FCJ-110 Relations of Control: Walkthroughs and the Structuring of Player Agency

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2 Videogame walkthroughs provide instructions on various elements of gameplay in relation to specific digital games, and exist as text-based documents and, to a lesser extent, as recorded moving image game footage. We focus here on written-walkthroughs for the purposes of depth, while recognising the specific and significant position that moving image walkthroughs hold (see Ashton, forthcoming). Player-produced walkthroughs, freely and widely distributed online, point to the broader social contexts that inform and structure player agency. In this article, we emphasize three perspectives on these documents. First, walkthroughs can be approached as a means of recording and codifying playing styles, thereby legitimising specific approaches or strategies. Accordingly, we highlight glitch hunting and the *Pokémon* series to illustrate the diversity of these playing styles and the significance of the walkthrough as a form of ludic archival document. Second, walkthroughs as textual codifications of gameplay potential can encourage new styles of engagement with authors and performers by outlining opportunities for play, and illuminating strategies and techniques previously unknown to the reader. Importantly, as we shall demonstrate, walkthroughs not only investigate and interrogate game texts – exploring their every narrative turn and spatial aspects in minute detail – but also frequently present techniques that take advantage of weaknesses and flaws in the ruleset or code of the game in order to offer new gameplay options. In this respect, as James Newman (2008) suggests, walkthroughs can be understood as a form of reverse-engineering that renegotiates the player-designer relationship and encourages (perhaps even demands) deliberately investigative, resistant and deviant strategies of gameplay. These modes of engagement frequently involve playing beyond performative norms and technical limits. The walkthrough, then, is both a document of the game as designed and a record of investigations into the vagaries and imperfections of its implementation and how these may be enacted and exploited. Third, we suggest that the prefigurative potential of walkthroughs may be seen as having a regulatory quality and, therefore, represents a key mechanism for shaping the way videogames are played. Noting research on the social contexts of gameplay, we situate the prefigurative qualities of walkthroughs in the context of the presentation and performance of expertise.

3 Focusing on these three ways of approaching walkthroughs, we map the specific contexts for the ordering, dissemination and reception of walkthroughs, and highlight the forms of governance and control that mark player relations in these settings. Key to an appreciation of the importance and uses of walkthroughs is recognition of the role played by the online and offline videogaming communities that support and surround them. Accordingly, we are keen to examine the connections between the expert walkthrough creator and the game community contexts within which this expertise is developed and asserted. In establishing the significance of these contexts and forms of identity work, the following sections first introduce and position walkthroughs, and then move on to examine the recording of playing styles, the presentation of new gameplay opportunities, and the regulation and policing of technique.

Defining and Positioning Walkthroughs

4 Thornham's (2008) encouragement to shift the focus of games studies toward an investigation of the mediation of games by gamers provides a useful starting point for thinking about walkthroughs. Indeed, as Newman (2008: 93) describes, walkthroughs are 'rich and multifaceted texts [that] perform a variety of interrelated functions'. Accordingly, we encourage a consideration of walkthroughs as extended instruction manuals, virtual tour guides, and explorations of the boundaries of the logic and integrity of the game code and simulation models. Given the plasticity and mutability of walkthroughs, their variety of functions, and the range of uses to which they may be put, it is useful to spend a little time considering their scope and setting them in their context alongside the myriad other fan-produced texts and the products of the mainstream games industries which serve overlapping but nonetheless different purposes.

5 Scholarly studies of walkthroughs are a comparative rarity as a topic in academic game studies (e.g. Burn 2006) and where they are encountered, their range is not always made evident. Mia

Consalvo's (2003: 327-328) study of *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* walkthroughs describes the texts as:

6 > Detailed guides to how a player should play a game sequence to find all of the hidden bonuses and surprises, how to avoid certain death, and how to advance past difficult puzzles or trouble spots to best play and win the game.

7 Here, we note a broad and inclusive definition but one that is clearly centred on the play imperative. For Consalvo, the walkthrough is essentially a guide, a tutorial whose principal, perhaps only, function is to drive the player onward towards completion. The implication of Consalvo's characterisation is that the walkthrough is turned to in times of difficulty and represents a virtual safety net. Both Consalvo (2007) and Newman (2008) have subsequently gone on to explore the ways in which walkthrough use might be considered 'cheating' within specific gaming cultures and contexts. While the discussion of cheating is somewhat beyond our scope here, it is important to note that were our definition of walkthroughs solely limited to matters of completion and the conquering of difficult puzzles or trouble spots then it should come as no surprise to find that walkthroughs might be treated as little more than cheat sheets for the non-expert player. [1]

8 Without doubt, walkthroughs can more than adequately serve the function of purveyors of hints and tips to assist gamers during times of difficulty. Indeed, the video walkthrough site StuckGamer.com alludes to this imperative in its very title. However, any investigation of the scope and extent of the kinds of text-based walkthroughs that are collected at hubs such as GameFAQs.com, which are the focus of our study, reveals a considerably wider array of potential functions. Such archives speak of a more diverse range of motivations among authors and readers alike.

9 Our investigation focuses on a range of player-produced walkthroughs available via the GameFAQs.com online portal. Our decision to focus on player-produced walkthroughs reflects our interest in the status of these texts not simply as presentations of solutions for gamers unable to progress beyond a particular point, but as foci for discussion and experimentation with games and gameplay. As such, we have chosen not to consider commercially-produced Official Strategy Guides, often published in close consultation with game development teams and publishers, as these tend to legitimise a limited range of ways to tackle the game; demonstrating only 'approved' tactics, strategies and approaches to gameplay. The player-produced walkthroughs, FAQs and guides we consider here, on the other hand, are more concerned with documenting games and gameplay opportunity in completist and exploratory terms. As such, discussions about mechanisms for exploiting inconsistencies or glitches in games fall within the remit of the fan-author who is liberated from the demand to deal only with 'officially-sanctioned' gameplay and technique.

10 For similar reasons, we have chosen also not to explore the small number of video walkthroughs such as those available at StuckGamer.com. Like the commercial Strategy Guide, StuckGamer's downloadable clips appear to function more as didactic tutorials than GameFAQs' altogether more investigative explorations. Moreover, we feel that there is something important in the textual (im)materiality of the GameFAQs walkthrough. Their existence as constantly evolving, collaboratively authored and updated, searchable, plaintext files is vital to their function. In stripping away the audio-visual representation and the tactility of gameplay 'feel', the GameFAQs walkthrough reduces the videogame to its most fundamental constituents and casts both the reader and author as game studies analyst examining underlying simulation models and systems.

11 Importantly, our aim here is not to present a survey that accounts for a wide variety of subtle variations in form and format of the myriad walkthroughs available on GameFAQs or via other portals and fansites. Rather, we wish to examine specific walkthrough texts in order to exemplify some the overarching characteristics of the form and to point to the distinctiveness of the text-based walkthrough in relation to the didacticism and completion-focus of the official Strategy Guide or video walkthrough.

12 While GameFAQs.com is perhaps the largest repository of player-produced walkthroughs currently available online, its title is something of a misnomer as much of the textual material it hosts far outstrips the typical designation of 'FAQ' both within and outside gaming culture. The FAQ (or Frequently Asked Questions) has become commonplace within technical and support literature

and is primarily designed to anticipate user difficulties and issues with a product or service. The FAQ is typically structured as a list of apparently oft-posed questions that are supplied with answers, solutions or suggestions for action and, as such, are designed to structure self-guided help or initial troubleshooting. Among videogaming communities, the FAQ has been adopted as a similarly problem-centric document. FAQs are most typically written to deal with specific issues and potential problems that gamers are likely to encounter whether these be specific puzzles, techniques or the vagaries of control systems. Authored by players, these texts bear some similarities with walkthroughs in that they ostensibly aim to provide support and guidance for gamers and speak of a desire to pass on knowledge and share the benefits of experience. In turn, they serve simultaneously to stand as indicators of both the author's expertise and the reader's implied poverty of skill and dependence on the ability and generosity of others. Perhaps the most significant differentiator between the walkthrough and the FAQ, however, is that the latter isolates specific moments of gameplay. The walkthrough, on the other hand, provides a far more discursive, in places step-by-step, account that details a journey through the gameworld and unveils the scope of its potentialities. In fact, recalling Consalvo's definition above, we might find that her concentration on problem-solving and 'completion' actually makes for a better working definition for what we term here the FAQ than for the walkthrough.

13 It is useful also to distinguish the objects of our interest in this article from another text that is frequently described in the same terms as the player-produced walkthrough. The 'Strategy Guide' is most usually the product of commercial publishing and texts very often designate themselves as having 'official' status indicating that they were developed with collaboration from the game's designers and development teams and with reference to design documentation. Prima Games (n.d.: online), which described itself as 'the world's leading publisher of strategy content for PC and console video games', describes how 'each guide is packed with the essential information you need to know to not just beat but dominate every game you play'. Similarly, the Prima Games (n.d.: online) description for its strategy videos encourages players to, 'watch how an expert moves through a key boss battle and you'll master a game in no time'. Their official status means that Strategy Guides often reproduce production and pre-production art both as part of the aesthetic package and as a means of illustrating and explaining the gameplay under discussion. Importantly, we should note how they are developed through consultation with design teams and development documentation and are devised as part of the retail strategy for the title. Indeed, at retail, they are frequently sold alongside the game reinforcing the value of the potential purchase (the scope, extent and literal 'size' of the game) while also indicating the complexity of the undertaking that implicitly requires that the player have some manner of guidance or external support.

14 The Strategy Guide may be seen as a mechanism by which the integrity of the game as code and as impenetrably faultless system to be played against is reinforced. In addition to presenting a potentially lucrative retail opportunity and serving to frame the game as rich, complex and potentially rewarding even prior to purchase, Official Strategy Guides draw on a close relationship between professional writers, development teams and publishers and most clearly point to the mediation of the game by developers and publishers. It follows, perhaps naturally, that the scope of the Official Game Guide is limited only to those aspects of the game anticipated by the designers and while there may be evidence of vogueishly "emergent" gameplay (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003), it will clearly emerge only within the confines established by the developers and within the restrictions imposed by their code and simulation model. As such, while Official Strategy Guides are focused more on the journey through the game than the anticipatory problem-based FAQ, any discussion of gameplay opportunities that take advantage of flaws in the game's logic or that exploit repeatable bugs or glitches is notably absent.

15 This is by no means the only aspect by which we might distinguish the Official Strategy Guide from the player-produced walkthrough. They share some similarities with player-produced walkthroughs in being more journey-orientated than problem-based, and more discursive, open and exploratory than the anticipatory troubleshooting of the FAQ. More obviously, commercially available (Official) Strategy Guides legitimise certain "official" play strategies, and implicitly close down the possibility of other, often more resistant, exploratory and emergent types of play that exploit or workaround the "intended" limitations and structures of the game. It follows that they

do not 'replicate the deductive and experimental working patterns of gamers learning through experience and observation' (Newman 2008: 97).

16 In our opening discussion we have sought to draw out some of the specificities of walkthroughs by positioning them in relation to FAQs and Official Strategy Guides. The focus in the remainder of the article is on the mediation of games by (groups of) players. Our investigation is based on how engagements with walkthroughs by players (either as authors or readers and users) are bounded by implicitly and explicitly enforced relations of control. This analysis is structured following Newman's (2008: 93) suggestion that, player-produced texts "record playing styles, encourage the adoption of news styles of engagement, and perhaps even seek to regulate the way videogames are played".

Recording Playing Styles

17 A consideration of different playing styles and 'unanticipated' forms of emergent gameplay, concerned not only with playing the game but playing with it, are essential in appreciating the ways in which videogames are configured through the performances and practices of play (see Moulthrop, 2004). In their discussion of 'digital play', Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2003: 19) emphasize that 'though gamers navigate through virtual environments, their actions consist of selections (rather than choices) made between alternatives that have been anticipated by game designers'. As a broad statement, this usefully points to the game as a carefully built virtual environment within which players operate with varying degrees of agency. Certainly, Kline et. al.'s position is extremely helpful in foregrounding the design process (the consideration of which is lamentably absent from much scholarship on games). However, their assertion that the available alternatives presented to the players are limited to those anticipated by game designers is uncomplicated and tends to present both a vision of software development that is overstated in allusions to precision and perfection and an understatement of the exploratory, investigative nature of gameplay.

18 While scrutiny of the Official Strategy Guide might well further solidify the notion of the game environment as locked down rulesets enshrined in code and pristine mathematical models and simulations, the player-produced walkthrough eloquently demonstrates the misplaced technical idealism of this position. As critics such as Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä (2005) and Newman (2008) have demonstrated, the videogame is brought to life through the interactions between player and system. As we shall see below, their agency allows players to interrogate the different available selections and to enact new and sometimes unanticipated forms of gameplay that may emerge from the exploitation of unintended situations and the consequences of certain inputs, or combinations of gameplay operations. It is our assertion here that a more careful and considered investigation of walkthroughs is vital for unveiling these configurative dimensions of play, since these player-produced texts are among the key sites through which gameplay is mediated, interrogated, reformed and reimagined by players.

Glitch Hunting: The *Pokémon* Series

20 The act of glitch hunting demonstrates the configurative nature of play and how the open, mutable nature of certain games allows players to redefine, remake or even reduce them into a set of resources for playing with. Newman (2008: 15) states:

> 21 Players explore and probe the boundaries of what the game will do to destruction, exposing and exploiting the glitches that slip through the quality control systems and that, *in extremis*, may crash the game outright. More interestingly, many of these glitches or limitations in the simulation, allow access to new, perhaps unpredictable, techniques and capabilities or to unravel the sequence of the game-making levels or abilities available out of order.

22 In the practices of glitch-hunters, we see players who clearly operate outside the 'official strategies' and who apparently eschew the player-game relationship model. They instead embark on a deliberate and rigorous journey with the goal to uncover and master not only what the game appears to offer in terms of gameplay and available selections, but also those potentialities that even the code's creators and developers were unaware of. Importantly, many bugs, glitches and flaws within games have moved into the lexicon of gameplay as they become enshrined into walkthroughs as viable, if sometimes complicated and difficult to enact, techniques.

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The *Pokémon* (Game Freak, 1999-) series has provided extremely rich pickings for those wanting to push their gameplay beyond the normally sanctioned boundaries. Glitches abound in various titles in the series with some simply crashing or freezing the game. It is also notable that even glitches such as these are studiously documented by walkthrough and FAQ authors who seek to create exhaustive coverage of every aspect of gameplay opportunity even those that potential bring gameplay to an abrupt end (sometimes even wiping extant progress in the bargain). There is clear currency in identifying these reproducible glitches even where they have no intrinsic gameplay value and actually set back or reset progress. The imperative here is clearly more complex than simple 'completion' of the game as many of the glitches that are turned up through the investigative glitch-hunting play have no benefit in this regard.

The recording and documentation of these glitches in walkthroughs and at fansites seems motivated more by a desire to create the most comprehensive account of the potentialities of the game rather than to simply guide players towards the performance of officially sanctioned strategies. As we have noted already, the notion of walkthrough completeness carries significant weight in communities such as those operating around GameFAQs.com. Even accepting that 'completion' is at best a nebulous term in relation to games given the variety of selections that may be made or performances that can be enacted, documenting the means by which the game may be 'completed' is but a small part of the task of the walkthrough author.

Not all glitches are show-stopping bugs that freeze gameplay. Many of the *Pokémon* exploits offer opportunities to break the logic and narrative sequence of the game, thereby obtaining items before they were designed to be available or unlocking sections without undertaking the requisite gameplay performances or making the otherwise putatively necessary selections. One of the most widely documented *Pokémon* glitches centres on obtaining the usually elusive 'Mew' character in the game. Ordinarily, the process is one demanding attendance at a Nintendo event at which Mew is 'unlocked' on the player's cartridge. However, inventive players exploring the game's system through iterative play, information gathering and analysis, found ways of unlocking this secret character by exploiting specific combinations and sequences of gameplay activity as outlined below.

To do the Mew glitch:

1. get 2 pokemons, water type***
2. have 13 items with you
3. get into battle
4. go to item
5. go to the 13th item (press down 12 times)
6. press select
7. press B
8. go to switch pokemon screen
9. press down (point to 2nd pokemon)
10. press A (the pokemon should turn to Mew)***
11. Now you can press B to cancel back to the battle screen and run away

from battle OR kill the enemy to win the battle.

12. Heal your pokemon and put Mew into the PC then take it back out (it

should fix the HP)###

13. Or simply trade it to another gameboy

*** using other types your pokemon will turn into a “fossil” and the game freeze at step 10

*** if you win the battle with this ‘Mew’, it will turn to lv.101

it will mess up your item#1 so don’t put bicycle at the first place in the item list (put potion ^^) and also some other things may not work probably.

— repeat the steps 1-10 will turn your Mew back to the original pokemon (the pokemon you turned into Mew will come back) and it will also fix all the problems you get when you hold the Mew (fix the item#1). (gunbladelad77, 2009)

What is immediately clear is the amount of effort and work that goes into the unraveling of glitches such as these in a game’s code. In this case, players operate from a starting position where the outcome is uncertain rather than acting as true reverse-engineers. By playing with attentive rigor so that inputs and actions can be documented and repeated, the exploit is gradually revealed through iteration. Other (in)famous *Pokémon* glitches include the so-called ‘Glitch Pokémon’ MISSNGNO and ‘M, described by Newman (2008). Although there remains much speculation about the status of these *Pokémon*:

> The brute fact is that both MISSINGNO and ‘M are the products of glitches. They manifest themselves as real Pokémon though in fact their names and graphical representations reveal their status as errors. MISSINGNO or ‘missing number’ refers to a data call in the program that searches for a non-existent Pokémon from the checklist while ‘M is represented on screen as a garbled mass of pixels, roughly in the shape of an inverted L and looking not dissimilar to a *Tetris* block. Neither glitch is serious in that they do not crash the game (though some reports do suggest conditions under which game data may become corrupted), but they are anomalies that arise from coding errors that arise under a specific set of repeatable conditions that are comprehensively documented in Game Guides such as Raddatz’s (2005) and even on Nintendo’s own corporate website (Newman 2008: 117).

What is of particular interest to us in this article are how glitches as products of aberrant, deviant, often deliberately re-configurative playings become canonised as part of the mediating mechanism of player regulation. Not only are *Pokémon* (and other game) glitches fastidiously recorded in various walkthroughs, but the existence of Glitch Pokémon such as MISSINGNO and ‘M are celebrated in fanart and fanfic thereby ensuring their mythic status among the community and absorbing them into the ‘official’ roster of collectible Pokémon (see Newman 2008 on the ‘Tales from the Glitch’ series of fanfics, for instance). There is a palpable sense in which the *dramatais animalia* of the *Pokémon* games are imbued with new agency as a result of the ‘Glitch Pokémon’ as fanfic writers, fanartists and players bring them to life.

Glitches and the Diversity of Playing Styles

In glitch-inspired fan creations, there is an implicit suggestion that even the developers of the game were unaware of the presence of these critters, especially since they are often uncovered only through the sensitive, investigative work of dedicated players who nurture them into revealing themselves. In the case of the Glitch Pokémon, their inclusion within the well-documented and widely-circulated fan canon of the game’s creature list has even necessitated that Nintendo recognise their existence by responding to the revelation of unanticipated play. Here, then, we see the inversion of Kline et al’s argument in which the developer is placed in the position of dealing with and responding to the consequences of unexpected and unplanned for performance and selections.

To a certain extent, we should be unsurprised by this apparent desire to investigate the game and probe its boundaries up to and even beyond the point of the apparent integrity of code and consistency of the gameworld. Videogames, after all, charge their players with tasks of investigation and exploration. Puzzle solving and the ascertaining of rules, strategies and techniques through the act of iterative play, reflection and replay, are the very watchwords of videogame engagement and gameplay. That this self-reflexive, configurative play should also seek

to reconfigure the game into forms unimagined, unanticipated and unplanned by the developers is testimony partly to the difficulty of maintaining bug-free codebases but also, more interestingly, to the inventiveness of players and the plasticity of the gameworld as (re)configurable toolset for play. Furthermore, many videogames build into their 'legitimate' fabric the opportunity to enable additional, often initially hidden 'debug' or 'cheat' modes that, by offering level-skipping functions or even some form of primitive level creation tools, immediately and decisively reframe the relationship between player and game designer as Surman (2009) has so persuasively noted. That glitch-hunting and the exploitation of coding errors becomes part of the canonically accepted structural language of inputs, even if they are apparently unsupported as 'official' strategies, must surely be seen as nothing more than inevitable given the encouragement to step outside the role of player and into that of designer in titles like *Sonic 2* (Sonic Team, 1992) or *Little Big Planet* (Media Molecule, 2008) or the frequency with which Easter Eggs and other secrets are embedded into games as barely hidden rewards.

Encouraging the Adoption of New Styles of Engagement

49 Recognising the ways in which videogames lay themselves open to diverse playings is an important and often overlooked notion in academic game studies. Walkthroughs are a key means by which players can develop and refine their gameplay styles and experiences. Some scholars and commentators have attempted to tackle this with rather crude classificatory systems that posit a few broader player types (e.g. Bartle, 1996). These are useful in drawing our attention to differences in the way the game may be configured and experienced by players. For instance, it should be clear that the quest for attaining high scores versus the completion of levels or sequences in speedy times dramatically alters the form and shape of the resultant gaming experience. Regardless of any questions we might have about the success of specific attempts to present taxonomies of play motivations or types, we are keen to note the pivotal role of walkthroughs in the processes they seek to describe.

50 As Consalvo (2007: 3) suggests, walkthroughs 'challenge the notion that there is one 'correct' way to play a game'. More importantly, however, is that the formal recording of different playing styles provides a resource that other players might draw from in the development and honing of their own approach to the game. Crucial to this relationship is how walkthroughs are gathered and labeled. Our analysis of GameFAQs' organisational structure in the following section illustrates the significance not only of an overdue study of walkthroughs, but also of a contextual account of these player-produced materials.

Online Collections of Walkthrough Materials: *Pikmin*

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53 At the simplest level, a survey of GameFAQs.com reveals that games with rosters of many playable characters such as the *Soul Calibur* (Namco, 1998-) or *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1987-) series have dedicated, in-depth walkthroughs that detail the specific characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses of each protagonist. Importantly, these characters are not merely separated out to make the walkthrough / FAQ lists more user-friendly for the visitor to the site. Rather, because each character presents a varying arsenal of basic and special moves that differently balance defensive versus offensive tactics, the player is encouraged to interrogate the roster in order to either (or perhaps both on different occasions) adopt a character that best suits their preferred playing style or motivation (attacking versus defensive; nimble with light attacks versus lumbering with more powerful assaults; long-range reach attacks versus close-at-hand grappling etc.) or adapt their style to accommodate the particularities of the character. The reward structure of fighting games such as these is frequently articulated around the completion of a specific number of bouts unlocking other techniques, characters or locales with each character revealing a different subset of the total. In this respect, it is inevitable that mastery of the game demands mastery of different styles of play, tactics and strategy.

54 Where the adoption of different playing styles is hard-coded into game series, such as *Street Fighter*, *Tekken* (Namco, 1994-) or *SoulCalibur*, even more interesting are the ways in which player-produced walkthroughs encourage the development and adoption of different playing styles outside or beyond that which might be implied by the particular complex of characteristics a videogame presents. Games as diverse as Konami's (1998) *Metal Gear Solid* and Nintendo's (2001)

Pikmin each inspire the creation of dedicated walkthroughs that map out different ways of approaching gameplay in terms both of short-term tactics and longer-term strategy.

55 Two examples that demand that the player rethink their engagement with *Pikmin* are Dragorn's '9-Day Challenge' and Grenade Guzzler's 'Blueless Quest'. Disallowing the use of certain items in the case of the latter, or disrupting the apparent narrative/temporal logic of the game, these walkthroughs place a new ludic challenge on top of the pre-existing ruleset and variously mutate and amplify the ostensible objective of the game. The 'Blueless Quest' is particularly revealing as it actually renders the game impossible to complete in its usual sense thereby neatly underlining our assertion here that walkthroughs are not simply documents created to help gamers stuck at particular points or who wish to be propelled through a game's flow. As the walkthrough author notes, the Blueless Challenge is a deliberately playful one that exists as a means of both eking out additional pleasure and gameplay from *Pikmin* and demonstrably proving one's own mastery beyond the existing limits and bounds of the game's ruleset and resource allocation.

> 56 This FAQ will explain how to go through Pikmin without ever getting the blue Onion (interesting note: the blue Candypop Buds never appear without activating the Onion first). There are some parts that you must need blues to get them, but you'll have enough chance to get the remaining parts so that you'll be allowed to access The Distant Spring.
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> 57 Of course, you won't actually get access to the Final Trial and the end of the game, but this is just for bragging rights and an extra challenge. (Grenade Guzzler, 2006)

58 It is clear that sites such as GameFAQs codify the rich variety of potential encounters, playing styles, tactics and strategies. GameFAQs' walkthroughs are simultaneously documents of exploratory modes of subversive play that reveal the existence of coding irregularities and mechanisms by which these reconfigurative exploits and newly created ways of playing may be shared within the community. Perhaps as important as any specific walkthrough or even any type or genre of player-produced text that it may host, however, is the extent of GameFAQs' collection and, in particular, its 'archival' function.

GameFAQs' Archive and Prefigurative Play

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60 The lists of walkthroughs (or 'FAQs' in GameFAQs.com's own somewhat misleading parlance) that accompany each game perform an archival function that literally sets out and makes manifest the range of different types of engagement and playing styles that any given game has to offer. Even before one delves into the often copious and voluminous pages of a given walkthrough text, this archival role is apparent and plays an important part in making accessible these different playing styles.

61 Of course, GameFAQs and its plaintext, ASCII art-topped walkthroughs are by no means the only sites at which this archival function can be seen at work. For example, the video walkthroughs available on the StuckGamer.com website for *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005) include: Full Game Video Walkthrough; Separate Ways Video Walkthrough; Assignment Ada Video Walkthrough; Mercenaries Mini-Game Videos; Shooting Gallery Mini-Game Videos; and Cut-Scene Videos. Of significance here is the recording of different ways of playing and the clear signaling of these prior to the first frame flickering into life on the embedded media player. These online collections of walkthrough materials, whether presented in plaintext or high definition video, serve not only to gather together the collective insights of the gamer communities that coalesce around them, but also function as archives and exhibitions of the variety of these materials and the play styles, techniques, tactics and strategies that give rise to these codifications and recordings. In this way, GameFAQs and its ilk are among the most influential sites (in both senses) through which players moderate and mediate play and engagements with games.

62 It is in the lists of walkthrough, the archiving of play and performance, and the content of the walkthroughs themselves that the relationship between player, game and designer are renegotiated. The encouraging of new styles of play is intimately entwined with the archiving of existing gameplay. As Ashton (forthcoming) argues, given the engagement with those same technological objects (the console and game) as the walkthrough creator, walkthroughs are "prefigurative demonstrations [that] have a strongly performative aspect in the creation of new artifactual experiences". The notion of the prefigurative is adopted from Martin Barker's (2004)

discussion of ancillary materials. According to Barker, ancillary or satellite texts 'shape in advance the conditions under which interpretations of film are formed'. Barker (2004) highlights, 'publicity materials, Press Kits and EPKs, contractually-required interviews and photo opportunities and so on… [that] …constitute more or less patterned discursive preparations for the act of viewing'. As Barker observes, these ancillary materials are 'foreknowledge' that can shape 'expectations', and that 'constitute a discursive framework around a film, a kind of mental scaffolding giving it particular kinds of "support" and providing the means by which people may "climb inside" (2004). Rather than interpretations of the film or discursive preparation for viewing, we can see the scaffolding potential of walkthroughs as a blueprint encouraging new styles of play.

63 As we noted above, instances of emergent or unanticipated gameplay help unveil the configurative dimensions of digital gameplay. Our discussion of the archiving and ordering of walkthroughs highlights the importance of social contexts in shaping players' expectations and foreknowledge. The notion of the prefigurative helps to emphasize the way in which new styles are encouraged and demonstrates that these have a direct, material and traceable influence on the gameplay of others. Moreover, walkthroughs are not necessarily encountered on an equal footing and by further unpacking the status of these walkthrough accounts and the expertise they imbue, the notion of encouraging new styles of play can be further understood in terms of regulation and relationships of control.

Regulating Play

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65 Taking into account the introductory comments on many walkthroughs posted online by players, a palpable sense of the performance of expertise is apparent. For example, Gameboomer (online) states: 'we have some of the best gamers from around the globe who are ready to help with all your gaming needs'. A distinction is drawn here between the "best gamers" and "you" – the "ordinary" gameplayer who comes to Gameboomer for assistance. Clearly, these lines are not strict and rigid. An expert in one genre of gameplay, for example massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), or one particular game, for example *Everquest*, may not be versed in other genres and games. In this sense, the expert in one field may need to come to an expert in another for advice. What is revealing though in terms of how walkthrough creators speak to their audience is the discursive construction of expertise. As Newman (2008: 104) suggests, 'they are living documentation of the author's ability to decode the game'. This ability informs how the creator of a walkthrough responds to those coming for assistance and those also potentially offering their own interpretations and advice.

66 Taking the 'submissions' section for *Hitman: Blood Money* (IO Interactive, 2006) as an example, the distinction between the visitor/potential poster and the walkthrough writer as expert and adjudicator is apparent. The following breakdown with comments from the 'submissions' section illustrates this (n.d.: online):

67 Opportunity to submit: 'If you've discovered a new, interesting method of completing a certain objective and would like to send it in, double-check quickly that the method you're thinking of isn't already included in the GameFAQs.com version of this walkthrough'

68 Adjudicator of methods: 'On a side note, killing someone in plain sight and having a whole bunch of guards chasing after you doesn't count as a "method" (though it's fun, I have to say)'

69 Standards and trust in own competence (a competence that may be lacking with others): 'Relate your info as clearly and logically as you can'

70 A challenging role: 'Please be patient as I test the various strategies I receive and place them in the walkthrough. This process takes more time than one would think, so bear with me as I proceed with business as usual'

72 The discussion clearly marks out a relationship in which the walkthrough expert sets the parameters for standards and inclusion.

74 This sense of performed mastery may also be seen in the ways walkthrough audiences sometimes defer to this form of expertise. In this sense, 'by following the walkthrough and Guide suggestions, readers are given the chance to learn directly from the experts' (Newman 2008: 110). Such deference is not given lightly and the peer review and rating of walkthroughs forms a crucial role in shaping the extent to which a walkthrough creator can establish a reputation. As Consalvo

(2003: 273) suggests, walkthroughs are 'a way to establish yourself as an "expert" on that particular game – it can be a status marker, especially on a site like gamefaqs.com, if your walkthrough is highly rated'. The online eulogies that accompanied the passing of Kao Megura (Chris MacDonald) points to the status and presence walkthrough creators can achieve. For example, a posting by ManekiNeko on *digitpress* stated that 'Kao has done a lot for the online gaming community, writing dozens of comprehensive Strategy Guides (which were often "borrowed" by unsavory video game magazines and websites)'. Similarly, a posting on *WikiFAQs* offered the following on Megura/ MacDonald:

> One of the most prolific and well-respected contributors to this site, he created probably the most well-known and well-read (and not to mention well-written) FAQs on the whole of the Internet back in 1997 for Final Fantasy VII. That guide alone is still used and credited today as the inspiration for countless authors to follow. (WikiFAQs 2005)

Megura is described here as a notable contributor and an influence for gameplayers and other walkthrough creators alike. This second role in influencing other walkthrough creators is further evident in the norms and standards of writing he introduced.

In noting the slippage between second and third person in Kao Megura's *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) walkthrough, Newman (2008: 102) suggests the text operates in the 'imperative mood', and that it 'does not suggest but rather orders the gamer to the follow the instructions'. Further to encouraging new styles of play, the register of the walkthrough text alongside the 'expert' positioning crafted by creators and conceded by gameplayers, highlights the prefigurative potential and the relationships of control at stake. In particular, it is useful to note the hierarchical nature of these virtual communities and the performances around walkthrough production. Within these communities, issues of display, recognition, and the management of identity are placed centre stage. Individual authors and teams, often coalescing around specific websites dedicated to particular games or sometimes operating as hubs for walkthrough production, are able to gain peer recognition for their walkthrough contributions. Sometimes, and perhaps most visibly, this recognition is formalised through competitions to create the first walkthrough for a newly released title or to tackle an older "vintage" title that has enjoyed little or no attention. Moreover, recognition also comes through the entrenched, rigorous and well-policed practice of attribution and thorough referencing that ensures that any contribution to a walkthrough text, no matter how small, is recognised, thereby earning its originator a measure of notoriety as their material is linked to and circulated.

From this perspective, the 'walkthrough may be read as a vehicle through which the author implicitly seeks to take control of and normalize the gameplay of the reader/gamer' (Newman, 2008: 102). This normalising role emerges in the relationship between contextually situated walkthrough creators and their audiences, and involves forms of identity work and positioning. Through tracing the forms of identity work at stake in fostering the position of "expert", the following section highlights the relations of control at stake.

Relations of Control

Tony J. Watson (2008: 126) usefully notes that the phrase 'identity work' has been used as 'as a way of dealing with 'agency' aspects of identity shaping' and as an alternative to terms including, 'identity construction', 'identity management', 'identity achievement', 'identity manufacture' and 'identity project'. Following Consalvo and Newman's earlier comments, expertise can be identified as a form of status or standing that is worked towards and can be established. This process of identity work has been described by Paul du Gay (1997: 314) as the material-cultural making up of 'persons', and the 'adoption of certain habits or dispositions [that] allows an individual to become – and to become recognised as – as particular sort of person'. We might argue that writing in an imperative mode and of demarking expertise in describing the submissions and contact procedure to be used by an 'ordinary gamer', are the kinds of habits and dispositions involved in the becoming and recognition of the walkthrough expert.

In *Organizing Identity*, du Gay (2007: 11) further explores the approach to material-cultural 'making up of persons' as follows:

> Such an approach involves a shift away from general social and cultural theoretical accounts concerning the formation of 'subjectivity' and 'identity' towards an understanding of the specific

forms of 'personhood' that individuals acquire as a result of their immersion in, or subjection to, particular normative and technical regimes of conduct.

84 This further point is crucial for considering the social context to walkthrough interactions and relationships – how and where are walkthroughs disseminated to audiences and how does this environment structure these interactions and relationships? As walkthroughs mediate game content, the relationship between walkthrough experts and their gameplaying audience is formed within specific contexts and regimes of conduct.

85 In discussing MMOGs, Taylor (2006: online) addresses the management of online spaces and the ways in which games developers and publishers enfranchise players. For example, Taylor (2006: online) suggests that 'game designers are always making choices about what kinds of activities and player identities are to be supported to the exclusion of others'. Equally then, what activities and player identities are supported by specific walkthroughs? This refers to regimes of conduct more specifically concerned with videogames fan communities as opposed to between players and designers. As we have noted above, the social context for these interactions is significant. The creation of walkthroughs is only partly a practice that is engaged in to record individual achievement for personal reward. While it is almost certainly true that the individual walkthrough author may treat the creation of their text in much the same way that they use a high score, lap timer or other intrinsic reward indicator to measure their prowess, the walkthrough is a document explicitly for public consumption and, as we have seen, encourages public participation as well as viewing. Contributions might range from corrections and clarifications, through to identifications of overlooked narrative branches or accessible locations, or the imposition of new challenges via the creation of rulesets superimposed over extant game logic. Our discussion *of Pikmin* and the demands of completion within a specific time limit with or without the use of certain equipment or techniques is evidence of this range. The value placed on individual contributions and often apparently minute morsels of information is clearly foreground here also. Moreover, we should be aware that, despite the frequency of a single-authored designation, walkthroughs typically represent the combined efforts of a community of players.

86 The player-produced walkthrough reveals itself as not only a document or record of the original game, but also operates as a vector by which the structuring and governance of player agency is managed by other players. Importantly, the walkthrough is not merely a means of generating consensus in approaches to gameplay. The creation of new, and often more difficult, challenges, for instance, serves to further bolster the notion of the existence and, by virtue, the status of masterful "expert" players who have conquered the game and now challenge the reader to test their skills and prowess. Just as the walkthrough author aims to offer the most complete and extensive walkthrough (as evidenced in the ever-increasing version/revision number proudly displayed in the text's colophon and scrupulously documented in its changelog), so too does the contributor of a new challenge seek both to share their knowledge and simultaneously demonstrate their superiority. To some extent, we might be tempted to view the discursive accounts of performance encoded within the virtual pages of the online textual walkthrough as extensions of the high score imperative that seeks, at once, to provide a mechanism for individual, personal feedback and reflection, and act a public indicator of achievement and attainment (Newman 2008).

Personhood: Content and Expertise

87 Our point is to note that the walkthrough, in itself, is an intriguing product of gaming culture and one that speaks with some degree of eloquence about the mutability of games and the transformative, configurative nature of play and performance. We want to suggest also that it is instructive to examine not only the individual walkthrough and its production, but also the context in which walkthroughs are collated, archived, encountered, compared and, we would argue, performed. Expertise and status are clearly, and perhaps best, articulated in contexts such as GameFAQs where ratings, reviews, comments and feedback endorse or critique authors' gameplay skill and knowledge as evidenced and made manifest in their walkthrough texts. We suggest that GameFAQs provides a context in which an expert form of personhood is constituted. Being first to GameFAQs.com with a walkthrough for a new game speaks of one's connectedness with gaming and participation in the present and future of the form just as the production of the first text investigating a 'classic' title connects with a gaming heritage. The incrementally rising version

number, displayed alongside the various walkthroughs in the lists displayed for each title curated at GameFAQs.com is itself a visible measure of the author's mastery, just as the 'last updated' date neatly and effectively communicates either the ongoing nature of investigations into the game (speaking of the flexibility and openness of the game and the continued inventiveness of the player/author and their gameplay) or underscores the fact that the investigations concluded some time ago perhaps implicitly suggesting that the gameplay opportunity has been thoroughly exhausted. Moreover, coupled with an accompanying version number that updates from in-progress 0.x revisions into a >1.0 release (mimicking the alpha, beta and public releases of the games software they document and record) or that does away with numbering altogether and simply designates itself as 'FINAL' or 'COMPLETE', the mastery of the walkthrough's author(s) is secured. Comparison of version numbers, update statuses, and even attached .txt file sizes (which given the sparsity of the walkthrough's plaintext formatting offer a blunt but reasonably reliable indication of the scope and extent of the material even if they cannot communicate its quality) are rendered inherently performative within the context of the archival collection of the searchable GameFAQs.com database.

88 Further to our earlier comments on the significance of organising, labeling and archiving walkthroughs, the GameFAQs regime of conduct that is bound up in the formation of expertise is equally enacted by other visitors to the site who are savvy to file sizes, version numbers, and status indicators. If a walkthrough creator achieves expert status within a specific community form such as GameFAQs, their capacity to shape and regulate the actual gameplay of their walkthrough audience may be significant. It is at this stage that the prefigurative and normalising capacity of walkthroughs is most potent. This point, however, does not rely on the actual forms of gameplay influence and activity that follow. Instead, it is the very social context enmeshed with the expert form of personhood that is crucial. In this sense, identity and mastery are performed through the listings and archiving just as they are in the walkthrough texts themselves.

89 Accordingly, we can recognise walkthroughs as the practical means and context to develop particular forms of personhood including, for instance, an 'expert walkthrough writer' and a 'deferential gameplayer'. This is, as du Gay (2007) stresses, just one way in which individuals may come to understand and relate to themselves. Our suggestions here, in keeping with the dynamic forms of development and organisation of walkthroughs materials, are not solely concerned with fixing practices of recording gameplay and encouraging new styles, nor with fixing the forms of expertise with the potential to regulate gameplay. Rather, as the use of personhood helps signal, we have sought to stress the social contexts through which gameplay can be mediated, interrogated, reformed and reimagined by players.

Conclusions

91 Taking the mediation of gamers by gamers as a starting point, we have sought to unpack videogame walkthroughs as a form of mediation in terms of recording playing styles, encouraging new styles, and regulating play. In exploring the recording of playing styles, we have seen that the agency of players in enacting new and unanticipated forms of gameplay is crucial. For example, the discussion of glitches illustrates that walkthroughs demonstrate an investment in documenting and presenting a comprehensive account of potentialities within and beyond the intended game design. In this respect, any conception of the walkthrough that deals only in terms of providing methodical and instructional advice on completing a game needs to be carefully refined with regard to the investigation and probing of boundaries.

92 Closely connected to the recording of these investigations and diverse forms of play, are the ways in which they may encourage new styles of play that are engaged with by players to expand their own repertoire. Crucial to this point is the recognition of different ways of approaching games. The examples of Dragorn's '9-Day Challenge' and Grenade Guzzler's 'Blueless Quest' for *Pikmin*, highlight how walkthroughs can function as places that codify the introduction of new ludic challenges. The kinds of challenges posed in these player-produced walkthroughs provide a useful reminder of the distinctions between these texts and the commercial 'Official Strategy Guides'. Of further significance is the 'home' for this specific material and the ability for players to be able to recognise, locate and make sense of it. GameFAQs, for example, demonstrates how walkthroughs are organised and that specific organisational modes and methods can be used and assumed. In

other words, the prefigurative potential of walkthroughs to encourage new styles is made sense of through and with the context within which they are published and encountered.

93 We argue also for a consideration of the social contexts that shape expectations and foreknowledge as these are formative in establishing expertise and identifying markers of expertise. Our examples drawn from *Hitman* and Kao Megura's walkthroughs pointed to the practices of expertise that shape the conventions of walkthroughs and to the ways in which expertise was distinguished. The mediation of games by gamers in this regard is intimately bound up with implicit ways of encouraging and regulating play, and in establishing relations of difference and control. We feel that notions of situated identity work are useful in drawing out these distinctions and exploring how expertise is established.

94 Finally, although studies of walkthroughs are far from commonplace, we wish to shift the emphasis onto socially situated and contextualised walkthrough practices. Our discussion of personhood highlights the role of identity work and demonstrates that the capacity for an individual to relate to themselves as specific sort of person, for example 'a walkthrough expert', is inextricably connected with context and practical means. For example, visible measures of mastery, such as version numbers, update statuses, and attached .txt file sizes, are a central part of the GameFAQs architecture. With regard to relations of control and the potential to regulate forms of gameplay, it is our assertion that the walkthrough context of listings and archiving is as significant as text itself. Moreover, the mediation of games by expert gamers within a specific community form speaks to differentiated capacities to shape and regulate the actual gameplay of their walkthrough audience. In this respect, the walkthrough presents an intriguing and captivating means for tracing the negotiation of situated player relations.

Notes

[1] See also Newman and Simons (2004) for game developer's comments on walkthroughs as cheating.

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