

Let's Play video essays: Exploring alternative assignments in a game studies course

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we aim to share our experiences implementing Let's Play videos as a core assignment within an undergraduate game studies course. Conventionally, a Let's Play (or LP) video presents a disorderly, unstructured recording of a play session of game, with (often humorous) commentary by the player heard through a voice-over, or seen via a picture-in-picture window. Achieving major popularity over the past years, LP videos have become among the most successful genres of video uploaded on platforms like YouTube, with some LP makers attracting audiences of millions. While primarily an entertainment format, elsewhere we have discussed the potential of LP videos for game archiving and exhibition purposes within cultural heritage institutions (Glas et al. 2017). Here we argue that the concept of the LP video has potential within an educational game studies setting as well.

For students, the question of how to do game research has been answered by a wealth of books and journals, as well as various dedicated introductory textbooks (Mäyrä 2008; Fernández-Vara 2015; Egenfeld-Nielsen et al. 2016). On the other hand, how to actually *teach* within the field of game studies has received less attention. Only a few textbooks such as Newman and Oram (2006) and Zagal (2010) have delved into more practical considerations for teachers. In these texts, the emphasis lies on acquainting students with the various scholarly traditions within game studies as well as expanding students' repertoire knowledge of and critical perspectives on games. Furthermore, both Newman and Oram (2006) and Zagal (2010) provide several exercises for students that help them get to grips with and reflect on their position as player and researcher (most notably,

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Newman and Oram's suggestions for collaborative classroom play sessions with added worksheets (2006 13-14), or Zagal's suggestion for keeping a learning blog/play diary (2010 61-87)). However, Newman and Oram as well as Zagal focus primarily on written assignments, from blogs and diaries to the more traditional final papers. For our course, however, we wanted a type of assignment which would more closely align with our desired learning outcome to understand and analyze games using medium-appropriate methodologies, with a strong emphasis on play as method (cf. van Vught & Glas, 2017).

We proceeded to fully implement LP videos as an audiovisual assignment into the curriculum of a third-year BA course on game studies over a period of two years, with around 50 students participating each year. The initial goals were to increase engagement with the course material (primarily the games everyone had to play) - with a focus on students with a minimum of repertoire knowledge or interest in the medium - as well as simply offering an alternative type of assessment in addition to the written papers as the traditional assignments of the course. However, in the two years that we have now used these assignments, we noted a range of other benefits of the approach.

First of all, we found that "forcing" students to show their play rather than (only) write about it, stimulated a more thorough and self-reflective engagement with the game, pushing the players beyond superficial play or even just watching a walkthrough, towards more advanced forms of analytical play (cf. Aarseth 2003). Here we hypothesize that the foresight of peers and teachers getting insight into the playing skills of students, created a sense of (peer-)pressure and encouraged them to "show-off" which was only possible with repeated play, which in turn gained them more experience and new insights in the game at hand. Secondly, the video format encouraged students to engage in more experimental play styles to see how certain actions would foreground unexpected game elements or, in the case of online multi-player games, play behaviors from other players they encountered. In other words, students displayed more transgressive styles of play (Aarseth 2007) which provided the teachers with ample opportunities to engage in more in-depth discussions around the role of the player in the research process, and how different modes of play can yield different "readings" of the game. Finally, watching each other's LP videos in a classroom setting provided a sense of "vicarious play", a "combination between ludic immersion and non-ludic engagement" (Glas 2015, 84) which also created awareness of the variable or processual nature of play. As Newman has argued, LP videos can give us "a clear sense of the range of potential playings which a given game might support and, importantly, gain insight into the performances, observations and techniques of others" (Newman 2013: 62, see also Menotti 2014).

Even though we still asked students to produce a short written text accompanying the LP video in which they could add additional remarks or more in-depth discussions of theory, a large part of the students' efforts went into thinking about ways to play to produce research results and to present these results in an interesting way. We actively steered students into this direction by rewarding originality and creativity of the presentation (in addition to more traditional elements like academic relevance and structure of argument). In the end, we found that even though students thought the assignment was very time-consuming, they nonetheless enjoyed the engaging nature of both creating, sharing and discussing videos of their research project. While it will not replace the written paper, we would argue that the LP video format can encourage students to adopt a more critical and

self-reflective approach to the games under investigation by emphasizing the role of play in game research.

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