The Video Video Game: On Watching Let's Plays

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"[T]he players are not the only people engaged with the game…"
– Gifford Cheung and Jeff Huang

A Let's Play (LP) is footage of a video game as a person (or persons) play their way through it. Unlike streaming, these videos are an address to an absent viewer as the player talks to a camera prior to uploading their video. The popularity (and what might now be a decline) of LPs is nothing short of a cultural phenomenon, with millions of viewers still watching over a thousand LPs daily. Over the past ten years, LPs have grown from simply sharing gameplay with commentary, to full cinematic game walkthroughs, live reactions, and channel branding specific to the player. As the term "Let's Play" suggests, the viewer is invited to participate and spectate as their "host" or Let's Player (LPer) navigates their way through a video game. It is this invitation and address that have likened LPs to watching a friend play (T. Taylor 251).

Watching a recording of someone else playing a game challenges many assumptions about games and play. Most critics would argue that merely watching someone play a game frustrates the fundamental purpose of games, namely, their interactive and responsive mechanics-to-user input (Salen and Zimmerman 80). Another critique of LPs is their possible exploitation of game companies. Viewers can simply watch a video of a game online instead of purchasing the game themselves (Carey). This frustrates the commercialization of games when consumers can simply bypass acquisition and explore the game through someone else. The last critique leveled at LPs is that they are simply the product of a burgeoning, online entertainment industry that will do anything to get views and go viral. The "authenticity" and "sincerity" of this video genre has thus met with severe criticism (Nguyen; Ellis). The creative and cultural aspects of LPs are

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Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

frequently dismissed as well as the genuine work that players invest into making their videos.

With these critiques in mind, this essay is interested in outlining and celebrating this style of gameplay as accessible and inclusive to viewers who might not otherwise play the game themselves- whether that is from financial restraints, ability, or the content of certain games. I will ask what draws people to watch LPs and what keeps viewers returning again and again. To do this, I will compare two sets of LPs, set ten years apart, on the games *Amnesia the Dark Descent* 2010 and *Amnesia Rebirth* 2020 on YouTube. I will weigh these two play-throughs, looking first at what made the original game in 2010 so pivotal and move into how the format, platform and players have changed since. I chose these games and their LPs as a "fixed point" to mark how the online culture has changed around channels and viewers, how Twitch has influenced video sharing on YouTube, and how a video genre that has been dismissed as "reactionary" has endured over a decade. Finally, I want to argue that these videos, which are often criticized for being fake and performative, are simply exaggerations of who players are. They are selling you the affect that games are always fun at the cost of their own time, privacy, and enjoyment.

Definitions and Context

Ivan Taylor defines a LP as "a general term used to refer to a fan-generated content of a video game playthrough" (248). Josef Nguyen describes it as a "fan practice" that involves a performative style of commentary" (1.3). I would like to further nuance that a LP is a pre-recorded video that can be edited or manipulated before it is uploaded to a video-sharing site. Unlike live streaming game footage, a LP is an enclosed performance space. The LPer is essentially "cut-off" from interacting with their audience until the video is uploaded, unlike many live streams, which feature chat and immediate response to comments from viewers. I will talk more about streaming but for now, let me briefly mention that there is a noticeable decline in the number of LPs due to streaming sites like Twitch as well as YouTube's tightening copyright restrictions.

Ivan Taylor traces the origins of LPs to static "screenshots uploaded to the Something Awful message forum" (248). These screenshots show scenes of gameplay with reactionary comments from the uploader. They were usually intended to highlight play aspects of the game, give tips or pointers, show Easter

eggs, or share funny moments or glitches. What began with screenshots, turned into full video and audio playthroughs, intended to highlight tips and tricks to assist other players. Earlier LPs had text layered over the game, while later editions and updates in video processing software allowed players to ad-lib commentary as they were playing. Over time, and as new games were released each year, the content of LPs also changed. LPers found niche audiences with humorous and/or entertaining commentary on games that they had not played before --and, as I hope to show with my analysis on *Amnesia,* LPs became marketed as sites of discovery and "authentic" reactions.

Bram de Rijk also observes, "[w]hat sets LPs apart from earlier phenomena such as speed runs and super play videos is that they are not necessarily focused on the gaming prowess of the LPer…Their narrative content can vary from the humorous to the educational, and the reasons for the audience to watch them differ greatly" (4). Unlike speedruns of games, where the player is an expert, most LPers arrive at games as newcomers and often fail tasks or get stuck. They repeat sections or backtrack. LPs are less about proficiency and more about exploration – inviting the viewer along as they encounter a new game together. Today, the most common style of LP is a double-window video showing the gameplay with the player's face superimposed.

We can witness a similarly significant shift in the LPs from *The Dark Descent* (*TDD*) to *Rebirth.* The ten years difference between these two games makes even the similar game design and gameplay vastly different spaces for the LPs created with them. In video and recording technology alone there are remarkable gaps. Eight out of the ten LPs I watched on *TDD* 2010 do not have face cameras (the exceptions were Yamimash and Kuplinov). Interestingly, Jacksepticeye adopted a face camera in his third episode and has continued to use one ever since ("Water Asshole"). In the ten LPs of *Rebirth* that I watched, all but two of the LPers had facecams (IDP and theRadBrad opted for voice-overs). I should stress that the adoption of the 'facecam' is not a natural progression: LPers like Cryaotic and theRadBrad have created content for years without recording their faces. Yet it is interesting to map out how longer running LPers like Markiplier and PewDiePie have changed so rapidly in such a short time – from simple voice-overs to studio-like recording setups with hired, professional editors, longer videos (more advertising revenue), and channel branding such as banners, tag-phrases, and merchandise links.

Most of the LPs on *TDD* and all the LPs on *Rebirth* were first-time playthroughs (aside from Jacksepticeye and Tommyboypsp who claim to have played *TDD* before). While not experts at the game, each LPer brought thoughtful, humorous, and sometimes deeply personal commentary to the gameplay. The commentary or "riffing" as Nguyen describes it, keeps the audience involved and entertained (3.7). For instance, *GabSmolders*, a Dutch player who records in English, surprised herself and viewers when she understood the Afrikaans in *Rebirth* ("I UNDERSTAND HIM- Amnesia: Rebirth [3]).

In addition to these definitions, I would also like to argue that what really sets LPs apart from all other gameplay videos (streaming included) is the second-hand relationship between viewers and LPers, and the immediate and performative relationship between LPers and games. A LP features a person playing a game. Yet, prior to the LP's circulation online, the LPer not only "acts out" the game, but also responds to and performs for an audience who is technically and physically not there. LPers must anticipate viewer critique or answer questions that might be asked. The LPer not only questions the game, but they also must anticipate and critique their own playing styles. For example, PewDiePie at the beginning of his twelfth episode on *TDD* mentions that he has been reviewing some of his older footage: "I do apologize that I…I realize I was so into it. I didn't really say much and I, I don't know maybe it was still entertaining for you to watch… either way. I'm gonna try to be more active this time and less scared. I don't even know if that is possible." Similarly, ChristopherOdd in Part 18 on *TDD* [19:10] "I really enjoyed the puzzles. Some of them were super complex though, like, in that prison area. Maybe it was just me…I got stuck. You guys were probably pissed watching it." As Peter Dalsgaard and Lone Koefoed Hansen define it, the LPer can be viewed "as a simultaneous operator, performer and spectator" (15). This play-space is also unique from live-streaming, as again, the chat feedback is not present. The viewers interact with the LPer *after* the video is posted. The LPer must address an imaginary audience. This address to the camera-as-audience and pre-recorded nature is where most of the critique of LPs comes in: claims that this video genre is simply a "performance" or "act." However, as I hope to show below, this performance is an act of labour that players undertake at the expense of their own enjoyment.

The play of a game is a point of translation that LPers must react to in real time, make it entertaining, play well, and make sure the stakes and story of the game are clear to the viewer, such as noticing how splashes in the water suggest a monster is near (ManFeelings). Eskelinen similarly argues that "in games we have to interpret

in order to be able to configure" (33). For LPers, this becomes an exercise par excellence, one that depends on their close attention to the game as well as "switching" to address the viewer. Watching someone else play a game reveals how well they can orient themselves between several borders. As Steven Jones asserts: "[s]uccessful gamers... have to play comfortably at the 'threshold' of game and world (np). The LPers that I watched vacillated between play and "reality," navigating the fringe between the game world and the video they were creating.

Bram de Rijk classifies LPers into four separate categories: Hobbyist (posts videos part-time), (semi)professional (actively try to make LPing a career and invest in "branding" their channel), YouTube celebrities (famous or recognized for things other than LPs, but still post gameplay videos), and game media hosts (plays games to post reviews). The LPs of *TDD* and *Rebirth* mostly fall under the category of (semi)professional players who are actively making videos for their careers. The LPs that I watched included introductions that were specific to the LPer and their channel. Markiplier, when he uploaded his playthrough on *TDD* in 2012, starts his videos with either "Hello YouTube" or "Hello Everybody", which he later finesses to always be "Hello Everybody, my name is Markiplier…" in 2020. In 2014 Kuplinov starts his video on *TDD* with a disclaimer and an age recommendation – the exact same one he uploads in 2020 for *Rebirth* in an interesting bid for nostalgia.

LPs have become a full-time job for some people: an occupation that is intensely lucrative if played for the "right" games, promoting certain products and/or content, chasing trends with the viewers, and creating channel-specific merchandise. Does it mean that it is all an act – a cash-grabbing, capitalist bid for money at the transaction of time, sympathy, empathy, and laughs? Are these players promoting a false sense of intimacy with their viewers to simply promote their brand? Certainly. It would be incorrect to say otherwise. Some channels are very conscious of this, blurring the line deliberately between their public and private lives to create more rapport between themselves and their viewers. As Nguyen writes, "Let's Plays emphasize the constructed performance of live, spontaneous and authentic experiences…showcasing a range of feelings and responses by video game players performatively mak[ing] meaning of game play" (3.7).

Indeed, there are dangers of being too "enamored" with the production and performance of gameplay and the LPers themselves. Stuart Moulthrop points out the dangers of media transparency, or when we do not recognize that we are getting something contrived and are convinced of its "reality" (57). Similarly, Lindsay Ellis states that YouTube's platform, and the success of a certain cadre of its

contributors, is built upon manufacturing a "realness" – of [appearing to] strip away or pull back the curtain on the work that goes into producing, recording, editing, and uploading videos – but also too on the humans behind the screens. One of the draws of watching someone play the same games repeatedly lies *not* in the gameplay but in a sense of familiarity. Ellis also goes on to say that the "product that YouTubers, Twitch streamers, and other influencers sell, is almost exclusively affect: they sell to us, the aesthetics of emotion. They fabricate intimacy (whether they are "conscious of it or not"). Ellis speaks as a video creator herself when she notes: "a part of the platform of YouTube, what some would call 'influencer culture' is that it's important for creators that their audience think they *know* you. And that your job depends on maintaining that sense of accessibility" (00:29:13, emphasis in original). Most viewers are content to watch their favorite LPer and could not be bothered to learn game mechanics, nor even acknowledge the developer of the game that is being played.

However, and at the risk of sounding like a fan, I want to offer a subtle reminder that these "influencers" are themselves human. They get burnt-out pretending for eight hours a day, every day to be having a "great time"; they hold conversations with millions of people (via a camera) and are extremely self-conscious about what they say or do that is recorded and published for millions to live "forever" on the internet. To be under so much scrutiny for things like not playing well, making the game look easy, enjoying the game too much, not liking the game, being too critical, missing something, skipping parts, not editing, playing "incorrectly," muddling words, and so on would make any sane person eventually not love creating gameplay videos. Aside from merchandise, the major thing LPers "sell" to their audience is affect – an emotional respite that is performatively humorous, entertaining, engaging, critical, and/or thoughtful (Ellis). Essentially, they "sell" you the idea that playing games for eight-plus hours a day is always fun. Lindsay Ellis calls the maintenance of this affect "emotional labor" – citing this performative space as the reason for burnout: "not only [does] YouTube's algorithm plac[e] priority on creators who upload regularly and homogeneously, but also on the emotional labor of only showing the side of yourself that your audience wants to buy" (28:06).

It is enough to say that these influencers (noting that not all LPers have this "status" level) are gaming the system between being accessible to their viewers and remaining above the hyper-scrutiny that they offer to the Web (as most recording happens at home, this also includes where they live, partners, pets, and children as

well, whether intentionally or otherwise). All this is to say that painting these videos as just a cash-grab performance would be disingenuous. The players get tired, they get frustrated and angry when they are stuck on puzzles, and in the case of *TDD,* they get scared. Even the very act of exaggerating the emotions for the camera can itself be exhausting.

I would like to argue that the "performative" space that a LPer creates is not a fake representation of who they are, but again more of an exaggeration, a critical awareness that they could have millions of viewers and have branded (or were branded) as having a distinct style. Let us take one channel for example: Markiplier, one of the largest gaming channels on YouTube, starts his LP on *TDD* in 2012 with subdued and snarky commentary – he mocks the voice recordings in the game and playfully claims to "be so smart and strong" ("Amnesia: The Dark Descent |Part 1|"). In 2020 he has polished his "riffing" to be much more speculative, less sporadic, and more open: "This is so cool to be back in *Amnesia* again." Yet, in trademark fashion, he adds his own sound effects and claims to be (sarcastically) "just so strong of will" ("BABY, I'M BACK!"). He is still, mostly, the same person. Markiplier, in these videos, is being himself, even if it is to an exaggerated degree.

Another misconception of LPs is that the narration "is almost exclusively a reaction to events in the game [as] either explanations of choices or considerations, visceral reactions to events or simply general opinions on parts of the game" (de Rijk 10). While most of the topics discussed by the player are obviously mediated by the game, many LPs feature extra-diegetic elements, such as "personal anecdotes, snippets of songs, referential humor, jokes, and even reactions to events outside of the game" (T. Taylor 5). Instead of being an exclusive review of the game, most LPs are like listening to someone's stream of consciousness. T.L Taylor similarly describes livestreaming as: "A lot of [players] sharing details that are beyond their immediate playing broadcast. It actually gets a little more mundane. You sort of peek into peoples practice time. You watch them fail. You can chat with them. You can see their play-space" (00:19:07). In the gameplay that I watched on both games, LPers rarely edited their interactions with the game and they shared their thoughts, comments, critiques, and reactions as they came to mind. For *TDD* and *Rebirth,* viewers were invited to watch LPers experience something for the first time, and thus witness an "immediate" reaction. Even though the videos were pre-recorded and uploaded to the internet, viewers are entertained by this immediacy as they discover the game at the same pace as the LPer. In fact, the immediacy of an LP may be defined through this mutual discovery.

The Dark Descent

Arguably, LPs on *Amnesia, TDD* jump-started the popularity of watching people play video games online. The groundbreaking and terrifying game design made it uniquely popular material for the creation and publication of LPs. The game did not allow the player to fight back against the monsters that continually stalked them – not a new mechanic in 2010 but definitely compounded by the meticulous atmosphere and claustrophobic setting. In addition, the core elements or themes of the game include torture, death, and despair. Up to the game's release in 2010, most videos on games were walkthroughs: a recording of gameplay with the host playing their way through the game with constructive and/or critical commentary. With *TDD*, however, as people played the game for the first time, the terrified screams, nervous banter, and terror of the players proved to be more popular with viewers than tips and tricks. The LPs of *TDD* provided a vicarious, sadistic, and sometimes humorous pleasure for the viewer in watching someone else be scared. And, unlike speed-runs or walkthrough videos, the spectacle of authentic emotion felt real for viewers as the players encountered the game for the first time.

The popularity of these videos (viewership being among the millions) can be again explained by Ellis' analysis of "authenticity" on YouTube. "There is a viewer fascination with what Marie-Laure Ryan calls: 'higher cognitive emotions': shame, excitement, sadness and embarrassment" quotes Ellis. "Part of the viral appeal [of certain videos]…is, in part, that the emotions are so extreme…that they may be read as sincere. And, in this new marketplace of YouTube, sincerity and authenticity are the valuable commodities" (Ellis 20:59). The appeal in these videos, the reason they became so popular and so widely shared, was the sincerity and authenticity of the emotional spectacle, or what Nguyen describes as "the construction of liveness" (5.1). Viewers were attracted to the "genuine" fear that the players portrayed. This is also perhaps why certain players adopted facecams for the first time during this playthrough (Jacksepticeye WATER ASSHOLE) to maximize the conveyance of emotions ("Water Asshole"). Interestingly, ChristopherOdd does the same thing with his playthrough of *Rebirth*- adopting a facecam which is not his usual play style. Some viewers left comments that indicated that they did not like this change as it 'broke immersion' but user c. hox writes that they liked when he turns to the camera to address the viewer: "It's such

a small thing that not many streamers/content creators do and it really goes a long way in creating a connection with the viewer" ("What is True Horror?").

In 2010, and in the following two years that videos were made on *TDD*, viewers could stop, replay, and react to the player's reactions as they jumped, screamed, or cringed in fear. Even if it was exaggerated and played-up for views, the groundbreaking design of Frictional Games' pilot project did indeed scare a lot of players. For example, Yamimash, while playing the infamous "water part" in *TDD* asks for a second to gather himself before he pulls a lever and runs from the room:

> Yamimash: All right. Shall I pull the lever now?
>
> Friend (in voiceover): Okay now pull the lever up, and then you wanna, like. I'm gonna jump to the, uh, the next box and then jump to the next one and then I'm just booking it out the door.
>
> Yamimash: "Um…I don't…give me a second" [Puts face in hands]. (8:10 "Water Part")

Pewdiepie, less theatrically, takes a break in his fourth episode of *TDD* saying, "I, Okay. I need a break, seriously. I'm gonna end this and I'm gonna take a break but I'm…gonna end the episode. This is too much for me, sorry…When I saw that monster, I…I just wasn't ready for it" (1:57 "Amnesia: Playthrough Part: 4")

Although perhaps a contrived act, this game, specifically the water part, has haunted many players. Based on the number of comments left on *Rebirth*, you can see the lingering effects of the original game. For example, to introduce his video ChristopherOdd reads off a letter from Frictional Games: "'We decided to make a horror experience that felt really special. We wanted to... [t]ake [players] on a journey that stood out among all the other horror games released over the past decade.' And to me [ChristopherOdd], if you think about *Amnesia* coming out about ten years ago, and what happened after that, these guys *really* started something pretty special" ("What is TRUE HORROR?"). And IGP states that *TDD* is "a classic. Maybe not by technical definition, but that game really paved the way for modern horror games, especially in the indie scene...*Amnesia* was one of those games, that it was horrifying to play, but what really set it apart from the rest, was the way that the story was told, the atmosphere that it created, and just the way that it sucks you in" ("We've Waited 10 Years for This").

The viewers, at least, believe the sincerity of the player's fear. PianoBroha commented, "I love watching Yami get so scared when he plays, it's so entertaining" ("Water Part"), while Jin Hua Lu enthused, "[to] see young pewds sooo scared of shadows makes me laugh" ("Amnesia: Playthrough Part: 4") This

generated authenticity is what viewers come to watch repeatedly. Viewers will even watch a game that they already know (having played it themselves or seen another LPer complete), just to watch a different LPer's reaction.

Another reason that LPs on *TDD* became so popular was that people were genuinely afraid of playing the game. The game was too scary for most people to play when it was first released, and many people, instead of playing it themselves, watched other people from a safe remove. *TDD* may have instigated this, but it remains true today: watching someone play through a screen alleviates some of the less accessible points of games, from content to gameplay. People will watch other people play, not just to voyeuristically enjoy the spectacle of emotions but because the game itself is scary, or hard to play. LPs make *all* games easier to participate in. They also allow us to watch consoles and/or hardware that we cannot purchase. For example, when *Half Life Alyx* was released in 2020, "over 100,000 people" watched it – bypassing purchasing a VR headset which can cost from 100 to 500 dollars (Olson). As Olson observed "Streams and Let's Plays [were] the first way many folks…experience[ed] Valve's latest" (np). LPs essentially level the playing field, allowing anyone with any ability to "play" along.

Rebirth: What is different?

Between 2010 to 2012, most of the LPs that I watched on *TDD* were done by white men. In 2020, the LPs on *Rebirth* have a much higher inclusion of female players. This is not to say that women, POC, and nonbinary players did not upload videos on *TDD* but rather that they were few and far between. For *Rebirth*, specifically, queer, and nonbinary players were difficult to find, but that does not mean there is little representation on YouTube.[1] I will say that watching female players made viewing *Rebirth* a different experience for me, as the game's main protagonist is pregnant throughout the game and at one point, goes into labor alone in the desert. As Gab Smolders observed, it brought a new layer of horror to the game: "[t]his is a horror game on different level now. It's like, all my womanhood fears are in this one shot...I'm so uncomfortable" ([00:22:06] "What's Best for Amari?"). Having a diversity of players to watch opens this genre to new viewership. People of all ages,

[1] See for example: Tin Plated and Press 'A' to Gay, Adam Koebel, Heather Alexandra, Tye, Ellaguro, kathleenmms, Tanya Depass, Rabbit Plays Games, Simply Undrea, DomSoExtra, Melina' Arcade and Mr Kravin. See hornet.com/stories/youtube-gaymers and videogamesincolor.tumblr.com/letsplayers.

backgrounds and experiences are looking for kinship with players, and the range of players and play styles represented on YouTube and streaming platforms are slowly but steadily increasing.

One phenomenon I noticed was the comments in 2020 seem to be nicer and more personal, addressing the player directly or speculating on the narrative and/or gameplay rather than open, blatant critiques. For example, on theRadBrad's playthrough in 2011, JMel2012 wrote: "Awww, he's so much more enjoyable [here] when humble" ("Walkthrough – Part 1"). Compare this to comments made on his playthrough of *Rebirth* in 2020 where Avery Brewster wrote: "thanks for being there making such good content I can't wait to see what's in the future" and Sabrina BRUVV: "Thank you for being my childhood, Brad". I do not particularly know why this is and do not have the space here to do a thorough and comprehensive sweep comparing all comments on all the videos; however, in the most general sense, I can see that viewers tend to be more invested in supporting the player, especially if it is a community that has been built up over a decade.

The style and substance of the LPs made on *Rebirth* also really show how far this genre has come. The quality of videos uploaded (including graphics, framerate, audio mixing and recording) are all testament to the vast improvements in technology over the past ten years. The quality of these videos is also based on the "career investments" made by LPers as they moved into video production as a full-time job (better computers/consoles, microphones, professional editors, and so on). Additionally, the style of commentary has been professionalized. Compare Pewdiepie's apologies in *TDD* to his demands in *Rebirth:* "I'm sorry for not speaking much but I'm so fucking focused" ("Amnesia: Playthrough Part 5: NOPE" 2010); "That was the first part of *Amnesia*. If you want to support this series and want more episodes, go ahead and like, comment and subscribe and all that epicness" ("Amnesia Rebirth- It's been 10 years."). There are many more calls to action ("smash that like button, subscribe and leave a comment down below") as the algorithm pushes for community engagement as a standard of measuring advertising appropriateness.

You can also see Twitch's influence with, on average, longer videos (Markiplier, John Wolfe, Gab Smolders and Pewdiepie) with less editing. In fact, Runebee's video on *Rebirth* is a Twitch stream re-uploaded to YouTube. In her video, she talks to viewers who are interacting with her stream in the past. I would not consider this a LP as the "performance" and address to the camera is not present; instead, she reacts in real time to questions or comments that viewers have.

Uploading Twitch streams to YouTube seems to be a rising trend, arguably encouraged/compounded by the increasingly stringent copyright policy on YouTube[2], but also because of the way that Twitch allows viewers to interact with the players in real time (often behind a paywall or tier system). As Runebee highlights, the line between the two platforms has blurred.

One LPer, Demon Rebuilt, argues that LPs are actually dying on YouTube, citing that "this is just a symptom of a larger issue. These kinds of videos, this format of producing content, doesn't really work anymore" ([00:03:00-00:03:15] "Let's Play Videos are Dead on YouTube"). Many of the comments agree with him, stating that they would rather just interact in "real time" with the player and watch one-off videos Far be it from me to predict the trajectory that LPs take in the future. For now, however, there appears to be a decline in LPs and/or a merge with streaming. Episodic videos seem to be declining in favor of longer, un-edited ones, and viewers are being "converted" to the immediacy of chat interactions and the lack of editing that streams offer.

Conclusion: Critical Play-Critical Views

The viewers of LPs are participating in play – in a literal sense, by reacting, commenting, and following the player – but also by engaging with games, responding critically to what each game offers and affords, the game story, and the apparent enjoyment of the player. It is a different interaction with and around games, one that subverts the "hands-on" experience of play. This does not delegitimize this interaction – but rather prioritizes narrative and aesthetics over gameplay and mechanics. Each viewer of *TDD* and *Rebirth* came to the LPs for

[2] Claims around "fair-use" abound, mainly at the behest of game developers who are alarmed by videos that showcase their entire game from start to finish. In February of 2013, Nintendo historically claimed that every single video made using their games was subject to copyright (I. Taylor 249). However, after LPers argued for fair-use in the alteration of original content, Nintendo rescinded the claim within the same year (249). Bram de Rijk notes that "millions of advertisement revenue [is] moving from traditional media outlets to professional LPers" (5). By playing the games, the LPer allows viewers into the "private sphere" of the game as text. Many people will watch a playthrough of a game before buying it, and the games that are popular on video sharing sites undoubtedly have higher impact on consumers. Game companies are beginning to play by YouTube's rules and make it easier for LPs to be uploaded. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux observe "[a]s players share more and more gameplay by trading demo files, posting videos, and livestreaming, videogames increasingly incorporate recording, hosting, sharing and even analytic services in a race to redirect the work of watching…back into economic circuits" (66).

different reasons – whether it was to distance themselves from the content of the game, to interact with/view the player, or simply because they could not afford and/or play the game themselves. Whatever the reason, they all "played" the platform of YouTube (by choosing who to watch, which videos to like, subscribing, or leaving a comment) and "played' the game (getting a better understanding of its mechanics, art style, and limitations through the explanations and commentary that the player provided). Similarly, Boluk and LeMieux write, "[f]rom Twitch to transmedia television, both watching people play and playing with the practice of watching are forms of ludic spectatorship. Whether sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in stadium seats or watching over someone's shoulder at the local 'barcraft', spectatorship is an ergodic, gamic action in and of itself" (65). Viewers are playing with the practice of watching. I am suggesting here that you do not have to play a game to enjoy or be critical of it. On the topic of critical play, Mary Flanagan writes, "As new forms of play emerge, each element of a game may foster a different sense of critical thinking, reflection and dialogue" (2). The LP is simply a different form of play, (for the viewer and the player) – one that is predicated on inclusion, performativity, community, and discussion.

Posting LPs provides an advantageous starting position for everyone to interact with the game in new and inclusive ways. For a medium usually predicated on "going it alone" with only your own thoughts to guide you, LPs provide an interesting sounding board for the player, the game, and the rest of the community watching. Throughout my analysis of *TDD* and *Rebirth*, I continually saw insightful and thought-provoking observations in the comments. For example, DarkManifest on John Wolfe's video wrote:

> I really appreciate the inclusion of the third ending, it felt like the "perfect" ending for all it was the saddest. The Empress' reign was finally ended, her nightmare world built on the back of ongoing torment destroyed, and Tasi was redeemed for originally choosing her child over the welfare of so many others by choosing the greater good over her child when given another chance. Seems like the theme of the story is selfishness vs selflessness, with every character from the crew making choices for one or the other. I thought that was nicely done.

The viewers were just as invested in understanding the game as the player was. They offered tips, story speculations, encouragement, misplaced advice, as well as praise and critique on the player's style. In *Rebirth* especially, there were multiple references to other horror games in addition to the more obvious comparisons to

the first game, drawing connections in the story and analyzing the repeat of gameplay and symbolism from older titles: "Soma is to me, [Frictional Games] magnum opus. *Rebirth* felt like a combination of all the previous Frictional Games and that includes the dated part. My favorite part of this game was the environment and the story telling" (Tanner Hill on Wolfe "ALL ENDINGS") and Tonka Babić3: "I love Tasi, and love idea of the story, but is not best game for sure. However, I think it is unfair to compare it to Dark Descend [sic] Amnesia too much because I feel it would be impossible to do follow up to that game and have as legendary impact unless you make a completely new one game."

As Sherry Turkle suggests, I believe we can use the "stage" of games to develop a social criticism of what games are and how they are played (377). The removed spectator position is uniquely qualified to look at the way games are being played and at how the player interprets and acts on the choices the game affords. Similarly, Nguyen writes, "Understanding how players make sense of game playing through performing personalities…offers an important opportunity for understanding how players locally and individually negotiate, revise, and make meaning about playing video games" (1.2). As an audience that is outside of the gameplay, the spectators are in a privileged position of observation. They often catch things that the player misses because they are not physically or mentally tasked with responding to stimuli. While the player struggles to hide, solve a puzzle, or engage in dialogue with the game, the viewer is free to watch, listen, and remember. In this way, the viewer and player engage in a reciprocal conversation that is unique to LPs, delayed as it is through posting the video and waiting for its reception.

I would urge viewers of LPs to watch critically – to question the content that is being provided to them and by whom – but to also embrace LPs as alternative ways to engage with and interact with games, "at a distance." LPs are accessible, free, and fun (even as a performance). They offer dialogue and community and are at a safe remove for games that challenge the ability and psyche of the player. They are perhaps on a decline on YouTube but will simply make way for people to enjoy spectating games in other avenues. As Boluk and LeMieux conclude, "[t]he act of play can no longer be reduced to the manipulation of a keyboard, the agency of a single player, or even the operations of the software or the output on the screen. Spectatorship is not a superfluous byproduct of gaming but part of a much broader media ecology of play in which the production, performance, and perception of videogames are conflated" (60).

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