridges, while the *Famicom* operated using CD-ROMS. Because of their hardware differences, each of these systems interpreted the lack of data caused by the brick collision glitch differently. The *Famicom* led players to a “World -1”, a “World -2”, and a “World -3”, the last of which allowed players to uphold a prototypical imperative constraint as their end point. They could save the princess, albeit an invisible princess.

Both the *NES* and the *Famicom* minus worlds do not feel actively designed, as they were not. For example, apart from the invisible princess the *Famicom* version has a floating non-interactable princess in “World -1”, squids floating through rocks in “World -3”, and so on. However, the *Famicom* version does lead to a satisfying resolution to the Minus World play method. It is satisfying enough that one of *Super Mario Bros*’ five speedrunning routes is the Minus World category, a very tightly contested category with Niftski currently holding the current world record at 2 minutes 31 seconds and 800 milliseconds. More importantly, it is an example of a play method



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that renders quite a few prototypical constraints impossible to uphold.

Finally, Minus World Routing play method player Skelux (2018) straddles the line between presets and constraints. Skelux' work falls in an uncomfortable position as while he does not modifying the game's data, as presetting usually does, he does alter how he can access it outside of a play session. Nonetheless, his play session is definitely interesting to look at. Skelux played 248 minus worlds by filling in the missing corrupted data with random data. This leads him to show a variety of very interesting levels. My personal favourites include Mario swimming in a sea of darkness (Figure 13) Mario strolling nonchalantly without the player's input until he meets a rock (Figure 14), as well as as the level which ends with the player saving the princess until a goomba (a common *Super Mario Bros* enemy) sneaks up on the player and defeats them before they can make it through the celebratory text (Figure 15).



(Figure 13: Mario Swimming in a sea of nothingness)



(Figure 14: An Uncontrollable Mario stumped by a rock)



(Figure 15: Defeated by a Secret Goomba)

### **Demons and Pizza in Super Mario 64**

The above examples predominantly iterate by flouting material constraints. However, this does not necessarily need to be the case. Players can equally iterate by flouting imperative constraints.

The Green Demon play method in *Super Mario 64* (1996) provides an example where an explicitly expressed intentions (as explained in **Section 3.3.2**) are actively challenged through adopting a new potential constraint. In *Super Mario 64*, certain boxes have a 1-Up mushroom, which gives Mario an extra life. This is a good thing. Extra lives are always good if players are upholding the prototypical play method, and they are denoted as good through game feedback, such as pleasant sound and an increasing number. Moreover, in some levels, these 1-Up mushrooms hone in on the player, just to make sure they get this good thing. In the Green Demon play method, players actively avoid the 1-Up mushroom, usually while upholding the imperative constraint of collecting the eight red coins spread throughout any given level. If the 1-Up mushroom catches up to the player, they lose (SwankyBox, [2017](#)).

Similarly, the Pizza Box play method in *Super Mario 64* is an example of an implicit expressed intentions being actively challenged through a potential constraint. In *Super Mario 64*, there are wooden boxes which players can use to defeat enemies. If players pick a box up and throw or drop it, the box will shatter. Moreover, if the box hits an enemy, the enemy disappears. While there is no explicit instruction saying that players should be throwing boxes, boxes' only affordance is being thrown, shattering and occasionally removing enemies too. However, in the Pizza Box play method, players pretend the wooden box is a pizza that they have to deliver from the start point of a level to a designated end point. They have to carry it throughout, without ever placing it down, and making sure it does not shatter – a dropped pizza is a bad pizza. (SwankyBox, [2017](#)). Both the Green Demon and the Pizza Box play methods have players creating potential constraints that aim to actively flout a specific imperative constraint, by loading narrative meaning where there is none.

### [5.3.3] Lawful Defences at Play

There is a final type of play that actively tries to challenge pre-established play methods. In **Section 5.2.4**, I discussed how communities create play methods that stem from the prototypical play method, but limit it to make it more amenable for that community, such as competitive SSBU play methods limiting *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*'s possibility space by creating a play method where execution is placed in the limelight. As play methods become communally upheld, players in turn adopt potential constraints to resist these communal undertakings. In this section, I will be looking at a few of these examples.

#### Caught up in a Twixt

In his controversial experiment in *City of Heroes/Villains* (2004), Myers' (2008) tried to replicate Garfinkel's criticism of functionalist sociological models within a digital world. Through Garfinkel, Myers argues that "social rules and order cannot be confirmed [...] by either a member of that order or [...] by the scientists. (2008, p. 148)" Moreover, he continued by stating that while Garfinkel's research required breaking some social rules, games are already regulated by "hardware mechanics and software code." Anything beyond those regulations is fair game.

*City of Heroes/Villains* had a PvP zone called Recluse's Victory (now called *RV*), which had a control point imperative constraint. This means that players are encouraged to control as many of a particular zone as possible. Myers states that he was trying to uphold the prototypical play method, which included this imperative constraint. However he argues that in turn this led him to flout the dominant communal RV play method.

In order to uphold the control point imperative constraint, Myers utilised three methods. First, he teleported his enemies into invincible NPCs, which would subsequently cause his enemies to die – the communal play method frowned upon doing this as there was no clear counter-play. Secondly, he did not allow players to use the *RV* PvP zone to farm: players often went to the *RV* zone to defeat high level NPCs, so that they could get more experience than they would in other zones. Myers argued that players farming

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experience were flouting the control point imperative constraint, and he was there to stop it from happening. Thirdly, he refused to join in teams, stating that his teams often had players who were hostile to his commitment to upholding the control point imperative constraint.

Myers argues the communal RV play method would fit under the previous section: the players were adopting potential constraints that actively flouted the control point imperative constraint. Meanwhile, he maintained that he was overwhelmingly playing the game in a normative fashion. Of course, other players disagreed. *City of Heroes/Villains* player Iltat (2009) argues that Myers was flouting both the communal RV play method as well as other imperative constraints. For example, Iltat argues that the *PvP* zone has an explicitly expressed intentions that only players should kill other players, expressed through it being called *PvP* zone, not a *PvE* (player versus enemy) zone. However, by having NPCs defeat opposing players, Myers caused the opposing players to suffer penalties that they would not otherwise suffer, known in *City of Heroes/Villains* players as *debts*. In this way, Iltat argues that their adopted potential constraint, forbidding teleporting players into NPC enemies, helped them uphold the prototypical play method of the *PvP* zone. By flouting their potential constraint, Myers flouted the prototypical play method.

From Iltat's point of view, Myers' experimental play method was a clear example of iterative play founded on disrupting a communal play method. Despite Myers' protestations that he was merely upholding the control point imperative constraint, he was flouting other constraints in the process. The main difference is that Myers' play method justified itself as legitimate as he could perform it by simply upholding some of the prototypical play method. Meanwhile, the rest of the players felt that their communal understanding of the imperative constraint justified adding a potential constraint to uphold the prototypical play method more fairly.

Myers noted that other players would characterise his experiment as "griefing". Griefing is a particularly popular play method, which necessitates adopting just one potential constraint – making it harder for other players to execute their chosen play methods. Griefing becomes especially effective when the play methods are communally upheld, rather than having a material backing. When the material constraints do not adequately

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promote upholding imperative constraints in a multiplayer game, it falls upon the community to agree to uphold them. “Griefers” refuse to comply with this communal agreement. In Myers’ case, his method was obvious – by invoking the gameplay condition on other players, they were booted out of their play session, disallowing them from continuing to execute their communal play method.

### **The Red Shirt Army**

*H1Z1* (2015) had a particularly coordinated griefing method. *H1Z1* has a four player per team limit in a hundred player game, a constraint which is very easily flouted. 恶魔 qq (now called EMoQQ), a famous Chinese streamer, flouted this limit by establishing the 红衣军 (transliterated and now called HongYiJun, which means the red shirt army). While streaming on DouYu, a popular Chinese streaming website, EMoQQ would encourage his viewers to look for a match at the same time as him while wearing a red shirt. He instructed his viewers to never shoot other players in the HongYiJun, so that they could quickly outnumber any other players who happened to be upholding the four-player team limit constraint. In any given 100 player game, there would be at least 30 people HongYiJun players following EmoQQ’s instructions. This meant that EmoQQ’s play sessions usually ended with HongYiJun dominance. Since *H1Z1* only recognises up to four players (one team) as winners, after establishing their dominance, the HongYiJun players would line up and let EMoQQ shoot them all, guaranteeing his (but communally their) victory.

Eventually, EMoQQ was banned from *H1Z1*, but the EmoQQ’s established HongYiJun play method continued in *H1Z1*, as well as similar games such as *PlayerUnknown’s Battleground* (2016). EMoQQ’s watchers remember upholding this play method quite fondly. For example, the viewer 神烦葱 (2017, transliterated as ShenFanCong) uploaded a heartfelt video recalling the HongYiJun play method. Meanwhile, users not following the HongYiJun play method remembered it less fondly. Players often complained about the HongYiJun ruining their play sessions. However, others such as Grimmybear (2017) and Ther01231 (Bibou, 2017) responded by creating their own play method, where they tried to infiltrate the HongYiJun by wearing a red shirt. The HongYiJun’s disruptive play method led to a further iteration dependent on them. They

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tried to uphold the original play method by counter-flouting the HongYiJun's play method.

This leaves with the prototypical play method, which involves setting up a team of up to four people and surviving to the end. Then, EmoQQ created the HongYiJun play method, a first degree play method which involved

- **Flouting a prototypical material constraint:** maintaining a four player team limit
- **Adopting three potential constraint:**
  - wear a red shirt
  - do not shoot other players wearing a red shirt
  - let EMOQQ shoot you at the end (or assure mutual destruction if EMOQQ is not present)

In turn, players such as GrimmyBear established a second degree Infiltrate HongYiJun play method which necessitates that other players are upholding the HongYiJun play method, which revolves around one core constraint: flouting HongYiJun's third potential constraint. They were to kill EmoQQ before he kills them. In some ways, both the HongYiJun play method, as well as the Infiltrate HongYiJun play method involve grieving: the HongYiJun are grieving players following the prototypical play method, while the counter-HongYiJun players are grieving the players following the HongYiJun play method. The counter-HongYiJun are perhaps seen more positively as they are doing it to restore (or to avenge) prototypical play method players.

### **Macros at Play**

One final example is Thunder.Atuun's (as reported by Vlad Savov, 2018) usage of macro keys in a *Dota 2* (2013) tournament. In *Dota 2*, pressing any one active button on your mouse or keyboard results in inputting one command. For example, pressing 'Q' means you use your first ability once. However, certain keyboards and mice allow for macros, controller embedded commands that allow players to input multiple commands

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with one click. On one hand, Atuun, a professional player for the team Thunder Gaming, claimed that he felt there was nothing wrong with this – there was no material or imperative constraints forbidding or limiting macros. However, other professional players felt that this gave him an unfair advantage, as it made normally tricky moves much easier to execute.

Atuun was right in saying that he was not flouting any material or imperative constraints. However, by agreeing to take part in this specific *Dota 2* tournament, he was also agreeing to uphold the competitive Dota 2 play method, which just like previous competitive play method examples is based on the communal understanding of how fairness can be ensured. While both Myers, as well as EMOQQ's and his viewers, managed to disrupt other players' play methods relatively scot-free for a significant amount of time, Atuun was immediately punished. Both he and his team were immediately disqualified from the tournament.

What binds all these three examples together is that each has an example of player flouting play methods that other players created. Myers flouted the communal RV play method in *City of Heroes/Villains*, which aimed to make the prototypical play method easier to uphold, GrimmyBear flouted the HongYiJun play method to stop other players from flouting the prototypical play method, while Atuun flouted the competitive Dota 2 play method either because he truly did not know he was doing so, or to gain a play advantage over other players.

### [5.4] Setup Play Interventions

Throughout this chapter, I have largely looked at play methods that iterate by disrupting other play methods during their execution. Looking at just the last section, Myers, EmoQQ, GrimmyBear and Atuun all flouted other players' communal constraints while those players were trying to execute them. In this subchapter, I will instead look at play methods that iterate by disrupting the access to play methods. In **Section 3.2.1**, I argued that materiality is part of players' adopted material constraints. In this subchapter, I will look at how iterating on this materiality is an iterative play practice, which creates new play methods3.2. by forcing players to consider how their access to their play method



affects the play method itself.

### **[5.4.1] Feel, Flow and Disrupted Control**

Jess Marcotte (2018) queers the relationship between controllers, players and the designed play. Queering, on the one hand follows from Sara Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology*, where she defines it as something oblique, as well as relating to sexual practices that are seen as "odd, bent, twisted" (2006, p. 161). Equally, Marcotte also follows from queer theory within game studies, taking Ruberg's (2015) definition of "being queer is about being different and desiring differently" (pp. 113-114). In this way Marcotte follows up by stating that queering controllers means seeing them as oblique, odd, bent, being different, and giving something different back.

Although Marcotte's work is mainly focused on designing games with alternative methods of control, in this thesis I have been arguing for play as design. The materiality players choose is part of their play methods, and in turn it can also be queered. Marcotte's analysis gives us a good starting point to do this.

The first aspect queered by Marcotte is flow, a term taken from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) work. Marcotte argues that the hegemonic state of games is one that aims to maximise flow, in which players' skills and the game's challenge align as well as possible, leading to a state of play in which players forget the ludic situation they are in. They argue for design which can "disrupt [...] or reorient the flow channel" (2018). Marcotte sees controllers as a method of disruption. Within every play method devised, queered controllers can allow for either a one-time reorientation to flow, or a setup which constantly disrupts the flow.

This ties in well to Marcotte's second aspect: game feel. They take this concept largely from Steve Swink's (2009) work, who had defined game feel as "the tactile, kinesthetic sense of manipulating a virtual object. It's the sensation of control in a game" (2009, p. xiii). Marcotte argues that the normative state of game feel is one that encourages intuitive control: one where the controls are "as little mediated and as invisible as possible" (Marcotte, 2018). Marcotte argues that game feel in controllers can be queered through glitched design, where the controllers' input differs from what we expect.

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However, as I have shown in my *Skyrim* crashing example in **Section 3.2.2**, there are play sessions where the materiality does not need to be actively designed as disruptive for it to disrupt our game feel or flow.

Borrowing from Rilla Khaled's (2018) *Reflective Game Design*, Marcotte argues that the process of disruption and reorientation of both flow and feel encourages "disruption over comfort" as well as "reflection over immersion." Shifting control schemes in games makes us have to actively consider our actions. Maximising flow encourages *muscle memory*, activating players' presence in the gamespace through a quasi-instinctive response, which goes hand in hand with the prototypical play method. However, as soon as this *muscle memory* is disrupted, then our muscle's response needs to be measured and calculated, and players have to actively consider at least a small part of their material constraints: what their choice to press buttons means.

### **Controlled Discomfort as Play Method**

ATwerkingYoshi's play methods are a great starting example. On his youtube and twitch channels, ATwerkingYoshi chronicles himself playing a host of games, including *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (2019), *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019), and *Dark Souls 3* (2016) through alternative controllers largely set up through Makey Makeys, an arduino kit which turns everyday objects into viable controllers. These everyday objects have included bananas (2017, no longer available), bongos (2019), as well as a DJ turntable (2017), for the above games respectively. While ATwerkingYoshi's reflection might not align with the more personal reflection that Marcotte is discussing, ATwerkingYoshi's choice to constrain himself through his controllers involves constant reflection on each of his clicks and presses, in what are largely unintuitive and unwelcoming control schemes.

ATwerkingYoshi's play method takes him out of flow because the controllers are largely unintuitive. There is a large disconnect between his "sensation of control" (Swink, 2009, p. xiii) and the tactile objects he is using. It feels wrong to make a dodge roll in *Dark Souls III* by touching a banana, because there is no implicit or explicit association with the game's processual response. While AtwerkingYoshi does follow

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many prototypical constraints, having to constantly consider what it means to click a button creates a play method which significantly differs from what most players would arguably experience while playing the aforementioned games.

### **Control Disruption as Play Method**

Marcotte gives their own example that focuses on play choices as its locus. They present Robert Yang's *Hurt me Plenty* (2014), a game in which a dominant sexual partner is negotiating how hard they are allowed to spank their submissive sexual partner. The material constraints can be upheld through two sets of controllers: a mouse, or a Leap Motion controller. The LeapMotion controller tracks the user's hand movements through two infrared cameras, rather than through standard handheld means. The main imperative constraint is clear – do not spank your partner harder than they want, or in ways they do not want. While playing *Hurt Me Plenty* using a mouse, successfully upholding this imperative constraint is somewhat easy, because the mouse affords large control sensitivity. However, as Marcotte notes, playing *Hurt Me Plenty* using a Leap Motion controller makes successfully upholding this imperative constraint much trickier, especially with less than ideal settings for infrared cameras (such as places with many lights). If the player is unsuccessful in upholding the imperative constraint, the game will lock them out. Their partner will be unwilling to consent to sexual acts that involve spanking, since the player will have previously broke the consent, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

While both controllers are still within the realm of the prototypical play method, the choice of how to uphold the material constraints (which controllers you choose) diverges the prototypical play method into two, with varying levels of player success. In turn, this divergent success rate affects the rest of the player's constraint execution. While using the mouse, players might edge the line between upholding and flouting the aforementioned imperative constraint, in line with exploration as mastery discussed in **Subchapter 4.2**. However, with the LeapMotion's lack of control, players are more likely to play safely, or even flout the imperative constraint through bad faith arguments on their lack of control.

### **Changing Familiarity as Play Method**

As one final anecdotal example, while in Japan for DiGRA 2019, a game studies conference, another game scholar asked me whether I wanted to play *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (2019) with them. I used to play the previous installation in the *Super Smash Bros* franchise with them regularly. However, since we were by then living in different continents, we had not yet had the opportunity to play the latest instalment with each other. I agreed. However there was just one problem. They did not have their controller with them, which spurred a multi-day hunt for a specific controller. For this game scholar played with a *Gamecube* controller, rather than the *Switch Pro Controller* that I was using and is much more widely available everywhere.

We eventually found a *Switch Gamecube USB* controller, which is largely similar to the *Gamecube* controller, except it uses a USB port over the *Gamecube* controller's signature port. When we got to playing, I found that my *Switch Pro Controller* just was not working, meaning I had to use another friend's *Switch Pro Controller*. Despite both of us having our controller of choice, we both agreed our controllers felt *wrong*. It was enjoyable getting to play against each other again. However, it was not completely the same.

We both experienced a lack of *muscle memory* on controllers that were overwhelmingly similar to our regular ones. The same type of controller, yet a different controller, was enough for it to feel like a somewhat different play method than what we are normally accustomed to. Professional *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* players, such as Ezra "Samsora" Morris, feel this too and often talk about "breaking in" a controller before they attend tournaments, even if the controller is the same type as the one they had previously been using (2019).

### **[5.4.2] The Rhetoric of Control**

Marcotte also argues that procedural rhetoric, Bogost's (2006) concept discussed in **Section 2.3.2**, is an avenue that can be queered through controllers. Marcotte argues that

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the controllers we use, and the controllers that games allow for are in and of themselves rhetoric choices. Queering procedural rhetoric through controllers means questioning the dominant rhetoric of standard control and hardware schemes, and the arguments latent in these choices.

While Marcotte gives solid examples of how designing games to work with specific controllers can create for non-normative rhetoric, porting this aspect into players' chosen sets of constraints is trickier. Procedural rhetoric emphasizes both material and imperative constraints' inbuilt arguments. Players' constraints cannot change either the material nor the prescribed play experience, they can only uphold, flout or ignore them. However, as I have shown in Yang's *Hurt Me Plenty*, sometimes players can choose how to uphold material constraints through which controllers and console they choose. Each console and/or controller has its own politics, both in its ergonomics as well as in its metaludic aspects. Choosing to adopt a specific material to play a game is making a rhetorical call.

### **Medium as Rhetorics**

Platform studies is perhaps the best way to consider this line of thought. For example, Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal (2012) write of the revolution that came with the Wii console, where playing with a Wii is in and of itself "shifting attention to player space [...] where actual or potential interacts with other people are assumed" (2012, p. 3). Choosing to play any specific game on the Wii as opposed to another console is the rhetorical choice of being open to socialisation, it is adopting an implicit imperative constraint that suggests playing with a friend. Looking at Nintendo's most recent console continues this rhetorical line: the Nintendo Switch not only comes with two controllers, for you and a friend, but these controllers are built into the console, rather than bought as peripherals.

Wirman and Leino (2017) also introduce the idea of a transmedial Mahjong, arguing that the materiality of a given object influences the way the game is perceived. Ritualistic elements like setting up the four walls prior to executing the main imperative constraint in physical Mahjong are replaced by automatic shuffling and wall setting up.

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While I am verging into once again discussing presets over constraints, this presetting also stems from the difficulty of setting up certain material constraints. Using mobile phones to uphold Mahjong's material constraints necessitates that the player input is as lessened as possible, due to mobile phones small input size compared to a Mahjong table, or even Mahjong on an arcade machine or a computer screen. Wirman and Chen (2018) continue by stating that as Mahjong shifts platforms, it de-casualises itself. While the available player base does grow significantly, players become more and more hardcore and their play retention is heavily tied with how the game is monetised – the more they can win, the more likely they are to stay. Just as the Wii attracts friends, mobile platform Mahjong attracts predators and victims. Most importantly, both platforms and the material constraints they encourage come with built in rhetorics. Choosing to play Mahjong with different controls is choosing to challenge those rhetorics.

### **Flouting Rhetorics as Play Method**

Flouting the rhetoric materials place on a play method is equally a type of iterative play. For example, Boluk and Lemieux (2017) discuss controllers for quadriplegic players. Ken Yankelevitz' QuadControl controller substituted traditional manual controls with a sip-and-puff control scheme. Through tongue dexterity as well as mouth breathing control, quadriplegic players could now play what was previously bound to the hands. In turn, Fred Davidson (2014) released the Quadstick, which not only improved Yankelevitz' earlier design, but also made flouting prototypical control scheme easier by making it much more readily adaptable to different materials. Yet through all these iterations, each controller flouted an implicit rhetoric present in many games: that they are to be played by able bodied players. In game community circles, there is a larger discussion on game accessibility through controls<sup>12</sup>, stemming from this realisation of this implicit rhetoric.

Of course, not every example comes with such lofty ideals on its iteration. In **Section 5.1.2**, while discussing the OoT any% speedrun play method, I showed how the route

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12 Game Maker's Toolkit provides a good summary of this discussion on his YouTube video, which can be found here - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NInNVEHj\\_G4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NInNVEHj_G4)

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MrCheeze's designated was controversial in the *Ocarina of Time* speedrun community as it required the controller to be notched in a particular way to guarantee an exact input when necessary. Meanwhile, In **Section 5.3.3**, I showed how Thunder.Atuun and his team were disqualified from a Dota 2 tournament because one of their players used macro keys (2018). In this case, both players wanted to flout the communal play method's negotiated agreements so that they could push a route further, or gain an edge that they would not have otherwise had.

### [5.5] Conclusions on Iteration

In the previous chapter, I discussed how players constraint themselves in ways that allow them to better explore the games they inhabit. In this chapter, I looked at how after players feel they have sufficiently explored the game, players constrain themselves to iterate on the play methods they were adopting, adopting constraints which build upon previous play methods, disrupt previous play methods, or force the player to reconsider the way they play by changing the access to these play methods.

Starting by discussing routing and speedrunning's intertwined relationship allowed us to tie these two chapters together. In the routing play method, players are exploring the game they inhabit in order to find the most efficient way possible through it. Once a sufficiently efficient route is discovered, players start using this to speedrun. In truth, the speedrun play method is not a play method where players play games as fast as possible, but rather a play method where players execute a very specific route to the best of their ability. Moving from route to speedrun allowed us to see how a first degree play method, such as routing, can contribute to creating a play method that stems from it, or at times even necessitates it. In this chapter, I looked at this relationship between playing to create new constraints that might lead to play methods, and playing to simply execute a predetermined play method.

In **Subchapter 5.2**, I started by looking at iterating by looking at previous play methods and creating constraints that complement the play methods that are already there. I started by discussing play-styles, as subtle and rather personal constraints. Players realise what they like from a game, or from a play method, and adopt small changes to

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make their play session more amenable. I also looked at sandbox games as an avenue to create complementary constraints to a prototypical play method that does not ask of much from the players – this leaves future play methods a lot of creative space. Then, I looked at constraints that players create after exhausting a previous play method: as much as a specific play method might create personal value, this personal value is often finite. Players add constraints to refresh a play method, often by making it harder or by making it somewhat *different*. Finally, I looked at constraints that players adopt that limit a previous play method. In avenues such as competitive gaming, players might restrict certain constraints to make a more focused play, while still maintaining the general direction of the original play method.

In **Subchapter 5.3**, I looked at iterative play through constraints that disrupt previously established play methods. I started by looking at disruption of the constraint that is present in every game: trying to remain a player. However, I then moved into different types of disruptions. I looked at players who flout material constraints to create play methods that can only happen through glitching and subverting material expectations. I looked at players who flout imperative constraints to create a play method with meaning not necessarily supported by the original intended experience. I also looked at players who flout communal play methods. They do this by griefing, which is a play method centered around disrupting other players' play methods. However, I also looked at flouting communal play methods to get competitive edges.

In **Subchapter 5.4**, I explained how the above examples of complementing and disruption usually occur during the process of executing a specific play method. However, the material choices we make alongside the game we choose also have a bearing on how we execute our play method, how we can uphold our flout previous constraints, and what new practices can emerge from these play methods. I first looked at how our controllers and hardware can be disruptive to a play method, which in turn causes us to carefully consider what our play method actually means. Whether it is through weird control schemes, imperfect response, or even the wrong feel, I argue materials play an important role in the (de)familiarisation behind the prototypical play method. I also argue that the materials we choose have built in rhetorics, and choosing specific materials over others can be a rhetorical choice that influences how we create and uphold play methods after our choice.



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In **Chapter 4** and **Chapter 5**, I have spent a lot of time looking at make-up of constraints, play methods and their interrelation, once or even twice removed from the prototypical play method. In **Chapter 6**, I will break away from using examples to show the use of more granular language, to instead move into a discussion on more personal uses of constrained play. I maintain that many examples used across these last two chapters have been creative. However, now that I have spent considerable time showing the value of discussing play in terms of constraints, I think there is space to look at how players express themselves through such constrained play.

## CHAPTER 6: EXPRESSIVE PLAY

In **Chapters 4 and 5**, I looked at how constraints can be used both to explore games, as well as to iterate on previously established play methods. In these chapters, the players' concern was largely their own play. I discussed making constraints to play better, to play fairer, to play disruptively, to play exploratively, and so on. In this chapter, I will be focusing more on play methods that players use to reflect upon themselves, rather than to reflect on their play. I will specifically be focusing on play where players adopt non-prototypical play methods, using the game as a vehicle to create play methods which help them learn more about themselves, or critique the power structures existing around them, in and out of the game itself.

I will start by looking at transformative play methods that reflect on transformation through the act of creating and adopting specific play methods. I will first start by looking at academic examples of play methods that are actively transformative, and consider them as such, such as veganism play methods and interventions on pro-war positions. After this, I will move into non-academic play methods that actively try to transform their players, or the players exposed to these play methods, such as Chinese netizens' Great Socialist Production as well as Hong Kong unrest play methods.

I will also consider how play which players do not consider to be critical can in fact still be transformative. I will introduce this topic by discussing inaction as an avenue of critical discourse, linking previous chapters to critical play. Then I will look at two specific case studies of “non-critical” transformative play, including No Kill and Pacifist play methods as considerations on the ethics of harm, as well as a negative transformation against feminism happening within play methods in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018).

I will then look at personal expression as found inside games. I will start by looking at different types of gendered expression in games: upholding prototypical play methods through gender, performing a specific gender to be able to uphold a specific play method, reflecting on gendered expression through specific constraints oriented around it, as well as flouting material and imperative constraints to be able to express our own specific gender and sexual identity. While gender is not the only type of personal

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expression, it is vast and heavily researched allowing us to use it as a brief analysis of how personal expression is performed through specific play methods. I will also look at a few other play methods unrelated to gender, such as nationalism and socio-cultural identity to further look at how adopting specific play methods can allow players to un-  
other themselves in games whose prototypical play methods would generally not allow them to.

Finally, I will focus on retelling personal stories that have passed through play methods. I will especially focus on stories of loss as examples, while also noting that there are all sorts of stories told through play. I will start by looking at some examples of play methods as a way of remembering something close, looking at the impact of saved files as recreating a person's memory. Then, I will look at play methods which focus on creating memorials, describing various in-game memorials while focusing on a specific example in *Eve Online*, where players built a cemetery which has various play methods, including memorialising, built around it. Finally, I will look at loss of digital selves, by first starting by looking at digital refugees carrying play methods from old games to new, and then move into permadeath play methods as virtual loss.

By the end of this chapter, I will have hopefully shown a vast array of play methods focused on personal expression and transformation. While previous chapters were more focused on the intricacies of the method, in this chapter I will have given a very brief overview of how methods of all kinds contribute to these personal expressions. In the conclusion, I will review how I have done this and set up for the next chapter, where I will look at how play methods, and the creative works stemming from them, are recorded, shared and consumed.

### **[6.1] Self Play**

#### **[6.1.1] Transformative Practice**

Gualeni (2014) argues that play can be transformative. He states that transformative experiences are “experiences that elicit profound changes in the people that engage in them” (2014, p. 1). He continues that while there are particular transformations that directly stem from their equivalent transformative practices (such as exercising,

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meditation or going to therapy), there are also transformations that stem from practices unrelated to the practice itself. He argues that play can be transformative through engaging players in social criticism, ethics, creative thinking, building interpersonal relationships and so on.

He ties this idea with Foucault's (1982) work on freedom. Gualeni states that 'freedom' in Foucault's work can be understood as the activities which emerge from relationships to power. Being free is not escaping power, but conducting "critical activity" which shapes ourselves in relationship to it. Gualeni argues that transformative practices work with this frame of mind – if we approach play critically, then we can engage with the power dynamics that define it.

He moves on to argue that game design can also be a practice of freedom. Design is a critical activity that encourages designers to "critically confront existing structures of power and knowledge" (2014, p. 8), and through this engagement designers in turn shape themselves. This is a widely discussed idea within game design scholarship. Doris Rusch and Matthew Weise (2008) argue that metaphors, such as love and trust can be transferred into games either through abstract representation or through multimodal means. By playing games primed to deliver these metaphors, players can develop themselves. Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric also suggests something similar by saying that capitalistic messages in *Animal Crossing* belie the game's theme, and in turn influence player's play production towards capitalism. Rusch (2009) ties her previous paper on metaphor with Bogost's procedural rhetoric, arguing for a three pronged model of transformative design: affective, meaning related to emotion; procedural, meaning related to the game mechanics; and metaphorical, meaning related to socio-discursive practices. Flanagan's (2009) work on critical play actively chronicles and deals with "games designed for artistic, political, and social critique or intervention, in order to propose ways of understanding larger cultural issues" (2009, p. 2). Many scholars have noted and realised that games designed for a specific purpose can "elicit profound changes in the people that engage in them" (Gualeni, 2014, p. 1).

By discussing transformative practices over transformative design, Gualeni's (2014) work allows me to tie back to my claim that players design their play sessions. Players are confronting existing structures of power and knowledge both by creating constraints

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with which they play, as well as by adopting creative play methods within the predefined power structures present in games. Playing can be transformative either by following through with the intended experience, or by creating new modes of experience through play design practices. Gualeni's freedom can be found both through adopting previously established play method, but also through creating new constraints.

### **Academic Transformations**

Michelle Westerlaken (2017) directly interacts with this aforementioned dual transformation in her paper on self fashioning through gameplay. Westerlaken decided to play *Breath of the Wild* with a veganism play method. *Breath of The Wild* is a game in which you play as Link, a hero given a mission to save the land of Hyrule from eternal evil. The prototypical imperative constraints encourage Link to ride horses, kill wild creatures, cook small animals (or specific parts of larger animals) and so on. Westerlaken wanted to challenge these constraints, seeing being a hero and speciesism as mutually exclusive. However, she also states that "By embodying Link, my temporary-self as a vegan, I construct new images and practice familiarity with my personal stances" (2017, p. 5). Her intentions were not only to critique the game's rhetorical production, but to self fashion herself by playing as a vegan in *Breath of the Wild*.

Westerlaken engages with the Gualeni, by arguing that creating the veganism play method, as well as adopting the veganism play method she created in BotW are both part of the process of self-fashioning. She argues that as opposed to "predefined set-out challenges" such as speedrunning and pacifist runs,

"Veganism is understood here as a general and interpretable ideology, not a strict set of rules [...] the game is approached according to values that can be negotiated with" (2017, p. 5).

Westerlaken states that figuring out how to be vegan in *Breath of the Wild* is based on constant exploration and adoption. Whenever she encountered a situation such as considering what a living creature is, what self defense is, what to do with gifts that have animal products and so on, she had to adapt her veganism play method in response

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to it. She consistently set new potential constraints on herself, and upheld them in good faith. She also wrote a personal blog and shared her evolving potential constraints on Reddit, where other players engaged with her play method and even adopted them for themselves.

Westerlaken continues by stating that in *Breath of the Wild*, she is “the protagonist in my own game and I establish veganism to live by” (2017, p. 5). Despite *Breath of The Wild* potentially encouraging speciesism, Westerlaken realises her role in play design – any values that could have existed before her starting a play session are immaterial to the constraints that she herself sets up. As soon as she started to adopt her *Breath of the Wild* veganism play method, her adopted constraints became Hyrule’s new norm.

Firstly, I must note that I disagree with her claim that the veganism play method and “predefined set-out challenges” such as the speedrun play method are particularly different. Speedrunning is not a “predefined set-out challenge,” it is also an exercise in negotiation of play. In **Section 5.1.3**, I discussed how the routing play method feeds into the speedrun play method. However, outside of this minor quibble, she does raise the same point that I raised in that same section. Creating and adopting constraints are two very different things. The routing play method creates the constraints that speedrunners adopt, while the speedrun play method is the act of adopting the route created. Similarly, she had a dual role were she was both creating the play method that anti-speciesists could adopt in *Breath of the Wild*. Furthermore, based on her conversation within the Reddit subforum, some people (including herself) adopted the play method she created afterwards. We could divide these two play methods as exploring veganism and performing veganism play methods. The core difference between these two veganism play methods, and routing and speedrun play methods is that these two veganism play methods can be performed somewhat simultaneously, while routing and speedrun play methods cannot.

Both through realising that play is design, and through negotiating her own play method, I would argue that Westerlaken furthers this distinction between herself, and someone who would adopt the constraints she set out. She is self-fashioning through designing a play method, the Reddit users that adopted her play method are self-fashioning through adopting that play method. While both methods are transformative

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practices, as per Gualeni, it would be presumptuous to argue that these distinct methods would necessarily transform players in the same way.

### **Flouting Interventionism**

Joseph DeLappe's (2006) *dead-in-iraq* is another interesting example of creating play methods as having transformative potential. *America's Army* (2002), a game developed by the US Army and actively used as a recruitment platform, is a multiplayer first person shooter. Players are placed in an active war situation and they are told to eliminate hostiles (usually other players). DeLappe actively flouts this imperative constraint by doing nothing but typing. When he is eventually found and killed by the other players who are upholding this same imperative constraint, he sends his typed out message: it includes the name, age, and date of death of personnel who died in the United States' military intervention in Iraq.

By the end of his project in December 2011 (when the United States officially withdrew their military from Iraq), he had typed out a total of 4484 unique names while playing *America's Army*. Like Westerlaken's veganism play method, there are two facets to his *dead-in-iraq* play method. On the one hand, the active design of the play method is an act of consideration against the United States' interventionist policies. However, the execution of the play method 4484 times could also have transformative potential that solely creating a play method does not.

However, unlike Westerlaken's example, his play method was directly confrontational. In Westerlaken's example, players self fashioned by intentionally adopting the play method she painstakingly detailed and explored. However, in DeLappe's play session intervention, players were subjected to his chosen play method. Where they expected someone helping them uphold the imperative constraints, instead they found someone who was actively flouting the communal play method. DeLappe's *dead-in-iraq* play method does have parallels to the grieving discussed in **Section 5.3.3**. However, in this example, there is value in discussing the *why* along with the *how* of the play method.

Rather than "grieving" solely to disrupt other players' play method, DeLappe executed his play method to confront the other players' with the game's innate politics. His play

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method was often received with either anger (such as “dead stfu you dumb \*\*\*\*”), annoyance (such as “do that somewhere else or have DC make a memorial”), or confusion (such as “dead...whats your point”). However, on occasion, there were glimpses of reflection, such as \_AngelWarrior who asked “are these guys who died dead in iraq?”. DeLappe’s play method reached out to unwilling participants, and will have had some transformative potential through being subjected to a play method in a game where his message might generally be not too well received.

### **Systemic Morality**

In Westerlaken and Delappe’s work, I looked at transformative play within an academic setting where the author play’s method worked through flouting imperative constraints. However, transformative play does not require residing within an academic setting or actively trying to flout specific constraints.

In **Section 4.3.2**, I looked at the twitter project *Can You Pet the Dog?*, in which players sent their attempts at petting digital dogs to the twitter curator, who would in turn chronicle these attempts. I discussed it in terms of exploration – taking an actual referent and seeing if that referent can be reperformed within a digital space. This exploration created its own play method which players now perform both for humour, but also out of curiosity.

However, we can also look at *Can You Pet the Dog* as an example of the politics of care. In the interview with Nathan Grayson (2019), the unnamed curator had expressed disappointment that in games like *Tom Clancy’s The Division 2* (2019), you could only interact with the dog through violence. The curator approached this play method opportunistically: upon seeing a dog, they tried, as best as they could, to pet them. In its absence, they tried to interact with them in alternate ways, and see if they could in some way or another perform care. The practice had transformative potential not only for the twitter curator, but also for all the players that adopted this consideration for care as well as for developers, such as Dan Marshall (2020, mentioned in **Section 4.3.2**), who coded in the potential for care when they saw *Can You Pet the Dog*’s online reception.

In **Section 6.1.1**, I also discussed how upholding the prototypical play method within a



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digital game setting can impart rhetorical concepts. The play method that players must adopt for the rhetoric to be effectively imparted is the prototypical one. Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013) advocates for a radical softness in the face of extreme dire straits, Gonzalo Frasca's September 12th (2015) advocates for non-military interventionist policies. Kris Ligman's *You are Jeff Bezos* (2018) makes the argument against the excessive hoarding of capital at the expense of everyone else. All of these games' transformative potential is in upholding their prototypical play method: for these games' rhetoric to be delivered, players must be open to playing the intended experience.

However, even in games where there is clear rhetoric at play, certain games find transformative potential residing in the relationship between the players' adopted play methods and the prototypical play method. Without actively flouting the prototypical play method, the added variations present in players' play method could reflect a response to the intended rhetoric.

*Frostpunk* (2018) is a great case study. *Frostpunk* is a simulation game set in an alternative late nineteenth century. A new ice age hits the world and you as the ruler of one of the last remaining human settlements must do your utmost best to make sure your people survive. However, as you are doing so, the game presents you with moral choices, such as whether to adopt child labour, unfair working hours, a religious cult of personality, removal of dissidents to your methods and so on. A successful play session presents you with a win condition based on two things: firstly, you are to help your city outlast the sheer cold. If you don't, you are booted out of your play session, indicating that you failed to execute the prototypical play method. Secondly, you are to remain as morally conscious as you can, where at the end of contiguous play sessions, you are presented with the line "We have (not) crossed the line," if you make sufficiently morally good choices. If you are told "we have crossed the line," then it is an indication that you have flouted the imperative constraint of being a "good" leader.

The second part has had players particularly engaged with their play methods' transformative potential. On one hand, while playing *Frostpunk*, player Adam Millard (2018) sent a child to fix an energy generator on the brink of explosion which led to the child's death. However, the end game presented him with the line "We have not crossed

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the line.” *Frostpunk* has a threshold of morally bad choices you can make, and sacrificing a child was not enough to cross it. Millard was shocked to see that you do not have to religiously uphold the moral imperative constraint, you just have to uphold it enough. He felt that this deeply undermined his emotional response to his immoral choices. The transformative potential in his play came from him feeling a utilitarian approach (a child for a city) is immoral, but being presented with a different evaluation.

On the other hand, not too long after *Frostpunk* was released, it was review bombed<sup>13</sup> by Chinese users who felt the end-game’s moral judgement was heavily hypocritical. The wechat page 澎湃新闻 (2018, transliterated as PengPai XinWen) provides the following paragraph to sum up both the play method adopted by some Chinese netizen players as well as their criticism of the game’s moral judgement.

“社会主义大生产”的玩家认为，民众能否吃饱穿暖是第一位的，只要达到了这个目标，其他权益并不重要。游戏的开发者显然对此有不同意见，所以会将一些决策认定为“越界”。由此，很多中国玩家发出了嘲笑：“我们”在“你们”的游戏里，把末日变成了乌托邦，“你们白左”却还在纠结那些无足轻重的东西。”

“Great Socialist Production” players believe the first step is making sure the people can eat, you first have to attain this goal. Other (human) rights are not important. The game developers clearly do not have the same view, so some strategic decisions will be deemed “crossing the line”. Because of this, a lot of Chinese players derided this: “We” inside “your” game, turn Judgement Day into a utopia, while “you white left” are still struggling with these insignificant things.” (PengPai XinWen, 2018, trans. mine)

The great socialist production play method stems from the Cultural Revolution slogan “抓革命、促生产”，which means “Grasp the Revolution, Promote Production”. This play method emphasized choices that promote science and technology at any human cost, so that at the end of the ice age, society would not have just survived, but rather thrived and ready to enter a new era. Meanwhile, they felt that struggling to make choices like 14 hour work days, child labour, and crushing dissent is a symptom of “白左” (translated as white leftism)<sup>14</sup>, idealist fantasies where maintaining individual freedoms leaves society at a worst state at the end. To them “crossing the line” is a

13 “review bombed” is an internet slang expression meaning a co-ordinated effort to review a game negatively, usually with the hope of expressing a message to the developers.

14 Chenchen Zhang describes the usage of 白左 in internet discourse very well in this article – <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/digitaliberties/curious-rise-of-white-left-as-chinese-internet-insult/>

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banal judgement, as their society is the utopic one – deeply productive, technologically advanced, with food on everyone’s table, rather than the “white leftist” one where by the end players are struggling to get past the finish line.

While the other *Frostpunk* player Millard felt that upholding the imperative constraints made his transformative play method less effective, as it allowed for a level of utilitarianism that he was morally against, the great socialist production players felt that flouting this same imperative constraint was the best way to uphold their perceived imperative constraint of helping their society thrive. The moral judgement presented at the end was contrary to the transformative play method they felt was most effective.

### **Communal Transformations**

Multi-player constraint creation is interesting as the negotiations necessary of transformative play no longer occur by having a single player analyse their play method. Instead, transformation comes through conversation while creating the constraints. The play method shifts based on discussion, based on consensus, and based on iteration on previously agreed upon bases.

A recent example of multiplayer transformative play can be seen in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2019) amidst the 2019 Hong Kong unrest. As a very short backdrop, starting from June 2019, pro-democratic groups in Hong Kong organised wide-scale protests across the city, arguing for universal suffrage, retraction of a controversial extradition law, and independent investigation into police violence amongst other demands. Meanwhile, pro-establishment groups argued that these protests had devolved into violent riots which were secessionist in origins, as well as heavily nativist by discriminating against mainland Chinese as well as Hong Kongers who identify as Chinese. As of this thesis’ submission, this unrest is still ongoing.

*Animal Crossing: New Horizons* lets players have a limited amount of Pro Designs, tiles which they can customise in any way they wish. Soon after *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*’ release, pro-democratic supporters started using these tiles to post politically charged messages. On April 10th, Joshua Wong, a prominent pro-democratic activist, posted a collection of these customisations, which included common slogans during the

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unrest such as 光復香港時代革命 (liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times), and common protest symbols such as a hand indicating five (reflecting the five demands made to the government) (Figure 16). They also included organised group play methods where they organised a fake funeral for Carrie Lam, the pro-establishment Chief Executive of Hong Kong (Figure 17).



(Figure 16: Pro-Democratic Slogans)



(Figure 17: Funeral Proceedings for Carrie Lam)

On that same day, very soon after this play method went viral on twitter, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* got taken off the mainland Chinese market. While no official reason was ever given for this retraction, it was widely speculated in both Hong Kong as well as mainland China that the aforementioned play method was the cause. Despite this

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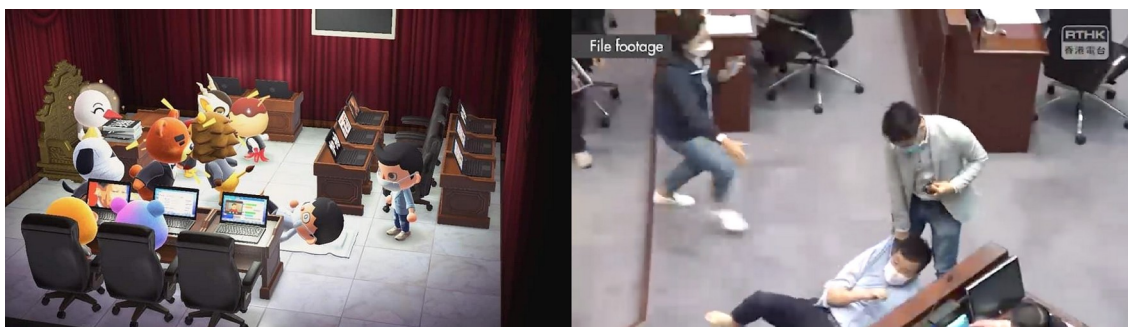
market ban, pro-establishment supporters did not stop playing, or even buying *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. For example, WeChat blog user 有理儿有面 (2020, transliterated as YouLiEr YouMian, which roughly translates to “having reason is having face”) took part in this conversational transformation, responding in kind to the pro-democratic play by designing a picture of the same Joshua Wong fenced in a bed of white mums (a flower signifying funeral processions in China) along with the character 奠 (diàn, also a character with funebral signification) (Figure 18).



(Figure 18: Funeral Proceedings for Joshua Wong)

While pro-establishment figures have since limited their involvement in this transformative practice, pro-democratic figures still actively participate in this Hong Kong Unrest play method. Owing to its withdrawal from the Chinese market, playing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is portrayed by some pro-democratic figures as a counter-culture activity, and this transformative play method as incendiary towards those who should have limited access to it. For example, on May 8th, there were direct physical confrontations in Hong Kong’s legislative council over filibustering of another hotly contested law. The next day, Ray Chan, a pro-democratic parliamentarian who took the brunt of the physical part of the confrontation, shared a player made recreation of the events (Figure 19, along with comparison picture of actual event).





(Figure 19: Animal Crossing / LegCo Ray Chan event)

Both sides of the Hong Kong unrest realised that this play method had transformative potential. The Hong Kong unrest play method, which revolved around designing political slogans, banners and memorials gave its players a larger audience. It incorporated previously established play methods (using pro designs for creative means), through a game that was radically popular at the time, and subsequently charging these play methods with political impetus. The play method's transformative potential was so clear that it might have caused the game to be taken off the mainland Chinese market. What amounts to a relaxed island living simulator is somewhat seen as a counter-culture commodity because of an adopted play method. In turn, the play method itself also developed and progressed. From a simple pro design, to staging a funeral, to an all out re-enactment of a political event, the constraints players adopted became more and more complex, as the transformative potential became more and more clear.

### [6.1.2] Practices that Transform

In the previous subsection, all the play methods I looked at were intended to transform: In Westerlaken's veganism play method, DeLappe's dead-in-iraq play method, PengPai XingWen's great socialist production, and the back and forth in the Hong Kong unrest play method all focused on the relationship to power that their created play method could challenge. However, not all transformative play requires such an active consideration. The act of play can be transformative even when its players actively reject its possibility for transformation.

In **Section 4.3.1**, I introduced the idea that doing nothing can be a method of

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exploration. In this section, I will further state that doing nothing can be a method of self reflection. Scully-Blaker discusses (2018) inaction in digital games and its potential as a potential constraint. He also states that inaction does not need to lead to a specific critical discourse, but rather that play in and of itself can lead to critical positions. I will first start by discussing inaction on his terms, which I will incorporate into this thesis' discourse, after which point I will return back to his comments on critique.

He divides inaction into two: stasis and stillness, each of which can be designed or injected. Stasis is “inaction brought on by or through a game’s mechanics” (2018, p. 1). It is designed when it is forced on players for a procedural effect, and it is injected when the players try to subvert these same designs. Stillness is “voluntary inaction brought on by or through a game’s aesthetic” (2018, p. 1). When it is designed, it presents itself to the players through this aesthetic experience, while players try to undermine these very same aesthetics by injecting stillness where it does not exist. This division has argumentative issues, for example mechanics and aesthetics are very often intertwined. However, his argument on inaction is still deeply relevant, so I will recategorise his divisions within this thesis' language.

He gives examples on how both stasis and stillness can be performed by upholding prototypical constraints. For example, in *Until Dawn* (2015), players have to perform Quick Time Events (now called *QTE*). Normally, *QTEs* involve players pressing buttons at specific intervals during heavily cinematic ludic moments. *Until Dawn*, a horror game, twists this equation by having the *QTE* require you to not move at all – movement would be considered a failure state. Similarly, in the *Animal Crossing* franchise, players are encouraged to perform stillness by not running. Running can scare fish in nearby rivers, harm flowers, as well as irritate your fellow villagers, all of which have a tangible negative result. While running might not be actively flouting imperative constraints, not running is definitely a way to uphold them.

He also gives examples on how flouting material constraints can invoke stasis. In both *Resident Evil 4* (2005) as well as *Man vs Wild* (2011), players found themselves letting themselves die in order to see what happens. Scully-Blaker argues that *Resident Evil 4* sets an example of stasis as designed, because the player is provided with enjoyable feedback through a gruesome cinematic scene, while *Man vs Wild* sets stasis as injected,

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because the player is provided with minimal feedback provided solely through shifting colours. However, both these examples eject players from their play session. Both of them are flouting the material constraints of the gameplay condition, as described in **Section 3.2.2**.

Scully-Blaker's example of KlydeStorm's (2009) infamous video "Mario Party 2: Luigi wins by doing absolutely nothing" is an example of how flouting imperative constraints can invoke stasis. *Mario Party 2* (1999) has minigames where the player is told to compete against other players, or in their absence, against A.I. players. KlydeStorm competed with these A.I. players by doing absolutely nothing, which resulted in the A.I. players managing to defeat themselves in comical fashion. Eventually, KlydeStorm's video became so popular that Luigi beating opponents by doing nothing developed into its own play method within *Mario Party* games at large.

Finally, he shows how adopting potential constraints can invoke stillness. In *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2013), Scully-Blaker provides a poignant example of how he sat on a bench overlooking the sea, waiting for the sunrise to set as an example of stillness. He states that the game invited him to stillness. He stayed there during a particular time for a particular duration stems solely from him wanting to perform slowness, letting time pass without a material referent.

Bringing the conversation back to play's transformative potential, Scully-Blaker draws a conclusion by stating that while it would be easy to bring stasis and stillness back to the discussion of inaction being provocative, this would be insufficient. Inaction, through stasis and stillness, can do more. *Man vs Wild* can be seen as explorative play, where the player lets themselves die to see what happens, as I have shown in **Section 4.3.1**. *Mario Party* can be seen as iterative play, where the player tries to win by doing nothing as a newly adopted potential constraint based on pre-established play methods. However, Scully-Blaker's paper finds itself in this specific subsection in this thesis because he rightfully notes that play can be and often is critical, even when it does not mean to. While play methods such as Westerlaken's are very clearly defined and calculated, non-academic play can be equally critical without active consideration to its critical potential. Our job would then be not to play to critique, or play to transform, but also to see how certain play is already critical, how certain play is already



transformative, even to those who are resistant to it.

### **On YouTube Comments and Ethics of Harm**

Challenge runs are a great example of transformative play hidden behind the guise of non-critical play. As described earlier in **Section 5.1.1**, challenge runs are play methods in which players iterate on their play by adding potential constraints on top of previously existing play methods. For example, No Kill play methods are iterative play methods in which the player tries to fulfil as much of the prototypical play method while not killing anyone. Meanwhile, Pacifist play methods are similar except they forbid *hurting* anyone.

Youtuber Many a True Nerd (2013) uploaded a No Kill play method of *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), in which he tries to finish the main quest of *Fallout: New Vegas* without killing anyone. *Fallout: New Vegas* is a post-apocalyptic game set in the ravaged remains of Las Vegas, as multiple factions vie for control of the famous Las Vegas Strip, the last remaining bastion of civilization in what is otherwise barren wasteland. You play as a mediator between these factions, with mediation varying from speech to bullets. In the first episode of a seventeen episode series, he starts by giving two reasons for performing a No Kill play method: firstly, to show off *Fallout: New Vegas*' flexible play methods; while secondly, to decry previous attempts at No Kill play methods.

He states that previous No Kill play methods abused the companion mechanic: while you are wandering the wasteland, certain companions choose to tag along with you. Previous No Kill players allowed their companions to do the murdering for them while they hid. However, Many a True Nerd was having none of this. He defines his iterated potential constraint: no killing of anything potentially sentient, whether by your hand or by your companions. This said, he also makes two caveats: firstly, if you are accompanying an NPC, they are allowed to be violent; secondly, you may hurt sentient creatures to near death, just not kill them (as he states “the Bible is fuzzy on kneecaps”).

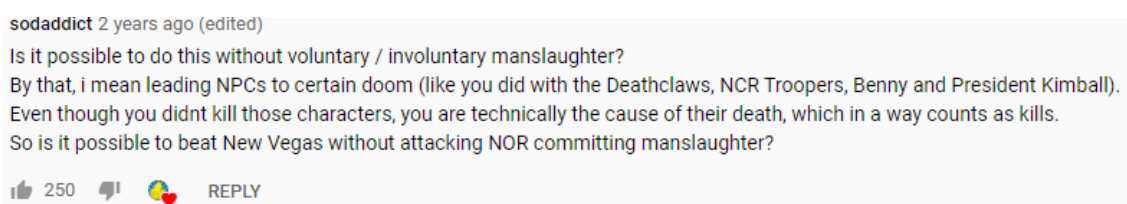
Meanwhile, Youtuber Mitten Squad (2018) performed a Pacifist play method of *Fallout: New Vegas*. In his play method, he refused to even actively harm any sentient being. However, he allowed himself to adopt the Yes-Man path, a particular route in the

## Chapter 6: Expressive Play

game which minimises violent encounters (which Many a True Nerd forbade). Additionally, he also allowed NPCs to die through his actions: such as handing over a particular NPC to a murderous legion, as well as leaving a severely immunocompromised person's body (called Mr House) away from a sanitised environment. He stated that the reason for performing this play method was solely to see if he could.

Both players specifically state that their impetus for their play method is not for transformative reasons – they were not interested in eliciting profound changes in themselves. They adopted these play methods to show versatility, show off, or see if they could. However, they did have to consider things critically during their play. The most interesting consideration that they had to consistently consider was what it means to harm. Many a True Nerd took the view that as long as a body has breath, then any other harm is permissible (even if it leads to death momentarily after). He utilised this caveat very liberally. Meanwhile, Mitten Squad took the view that causing someone to die is not the same as killing someone. However, he used this caveat much more conservatively. Through spectating and analysing different *Fallout: New Vegas* NoKill and Pacifist play methods, there can be critical discussion on which players consider worse: consistent less-than-lethal harm or seldom third-degree murder. Spectators even engaged in the youtube comments discussing these possibilities and permissibility, especially on Mitten Squad's video such as the following (Figure 20)<sup>15</sup>:

(Figure 20: sodaaddict's discussion on permissibility of harm)

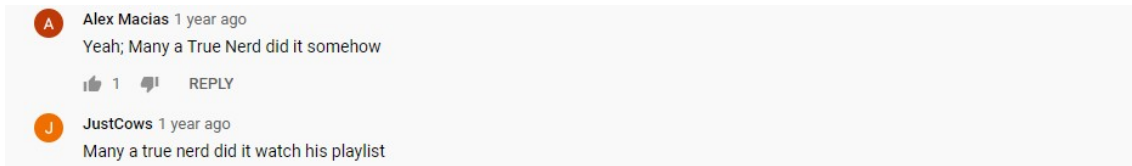


Users engaged with sodaaddict's question in multiple interesting ways. Users Alex Macias and Just Cows (Figure 21) cited Many a True Nerd's avoidance of manslaughter.

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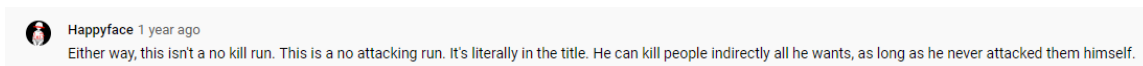
<sup>15</sup> Figures 20, 21, 22, 23 are transcribed in the Figure reference list for easier reading. Images have been printscreened to make sure that the originals have been preserved.

## Chapter 6: Expressive Play



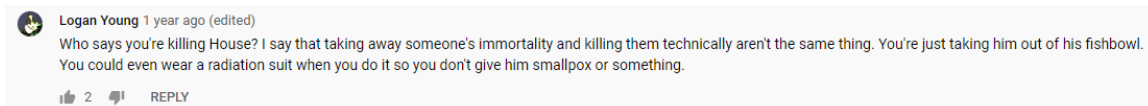
(Figure 21: Alex Macias and JustCows' discussion on permissibility of harm)

User Happyface engaged in a legalist defense (Figure 22). Since Mitten Squad's play method did not define manslaughter as unacceptable, therefore sodaddict's question was dismissable.



(Figure 22: Happyface's discussion on permissibility of harm)

User Logan Young discussed removing Mr House's sanitised environment as not manslaughter (Figure 23): he took a naturalist argument stating the following:



(Figure 23: Logan Young's discussion on permissibility of harm)

Scully-Blaker's call for considering the critical scope of uncritical play cannot find a better example. *Fallout: New Vegas*' No Kill and Pacifist play methods are actively engaging both the players, as well as the consumers of these players' works, which they recorded during the play sessions. Despite the players not actively considering their run as transformative, there is a whole discussion on ethics of harm in the YouTube comments to users that might not necessarily be normally exposed to it.

### Undesirable Transformations

Another reason that it is important to consider how play can be transformative even

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when players do not acknowledge it as transformative, is because not every transformation is a positive one. Considerations on acceptability of harm in post-apocalyptic wastelands are not close to the most disappointing way that players have approached play critically. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) is a game which takes part in 1899, depicting a wild west with extrajudicial killings, and horse riding, but also then contemporary issues such as the suffragettes, women in the United States working for the right to vote. The following section will have graphic descriptions of violence on women which are impossible to condone.

Youtuber Shirrako uploaded a video entitled “Red Dead Redemption 2 – Annoying Feminist Fed To Alligator” (2018), in which the video’s title is performed within *Red Dead Redemption*. This video went viral after Maiberg (2018) wrote an article decrying this behaviour. After being asked by Maiberg about his intention, Shirrako stated that he killed the suffragette because his “dialogue with the shopkeeper keeps being interrupted by her shouting” and that it was simply a funny moment that came up as he “simply wanted to shop in peace” (2018). This argument of course falls flat considering Shirrako uploaded multiple examples of gruesome murders including feeding the suffragette to bears, feeding her to a cougar, tying her up suspended over rail tracks, and punching her to death.

Maiberg rightfully pointed out to Shirrako some of the awful comments on his video. Currently, the second highest rated comments with over 5400 thumbs up, states “Press f<sup>16</sup> to pay respect to the alligator who now has cancer.” The comment is clearly stating that the victim was not the feminist, but the alligator, as feminism is a cancer. Even if we give Shirrako the benefit of the doubt, his play method is transformative, to a point that even viewers realise and acknowledge the political implications latent within his play.

There are a lot of transformative actions primed against a perceived power struggle against feminism, trans rights, and other progressive social issues that fall under the Social Justice Warrior (SJW) umbrella. While a lot of this happens outside of games, through online arguments and harassment (Andrea Braithwaite, 2016; Salter &

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16 “Press F” is an online meme originating from *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*. Players play as a soldier at another soldier’s memorial, and they are told to press the F key in order to pay respect to the fallen soldier. Players found this interaction forced, and turned it into a meme to fake sympathy

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Blodgett, 2012), adopted play methods such as Shirrako's, also serve as an avenue for less savoury players to wage this conflict.

### **[6.2] Reflection as Identity**

#### **[6.2.1] Being Ourselves**

In the previous section, I have largely looked at transformative play that engages with power structures beyond the self. In this section, I will instead look at more personal reflections, where the play methods players adopt reflect what players think of themselves, and how they want to shape themselves. While I am not arguing that this personal reflection is not political, I do argue that the play methods adopted somewhat vary from the above, both in execution and in reflective scope. This division also selfishly allows me to look at even more interesting examples of reflection through constraint adoption.

#### **Performing Gender**

One way players reflect upon themselves is through avatar choice; players constrain their play as reflected by the avatar that they choose (or have been assigned) within the game.

For example, there is a lot of research done on how gendered avatars influence the play methods adopted by players: the following works are but a few. Different genders might allow for different play methods within specific games. Fighting games often have gendered avatars with radically different play methods, where adopting a particular gender might be largely an instrumental choice, rather than an individuating one. Edward Castronova (2003) had written about how male avatars in *Everquest* sold for a higher price as they allowed for certain play methods that appeal more to the overwhelmingly male population in the game, such as being male during courtship.

However, players sometimes adopt same gendered avatars as it allows for a personally affirming play method, which the opposite gender would not allow. Gareth Healey

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(2016) argues that male *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) players perform hypermasculinity (such as misogyny and homophobia) that matches their game avatars, but might not reflect their real life gender performance. They adopt a potential constraint of overperforming a toxic masculinity as it reaffirms their gendered identity. On a different note, Nick Yee (2003) notes that players whose play method involves avatars that they identify as idealised versions of themselves are more likely to keep playing within the same game. Personal identification with the avatar has a correlation with the desirability of a particular play method.

Sometimes, playing as the opposite gender allows for some degree of exploration of opposite gendered expression. Rosa Mikael Martey et al. (2014) argue that male players in *World of Warcraft* perform female gendered conversational cues while playing as female characters. Interestingly, they also note that while movement in the game usually denotes a gendered performance (for example, male players jump more), male players playing as female avatars did not modify this behaviour (they still jumped a lot), likely because they are unconscious of this movement's gendered performance. Considering that they adopted gendered potential constraints for conversation, but not for movement, it shows that the male players had an active interest in constraints focused on performing their avatar's presented gender.

Nick Yee et al. (2011) interestingly also found that sometimes these gendered expressions are specific to a game's sociocultural production, and switching genders makes players feel more confident to perform these gendered expressions. For example, while playing *World of Warcraft*, both male and female players were more likely to adopt female avatars to perform play methods centred around healing, an activity seen in the game as female gendered. Similarly, both male and female players were more likely to adopt male avatars to perform play methods centred around player vs player combat, an activity seen in the game as male gendered.

What ties these examples all together is that cisgendered expression is often explicitly present in many games, so all of these examples are upholding specific material constraints: there is no way around playing as male in *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, there is equally no way of creating a non-binary character in *Skyrim*. Columnist Kori Michele (2015) writes that deviating from the cisgender binary often involves a headcanon: a

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term used in fandom communities oriented creating a personal narrative that does not present itself during the play method because of normative innate material and imperative constraints. For example, they note that they played the then latest *Pokémon* game as a gay transgender woman – which involved absolutely no changes to their play method, other than their personal consideration. However, they also note that some games' play methods allow flouting imperative constraints to a greater degree, in turn making their personal reality more possible.

For example, in *Story of Seasons* (2015) players go through the process of assigning themselves a gender through character creation. To further enforce this cisgendered division, male characters are given overalls and female characters a dress. However, as the game progresses, queering identity through adopted constraints becomes more and more possible. Through their personal headcanon and their play method, Michele managed to weave together a story of Roger, a gay transgender man. Despite being assigned female at birth (the character creation), Roger was still able to perform their gender identity by changing their clothes (as characters are allowed to wear either gender's clothes later in the game) as well as their sexual identity (only heterosexuality is allowed, so being female at birth allowed for gay relationships). By flouting imperative constraints, such as by performing maleness through a female assigned character creation and ignoring NPCs misgendering their character, Michele was able to perform their personal identity in a way that other games might not allow for.

This short subsection is nowhere near exhaustive of all the different play happening parallel to gender considerations. However, I have tried to show that gender expression happens through all means of constraints discussed in the previous chapters. Players uphold constraints, flout constraints, adopt new potential constraints, and every combination in between all with the explicit aim of expressing gender through play.

### **[6.2.2] Being Othered**

In the previous subsection, I picked gender as personal performance both because of the depth of research, but also because of the proclivity of gendered expression within games. However, even in the last example we saw how certain players' lived

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experiences of gender and sexual identity are often only expressed in gameplay through the adoption of potential constraints, not through a given game's encoding. In this section, I will look at more examples of lived experiences that find themselves transformed into play methods precisely because games either make no account for these lived experiences or actively disallow them. In turn, this forces players to either adopt potential constraints which are generally unsupported by prototypical play method, or to actively flout constraints to make their lived experiences a reality.

In **Section 5.3.3**, I looked at EMoQQ and the HongYiJun, with their iterative play method where they joined in large groups dressed in red to overwhelm unsuspecting opponents. While for some players it was solely iterative play on the prototypical play method that all but assured victory, for others it was also a way of expressing national identity in games that largely do not allow for it. ShenFanCong (2017)'s video has many bullets (rotating comments) passing through it: some are expressing sympathy for EMoQQ following his ban, some are expressing affection for the HongYiJun which might be nationalistic (red clothes as proxy for China) or might not be (red clothes being regular EMoQQ viewers). However, quite a few are expressing directly nationalistic sentiments, with the most common being "China number 1" along with many homophonic iterations such as 穿呢难波湾 and 传娜男拨玩, but there are also other internet culture expressions such as 如果奇迹有颜色, 那么一定是中国红 (if miracles have a colour, then it is definitely China's red)<sup>17</sup>.

This nationalism also displays itself during specific play sessions. In Grimmybear's (2017) earlier cited video, EMoQQ is wearing a top hat with the American flag (which is his usual garb), while shouting "USA" ad nauseum, as he and the HongYiJun kill their opponents. There are clearly some grievances about American foreign policy being aired through their play method, albeit done humorously and / or ironically.

While EMoQQ most likely pioneered this method, this nationalism through play method also found itself adopted by North American players (Zeb, 2016) turning a survival game into an ideological battleground. That said, when performed by Chinese players, it takes an extra layer of significance in a gaming landscape which rarely

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<sup>17</sup> Curiously, this originated from LoveLive! anime fandom. In a live performance show, the stage setting turned orange, and a viewer commented "If miracles have a colour, then it is definitely orange". Since then, it has been taken up as an internet meme with many iterations. The nationalistic China Red is amongst the more popular iterations.



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portrays China as successful, militarily or otherwise, or even simply non-antagonistically. Whether a healthy display or not, it does stem from games rarely offering ways to express a very prominent aspect of many players lived identity: their non-American nationalities, especially within successful military situations. The iterative play method discussed earlier was developed so that they could win. Winning was important as it gave them control of the conversation revolving around an important part of their identity.

### **Othered Cultures**

Another softer play method as un-othering within games occurred recently within *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Rami Ismail, a game developer and advocate for inclusivity in games, has often lamented that while many other cultures are represented and allowed to perform their identity in games, Islamic or Middle Eastern cultures are not. He cites the *Animal Crossing* series' year long planned activities: Christmas and Easter for people from Christian backgrounds, Harvest Moon festival for Japanese players, even St Patrick's day finds itself represented. However, neither Ramadan nor Eid find any mention whatsoever.

This lack of representation has perhaps been felt even stronger in 2020. COVID-19 has been raging across the planet at an alarming rate, which has put and will put a significant damper on many sociocultural activities. Ramadan, which for many Muslims involves up to thirty days of consecutive get-togethers for meals before (Suhoor) or after (Iftar) their daily fast, suddenly became a very lonely activity. And while players from a Christian background had virtual activities such as *Bunny Day* (an Easter celebration in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*) to fall back on, Muslims generally have close to no prototypical play methods to fall back on.

For this reason, Ismail (2020a) organised his own daily Suhoor and Iftar in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* for any and all that wanted to participate. He kept the play method simple: generally upholding *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*' prototypical play method, with a potential constraint of relating them to Ramadan, with typical greetings to other participating players as appropriate, along with sharing fruit and small gifts.

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*Animal Crossing: New Horizons* allows for eight players to play together at any given time: each of the sixty play session organised across the thirty days of Ramadan had eight players signed up, many of which were unique participants across days.

Other players quickly started to iterate on Ismail's play method adding more and more Muslim habits and customs to their play situation. Reimi (2020) organised her own Iftar, but before breaking their virtual fast, her co-players engaged in a digital Taraweeh, the traditional prayer performed during Ramadan right before Iftar (Figure 24). The Taraweeh room even had a bidet and a watering can, presumably for players to be able to humorously emulate Wudu, the ritual washing of the hands and feet usually done before entering holy places (Figure 25).



(Figure 24: A digital taraweeh)



(Figure 25: A digital wudu)

Yet again, Muslim players found that their lived experiences were not adequately represented within any chosen game. EMOQQ and the HongYiJun decided to remedy

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this by flouting imperative constraints, especially because their lived experiences required challenging the procedural rhetoric inherent to so many military oriented games. Meanwhile, Ismail opted to perform a play method within a game where adopting potential constraints is much easier, giving his chosen play method more room to grow and adapt to other players' unexpressed identities, as seen through the love and care Reimi gave to her play situation.

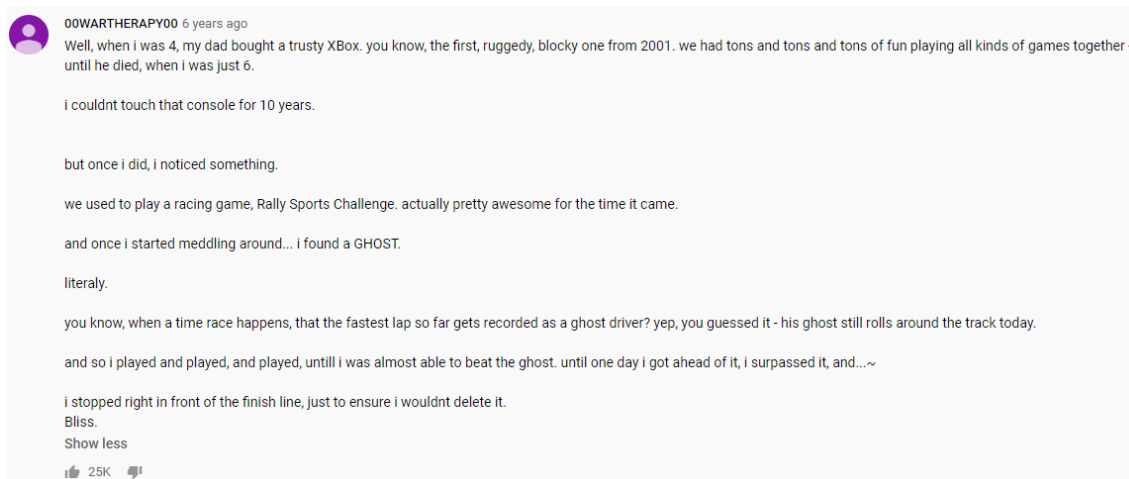
### **[6.3] Retelling Our Stories**

In the previous subchapters, I looked at how players reflect on themselves through their play methods. I started off by looking at play as transformative to power structures, then moved into exploration ourselves through our play methods. In this final subchapter, I will look at how players retell their own personal stories through play methods in the games that they increasingly inhabit. I will focus on play methods revolving around telling stories about loss: while this is hardly the only topic that players tell stories about, I will use it as an example to show breadth of play methods as I did with gendered expression.

#### **[6.3.1] What we find**

00WARTHETHERAPY00's comment (Figure 26) on a video about spirituality in games is a retelling which keeps cropping up in gaming circles over the years. 00WARTHETHERAPY00 explains how he used to play *RalliSports Challenge* (2002), a car racing game, with his father when he was around four years old. However, a couple of years later, his father unexpectedly died and he did not touch the game for a decade after.

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(Figure 26: 00WARTHERAPY00's experience in loss)

However, at one point he returned to the game to find what he calls a ghost. *RalliSports Challenge* records the fastest lap ever played and displays them as a semi transparent car that races alongside you. This imperative constraint suggests a sense of challenge of beating your best previous score, and helps maintain the illusion of a race even when you are playing alone. For 00WARTHERAPY00, the ghost was more than that – it was a living memory of his father. The fastest lap was not recorded by him, but by his father, and racing against the ghost car was a way for him to recall the times when he played the game against his father.

00WARTHERAPY00 concludes by stating that at a certain point he did beat the ghost car. However, when he arrived at the finish line, he stopped his car abruptly and let the ghost car proceed. Had he gone over the finish line, then his most recent play situation would be recorded as the new ghost car, removing his father's previous play session from the game's memory. 00WARTHERAPY00 actively flouted the imperative constraint so that he could maintain the play method which mattered to him. He wanted to retell the story of how he used to play with his father. The emergent lived constraint that his father unlocked allowed for him to create a play method that revolved around remembering and reexperiencing.

00WARTHERAPY00's play method is hardly the only one that situates games as locations for memory. Games allow us to retain a digital footprint, and play methods can quickly evolve around these footprints we leave behind. Reddit user Lastrogu3

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(2015) writes about how he still maintains his brother's *Skyrim* (2011) saved file, opening his brother's last play session but never progressing it any further, as a way of remembering his brother through his last known *Skyrim* footprint. What makes 00WARTHERAPY's example particularly interesting is the play method's contrasting rhetoric: winning the race meant losing a memory, and losing the race meant keeping it.

### [6.3.2] What we place

Of course, not all retellings are played through pre-existing digital footprints. Some retellings are inserted through posthumous play methods. Sticking to the theme of memorials in game, players have often adopted play methods to commemorate the loss of loved ones, especially if they had attachments to a particular game, by creating play methods within those specific games.

This has been realised in many games, especially multiplayer games where a person's death can be directly attached to characters within the game. Mike Fahey (2014) writes of a vigil held in *Final Fantasy XIV Online* (2010) for Codex Vahlda, a regular player who had recently passed away – players remembered him through two play methods: kneeling down at a set location as well as casting spells in a formation where the particle effects spelt out his name. Gas Bandit (2014) made a large monument for his deceased wife in *Minecraft* (2011), a play method which took him over two months to complete and is still hosted on a private server so that he, or anyone he invites, can remember her through this monument.

Another memorial can be found in *Eve Online* (2003), a massive multiplayer space exploration game, which includes the warfare and subterfuge that such an undertaking would involve. Azia Burgi (2017, through Lee Yancy) curates the *Capsuleer Cemetery of Molea*, a virtual graveyard where players place capsules, digital artefacts with information imprinted on them. In this case, the information imprinted are the names of *EVE Online* players who died in real life.

What makes this example particular interesting is the play methods that have evolved around his digital cemetery. The most obvious play method is players visiting the cemetery to place new capsules of newly deceased friends. However, some players also

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visit the cemetery to experience solemnness: at its height the cemetery held over 700 capsules giving the loss a sense of scale that might otherwise be hard to appreciate. Some players also visit the cemetery as part of a common play method within *Eve Online*: space tourism and travel. For example, the player Katia Sae (through Mark749, 2019) is famous in *Eve Online* communities for being one of the few players to travel to every system (as in space system) available of over 7800 systems. I am certain the cemetery was on her list when she visited *Morea*. Finally, some players grieved rather than grieved: they went to the cemetery to destroy the capsules just because they could, in turn trying to make all the above play methods impossible. While they were often held back by the curators, at their most successful, the griefers destroyed around 500 capsules.

The process of memorialising *EVE Online* players lost in actual life created a story that players interacted with. Some felt sad for others' loss, some came to feel the aura of a unique work of art reproduced digitally, for some the story was another lived story that cultures create: as mass graves are part of the tourist's eye, so is *Eve Online*'s capsuleer cemetery. Finally, some felt that stories subvert what *Eve Online* is really about: looting and pillaging, and flouting this shared personal constraint in a large game-world was an act of upholding their own prototypical play methods

### [6.3.3] Losing Our Digital Selves

In the above two sections, I have looked at loss of life commemorated through play methods that reflect upon it. 00WARTHERAPY00 reflected upon what was long lost through *RalliSports Challenge*, Lastrogu3 on the recently lost through *Skyrim*, and the *Capsuleer Cemetery of Molea* in *Eve Online* on what is continuously lost over time. However, in all the above play methods, the emotional impetus came largely from events external to the play method. The play method conserved the emotional momentum. In the following examples, I will argue that the right play methods can also create the emotional impetus bound to loss.

### Losing Our Games

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Celia Pearce (2011) had performed an interesting multi-sited ethnography on *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (2003, now called *Uru*) players. *Uru* was a very short lived massive multiplayer online game (now called MMOG), lasting from open invites in late 2003 all the way to February 2004. However, in this short time, it had amassed a significant player base, since it was part of the well acclaimed *Myst* franchise. This sizeable community had developed its own communal Uru play method that they did not want to lose.

Pearce states that the *Uru* community migrated to other MMOGs, mainly *There* (2003). Players on *There* were not all too happy about *Uru* players arrival. This was partially because they were a large community, which caused significant server stress and lag. However, it was also because the *There* community were worried that the Uru play method would supplant their own There play method. They were not completely wrong – Pearce notes that *Uru* players “maintained the same names and approximated the same appearances” (2008, p. 8), while they would also “highlight the difference between themselves and other gamers, and speak about their shared values.” (2008, p. 8). While the *Uru* play community did not supplant the *There* play community, they clearly came to *There* to replace that which they had lost: their digital identity along with their play methods created in *Uru*.

### **Losing Our Lives**

In Celia Pearce’s study, players lost a play method. However, they also lost a digital identity which they tried to remake in another game. *Losing a life* is often a flippant thing in games, a temporary setback as we try to uphold our chosen play methods. In Pearce’s study, it was not flippant as players lost their game (and its associated play method) at the same time. However, even just adopting the right play methods can make *losing lives* have different weights and different measures. I have already shown a few examples throughout this thesis. In **Section 5.3.1**, Juul (2009) intentionally losing a life in *Scramble* (1981) was met with dissatisfaction; play is meant to provide fun and a play method where ‘loss of life’ was the focus did not provide that. Meanwhile, Barr (2018) criticised *loss of life*’s lack of gravitas in games through the same play method as Juul: when dying means nothing, it instead becomes a source of levity and humour. This



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levity of death was shared in **Section 6.1.2**, through Scully-Blaker's (2017) discussion on stillness in *Resident Evil 4*, as players intentionally died to see the gory remains. Meanwhile, Leino (2011) got a brief glimpse of death's potential gravitas in his death loop in **Section 4.1.2**. A save file at the wrong time made him no more than a digital Prometheus, doomed to be devoured over and over by a super mutant with no respite.

Games might never be able to have the depth of consequence that death in actual life carries with it. Leino's gameplay condition is as close to death as we can come through play methods. However, there is no reason to not attach further narrative weight to this through notions of permanence and attachment. Permadeath play methods are perhaps the closest play methods have gotten to exploring the gravitas that loss of life carries. As I have explained earlier, permadeath play methods add a potential constraint that forces the player to end a play situation permanently if they die. Barr (2018) was an example of this, although it was intentionally done in bad faith – by killing himself as quickly as possible, he was flouting the potential constraints bound to permadeath play method.

Brendan Keogh (2013) explores permadeath by attaching narrative weight to it. He states that through a mix of fixed affordances (material and imperative constraints) and player-imposed rules (potential constraints), “the tone of the game's conventional gameplay shifts from one of experimentation to one of vulnerability” (2013) In his project *Toward Dawn*, Keogh's play method changes *Minecraft*'s death condition. Instead of losing all his possessions upon death, Keogh gambled everything – he would permanently delete the character.

As the name implies, Keogh started exploring east, seeing all the biomes that *Minecraft* had to offer on the way, wandering from one landscape to the next. He noted that his new approach to the game changed the way he viewed lived constraints he had upheld before. Whereas before *Minecraft*'s day night cycle was a way for him to regiment his day (travelling during the day, crafting and mining at night), in *Towards Dawn*, the day night cycle represented vulnerability and fear. Crafting and mining were no longer desirable since he acted the part of a nomad walking east, as well as because they came with significant dangers. Instead, during every night cycle, he hid in a makeshift cave and waited.

To add to his play method's narrative weight, Keogh (2010) blogged all sixty two in-



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game days spent wandering *Towards Dawn*, over the span of two years. He (2012) also created a video compiling pictures he took along the way. Approaching a play method with narrative intent is already sufficient to be reflective. However, as I have previously written (Harrington, 2016), creating a cohesive narrative stemming from a particular play method creates further narratological impetus. As I shall explain in further detail in the next chapter, creating works out of specific play methods allows other players (or readers or watchers) to observe them, recreate them, or even simply interpret the play method's outcome. For now, I can state that the combination of permadeath play methods, along with the blogs, videos and the academic paper he created, gave Keogh's consideration of loss of life in games an emotional resonance that would be hard to achieve by only playing. An unobserved vigil is not as touching as a vigil observed by many. Equally, a vigil by oneself might be less touching than a vigil with others.

### [6.4] Conclusions on Expression

This conclusion concludes two things: this chapter, and the play analysis part of this thesis.

Starting from this chapter, I started off by looking at transformative play methods. I looked at a few examples of what transformative or critical play could mean, including Gualeni (2014), Rusch (2009), and Flanagan (2009)'s work amongst others. I settled on Gualeni's definition of transformative play as play that can "elicit profound changes in the people that engage in them" (2014, p. 1). As with previous chapters, I argued that there are many different approaches to play that players can take to reach their goal, in this case being transformative play. Games with heavy procedural rhetoric encourage players to adopt the prototypical play method for transformation. However, I also showed how in the veganism play method, Westerlaken (2017) simply added a potential constraint that shaped further constraints as she went along. I also looked at DeLappe (2004) who actively flouted imperative constraints to create transformative play for himself, and perhaps even for the other players. Finally, I also looked at the great socialist production play method as an example of transformative play happening in

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spite of following procedure, where divergent play creates its own rhetoric from prototypical play.

This allowed me to move into examples of transformative play that happen even when players might not be actively looking for it, and perhaps might not even realise it. I opened with Scully-Blaker's analysis on stasis and stillness, which served two purposes. Firstly, it gave reflective examples of a topic I talked about in both previous chapters – doing nothing as play. I had already shown examples of how it can be explorative in **Section 4.3.1**, as well as iterative in **Section 5.3.1**. However, as far as the chapter is concerned, it also addressed the issue of analysis play as critical even when it does not intend to be. I provide a further two examples of critical play which is not critically oriented. I looked at No-Kill / Pacifist play methods in *Fallout: New Vegas*, and how players discussed the ethics of harm through their play, as well as more harmful transformations in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, where players carried out anti-feminist play without consideration of its transformative potential.

I also looked at players using play methods to express their identity. I argued that even in this situation, players use a variety of play methods to do so. On one hand, players uphold prototypical constraints to express masculine (or hyper-masculine) performances in *Call of Duty*. Sometimes, they choose specific in-game genders to perform certain potential constraints over others, as I have shown in Martey et Al's (2014) research. Meanwhile, Michele's (2015) gender and sexual identity only found themselves expressed in *Story of Seasons* through Michele's flouting of material and imperative constraints. I further argued that other expressions of identity are likely to be as vast, but also state that certain identity expressions necessitate flouting constraints as the game's world does not allow for a normative performance of those identities. I took one final look at HongYiJun play method, where players flout constraints to express hypernationalism, as well as the Ramadan play method in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, where players flout constraints to express their wish for better Islamic representation in games.

Finally, I also showed how players express themselves by telling stories through the play methods they adopt. For this purpose, I looked at play examples dealing with loss. I looked at a couple of examples in *RallySports Challenge* and *Skyrim* respectively,

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where players used save files to commemorate passed relatives. I also looked at a few play methods where players communally adopted the same play methods in order to commemorate similar losses, such as memorials in *World of Warcraft*. *Eve Online* also had a similar play method, but it was set apart by spawning second degree play methods from the original memorialisation of players who had passed. Finally, I also looked at loss of digital selves, where Pearce (2008) provided for a very interesting examples of transplanted play methods from game to game, to make up for a lost digital self.

This is far from an exhaustive look at all the ways players constrain themselves in order to express themselves. However, I should have hopefully been enough to emphasise two aspects. First, that the points raised in previous chapters also hold true for expressive play – and perhaps even all game-play beyond it. First, in **Chapter 4**, I argued that the *how* of play methods is as important to discuss as the *why* of play methods. In this chapter, I have also shown how within the same reason for play, the methods are radically different. While looking at expressing gender identity, Michele had to flout constraints while other players did not: solely discussing that players try to express their gender identity through games would miss that Michele had to create an elaborate play method for their gender expression. The same holds true for nationalistic and sociocultural sentiments. It is much easier to be American in games than being Iraqi, the latter often requires creating new play methods.

Meanwhile, in **Chapter 5**, I argued that play methods often serve to promote and promulgate further play methods. I argued that the speedrun play method is often insufficiently described solely by saying “players finish a game as fast as possible”. It ignores that most speedrun play methods are possible because other players before them executed the routing play method, a hyper-efficient route to go along with the speed and care of execution. In this chapter, I also got to somewhat explore this aspect. The *Capsuleer Cemetery of Molea* in *Eve online* was originally a play method which intended to make memory of those lost. However, it stemmed further play methods out of it, including players acting as curators, players grieving it, players visiting it as digital tourists and so on. Play begets play, and looking at method can help us understand how and why further play comes to be.

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Secondly, that play methods do not need to necessarily relate to the game's production itself. Players play to express, explore and understand something which does not end with the game's world, such as themselves. In **Chapters 4** and **5**, I had mostly looked at examples where players are constraining themselves to do something different in the game. Whether it is the routing play method, to learn the ins and outs of a game; or the power gaming play method, to make the most out of a particular play method; or even the griefing play method, where players are trying to disrupt other players' play methods. All these play methods revolve around enhancing, understanding or disrupting other play methods – they are play for further propagation of play. However, in this chapter, I took the further opportunity to explore play methods aimed at enhancing and exploring the players themselves: whether through active transformative attempts in veganism play method, wanting personal expression in the Ramadan play method, or simply remembering something that was lost outside the game in Eve's online memorials.

In these chapters, I have looked at many different ways in which players create their own play methods, and adopt other players' play methods. In **Chapter 7**, I will discuss how players record their play methods for posterity, for further proliferation, and even for the creative output that has emerged from their play.

## CHAPTER 7: RECORDING CONSTRAINTS

One of the larger claims that I am making in this thesis is that there are methods to play, which we can delineate and expound upon. In Chapters 2 and 3, I focused on how to talk about these play methods, which I have done by introducing the term **constraints**, dividing it into three categories, and explaining the conditions of application. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I followed this up by applying this term to many different examples of play methods, dividing each chapter by player motivation. This allowed me to show how the same constraints can result in varying play methods across different games, whether in motivation or in scope. However, it also allowed me to show that there is some degree of generalisability in play methods – similar constraints applied across different games can produce similar play methods.

In this chapter, I will look at how I have been able to make such claims, by looking at what has been left after these constraints and play methods. In Chapter 2, I made the claim that constraints can be done for their own constraints' sake – they do not need to produce literary works, even though they often do. While some of the constraints that the Oulipo performed have been immortalised through famous works, such as the *lipogram in E* through Perec's *La Disparition* (1969), other constraints' claim to fame is being recorded in one of the Oulipo's many compendiums.

Similarly, many play methods and their constraints have been executed and subsequently forgotten. This morning, I played some *Hearthstone* (2014), yet there is nothing to prove that I did, or any recording of the constraints that I chose. I did not feel the need to record that particular play session, or share it with others.

However, every play method that I have looked at in this thesis has been, in some way or another, kept for posterity. Otherwise, I would have been unable to discuss it. Even my own play methods, such as my *Skyrim* crash example in **Section 2.4.1**, have now been preserved through this thesis. In this chapter, I will look at the different ways players have recorded their constraints. The Oulipo often presented their constraints through writing, whether as applied to a novel or poem, or left as theoreticals in compendia. However, play constraints are much more complicated as they are recorded through many different media. This chapter aims to explore these complications.

## Chapter 7: Recording Constraints

Before I move into this division, in the first subchapter, I will briefly analyse how the relationship players have with their play methods and the means they use to record them is complicated. So far, the comparisons between the Oulipo's constraints and play constraints have been relatively straight forward. However, I argue that play constraints need special considerations when they are being recorded, which many of the Oulipo's constraints do not.

After this section, I will divide the remainder of this chapter into three further subchapters. In the first subchapter, I will first analyse how play methods have been recorded and preserved. I will break this subchapter down by dividing it through individual sections each showing a recording means. Writing constraints out remains a popular means, as I shall show through articles, rulesets, and wikis. However, players also turn them into visual forms, such as infographics and photo albums, as well as multimedia forms, such as video snippets, edited videos and save files. Players also perform play methods, where the act of recording resides in the audience watching them – this includes activities such as streaming as well as pedagogical play.

Then, I will look at how game studies scholars have recorded their own play methods. After acknowledging that academic play is in and of itself its own approach, I will divide how these recordings have often been presented in similar fashion as in the previous subchapter. I will also briefly discuss the difference in academic recordings against the popular play community's recordings, and analyse whether there can be potential advantages to considering alternate ways to record, detail and analyse academic play.

Finally, I will look at creative output that stems from play methods, but where the play method might no longer be the main focus. I will take a second look at streaming, where I will discuss how the play methods often take second fiddle to the entertainment being provided parallel to them. I will also look at creative output happening parallel to play methods, such as machinimas, comics and memes. Finally, I will look at play methods that develop into presets that enhance or transplant those play methods into other games.

## [7.1] Oulipo's Means of Production

While I discussed the Oulipo in **Chapter 2**, the state of ownership between them and their constraints is clear: the constraints they create are open for anyone to use. Nobody can stop me from writing a *lipogram in E*. However, the literary works they create through and from these constraints are theirs as individual members. No matter how many times I tell people I wrote *La Disparation*, nobody ever believes me and it will never be true.

If complications were to arise, they would stem from what the constraints relate to – literature's own materials and conventions. For example, Georges Perec's *La Disparation* related to his wish to write a text based around a *lipogram in E*. It necessitated the existence of French (the language he chose) and novels (the format he chose) and not much else. Italo Calvino's constraints related to his own original texts: he had prewritten drafts, he applied constraints to them, such as the Eulerian matrix, and then made works from this application such as *On A Winter's Night a Traveller*. They often applied it to each others' texts too. For example, Ian Monk transplanted Perec's *What a Man!* (a French text in a *reverse lipogram on A*), into English (also using a *reverse lipogram on A*) (Oulipo, 2009).

Sometimes, constraints are applied to a sociocultural production. Perec's infraordinary exploration in *An attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris* is a great example: the canvas was a street in Paris, the constraint was writing about what was not extraordinary, the work out of it was the final text. Sometimes, constraints are applied to texts where ownership is inapplicable: whether this is because the copyright period has passed. This includes the various retellings of Shakespeare's maxim "to be or not to be" in the *Atlas de Litterature Potentielle*, as well as perhaps an anecdote.

The complication only arises when they choose to relate their constraint to texts still within copyright under unwilling participants, which to my knowledge they never do. In this case, the set of constraints they adopt would still be theirs, but the work created from these constraints would have a contested ownership. Meanwhile, in this thesis, I have chosen to only look at play methods performed within proprietary games which the players did not create, meaning ownership is immediately complicated. I have

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chosen to do this because the large majority of play methods *are* performed in proprietary games which the players did not create. As I write this paragraph, 80,000 players are playing *Grand Theft Auto V*, yet not a single one of them owns the rights to *Grand Theft Auto V*.

This makes the way players and the Oulipo record their constraints significantly different. In **Section 2.2.1** and then later in **Section 3.1.1**, I introduced Fournel's three types of computer-mediated constraints. I stated that (digital game) play constraints follow the 3<sup>rd</sup> type, which he wrote, then I converted to as

**Fournel:** writer → computer → reader → computer → work

**Converted:** game maker → hardware 1 → player → hardware (n) → work

In his 1970s formulation, Fournel had a justifiable assumption that the computer itself would produce the works following the players' input, whether intentionally or unintentionally constrained. He uses Benabou's *Aphorismes Artificiels* as an example, where the computer digitally prints the artificial aphorisms. In the truest sense of the word, play does this too: our play produces something directly on the computer. If all these play methods did not print different observable results, then it would be hard to justify them as different play methods (or play methods at all). However, players' recordings are often not only the directly printed result, but rather reproductions of the original play outside of solely the hardware's printed materials.

While keeping this in mind, in the following subchapters, I will first look at how popular play communities record their constraints, then at how academic play communities record their constraints, and then finally, I will look at other creative output stemming from players' play which might diverge away from the original play methods adopted.

### [7.2] Recording Constraints

Works such as Mathews and Brotchie's *Oulipo Compendium* (2005) as well as Motte's *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (1999) both focused on doing the same thing: detailing what a writing constraint is and showing how it worked. Meanwhile *Atlas*



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(1988) and Marcel Bénabou and Paul Fournel's *Anthologie de l'Oulipo* focused on explaining writing constraints by showing examples of them. Meanwhile, Daniel Levin Becker (2012) intersped the writing constraints with a biographical approach, where writing constraints were bound to happen when certain people got together.

In this subchapter, I will similarly look at the various ways players record their constraints: I will start by looking at the most face value works – writing constraints down. Here, I will look at the many ways constraints can be written down, such as articles, end user license agreements, wikis that collate these written constraints, as well as discussion boards. I will then explore constraints maintained outside of writing. I will start from images, such as infographics and picture compendiums, and then move into multimedia recordings, such as gameplay snippets, edited videos, as well as save files. Finally, I will also look at constraint recordings maintained through performing them, such as streaming and pedagogical play.

By the end of this subchapter, I will have looked at a variety of different ways that players record their play methods. This will allow me to move into the following sections, where I discuss both academic recordings in comparison to what popular recordings as well as creative works that stem from originally adopting play methods, but then becoming something more.

### **[7.2.1] Written Works**

Perhaps the most common way to record constraints is simply to write them out. However, even writing them down can take shape in many different forms. While a created work has value in and of itself, many players who create works also want other players to access, adopt and even improve on these works created – simply writing down constraints is often not very effective. Below, I will look at different types of written works, while briefly discussing what different written works bring to the table.

#### **Articles**

One way players share their written constraints is through writing articles about these

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play methods. In previous chapters, I looked at quite a few examples of players sharing their constraints in long form articles such as Riley MacLeod (2016)'s search for Hong Kong's mid-level elevator in **Section 4.3.1**, Kori Michele's (2015) exploration of gender and sexual identity in farming simulators in **Section 6.2.1**, and PengPai XinWen's (2018) survival socialism with Chinese characteristics in **Section 6.1.1**.

All three of these articles have two things in common. Firstly, they detail the constraints they created and adopted in non-technical terms. Rather than writing about their chosen constraints as transgressive play, challenge runs, or any other play-loaded term, all of the three authors talked about what they did within their chosen game, and what resulted from it. Riley MacLeod describes his play method as "I decided I'd turn the whole thing into an adventure by finding the escalator using real world maps instead of looking up its location in-game" (2016), while Kori Michele provides a bit more technical detail as she describes hers as "I put all of these mechanics to the test to play a story about a gay, transgender man named Roger" (2015). Compared with the examples in the following three subsections, the level of technical knowledge required to access these play methods and their constraints is incredibly low, and the article format facilitates this by inserting these chosen constraints into a larger creative written work.

Secondly, by infusing a personal narrative with the aforementioned low-technical knowhow, articles do really well in attracting players whose interest in non-prototypical play methods is not particularly high. For example, I am not part of any finding escalators in *Sleeping Dogs* play communities. While I had played *Sleeping Dogs* before, I mostly followed the prototypical play method, while also following some completionist constraints. However, after reading MacLeod's article, not only did I try to replicate the play method (to moderate success), I also tried to replicate *Sleeping Dogs* resistance to inaction in other games (to lesser success). Standing in the middle of traffic is often one of the first things I try in open world games with cars in them. Similarly, *Frostpunk*, which should have been a moderately successful indie game by most measures, went viral in China because of PengPai XinWen's article and similar posts on Chinese social media such as Weibo and WeChat. Josh Ye (2018) reported that as of May 2018, 250,000 copies of the 668,000 copies of *Frostpunk* sold over Steam belonged to Chinese accounts. The Great Socialist Production play method not only

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attracted players to give *Frostpunk* another go with new constraints, but also attracted a whole score of players to give *Frostpunk* a go in the first place.

### Rulesets

On the other hand, written constraints can also have the advantage of providing a great depth of clarity in what exactly they entail. Writing down constraints can be so effective in this aspect, that it is often used alongside prototypical play methods to maintain a hegemony over which play methods should be executed. In **Section 5.3.3**, I briefly discussed Myers' *Twixt*, as well as EMOQQ and his HongYiJun, where I explained that they managed to disrupt the communally upheld constraints for a long time before they were banned. When they were eventually banned, the reasons they were given down were written down play methods. They were pointed towards End User License Agreements (EULA). While these user agreements do not often dictate how to play, they often dictate how not to play. They let players know that if the games owners do not like particular adopted potential constraints or particular flouted constraints, then players can, and often are, permanently removed from that game if they refuse to conform to the pre agreed play methods.

Record constraints through writing is especially effective when the constraints are (and need to be) very specific. In **Section 5.3.3**, I also briefly discussed Thunder.Atuun breaking a rule in *Dota2* – upon deciding to adopt the tournament's chosen play method, Atuun was bound by specific constraints whether he wanted to or not, whether he realised or not. *Dota 2* game owners are quite secretive with these tournament constraints. However, other esports such as *League of Legends* (2009) are not, openly providing its *LCS Academy League Rulebook* (2020). While the rulebook goes beyond defining the constraints that players are to adopt, constraints are a large part in it. The rulebook discusses how teams of players are to be formed and maintained, what hardware can be used to maintain these constraints, and even manner conduct as a personal constraint. In **Section 5.2.4** I looked at other examples of how limiting constraints as iterative play, where rulebooks are an important part of detailing exactly which constraints are to be limited.

### Wikis

In articles, writing down constraints serves as an effective way to make these works as easily accessible as possible, while also establishing a personal relationship with readers. In rulesets, writing down constraints serves as a way for both the games' as well as the play methods' owners to assert their play method as king. In turn, Wikis have the advantage of collating many written works together, allowing for a compendium style of access. While articles and rulesets are actively sought after by players who want to adopt those play methods, placing a group of play methods together increases the potential for audience proliferation through search gemination.

*VGChallenge Wiki* (2019), a player edited compendium where players record challenge runs, is a great example of this. In **Sections 5.1.1** and **5.3.2**, I exemplified how in challenge runs players adopt a specific constraint to shape their gameplay. Challenge runs are especially interesting because the constraints added can, and often do, span across multiple gamespaces. The *VGChallenge Wiki* homepage lists a host of constraints that span across games, including ones we explored in previous chapters such as 100% play methods in **Section 5.1.1** and pacifist play methods in **Section 6.1.2**, alongside runs that we have not mentioned such as double play play methods (playing as two characters at the same time) and low level play methods (finishing the game at the lowest level possible). The entries are often somewhat vague, as realising a challenge run can take form in different ways: a no-kill play method in *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) flouts imperative constraints. However, it might not necessarily flout imperative constraints in *Metal Gear Solid* (1987). That said, the foundational potential constraint, not killing anyone or anything, remains the same.

Some challenge runs are too specific to be described generally, which is why there are also game specific wikis, such as *Paper Mario Challenge Running Wiki* (2020). Just like *VGChallenge Wiki*, this wiki is also a player edited compendium which collates challenge runs within *Paper Mario* franchise games. For example, the *10HP Pre-Hooktail Pit Challenge Run* sets a few potential constraints that could be generalisable (having a maximum 10HP is conceptually very similar to low level play methods), yet it also has a specific constraint that can only be performed in *Paper Mario: The Thousand*

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*Year Doors* (2004). Players are to attempt the Pit of 100 Trials before finishing the first level. The overwhelming majority of games do not allow this constraint to be adopted, as they unfortunately do not have Pits of 100 Trials. Similarly, in **Section 4.2.1**, I also looked at *Oblivion*'s (2006) under levelling play method. The constraints in this method are so specific that no challenge run website chronicles them. However, *Oblivion* related wikis, such as uesp or elderscrolls, all feature multiple pages related to executing the under levelling play method in the correct way.

### Discussion Boards

Another way players share their newly created constraints in writing is through preserved conversations, such as discussion boards Reddit and Discord in western gaming circles. Each popular game boasts at least one subreddit and one discord channel, which then branch into various more as the constraints becomes more and more specific. Both have medium specific communication affordances: Discord is overwhelmingly real time, even supporting multiple user voice-calls; meanwhile Reddit users pace themselves and post sporadically over the day. On the other hand, Reddit has a voting system, where community contributions can be judged as positive (upvote) or negative (downvote), while Discord pleasure and displeasure is offered through direct rebutals, or very often through emoji reactions. These affordances lead to different communities, along with different constraints discussed at any given time.

*Hearthstone* (2014), a popular digital card game, players' main home from the two is Reddit, with 1.4 million players registered to the main *Hearthstone* subreddit. In **Section 5.2.1**, I briefly discussed how playstyles influence what potential constraints players adopt. Community forums serve as a great way for players to figure out how to customise their play accordingly. Rosewater's (2002) *Spike* would find a very willing home in the *Competitive Hearthstone* subreddit – players here discuss how they can win more often. Meanwhile, Rosewater's *Johnny* might find a more willing home in the *Gimmickstone* subreddit – players here discuss more creative potential constraints, where winning often comes as an afterthought. In each of these subreddits, players share the constraints they adopted through an initial write up, followed by a community moderated discussion. For example, the user Swatcol (2020) recently wrote a very

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comprehensive write-up of his chosen constraints: he used a very specific deck of cards, in very specific ways in varying situations. Other players surveyed his constraints and either shed doubt on them, or asked for clarifications on his choices. As of two days after his post, Swatcol's constraints were not overly popular – 38% of the people who voted actively disapproved of his chosen constraints, doubting their validity in securing the *Spike* play method. The remaining 62% approved or felt that at the very least they provided an interesting discussion.

Meanwhile, *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (2018) players overwhelmingly favour Discord over the two, with websites such as smashcords.com listing over 170 Discord channels providing specific discussions on different aspects of the game. In **Section 4.2.2**, I looked at labbers, fighting game players that explore constraints oriented around learning the nitty gritty aspects. The *Damsels in Success* discord, a *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (2017) Discord channel focuses on two identical characters – Princess Peach and Princess Daisy (hereby referred to as Paisy). It has thousands of people discussing what being efficient while using Paisy means. Apart from serving as an alternative to a Wiki, compiling a lot of information under pins (messages saved for future posterity and ease of access), players are constantly discussing which constraints can help them best secure the competitive SSBU play method. On any given day, the channels dedicated to this play method get hundreds of messages including questions, answers, debates and even challenges to assert whose chosen constraints work best.

When “being efficient” leans overwhelmingly towards choosing the right constraints, it seems that the long-form discussion that Reddit can provide proves fertile ground. Meanwhile, where “being efficient” leans overwhelmingly towards executing constraints correctly, Discord seems to be much more conducive because feedback is moments away. While this is definitely not the only factor as to why players use one discussion board over another, I do argue that medium specificity plays a part even in recording play methods. Additionally, while these two examples have focused on constraint creation revolving around being efficient, this is not all these communities talk about. The *Gimmickstone* subreddit is provided as an example of players that want to try new things within a given play situation.

## [7.2.2] Visual Works

While the previous examples served as a non-exhaustive look at written constraints, writing down constraints is not the only way that players record their constraints. In this section, I will look at a few more methods which are not based overwhelmingly in writing. I will start by looking at constraints recorded through images and pictures, moving into short video snippets, Videos on Demand (VoDs), as well as edited video content.

### Images

In the previous section, I looked at players using discussion boards to maintain their *Spike* style play method, using Swatcol's chosen constraints on the *Competitive Hearthstone* subreddit as an example. However, players in this community have also been using images to discuss which chosen constraints can best meet the *Spike* play method. Vicious Syndicate, a website dedicated precisely to this play method, releases weekly reports on which constraints best perform this play method. Report #165 (2020) comes with a written article, as well as with many images where constraints are chosen and compared to each other to see which fare better in specific play sessions. Images here are particularly effective as they manage to condense a lot of information into a small amount of space, especially when compared with the article section which gives comparable information in a much longer form.

In **Section 5.2.3**, I looked at the *Nuzlocke* comic by Nick Franco (2010). While this constraint is nowadays generally accessed through Wikis, such as the aforementioned VGChallenge and others (such as Bulbapedia (2020)), the play method was popularised through the comic being shared through *Pokémon* communities. The comic itself shares similar affordances that articles do: it sets up a personal narrative that people generally uninterested in non-prototypical play methods can relate to, while also presenting the proposed constraints in a way that's easy to access. However, an image backdrop attracts different players than a textual backdrop: I prefer reading long form articles, other players might prefer casual comics.

The final method for sharing constraints through pictures that I will discuss is through

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the use of photo albums / photo blogs. The *Video Game Soda Machine* project discussed in **Section 4.3.2** is a great example of this. Rather than forcing everyone who submitted to the project to write about it, Jess Morrissette (2016) instead required just a picture stating where the soda machine was found, leading to a photo blog with over 1,500 soda machines across different games. Using picture collections as works is particularly effective if the play method is more result oriented. In the *VGSM* project, players could adopt any constraints necessary as long as they uphold the constraint of finding and cataloguing a soda machine. A photo blog reflects this result-oriented approach.

### Video Snippets

Petting the dogs in *Can You Pet the Dog* was also originally result oriented: how you pet the dog was secondary to whether you pet the dog or not. However, when games did not intuitively allow for dogs to be pet, players started adopting more and more creative constraints to resolve the dog petting play method, such as the level makers in *Mario Maker 2* (2018) and *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* mentioned in **Section 4.3.2**. Additionally while soda machines are noun objects, petting dogs is an action. Even in result oriented play methods, when the constraints still matter and the result is a possible action rather than a possible object, then video snippets become more appropriate.

Routing and labbing play methods often enjoy employing video snippets for similar reasons: while their play methods are result oriented, as their play method is discovering something that was not previously well known, the specific constraints they adopt to execute this discovery are also equally important. In **Section 4.2.2**, I discussed chunkatuff's routing of *Ori and the Blind Forest*. The primary way he shared his knowledge with other routers, as well as speedrunners was through snippet videos edited into a one cohesive video and eventually uploaded onto YouTube. For example, among his most popular routing videos is the *First Ceiling Charge Dash* (2016) where he records a particular flouted material constraint that allowed him to gain more distance in the gamespace than he normally would have under a few different situations.

Using video snippets is very effective in showing exactly how a newly created constraint should look like, which is essential if this constraint is very innovative: non-visual descriptions might fall short if players do not know what they should be



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imagining. However, the comments on chunkatuff's snippet compilation still show the limitations of using video to share created constraints. There are four comments: one is expressing thanks, two are asking questions about how to perform the trick, while another person just commented "boi", likely expressing surprise. Of these four comments, only one person definitely understood how to properly execute the constraint. Video snippets are useful for players already within specific communities, but definitely less effective for players outside these communities. Even in *Can You Pet the Dog*, while every player can appreciate seeing dogs being pet, there is perhaps a further appreciation in seeing the *Mario Maker 2* and *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* executions if you understand the work put behind making it possible. Video snippets explain this labour less rigorously than words, or perhaps even an infographic, could.

### Videos

Players also record constraints through videos. One way video works are presented is through unedited videos. In **Section 7.2.1**, I talked about how the *Damsels in Success* discord discussed what constraints can achieve the best results in the competitive SSBU play method. Dark.Pch (2020), a prominent Paisy player, uploaded a four hour video of him labbing. He tried various constraints, in various situations, discussing over each of his choices. While this sort of work clearly does not have the sort of accessibility that an article or an infographic does, it is a compendium of very specific constraints for people looking for a very specific type of play method. Recording each singular execution of his labbing play method gives players access to the differences between each minute difference in iteration.

However, other video works clearly try to improve this accessibility issue. I have looked at a few such example. In **Section 5.1.2**. I looked at Karl Jobst (2020) discussing the progression of the *Ocarina of Time* (1998) speedrun play methods. Meanwhile, in **Section 4.1.3**, I also looked at Bizkit047's analysis of *Kingdom Hearts 2.5* (2015) and how this new release influenced previously established play methods. In all these examples, videos served as a great way of collecting a lot of information in a digestible form, as with infographics. However, as with infographics, there is a lot of information to digest, which might not be incredibly apt for people not too interested in the

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particular play method. However, videos also have the same personability that articles have. Jobst has a sizable audiences, arguably bigger than the amount of players actively executing the play methods he discusses. Even when they do not attract new players, they do attract audiences more attune to at least learning about these play methods.

### [7.2.3] Performed Constraints

In the two previous sections, I looked at recordings that came after the play method, or as a result of it. Players wrote articles about the constraints they had chosen, shared videos of constraints they had experimented with, and wrote long discussions about constraints they had felt worked. However, some play method performances are recordings themselves, whether it is through watching someone's play session in real time or by carefully reenacting a play session. In Fournel's third type of computer mediated constraints, these recordings would be the closest to being directly accessed from the hardware's output.

#### **Streaming**

Perhaps the more obvious example of performed constraints is players streaming their chosen constraints. In **Section 5.3.3**, I looked at EMOQQ and the HongYiJun – while there are Weibo pages and comments under BiliBili videos that explain the HongYiJun's play methods, most players that have learnt the HongYiJun play method learnt it through EMOQQ's animated streams. In **Section 6.2.2**, I explained the significance of the ritual behind this play method. The HongYiJun wear the same clothes, find each other, kill anyone not wearing the same clothes, and at the end line up and let EMOQQ gun them down. While writing down these constraints is explicative enough, seeing these constraints being executed really hammers home why they are necessary to the play method. "Stand in a line and let EMOQQ shoot you" does not quite deliver justice to the communal death that is being rhetorically delivered through the streamed performance. I will return to streaming in **Section 7.4.1**, when I further discuss creative output stemming from, but no longer inextricably linked to the original play methods.

### Teaching

While streaming is one to many, not all performances are so divorced from their intended recipients. For example, Press Start HK, a Hong Kong based play consultancy, organises play situations where players are encouraged to adopt particular constraints in order to arrive at specific rhetorical outcome. For example, their Urban Design Fundamentals (2020) play method has players adopt specific potential constraints in *Cities: Skylines* (2015), a city building game, to accompany pedagogy about making urban spaces more livable, a rather pressing issue in Hong Kong. This aligns with Flanagan's perspective on critical play, cited in **Section 6.1.1**.

Similarly, websites such as GamerSensei.com have tutors teaching efficiency related play methods to willing students. Students pay for a "sensei", and that sensei finds a way to join the students' play session and advises them on which constraints they should adopt and how to execute them. Meanwhile, websites such as Epal.gg encourage more socially oriented play methods. Instead of paying for advice on how to adopt efficiency related constraints, players pay for "pals" to help them adopt and execute constraints that require further human participants.

### Save Files

The final method to record constraints that I will look at is save files. On chess.com, each play session is automatically saved. Players can review each choice they made in any play session, have it compared to the most "correct" choice possible, and are then even allowed to diverge from the choices they previously made and play on from there. They can also do the same for any publicly saved play session on chess.com's servers. Since digital chess is not a real time game, and allows for limited divergence from the prototypical play methods, play session re-enactment is not only possible, but actively encouraged. Each choice is saved and codified, allowing multiple entry points into a save file, providing an active temporal access to the choices made that is unparalleled in any of the above recordings.

While chess.com's save files are somewhat unique, using save files to record chosen

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constraints is not unprecedented. 4x games, such as *Civilisation VI* (2016), allow players to save and share scenarios. Scenarios are files saved during a substantially developed play session: sometimes players record them to show how efficient their chosen constraints were during their play session, other times players record them to create challenge runs of sorts, asking other players what constraints they would adopt from that point forward. Earlier on, I also looked at petting the dog in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* and *Mario Maker 2*. Both of these play sessions were also recorded through save files. Since very specific constraints were required to be adopted to get to that point, directly sharing the exact progression of their play session allows for the most accurate reproduction of a specific play method.

### [7.2.4] Amalgamations of Play Recordings

In the above sections, I detailed as many ways as possible that players use to record their constraints and play methods. While it is not exhaustive, I tried to be as comprehensive as possible for a couple of reasons. First, I want to show that different means of recordings have advantages and disadvantages. Sometimes players might use a specific recording means out of comfort, as a writer who wants to share their play method will likely write about it. However, I argue that players realise that each recording means might reach certain audiences better than others, or might communicate their intended meaning better than others.

Secondly, looking at many means of recording makes it much more possible to see how much overlap there is. For example, let us consider a gimmick *Hearthstone* deck, specifically choosing the Mecha'thun Warlock play method, which necessitates three constraints – 1) play as a warlock, 2) play a deck including Mecha'thun and Cataclysm (a combo) 3) play to win. Tempostorm (2020) wrote an article about it, *Hearthstone gamepedia* (2020) tracks the variations possible, while *Hearthstone top decks* (2020) archives these variations in a readily accessible list. Google image search gives ample images of close variants of this work, Roffle (2020) uploaded a video work of the deck in action, which in turn is an edited video of his streamed performance on Twitch (2020). All of these examples adopt the three constraints which make the Mecha'thun Warlock play method possible. Along the way, the play method is iterated upon. For

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example, players assume liberties in filling up the remainder of the deck. However, the three core constraints that form the play method remain the same, and players that search for Mecha'thun Warlock will be expecting those three core constraints. And yet, these three constraints find themselves recorded through so many different means.

I have already discussed a couple of the reasons for this. Firstly, different recordings appeal to different audiences: players who are likely to adopt these three constraints themselves are very likely to go to Hearthstone top decks. However, players who simply want to see how other players execute these constraints, are more likely to view Roffle's stream. Secondly, different recordings emphasize different aspects: Tempostorm emphasises how these constraints fare during any specific play session, while Roffle's YouTube video emphasizes the humorous aspect of winning against stacked odds.

However, something I have not discussed as much while describing the work's media is the lack of ownership over play methods. In the very first chapter, I explained how the Ou in OuLiPo stands for *ouvroir*, a workshop – a group focused on building things together, in their case being potential literature and the constraints that make it. Players really take this to heart: gamepedia does not give an original author for the original Mecha'Thun Warlock play method, and my best attempt at finding such an authorial figure comes up blank. Even in constraints that have a clear author, such as Franco's Nuzlocke, authoriality comes second to sharing these constraints, iterating on them, and creating as many works as possible that celebrate them. The only constraints that consistently come with notions of ownership are the ones that stem from the games' owners. For example, the play method delineated in the *LCS Academy League Rulebook's* cannot be replicated by anyone else in its entirety without the explicit permission of Riot, *League of Legends'* developers for legal reasons. Similarly, players cannot grab any game's EULA and iterate on it, changing constraints as they go along.

Games are not only sustained by players playing, but also by players creating and the communities that form around these creations. The Mecha'thun Warlock play method sustained my play within *Hearthstone* for at least a good ten hours. Had I not been writing this thesis, I would have never actively considered who came up with the play method, or all the recordings I consumed regarding this play method. And while some of these recordings might provide their players monetary remuneration (YouTube,

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Twitch and Tempostorm all run ads), none of the Mecha'thun Warlock recordings' remuneration comes from the game itself, or from the game's owners. And yet, the only reason I played *Hearthstone* again was to try out this play method that other players laboured to establish, promote and share.

### [7.3] Academic Recordings

In the previous subchapter, I looked at how players in popular communities record and share their constraints. I showed how players record their constraints using various media, that these recordings overwhelmingly overlap with each other, and that the play design landscape owes itself to individually created recordings stemming from communally created and shared play methods. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the academic landscape for recording constraints.

In the first section, I will briefly introduce the idea that academic play is in itself a play method, and thus it might have its own necessities and particularities in its recordings. While I explored academic play in previous examples, I did not spend too much time on it because it is sufficiently theorised already – in this section, I will give it its necessary dues. In the second section, I will look at how play methods in academia have been recorded: firstly, they have been overwhelmingly recorded as papers, with multi-media playing a secondary part as illustrative to the writing. However, I will also show how there have been good faith attempts at creating other works, such as blogs, narrated videos, as well as creative writing. Finally, in the third section, I will discuss what academic recordings do well, and what academic recordings could do better, especially in relation to other play communities' recordings.

#### [7.3.1] Approaching Academic Play

Firstly, I must address that academic play methods necessitate adopting non-prototypical play methods. In **Chapters 4, 5, and 6**, I have shown how a shift in approach can lead to a shift in play method: flouting a material constraint to explore a game (such as routing a faster run) is different than flouting an imperative constraint in

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the same way to hinder other players' play situations (such as griefing other players' progress). Similarly, academic play is an approach, so the constraints recorded by scholars studying games through play need to be considered as potentially unique play methods, even when they might not be.

Game studies scholars have previously dealt with this issue. Sybille Lammes (2007) argues that "reflexivity and situatedness are complementary requirements for a cultural study of games" (p 29). While I am focusing specifically on play design, over gameplay or even games at large, her statement still holds true. She defines reflexivity as realising that researchers are part of their object of study, which is designing and/or adopting specific constraints; and situatedness as realising that the object of study is seen as an outcome of local cultural practices, being either academic communities (or even popular communities) and their constraint creation practices. As an academic talking about creating constraints, I have to both realise that I am acutely aware of the constraints I am creating, while also realising that these constraints I am creating form part of and are formed by an academic tradition, a popular community, as well as other sociocultural contexts.

Lammes is not the only researcher to address this issue. Clara Fernandez Vara argues that "playing critically requires a series of choices about how to play" (2015, p 28). Vara explicitly addresses that critical play is the process of adopting specific constraints over others – critical play is a play method. Jasper van Vught and René Glas (2017) also found the need to deal with this issue when they discussed different play as different research methods. They state that academics need to be careful about making "universal knowledge claims" (p 30) as our academic gaze involves us making very specific choices. In **Section 1.4.3**, I also set my thesis' knowledge production in line with academics looking to study what it means for us to play games, including the aforementioned and others such as Consalvo and Dutton (2006), and Aarseth (2003), all of which would fit here too.

While the above researchers are all discussing playing as a research method, I argue that this applies for any academic play methods, even when taken out of a research spotlight. Whether our works are aimed to further academic knowledge, communicate to non-academic audiences about our research-based play, or to share our constraints with other

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players with no expectation of academic return, academic play requires a shift in approach: that we ask ourselves why we are adopting specific constraints when we adopt them, that we ask ourselves why we are creating specific constraints when we create them. This is how it has been relatively easy to delineate academic play from non-academic play in this thesis – because all academic play shares this shift in approach.

### [7.3.2] Academic Works

#### Traditional Works

The overwhelming majority of academic constraint recordings are presented through papers, books and conference proceedings. I have cited many such examples in my thesis such as Myers' (2009) disruptive play method in **Section 5.3.3**, Aarseth's (2003) explorative play in **Section 3.6.2**, Leino's (2011) death loop in **Section 4.1.2**, and many others. These recordings remain popular for both pragmatic reasons relating to academic requirements, but also because they can be very clear and precise, and allow for ease of access to other players in their play community.

Something that traditional academic recordings do well is embedding other types of media within the work itself. For example, in **Section 6.2.1**, Rainforest Scully-Blaker's (2018) did well to present images of the moments where he constrained himself to be inactive in his paper on stasis and stillness in games. It worked particularly well for him since still images are particularly amenable at displaying stillness, although there are obviously some aspects to the stillness (such as temporality) lost both in image and in academic writing. In a previous paper (2018), I have also tried to replicate Georges Perec's writing on the infraordinary, by presenting a similarly curated list of my infraordinary experience within *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* (2017). Presenting this curated list of the infraordinary allowed me to share a second method in describing my chosen constraints, where the focus was not on detailed description (as with academic writing), but on the results of the constraint. It gave non-descriptive closure to my play method.

However, even with multi-media embedding, academic works still have the same issue



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– they suffer from low access. There are several issues related to this: firstly, academic works suffer from complicated jargon. While other play communities also have their jargon (such as the speedrunning jargon explored in **Section 5.1.1**), these communities also have readily accessible wikis to explain these terms. Such an endeavour in academic works would not be possible because of heavy interdisciplinarity within game studies, because of the necessity for accuracy, and because of disagreements over even the most basic units being studied. Secondly, players outside of academic circles have limited access to these works. This is partially because of price restrictions, as access to academic journals and books often remains very expensive. However, it is also because of ease of access: finding how academics play is incredibly tricky, as there are no obvious terms to search for if you are not in academic circles.

The larger issue still remains lack of interest: there is no strong incentive for players to search for academic recordings of their adopted play. Popular works are presented in more diverse ways, are much more readily accessible, and have a lot of community labour invested in outreach. Academic play clearly has potential to be interesting to players: I have already shown some examples in this thesis, and the following subsections will also clearly illustrate this. However, it is competing with other play recordings that do some things better and we would do well to learn from.

### **Blogs**

Not all writing in academia takes form as academic writing, a lot of academics write in personal websites, such as blogs, which are often supplemental to their academic writing. In **Section 6.1.1**, I looked at Westerlaken's veganism play method in *Breath of the Wild* (2017). Apart from her academic paper, Westerlaken also wrote a personal reflection on her play method (2017), as well as post-play reflections (2018b). In her blog preamble, Westerlaken notes that compared to her academic writing, she states that this blog post “tried to leave out as much academic jargon and complexity as possible, while keeping the main points of the text” (2018b).

One type of work which is often annexed onto posthumous academic writing is blogs. In **Section 6.3.2**, I looked at Keogh's narratively infused playthrough of *Minecraft* (2009). Alongside his academic writing, Keogh also released a blog that detailed each

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play session (as divided by the *Minecraft* day night cycle) into individual blog entries (2012). The entries were not particularly long and detailed, but they did give his play method a sense of temporality that an academic paper cannot incorporate as well. It also added an element of personability that is missing from academic papers: while I can relate to Keogh while he was blogging, I find it much harder to make that personal connection to Keogh through his academic paper.

In **Section 4.3.2**, I also looked at Morrissette's *Video Game Soda Machine* project. Along with his academic paper work on the topic, I also noted that Morrissette shared a photo blog (2016) detailing every soda machine that he, or other players, noted during their play. Just like Keogh's work, Morrissette's photo blog has a sense of temporality: from the first soda machine in 2016, all the way to the present day, soda machines have been found in over 1,500 gamespaces. However, I am particularly fond of this academic work as it is one of the few examples where other players' play sessions are part and parcel of the research. Other academic works I have looked at inspired other players to adopt their play method, such as players enjoying Westerlaken's veganism play method and attempting it themselves. However, Morrissette's photo blog does something often present in popular recordings, but not as present academically: he obfuscates his role as play method creator, as instead takes the role of content aggregator.

### Videos

In Chapter 5, I looked at Barr's *Let's Play Permadeath Speedrun*, where he uploaded two seasons of permadeath speedrun play method video recordings. Barr's unique approach incorporates entire play sessions alongside creative audio choices to reflect both on games' transience, as well as the humour of dying as soon as possible. Barr's work also incorporates my call for reproducing play methods across different recordings. Apart from the video playlist he uploaded, Barr also wrote about his overall play method (2015), as well as explained the choices he made (2016b) on his personal website. Barr's play methods have also been featured on various gaming media, such as BoingBoing (2019). Paired with accessible content and humorous approach, Barr's permadeath speedrun play method shows that with some extra effort, even academic play methods can reach receptive audiences by giving them multiple entry points.

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Barr's cited academic paper (2016) on this play method was also part of a larger journal edition which encouraged all its participants to present academic papers through non-traditional means. While not every scholar talked about their play methods, Mark Chen (2016) presented a very detailed account of his play method in *Fallout 4*. He set out a potential constraint of adopting character realism. In *Fallout 4*, the main female protagonist started off as a suburbanite lawyer. However, most play methods have her acting like anything but one. Chen's video format not only describes the play method, like academic writing would, but also pinpoints the specific moments when he is exploring how his constraints actually constrains him. It allows for discussion on specific instances of constraint execution that would not be as possible in an academic paper.

### **Amalgamating Academic Play**

In the above section, I hope to have firstly shown that academic play does have some variety in presentation. While traditional academic papers remain the most popular means, for reasons that might not be solely restricted to scholars' choices, academic play still finds other ways of recording. However, there are still some lessons scholars can learn from popular communities' recording means, including how to communicate our work to non-academic audiences, how to present play methods through various different means and media, and acknowledging academic play's potential as a creative method.

Westerlaken, Keogh, and Barr's works, along with many works I did not mention, were effective at engaging popular communities not only because their play methods resonate better with non-academically oriented players, but also because they presented their play methods in various ways. Westerlaken had a paper, two posts on her personal website, and a Reddit thread; Keogh had a paper, a detailed daily blog, as well as a YouTube video, Barr had a paper, two posts on his personal website, a YouTube playlist full of videos as well as articles on gaming websites. In the previous subchapter, I discussed that one reason that popular play methods spread is because they are presented in a variety of ways. If academic play has applied merits to popular play communities, then diversifying the way we record our play might already be an example

of a more effective strategy.

## [7.4] Creativity beyond Constraints

In the two previous subchapter, I discussed how constraints are recorded and shared with others. Some recordings are saved at face value, with a name and an explanation, others are shared with some creative liberties, including narrative articles, interactive infographics, or humorous commentary. However, there is still a whole host of works where the play method leads to further creative output, where players move out of their play session and move into a creative endeavour inspired by it.

In this section, I will look at two types of creative endeavours. I will first start by talking a bit further about parallel cultures that stem from play: how do play methods such as the HongYiJun and competitive play lead players into other practices, such as streamer fandoms and esports as live performances. I will also briefly look at presets, where original play methods lead to either creation of mods, editing of configuration files or otherwise, where the game itself is changed into something new. In turn, players create new games where the originally adopted play methods become codified, and occasionally the new prototypical play methods for these new games.

### [7.4.1] Play Methods' Paracultural Production

#### Play Methods as Secondary Entertainment

In **Section 7.2.3**, I have already looked at streaming as a way of sharing constraints. For example, players overwhelmingly learnt how to execute the HongYiJun play method by watching EMOQQ's stream. However, this is not the only reason that players watched EMOQQ's stream. For a lot of watchers, the play method was simply a vehicle to accessing an entertaining personality. While a lot of streamers create and adopt very interesting play methods, sometimes these play methods are secondary to the streamers themselves.

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In **Subchapter 5.1**, I explained how the speedrun play method's most prominent exposure to an outside audience is through the *Games Done Quick* series, charity marathons where players stream themselves speedrunning their favourite games on Twitch. TwitchTracker (2020), a website dedicated to tracking viewer metrics on Twitch notes that during the *Games Done Quick* charity marathon, the *Games Done Quick* Twitch channel has recorded a peak of almost 250,000 viewers at one point. However, during day to day streaming, where they either show marathon reruns or stream special one-time speedruns, they tend to peak at 4,000 viewers. I would argue that the reason for this viewership disparity is clear: on a day to day basis, the channel attracts people interested in the speedrun (or routing) play method. During the marathon, it attracts both people interested in the speedrun play method, but also people who want to see a well coordinated charity stream that has become quite anticipated over the years.

Competitive play methods follow a somewhat similar trajectory to speedrun play methods. For example, every year *Dota 2*'s developers Valve host *The International*, a tournament aimed to promote and celebrate the competitive Dota 2 play method. The main English *The International* channel *dota2ti* held a peak current viewership of over 480,000 viewers. There were simultaneous streams in other languages with equivalent interest. Meanwhile, there are nowhere near that many players participating in competitive Dota 2 play methods, even if they play *Dota 2* competitively. Tournaments attract casual viewers like myself, who do not even play *Dota 2* any more, but realise that seeing players impeccably execute play methods is its own entertainment.

One final interesting example is the very recently released *The Sims Spark'd* (2020). *EA Games*, the game's developer, teamed up with TV channel *TBS* and online variety magazine *Buzzfeed* to create a reality television show focused on their own Spark'd play method. The Spark'd play method players can play in up to three different ways: the **stylist** is focused on making their sims as stylish as possible, the **builder** is focused on building the most appropriate house as possible, and the **storyteller** is meant to build a cohesive narrative from the sims and the buildings created. Additionally, all players have to uphold a potential constraint oriented around a theme. The first week's theme was *Destination Wedding*.

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However, the TV show version of the Spark'd play method comes with more constraints. First, rather than allowing an individual player to choose a specific play type, contestants were placed into groups of three where each of them had to adopt an individual role. Secondly, the TV Spark'd play method comes with time restrictions. Thirdly, the worst teams are eliminated from the show, while the rest continue to compete for a \$100,000 dollar prize. The reception for both the Spark'd and the TV Spark'd play methods is mixed, mostly because of the play methods' inorganic development – they were dictated by the developers and TV producers. Additionally, the TV Spark'd play method is clearly more oriented towards TV entertainment than a viable method of play (after all, *The Sims* games are overwhelmingly single player). However, there is also appreciation towards the fact that creative play methods are being more actively consumed as popular entertainment. What makes this example particularly interesting is that its play method was primarily devised not to be played, but to be second hand consumed as entertainment.

### **Breaking from Play Methods**

Of course, streaming is not the only way players turn play methods into second hand entertainment. Wirman (2009) discusses further examples of such practices, defining productions beyond play as practices that

“do not support play or exist as essential parts of a game [...] They can also exist as independent texts with no need for the user/viewer/reader to understand the original game” (2009).

Wirman uses fan fiction and machinima videos amongst many examples. Fan fiction is writing which serves to expand previously established fictional worlds. In the case of games, it might expand the stories held through in-game characters. Machinimas (a portmanteau of machine and cinema) were videos players filmed during play, but were then edited after gameplay to tell a narrative that might be divorced from the play method itself. In both these examples, players often first adopt a play method, and then afterwards create fiction that is inspired by their play session, but does not necessarily precisely recite it. For example, the “Live to Win” Machinima in the *South Park* episode “Make Love, Not Warcraft” is clearly inspired by the power gaming play method.

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However, it adds further non-Machinima animation to turn an original play method into part and parcel of *South Park*'s established fiction, and tell a humorous story without necessarily needing to understand the play method.

Franco's further entries in the Nuzlocke series are also a good example. In **Section 5.1.1**, I discussed the first page of the comic, which discussed the constraints that Franco would adopt while playing *Pokémon Ruby*. However, the comic continued for a further 69 entries. As Franco got better at comic drawing, he extended his Nuzlocke play method to *Pokémon White* (2010), a later entry into the series, and started taking much more liberties in his story telling. For example, in his latest entry (Franco, 2020), the NPCs are reciting dialogue which is definitely not present in the game, since it involves a copious amount of swearwords. The play method served as an impetus for him to 1) play *Pokémon* in a specific way 2) improve his comic drawing skills, and 3) tell an interesting story based on his Pokémon playthroughs.

Finally, many memes also originate from players originally adopting the same play method. Memes are image-based jokes that propagate through internet websites, where a base template is edited with intertextual references that people within these same communities are likely to understand. For example, the "Ah shit, here we go again"<sup>18</sup> is based on the opening cutscene in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004). The meme is particularly effective not only because *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is a very popular game whose cultural knowledge is shared also by player who never played the game, but also because anyone who has played the game is likely to have seen that cutscene, no matter what play method they adopted. The *Skyrim* "you're finally awake"<sup>19</sup> meme follows the exact same formula – a joke with shared cultural knowledge that anyone who has ever played *Skyrim* in any way can access.

### [7.4.2] Presets and Games

Play methods have also been transformed into creative works by creating both presets, as well as new games. In Chapter 3, I introduced the chapter by discussing that

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18 KnowYourMeme explains this meme's origins and development at <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ah-shit-here-we-go-again>

19 KnowYourMeme explains this meme's origins and development at <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/toddroll-youre-finally-awake>

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constraint design can be studied in two ways: game makers constraining themselves (through their choice of game engine, design choices etc) to design games, and players constrain themselves to design play methods. So far, I have overwhelmingly discussed the latter. In this section, this thesis will come full-circle as I discuss how player designed constraint sets inform the “potential constraints” that game makers adopt, as they create changes to the material that players eventually adopt into their existing and even new play methods.

### **Enhance Play Methods through Presets**

Perhaps the more obvious ways that play methods make their way into presets is through presets that make previously established play methods meet less resistance.

In **Section 3.5.2**, I looked at Consalvo’s (2009) discussion on the MMOGlider where I discussed how players are trying to avoid the “carefully structured paths” laid out for them, in order to be able to do the things they actively enjoy. By now, we can place these players as power gamers. In **Section 4.2.1**, I discussed how the power gaming method does not necessarily want to flout constraints, but rather reach milestones set by the imperative constraints as quickly as possible. The MMOGlider placed these milestones much more squarely in their hands – by having a machine execute the more trivial parts as quickly as possible, players could focus more time and effort into making the end-game milestones, along with their communal potential constraints, such as world firsts. Taylor (2009) gives another example of presets aimed at enhancing the power gaming play method. Players created the CTRaidAssist, which not only modified *World of Warcraft*’s User Interface, but also “monitoring our play, automating actions, providing key information, and in general facilitating a range of both mundane and complex action” (2009, p. 334-335). The power gaming play method set out the way players would constrain themselves, in order to achieve specific prototypical and personally set goals. These presets made achieving the goals set by this play method much more amenable.

Wirman (2009) also discusses *skinning* mods as an example of player’s productive labour. *Skinning* is a practice predominant in *The Sims* games. *The Sims* games



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encourage players to act out alternate lives through carefully constructed avatars, constructed through a vast selection of choices including skin, hair, weight, and many other factors. *Skinning* is the practice of adding further selections to the original skins encoded in the game. On one hand, this is done by enhancing *The Sims*' prototypical play method by allowing for more choices, such as variant skin tones and hair types. However, it also allows for players to create their own play methods that are not represented through *The Sims*' originals skins, such as players wanting to recreate celebrities as accurately as possible. Apart from *skinning*, there is also the usual practice of modding for the latter purpose. Users such as Fogity (2019) created the *Genderless* mod to allow players to remove gendered pronouns from the game. For players such as Michele (2015, as discussed in **Section 6.2.1**), this would be a very welcome easily adapted mod to make their play method easier to uphold.

There are further examples of presets that aim to make the prototypical play method more accessible, especially when players cannot uphold the prototypical play method without much resistance from the material. In **Section 4.1.3**, I discussed how *Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines* has a memory leak which causes visual anomalies to occur during play. This is hardly the only issue that this game has, with bugs that do not allow players to maintain their gameplay condition – they are actively booted out of the game. For example, there is a spot in the game's archaeological museum which never fails to crash the game. Players created and released the Unofficial Patch, which fixes this museum crash, as well as many other glitches and issues. The developers did well to communicate the prototypical play method. However, sometimes the material betrayed their communication. The Unofficial Patch remedied this. Players further released the Unofficial Plus Patch, which not only fixed these material issue, but also restored content – the developers had planned to further complicate and populate the prototypical play method, but they ran out of time. The Unofficial Plus Patch not only fixes the communicated play method, but also enriches an uncommunicated part too.

A final humorous example is the Brett Watanabe's Deer Cam (2015) in *Grand Theft Auto V*. In **Section 4.3.1**, I discussed how a play method revolving around doing nothing can quickly unfurl the assumptions made of the player's play method. Keeping the play method to bare minimums caused both *Sleeping Dogs* and *Just Cause 3* to quickly descend into chaos. Watanabe created a mod where the player camera instead

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follows a deer who acts out its encoded AI pathings. Apart from switching the player perspective to a computer agent, Watanabe also made the deer impervious to any harm. Finally, he streamed it on Twitch as a live installation. By replacing the player, tempted to act on prototypical constraints, with an AI inconsiderate of such constraints, Watanabe managed to replicate the emergent play method of general inaction in a game which demands it.

### **Allowing for New Play Methods through Presets**

While in the previous section I discussed presets that make previously created play methods easier to uphold in a specific game, players also preset their game to create and uphold play methods that they would otherwise not be able to in that specific game. In **Section 3.7.2**, I stated that discussing play constraints over game-specific play is valuable, as these same constraints (and the play methods that stem from them), span over a single game. The constraints themselves are often kept wholesale across games, albeit the results of play are significantly different.

However, sometimes these play methods are not as easily converted across games, and presetting is a way to solve this issue. For example, it is not particularly easy for players to uphold the communal play method popular in games such as *There.com* and *Second Life* (as described in **Section 6.3.3**) in *Grand Theft Auto V* online. Without presetting, this is close to impossible as players will consistently try to kill you. However, *GTA RP* servers combine a preset that allows players to play as NPCs (instead of the main characters) along with communally upheld potential constraints of roleplaying as those NPCs to varying degrees of enforcement. Upholding this play method through *Grand Theft Auto V* became particularly popular on Twitch partially because the play method was used as proxy for entertainment by famous streamers such as Lirik and Summit1G (as discussed in **Section 7.4.1**). However, it is also because while the preset made the play method possible, *Grand Theft Auto V*'s conventions still made the play method largely incongruous. The enjoyment of upholding the play method came from toeing the line of being able to flout it to carnivalesque extents (Majkowski, 2014) in mere seconds. Twitch streamer Ziggy (2020) has an ongoing series where the play method consistently descends into chaos from players toeing the roleplaying constraints to

different extents.

### **Turning Play Methods into Games**

In the previous subsections, I have looked at how players either create play methods to enhance previously established play methods in their chosen game, or to more easily transplant play methods from other games into their chosen game. It would be amiss to not briefly mention how these play methods, enhanced or transplanted through presets, sometimes end up becoming their own games.

Many games originated from presets that tried to better support play methods. *Dear Esther* (2012) stemmed from a *Half Life 2* modification. The original preset enforced the flaneur play method discussed in **Section 4.3.1**, by heavily restricting the possibility space within *Half Life 2*, and instead infusing it with narrative snippets. Allowing for easier replication of this play method proved popular enough that Dan Pinchbeck, the original preset developer, decided to turn it into its standalone game, which arguable spawned its own genre of games, with expected conventions. *Dear Esther* is hardly the only example, *Counter-Strike* (2000) equally stemmed from a *Half Life 2* mod. Valve, *Counter-Strike*'s developers, also created *Dota 2*, which stemmed from a *Warcraft 3* mod. While not every preset necessarily comes from a previously established play method, they do often stem from players' wish to play in a particular way.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

In **Section 1.5**, I had outlined my projected thesis takeaways, as well as research space that my thesis could open up. In this chapter, I will first give a brief overview of the topics covered in this thesis. Afterwards, I will discuss whether I managed to contribute to the topics established in **Section 1.5**, how I contributed to these topics, and how further research could further contribute. I will also show how this thesis' theoretical development could lead to interesting research, both for me, but also for future scholars researching the rich way players constrain themselves to play in creative ways.

### Overview

In this thesis, I have explained how constraints can be used to describe the different ways in which players play. After introducing the thesis, I first looked at how the Oulipo have used the concept of constraints in their work (**Subchapter 2.1**). I also looked at how they transferred their knowledge to the digital (**Subchapter 2.2**), and how their concepts were then appropriated within digital game discourse (**Subchapter 2.3**).

Having explained the theoretical background that would build up to this thesis' analytical discussion, I first started by introducing how constraints can be applied to the way players play (**Subchapter 3.1**). I first started by explaining material constraints, the way players choose to limit themselves based on the impositions of a game's material (**Subchapter 3.2**). I followed this up by explaining imperative constraints, the way players choose to limit themselves based on the perceived conventions and suggestions that a given game sets up (**Subchapter 3.3**). This allowed me to discuss the prototypical play method, which I argue is the set of constraints devised by the original players, the games' makers, and players are encouraged to follow for a prescribed experience (**Subchapter 3.4**). I followed this section by discussing potential constraints, which are the constraints players choose to adopt outside the referent of preceding play methods, such as the prototypical play method (**Subchapter 3.5**). I also explain how players' relationships to specific constraints is also an active choice on their play. Players can choose to uphold constraints, flout constraints, or even ignore them (**Subchapter 3.6**).

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In the following chapters, I started analysing examples of players playing. I started by looking at different examples of play centred around exploration, discussing exploration as a form of learning (**Subchapter 4.1**), exploration as a form of mapping boundaries of their play or future play (**Subchapter 4.2**), as well as comparative exploration, where games are measured by actual world measures to rather interest effect (**Subchapter 4.3**).

Then, I looked at players iterating on previous play methods. I started this through a short case analysis on speedrunning (**Subchapter 5.1**), both because it helped set up the discussion, but also because there is a richness of examples. I then looked at players iterating on previously established play methods to complement them (**Subchapter 5.2**), as well as to disrupt them (**Subchapter 5.3**). Finally, I discussed how setting up the way a game is to be played, such as through hardware choices or controller choices, is also an act of iteration.

This allowed me to finally look at players expressing themselves through the constraints they adopt. I started off by discussing self-transformative constraints, where players played in specific ways either hoping to change themselves, or changing themselves without trying to (**Subchapter 6.1**). This allowed me to move into players playing as a way to express themselves in ways that non-play activities might not let them to (**Subchapter 6.2**). Finally, I looked at players telling stories about their lives, whether online or offline, through the way they play (**Subchapter 6.3**).

Having looked at this rich array of play methods, I finally took some time to discuss how players share their chosen constraints with other players, as well as with outside observers. I first started by discussing how play constraints require different recording strategies than Oulipian constraints (**Subchapter 7.1**). Having discussed this, I discussed how players record their constraints using different media both to increase audience reception, but also because they realise that different media have different recording affordances (**Subchapter 7.2**). I moved into discussing how game scholars usually record their play methods, advising for further consideration from popular play communities (**Subchapter 7.3**). Finally, I discussed how play constraints can lead to creative works outside of the play sessions themselves discussing streaming, creative videos, modifications, and even new games.

## [8.1] Reviewing Discussions

### [8.1.1] Constraining Play

In this thesis, I argued that playing necessitates adopting constraints. In **Subchapter 3.4**, I argued that players often do not consciously choose their constraints. Instead they passively adopt prototypical constraints. However, I also argued that some players do choose their constraints, where I delineated three different types of constraints. In **Subchapter 3.2**, I talked about material constraints: players realise that their chosen materials causes them to limit themselves in specific ways. Choosing to press specific buttons, interacting with the game process in specific ways, as well as choosing which hardware to use to play are all significant choices in designing our own play. In **Subchapter 3.3**, I talked about imperative constraints: where players realise that the conventions of their chosen game, along with the suggestions given to them during, or outside of, their play sessions, causes them to limit themselves in specific ways. Following quest lines or playing in a specific way because of a game's genre are also significant choices. Finally, in **Subchapter 3.5**, I talked about potential constraints: players decide to constrain themselves not because they think their choices relate to their relationship to the material, or to the established conventions, but because they want to try out something new.

While working on this thesis, I feel there are some issues relating constraints to play. For starters, constraints in general exist in a weird dichotomy: on the one hand, the 'constrainer' is constraining their access to a possibility space. However, on the other hand, the 'constrainer' is constraining themselves in relation to other constraints. The Oulipo suffer from this issue, but definitely less so, because their possibility space is *everything* they're aware of / have access to. For example, while Perec could write about everything, he constrained himself to write about a street in Paris, or his everyday diet. However, his choice could have been anything else. This makes most conversations about the Oulipo's constraints squarely focused on the way they constrain themselves in relation to other constraints, since discussing the possibility space often verges on triviality. The *lipogram in e* exists within the already present constraints of (generally) the French language. The Eulerian matrix in Calvino's *If on a Winter's*

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*Night a Traveller* plays on the already present constraints of chapter structures in novels. Players suffer from this dichotomy a lot more, both because their possibility space is worth discussing since it is much more limited, but also because it is not as immediately obvious what players are constraining themselves in relation to.

### **Play's possibility space**

There are two issues when relating constraints to play. Firstly, players' possibility space is not everything. Players' possibility space is whatever is possible in any game, as well as that the player is aware of and/or has access to. This might sound like a lot, but it is not all that much. For example, to my knowledge, there is no game that replicates Saint Sulpice Square, the place that Perec wrote about in *An Attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris*. There is also no game that has every food item that Perec could write about in *An Inventory*. Discussing play without being able to discuss players' limited possibility space is definitely a shortcoming, since it is central to the constraints that players will eventually choose.

This said, I would argue that this might be an issue with discussing play in general, not just discussing play through constraints. For example, Malaby's "contrived contingency" (2007, p. 96), or Aarseth and Calleja "socially negotiated activity such objects can support" (2015, p. 2) understand that there is a limited possibility space. However, they also do not discuss *what* is contingent or *what* the objects can support. I would argue the possibility space in games is finite, but not finite enough to be discussed holistically. I think discussing constraints further exacerbates this issue – in the previous section, I pointed out how constraints necessitate discussing a possibility space. Unfortunately, it is an issue that I do not think that could be resolved within this thesis.

### **Constraining to what**

The second issue is that the constraints that the Oulipo constrained themselves to are decades, centuries, even millennia old. The French language is largely a known value, so it is not particularly difficult to explain how not writing the letter e is a constraint.

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Similarly, the structure of a novel has remained unchanged for at least a 100 years, even longer. Discussing shaping your chapters based on a mathematical formula is not as easy to discuss as removing the *e* from French, but it is not an impossible task either. Meanwhile, from the very first choice a player makes, which is choosing the game they will play, discussing any constraint already becomes difficult.

I devised the **prototypical play method** for this reason. It serves as an ‘ideal’ type of play which is divorced from the player, but the player can still access. Firstly, I argue it serves as an important step away from the *implied player* as discussed by Aarseth (2007) in **Section 3.6.2**. The *implied player* creates a player who is acutely aware of the ‘ideal’ way to play a game. This requires two premises – that there is an ‘ideal’ way, and that there can be a player aware of it. The prototypical play method removes one of those jumps, devising only an ‘ideal’ way. Not only does this remove one premise, but it also creates argumentative space around what the ‘ideal’ way is and what the player is actually aware of, where a lot of interesting discussions on play reside.

I had the opportunity to look at such discussions in **Section 3.3.2**, while discussing Van de Mosselaer and Gualeni’s (2020) notion of the *implied designer*. In this section, I discussed how between this ‘ideal’ play and the player, there can often be noise or even conflicting messages. Here I showed the example of less experienced players’ encounter with stop signs in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). There was an ‘ideal’ play, but it required that the ‘ideal’ player plays less than ideally by ignoring one point of signification present. Both the *implied designer* and the prototypical play method take account of this noise. I would argue that the prototypical play method works better for my thesis because it is something the player does, as opposed to something that a designer makes. This makes discussing constraints on the prototypical play method easier to fathom.

However, both have an issue in that they are discussing something which only vaguely exists. While the French language is heavily documented, the prototypical play method of *Sleeping Dogs* is anything but. Players, including me as a researcher, can access this play method through the material, the conventions, perhaps even documented designer insights. However, it is still an idealised play method. It is also unfortunately necessary to discuss how players constrain themselves. Each time I discuss players’ constraints, I



am building these constraints on idealised premise. While I do not feel it caused major issues in this thesis, it is still a limitation that I have not been able to solve.

### [8.1.2] Discussing Play through Constraints

Another topic I wanted to discuss in this thesis is that the language we use to discuss play methods is generally lacking. I have shown quite a few examples of scholars discussing specific type of play methods, where the language is very robust and accurate. In **Section 4.2.1**, Taylor (2006) describes the power gaming play method incredibly well. Equally, In **Section 3.5.2**, I also looked at Consalvo (2007) discussing play methods falling under the umbrella term of cheating with great detail, even preceding the divisions I made for constraints. However, I argue that there would definitely be value if Taylor and Consalvo's works shared common terms since they're ultimately discussing the same thing – the way players play.

Some previous work has tried to create common language. For example, Aarseth's (2007) distinction between the *implied player* and the *transgressive player* is already a start. This division is equally shared by Smith (2006)'s *active player* and the *rational player*, in **Section 3.5.1**. However, I argue that both these divisions have similar issues when discussing play, mainly because both Aarseth and Smith were overwhelmingly focused on players as parts of games.

For this reason, they prioritise the player over the play method. In the previous section, I have already discussed my issue with this. It requires two premises over one premise. Additionally, discussing play methods over players allows us to better discuss play's output. In **Section 2.3.1**, I argued that Aarseth (1997) understated the extranoematic aspect of play, and I think that still holds true here. Play is always productive – at the very least it produces a play method. Discussing play methods over players foregrounds this productivity. Since their focus is on players (and their play) as a part of games, they end up pitting an 'ideal' play against every other type of play. While this is an effective way to discuss how a game presents its 'ideal' play is different from specific types of ways that players play, it does not help us discuss the difference between the different non 'ideal' play methods that exist.

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Boluk and LeMieux also create common language to describe the different ways players play, which partially deals with these aforementioned issues. For example, in **Section 2.3.5**, I described how Boluk and LeMieux do really well to historicise play. Their *99 Exercises in Play* (2017) metagame does really well to show each minute iteration on the player's play method. They also deal with the non 'ideal' play methods by describing games relationally: playing a game in a different way is often called a *within-game*. However, this *within-game* could then be related to another game. Relations between metagames are stringed alongside other metagames, not treated oppositionally to an 'ideal' play.

In **Section 2.3.5**, I also described my issue with Boluk and LeMieux's theorisation, which still stands. Their *metagames* describe a lot of activities happening around games, including play methods, but also including mods, fan culture, and even new games. While this is a legitimate approach, it does make it significantly harder to discuss the intricacies of all these para-ludic activities. I decided to focus on just one of their *metagames* – the way players play. This allowed me to discuss the intricacies to a greater degree.

### **Distinctions in Play Methods**

I would argue the constraint model does two things well. Firstly, it allows me to discuss the differences between play methods much more effectively. In **Chapter 4**, I broke down all manners of play methods that might have 'exploration' as their focal point. Exploring an open world is very different to exploring glitches. Equally, exploring emergent qualities of a game's process is very different to exploring how soda machines are presented across different games. I likewise broke down iterations in **Chapter 5**, and expression in **Chapter 6**. However, **Chapter 4** stands apart as it was the chapter where I introduced popular examples of constrained play and placed the most emphasis on their differences across the analysis chapters. It also dealt with a much more quantifiable reason: exploration is often cited as a reason to play by other scholars, such as Van Vught and Glas (2017).

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Foregrounding adopted constraints became especially important when I discussed the difference between theorycrafting, routing, and labbing play methods in **Section 4.2.2**. It would be tempting to discuss all these methods under the same term. After all, their scope is largely the same – they are trying to make future play methods more efficient, more systematic. Game studies research often uses theorycrafting as an umbrella term, since this is the first term which entered the field due to the prominence of MMORPG research in early noughties games studies research. However, I feel I have adequately showed why different play communities feel the need to adopt different terms. The constraints a router adopts are radically different than the constraints a theorycrafter adopts, because their subsequent community’s needs are equally different.

It becomes clear that the lack of granular language discussing the intricacies of play methods has led to some blind-spots in discussing the difference between play methods. As one final example, in **Section 6.1.1**, Westerlaken had stated that the veganism play method and the speedrun play method are different because the latter is a pre-defined challenge, while the former is an emergent play method. This is not necessarily her shortcoming: previous papers also discuss speedrun play methods as going as fast as possible (such as Nguyen, 2019). However, as soon as we break down the speedrun play method into its constraints, and the routing play method that precedes it, it becomes clear that the challenge of going fast is only a small part of speedrun play methods.

### **Generalisability of Play Methods**

Secondly, the constraint model allowed me to discuss similar play methods across different games, by listing the play methods’ common constraints, in turn focusing on what makes them distinct. **Section 3.3.2** has one of the earlier examples. While discussing interludic knowledge, I stated that players who played *Oblivion* knew that mountaineering horses would be present in *Skyrim* too, since the two games share an engine. While horses scaling mountains does not necessarily constitute a play method in and of itself, it is an example of players flouting the same material constraint across games of the same engine.

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In **Section 5.3.3**, I looked at an even clearer example: grieving. I argued that grieving play methods are play methods where players actively try to flout other players' play methods. Once the common approach is delineated, I could then give a few different examples of how it can be done. Myers (2009) did it by hyper-executing the prototypical play method, which in turn flouted communal play methods. Meanwhile, EmoQQ did it by flouting both prototypical material and imperative constraints, which were generally adopted by other players.

This generalisability can also be applied to singular potential constraints such as blind, speedrun, pacifist, and veganism constraints among others. By describing the above four examples as constraints, we immediately know how the players will constrain themselves, and then any descriptive effort towards a general play method can go into their distinctive aspects. For example, if I state I am doing a blind pacifist play method in *Fallout New Vegas*, and a blind pacifist play method in *Skyrim*, then I have already delineated two similar potential constraints I will adopt in each of them. The descriptive effort can then focus on what constraints I can uphold, what constraints I need to flout, and what further constraints I need to adopt in order to execute these play methods as best I can.

All of these examples can easily be discussed without bringing in constraints. However, I would argue that constraints shine because the language is generalisable. Players have to constrain themselves to play. Identifying how players do so allows us to draw parallels between different games with greater ease. It also allows us to be more concise, while still maintaining accuracy. Discussing the speedrun constraint as “executing a play method as fast as possible” has the same descriptive potency as the general definition of a speedrun, while being more accurate, as it accounts better for different routes.

### [8.1.3] Players' Outputs

The last theoretical contribution that I wanted to discuss is how players' record their play methods. I first brought this up in **Section 2.3.1**, which I referenced in the previous section. Players' production is both noematic and extranoematic: while play is a

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mentally and socially upheld position (Malaby, 2006; Taylor, 2009, Sicart, 2011), it can also leave creative output afterwards (Wirman, 2009; Nelson, 2018). In **Chapter 7**, I showed how this can include writing about constraints (**Section 7.2.1**), as well as presenting these constraints within other media (**Section 7.2.2, 7.2.3**). However, it also includes players using their chosen constraint as a creative impetus, whether it is for consumable entertainment such as streaming, or comics and videos (**Section 7.4.1**), or whether it is to create something new altogether, through presetting games or even creating new games (**Section 7.4.2**).

In **Section 3.7.2**, I explained one reason why discussing play's output is so important – a lot of players prefer creating play methods for other players, than simply adopting pre-existing play methods. Throughout this thesis, we ended up finding a lot of these types of examples. I discussed the routing play method in **Section 4.2.2**, as well as the soda machine and the dog petting play methods in **Section 4.3.2**. Both of these play methods above all else encourage other players to adopt them, albeit within different contexts.

Another reason why play's output is so important is because it is often the reason for play. For example, in **Section 5.2.3**, I looked at Franco's Nuzlocke play method. Had he not created the Nuzlocke constraint, he would have no reason to play *Pokémon Ruby* again. I have discussed quite a few “challenge runs” in this thesis: TheHappyHob's no damage play method in **Section 5.2.3**, *Fallout: New Vegas* pacifist / no-kill play methods in **Section 6.1.2**, as well as the Green Demon play method in **Section 5.3.2**. All of these examples' reasons for play are the constraints themselves – constraints which other players (or they themselves) created through play's potential for extranoematic output.

### **Play Methods as Stand-alone Outputs**

Perhaps one aspect that could have been given more prominence, or finds itself as a potential future avenue for study, is play's output. I dedicated **Chapter 7** to looking at the different types of ways players record constraints. In **Section 7.2.4**, I discussed how one method might have advantages or disadvantages over other methods. In **Subchapter 7.3**, I discussed play method recordings within game scholarship, and how

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we could better incorporate different recordings in our work. However, with both of these aspects, there is space to dedicate more research on issues parallel to these creations.

One topic that can be looked at is play method's implications on games' research methodology. In **Section 1.4**, I had looked at how game studies research approaches other players' play. For example, Aarseth (2003) had stated that researchers might need to be skilled players in order to research a given game. He referred to other players' recordings as "secondary sources" (2003, p. 3) that have to go along with the "primary source", which is the games (and playing them). Meanwhile, I am arguing that these "secondary sources" catalogue a host of different play outputs. A detailed walkthrough, and a prototypical playthrough are two very different play outputs. I am not arguing that researcher that is studying a game holistically has to be sufficient at playing each of its recorded play methods. However, I do argue that secondary sources need to be approached through their proposed play method, not simply through game association. A *Super Mario 64* speedrun might be more relevant to a speedrun play method researcher, than to a *Super Mario 64* researcher.

I also briefly discussed the labour that goes behind play output, both in **Section 3.6.2**, as well as more generally throughout **Chapter 7**. However, this is an area that absolutely deserves more research focus. For example, Taylor (2018) recently released an entire book on one type of creative output stemming from play: streaming on Twitch. This is a topic which I dealt with in a single subsection. Not only do play methods need to be studied as (occasionally) methodologically sound contributions, they also need to be studied as fruits of labour. There is a lot of work being done for play to happen. I have acknowledged some of it. I have also cited some authors who have explored this topic under different premises (Wirman, 2009; Nelson, 2018). However, I do concede that further research into what labour means in the context of constraint production is necessary.

## [8.2] Future Outlooks

### [8.2.1] Renewing Oulipo Interest

I previously argued that one of the unintended side-effects of this thesis is potentially renewing some interest in the Oulipo within game scholarship. I cannot claim that my thesis is a forbearer in renewing interest. Both Apperley (2017) and Boluk and LeMieux (2017) precede this thesis in a new wave of Oulipian interest. This thesis followed their argumentative footsteps, giving the Oulipo another look in relation to the way players play, rather than through earlier formalist discussions on what games *are*.

That said, there is still a trove of knowledge that game studies can glean from the Oulipo. I already wrote a paper (2018) about the infra-ordinary in games, a concept that Perec had discussed. This is a topic I want to re-approach, especially now that I have better formulated how I can discuss constraints in relation to games. In **Section 4.3.2**, I argued that one issue with my earlier paper is that the play method is ill-defined and hard to replicate. One way to re-approach this topic would be by better explicating what constraints I want to adopt, reducing these constraints to a minimum, and seeing if I can encourage play communities to replicate it – or at the very least execute it across different games.

However, this is not the only topic that game studies can learn from. In **Section 3.1.1**, I argued that the Oulipo can be used to discuss constrained game design. While I explained why I did not want to adopt it for this thesis, there is still definitely an overlap that has not been exhausted yet. For example, the OuBaPo's *Scroubabbble* (2005) does not find itself discussed in game scholarship yet. I have also hardly come across scholarly comparisons between game jam modifiers<sup>20</sup> and the Oulipo as constrain makers. This might be because they provide no new knowledge. However, I argue there could still be some research space here.

While reading the Oulipo's compendia, I often found myself inspired and interested, both to design new things as well as to write about the things I read. I also felt that previously written works would have benefited from knowing the Oulipo, or knowing

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<sup>20</sup> Game jam modifiers are restrictions placed on people making games during a game jam. They can be thematic (such as make a game about waves), or prescriptive (such as make a game without sound), amongst other things.

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the Oulipo better. I already made one point of this in **Section 2.3.4**, when I pointed out that Levan and Downing's (2016) work references the Oulipo and prisons, while not referring to their extensive writing about prisons and labyrinths. Renewing interest in the Oulipo can mean full papers, but it can also mean nuggets of knowledge along the way.

### [8.2.2] Re-exploring Play Methods

I also argued that some of the play-methods I have talked about in this thesis remain under-theorised even after this thesis. The example I give is towards the speedrun play method, and its associated routing play method. I have already given these play methods a lot of attention in this thesis, such as in **Section 4.2.2** as well as in **Subchapter 5.1**. However, there is still a lot of knowledge that can be produced about these play methods. In **Section 1.4.1**, I explained how previous game studies research into specific play methods, such as power gaming play method in Taylor (2006) and cheating play methods in Consalvo (2007) used other methodological approaches such as interviews, ethnographic research, participant observation, and so on. While I have performed content analysis on a lot of speedrun and routing play method examples, it would be interesting to see 1) whether there is a discrepancy in the conclusions of content analysis and other methodological approaches, and 2) whether the constraint model still works when combined with other methodological approaches. I envisage that my first post-thesis academic contribution will be targetting these two questions, most likely using the speedrun and routing play methods as a case study.

However, these are not the only play methods that can be researched. In this thesis, I have not had enough space to deeply delve into every example that I have talked about. Some play methods, such as griefing play methods, find themselves studied quite often, as I have discussed in **Section 5.3.3**. Other play methods find themselves discussed less often. For example, it would be very interesting to discuss what the blind constrain truly entails across different play sessions. In this thesis, I overwhelmingly focused on detailing my descriptive model, through a large variety of examples. Future work could focus theoretical scope to make more salient observations on individual play methods.



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## Figures Appendix

**Figure 1:** Player “ee ramone” notes a glitch in *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines*. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/bizmarkiedesade/status/1005504388817809408> along with other examples.

**Figure 2:** Player “Nikki” notes a glitch in *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines*. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/NikkiIrisBane/status/1098546621057560577> along with other examples.

**Figure 3:** Player “Wib ‘Chainsaw’ Johnson” notes a glitch in *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines*. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/NikkiIrisBane/status/1098546621057560577> as part of a larger video.

**Figure 4:** Player “Coma\_Girlfriend” notes a glitch in *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines*. Originally found at [https://www.reddit.com/r/vtmb/comments/bya6d1/so\\_i\\_went\\_into\\_skyline\\_apartments\\_and\\_these\\_are/](https://www.reddit.com/r/vtmb/comments/bya6d1/so_i_went_into_skyline_apartments_and_these_are/)

**Figure 5:** Player Riley MacLeod finds the Central Mid-Levels escalator in *Sleeping Dogs*. Originally found at <https://kotaku.com/my-bizarre-complicated-quest-to-find-the-worlds-longes-1783060912>

**Figure 6:** Player Riley MacLeod causes casualties by standing still in *Sleeping Dogs*. Originally found at <https://kotaku.com/my-bizarre-complicated-quest-to-find-the-worlds-longes-1783060912> along with other examples.

**Figure 7:** Player Riley MacLeod notes the same NPC over and over in *Sleeping Dogs*. Originally found at <https://kotaku.com/my-bizarre-complicated-quest-to-find-the-worlds-longes-1783060912> along with other examples.

**Figure 8:** From the Anonymous Curator of *Can You Pet the Dog*. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/CanYouPetTheDog/status/1243534668269588487> as part of a larger video.

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**Figure 9:** From the Anonymous Curator of *Can You Pet the Dog*. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/CanYouPetTheDog/status/1223371047505887233> as part of a larger video.

**Figure 10:** From the Anonymous Curator of *Can You Pet the Dog*. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/CanYouPetTheDog/status/1243622377881247749> as part of a larger video.

**Figure 11:** From the Anonymous Curator of *Can You Pet the Dog*. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/canyoupetthedog/status/1119088183805763585?lang=en> as part of a larger video.

**Figure 12:** Self Made Diagram showing different degrees of play methods

**Figure 13:** A Printscreen from Skelux' Video found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riaf2vwMzMo>

**Figure 14:** A Printscreen from Skelux' Video found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riaf2vwMzMo>

**Figure 15:** A Printscreen from Skelux' Video found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riaf2vwMzMo>

**Figure 16:** From Joshua Wong's Twitter account. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/joshuawongcf/status/1248501778703761408> along with other examples

**Figure 17:** From Joshua Wong's Twitter account. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/joshuawongcf/status/1248501778703761408> along with other examples

**Figure 18:** Originally from the 有理儿有面 wechat account. Secondary source found at <http://www.bjd.com.cn/a/202004/11/WS5e914cc5e4b0df866aa94ed6.html>

**Figure 19:** Combination image: right half taken from Ray Chan's Twitter Account. Originally found at [https://twitter.com/ray\\_slowbeat/status/1259090006808748032](https://twitter.com/ray_slowbeat/status/1259090006808748032). Left half printscreened from RTHK public broadcasting video, originally found at <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1528170-20200525.htm>

## References

**Figure 20:** Comment taken from Mitten Squad's Youtube Video. Originally found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X6KP3xq9fw>. Text states the following:

Is it possible to do this without voluntary / involuntary manslaughter?

By that i mean leading NPCs to certain doom (like you did with the Deathclaws, NCR Troopers, Benny and President Kimball). Even though you didn't kill those characters, you are technically the cause of their death, which in a way counts as kills.

So is it possible to beat New Vegas without attacking NOR committing manslaughter

**Figure 21:** Comments taken from Mitten Squad's Youtube Video. Originally found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X6KP3xq9fw>. Text states the following:

Alex Macias: Yeah; Many a True Nerd did it somehow

JustCows: Many a true nerd did it watch his playlist

**Figure 22:** Comment taken from Mitten Squad's Youtube Video. Originally found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X6KP3xq9fw>. Text states the following:

Either way, this isn't a no kill run. This is a no attacking run. It's literally in the title. He can kill people indirectly all he wants, as long as he never attacked them himself.

**Figure 23:** Comment taken from Mitten Squad's Youtube Video. Originally found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X6KP3xq9fw>. Text states the following:

Who says you're killing House? I say that taking away someone's immortality and killing them technically aren't the same thing. You're just taking him out of his fishbowl. You could even wear a radiation suit when you do it so you don't give him smallpox or something.

**Figure 24:** From Reimi's Twitter account. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/diormeIody/status/1253940761336283138> along with other examples

**Figure 25:** From Reimi's Twitter account. Originally found at <https://twitter.com/diormeIody/status/1253940761336283138> along with other examples



## References

**Figure 26:** Comment taken from PBS Game/Show's Youtube Video. Originally found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vK91LAIiMOio>. Text states the following

Well, when i was 4, my dad bought a trusty XBox. you know, the first, ruggedy, blocky one from 2001. we had tons and tons and tons of fun playing all kinds of games together – until he died, when i was just 6.

i couldnt touch that console for 10 years.

but once i did, i noticed something.

we used to play a racing game, Rally Sports Challenge. actually pretty awesome for the time it came.

and once i started meddling around... i found a GHOST.

literaly.

you know, when a time race happens, that the fastest lap so far gets recorded as a ghost driver? yep, you guessed it – his ghost still rolls around the track today.

and so i played and played, and played, untill i was almost able to beat the ghost. until one day i got ahead of it, i surpassed it, and...~

i stopped right in front of the finish line, just to ensure i wouldnt delete it.

Bliss.