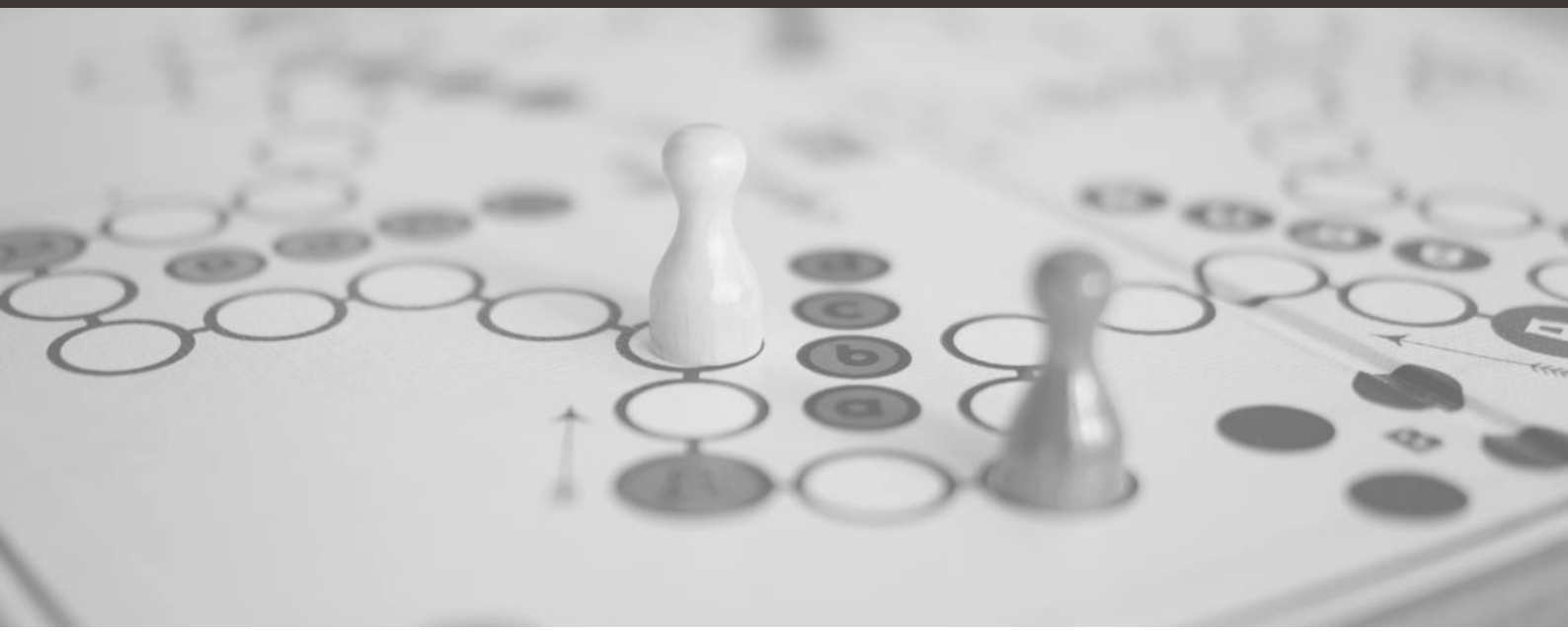
MATERIALITIES

GAMES CULTURES



NEW THINKING #3
2019/20

BCMCR | Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research

MATERIALITIES AT BCMCR

Over the course of the 2019/20 academic year, researchers in the BCMCR have been producing work in response to the research theme of '**Materialities**'. With this theme, we were interested in exploring the ways in which our theoretical work and practice interact with and exist within the material world.

Led by Dr Iain Taylor, the theme has produced a breadth and depth of exciting work across each of our research clusters. This pamphlet has been produced as part of a series, which aims to capture a snapshot of the ideas and discussions which have emerged from the theme over the course of the year, and to provide a resource for colleagues and students who are keen to consider notions of materiality from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives.

For more information on Materialities at BCMCR, or on the work of the Centre generally, please visit our website:

www.BCMCR.org

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Contents

Introduction 4

Materialities of Midland Games - Alex Wade 6

***Outlast* is not a Found Footage Game** - Andrew Heaton 9

Agency, Materiality, and a *Pokémon Go* Fanvid - Charlotte Stevens 12

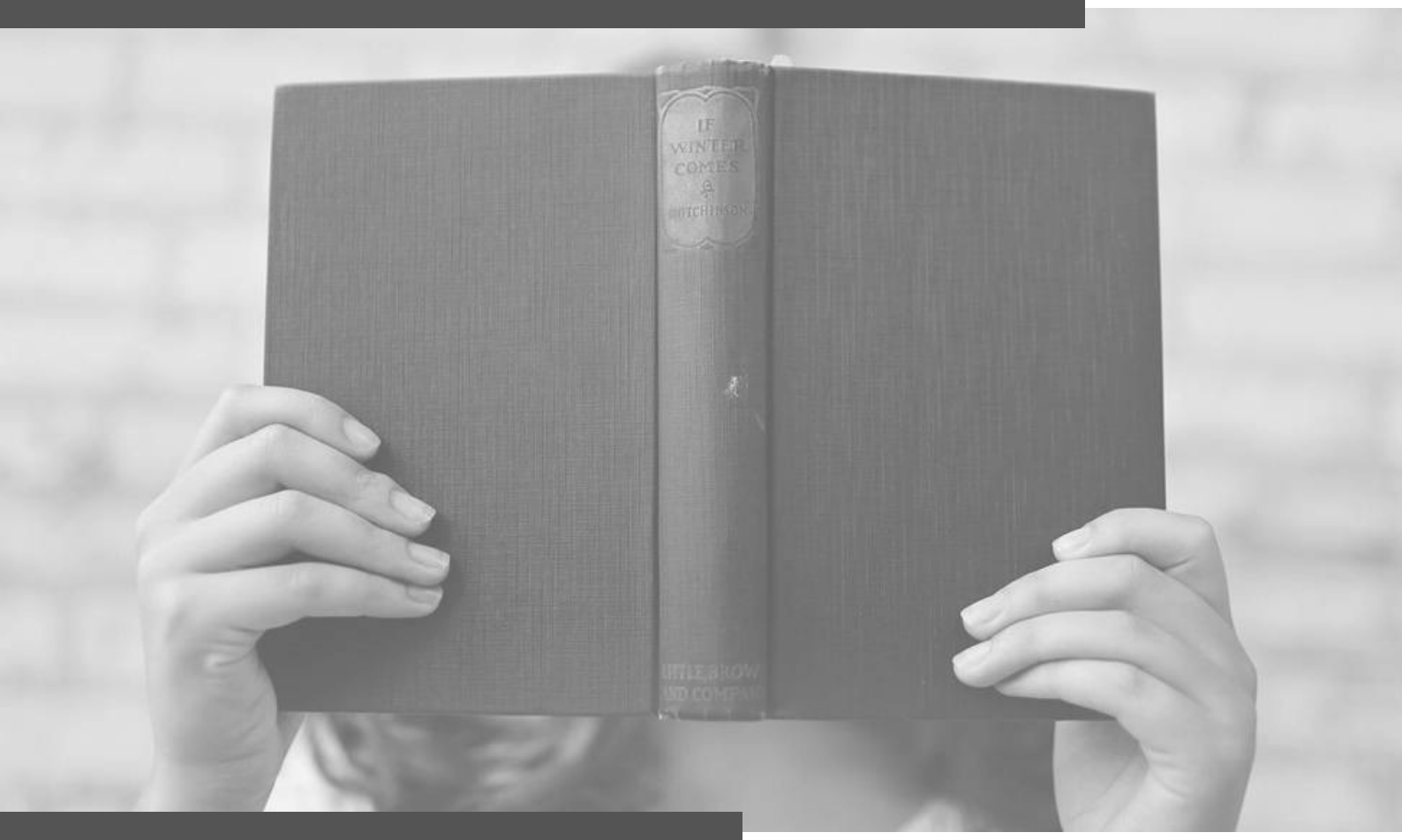
How Chinese is *Chinese Parents* - Li Menqi (Sam) 16

On digital games incorporating "material" gains - Poppy Wilde 20

On the Margins: Paratexts of Video Games - Regina Seiwald 23

Digital materiality and new forms of interaction - Zuby Ahmed 26

INTRODUCTION



NICK WEBBER

Welcome to the Materialities and More compilation from BCMCR's Game Cultures research cluster. Here you can find a selection of our work, much of it geared towards the BCMCR annual research theme of Materialities. As you will see, there are 7 excellent contributions in the pages that follow, each setting out the research and ideas of one of our cluster members. The work here attends not only to materiality, but also to subjectivity, space and place, bodies, and textuality.

Alongside these contributions, and in keeping with the cluster's focus on games, this pamphlet also contains a game which is also a contribution to the discussion about materiality. It asks questions about the relationship between materiality/mattering, choice and agency, following ideas from Miller and Latour.

To read through the research contributions, start here, and read the pages in order. To play the game, flip the booklet over, and start at the back.

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b
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MATERIALITIES OF MIDLAND GAMES

ALEX WADE

Alex Wade is Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for the Studies in the Practice and Culture of Education at Birmingham City University. As a sociologist he uses concepts of space and time to research a range of areas including celebrity studies, science fiction, academic writing, game histories, student mental health and well-being and young peoples' use of technology. He is chair of the History of Games Conference Committee and his most recent book is *The Pac-Man Principle: A User's Guide to Capitalism* published in 2018 by Zero Books. He can be contacted at alex.wade@bcu.ac.uk.

Perhaps now more than ever we are acutely aware of our work environments. As the hundredth day of lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic passes, the space of education, business and the corporate folds into home life. This is heralded as a slight return to the cottage industries of the past, where the means of production is closely tied to the domestic realm.

As a researcher of British videogames in the UK, cottage industries of the past and present pique curiosity. An entire special interest group has popped up examining the phenomenon of 'bedroom coding', seen as central to the history of British videogames 'which accelerates from small firms, maybe even individuals programming software in their bedrooms' (Johns, 2005: 157) during the 1980s through to exaltation in the contemporary – and generally excellent – popular history accounts including *Grand Thieves and Tomb Raiders* (Anderson and Levene, 2012) and the documentary film *Bedrooms to Billions* (Caulfield and Caulfield, 2015).

As Nick Webber and I (Wade and Webber, 2016) have previously identified, the specificities found within these 'local game histories' lend themselves to idiosyncrasies of which the lone programmer isolated in poster-laden bedrooms, cold dining rooms, inaccessible attics and cut-off cellars is one, and often perceived as significant, part.

Yet there remains a danger that with an overt focus on the local, the global in the geographic, economic sense and at the level of shared practices is left behind. For instance, during the 1970s and 1980s, the UK hardware market invariably tied itself to the material. This would take the form of the eponymous names of inventors and entrepreneurs including Clive Sinclair (Sinclair Computers) or Alan Sugar (of Alan Michael Sugar Trading or AMSTRAD), media corporations (the BBC computer) or local geographies of place (Dragon Computers from Port Talbot in Wales).

Yet the software market took a very different position in its branding and subsequent global location. While some developers and publishers drew on previous relationships, such as Mirrorsoft, which was part of the multinational Mirror Group Newspapers, others took a transnational, even non-spatial approach to branding and naming. This is prevalent in the English Midlands, where companies such as US Gold and Elite Systems located in Birmingham and Walsall respectively, would program, publish and distribute licensed games, introducing world-famous names such as Michael Jackson, Porsche, Indiana Jones, Frank Bruno and Bruce Lee to the not-so-famous world of home computers and videogames.

Yet the attribution of the predicate of 'cottage industry' to videogame production suggests that the domestic sphere was ascendant, whereas videogames were tied closely to wider commercial, cultural and social interests. Elite negotiated the deal to sign Frank Bruno up to a videogame at his gym in East London, while Dunlop Tyres agreed a contract with Elite for a driving game following contact with a marketing manager from Birmingham. The resulting game, *911 TS*, was given away with the purchase of four Dunlop car tyres with the famous Dunlop Rubber (now Fort Dunlop) building making an appearance in the game, as you can see in the picture.

Whether the silicon mid-Atlantic monikers of Codemasters and Rare, US Gold and Elite Systems were attributed by accident or by design is one of the questions future research will look to address. The manufacturing of these names, along with the videogame software in locales as varied as fish and chip shops (Elite) and farmhouses (Rare) show the importance of the local and the global in the materialities of Midlands games and how they remain vital to revealing – and perhaps eliding – the region's identity.

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OUTLAST IS NOT A FOUND FOOTAGE GAME

ANDREW HEATON

Andrew Heaton is a second year PhD student studying the representation of gender in the horror series Outlast, with a particular lean towards pre- and post-#GamerGate portrayals. His academic interests include gender, horror studies, agency, general video game studies, and textual analysis. When not doing his research, he is a freelance games writer for a number of websites, as well as a hobbyist streamer.

It cannot be stressed enough how important the camera is in the found footage-style *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013) games. Those who believe video games are immaterial have never had their creations destroyed after hours of work in *Minecraft*, have never heard the stories of people committing crimes to steal items in *World of Warcraft*, and have never experienced the terror of losing their camera in *Outlast*. (Immateriality is something that's discussed elsewhere in this pamphlet.)

When you no longer have access to that life saving device in such a life-threatening environment, you soon realise the importance of that item. The physical act of bringing the viewfinder up to the player-protagonist's eye has served as a linchpin of support and survival throughout *Outlast*. It was a means of "bearing witness" (Monforton, 2016). It became real and as a result of its loss, the game opens the player-protagonist up to new realms of vulnerability, of nakedness.

However, it is at this point that something becomes obvious about *Outlast*. Having recently finished reading Adam Daniel's *Affective Intensities and Evolving Horror Forms* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), I was surprised to see that nowhere did he mention *Outlast* in his video games chapter. In a book about found footage horror and its evolution into new media, there was a sense that it should have been mentioned somewhere.

Throughout most of the game, the player-protagonist will have the camera raised up to record, to zoom in, to see in night vision. Many may not even consider the fact that it can be unwielded, but it's when the camera is dropped during the latter parts that it becomes quite clear that *Outlast* is NOT actually a found footage game. Earlier this year, the horror website Bloody Disgusting listed it in an editorial piece about the evolution of found footage video games.

The article counts it amongst "one of the most brutal Found-Footage [sic] experiences in gaming," yet it does not fully fit the criteria for being classed as found footage horror. That fact that the player-protagonist can choose to walk through Mount Massive Asylum without the camera being in use shows that events are being witnessed through the human eye and not through a recording. The Bloody Disgusting article even mentions this.

Adam Daniel says that found footage horror is "filmed…by a character that exists within the film's world." Note the past tense there: *filmed*. He goes on to say that the most common trope is that found footage horror shows what happened *after* the events not during (p.32). Both points show that the narrative of found footage takes place in the past, whereas the events of *Outlast* are happening in real time. They are being recorded and are not a recording. While this does not derail the importance of the camera, I felt it was a turning point in how I saw *Outlast*. The camera is the weapon of choice for the journalist Miles Upshur and its material importance is what signifies the horrifying loss when the player sees it fall from their hands.

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Picture from the Outlast Fandom Wiki

AGENCY, MATERIALITY, AND A POKÉMON GO FANVID

CHARLOTTE STEVENS

Charlotte is a Lecturer in Media and Communication at BCU. She earned her PhD in Film & Television Studies at the University of Warwick (2015). This work is now a monograph titled Fanvids, published by Amsterdam University Press (2020).

She has published articles in Feminist Media Studies, CineAction, and on the Critical Studies in Television blog, as well as chapters about Doctor Who, vidding, video game fans, and historical precedents of binge-watching (forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press).

In this short piece, I was will look at one particular *Pokémon Go*[1] vid as a lens to reflect on physical spaces of play and the vid form as a conceptual space in which fans could remake narratives about play. This builds on work presented at Console-ing Passions (2018) and NECS (2017)[2], and I was looking forward to continuing this at SCMS this year. These developing thoughts were organised around the theme for our SCMS panel, agency in digital culture, and the materialities focus for BCMCR in 19/20.

Just like fans make vids from film and television sources, so too do they vid games [3]. Where film/tv vids are arguably[4] about interpretation of a source text, games vids are about both interpretation and play[5] I acknowledge that those two keywords have their own complexities within games studies that I will unpack as this work develops.

Questions of materiality in video game play can be about a player's body as it exists in physical space, and how it can be used to play the game, that is, how it uses apparatuses.[6] While I was preparing this presentation, Sebastian Svegaard reminded me of a point I raised at Console-ing Passions (in relation to a mobile game vid[7]): that games vids capture an experience of gameplay and semiotic navigation, but they don't capture the act of playing. The video capture accounts for what happens on the screen, but it loses the player's finger and therefore the material embodiment of playing.

Pokémon Go offers a compelling case study as issues of body/space are present in a different way when considering mobile games (vs console or PC). The vid[8] in question presents the game as it was played, and captures discourses present during the height of its popularity. The vid is a form of cultural production that offers a video essay on the commentary that accumulated around this popular – and uniquely visible – mobile game experience from 2016.

Tweet[9] and reply[10].

The *Pokémon Go* vid in question offers a range of possible inquiries around agency and digital games. For example, a player's agency in/with physical environment in the movement of bodies through space. There is also conceptual agency, in appropriation and textual productivity, where the vid form provides enables a structure through which to articulate the pleasures of the experience of playing *Pokémon Go* in a community of fellow players. And finally, there is the agency of meaning-making through the content of a games vid, recognising the interpretive acts of fans/players while they work through a game and reflect on it later.

In sum, games vids narrativize the experience of gameplay, in a manner distinct to other forms of player accounts. As records of gameplay, they can focus a conversation about materiality and agency; as memorialised interpretations, they capture individual accounts of what it was like to play that particular game.

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl2E22nnwSo
2 https://bcmcr.org/research/digital-games-vids-paper-report-from-necs-2017
3 https://vividcon.info/vidshows/185/
4 https://www.aup.nl/en/book/9789462985865/fanvids
5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huiLkF3jqjo
6 https://bcmcr.org/research/games-adaptive-materialities/
7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNAlYy4pbK4
8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl2E22nnwSo
9 https://twitter.com/mercurialHekate/status/1242444144204791808
10 https://twitter.com/Mehlahphuse/status/1242611240972812289

HOW CHINESE IS *CHINESE PARENTS*

LI MENGQI (SAM)

Blending in "Chinese elements" or "Chineseness" in a product is the "go-to marketing strategy" of creative industries aiming at the Chinese market. Some may even call that "the code of fortune". Here I want to discuss a Chinese game, by which I mean the producer, writer, designer and sponsor are all Chinese as their cultural background, with the word "Chinese" in its title, *Chinese Parents*. This game attempts to present the idea of being "Chinese" and this research attempts to understand such "Chineseness".

This game employs a certain degree of ludo-narrative dissonance, the conflict between play and narrative in video games, for the player to experience the conflicted lifestyle of a Chinese student. In the game, the main gameplay is minesweeping to collect trait points to study certain subjects. All the collections cost Action points. When one first plays the game, the goal seems obvious: to achieve a higher score in Gaokao, the university entrance exam. The game even sets a countdown reminding players how many turns left. During the "study" process, one must balance satisfaction of parents and self-stress.

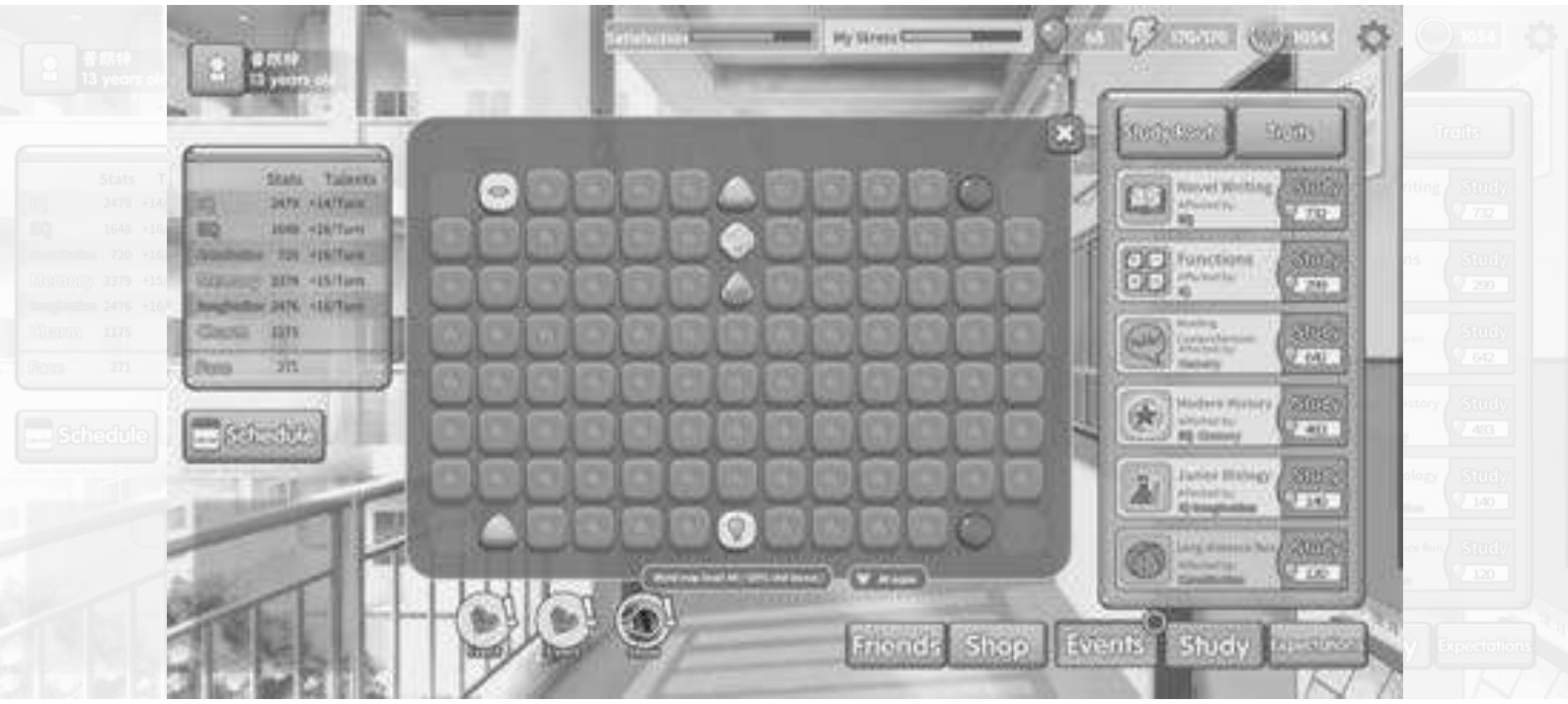


Figure 1, Game interface

However, this game has a hidden storyline. This game deliberately sets “relationship” against “study”, which is a form of “common sense” embedded in Chinese parents’ mentality. Maintaining any relationship costs Action points, which one “should” spend on study. After being admitted into higher education and graduating, the player suddenly realises the cruelty. The game ends with getting married, not getting employed. The player’s choice is either spending a decent amount of Action points on dating during study or ending up with a blind date. Marriage will affect the family stats – which talents will pass through generations. This ludo-narrative dissonance not only indicates the delicate situation Chinese children must deal with but also forces players to stick to one playstyle.

Figure 2 Getting appointments with friends or potential partner

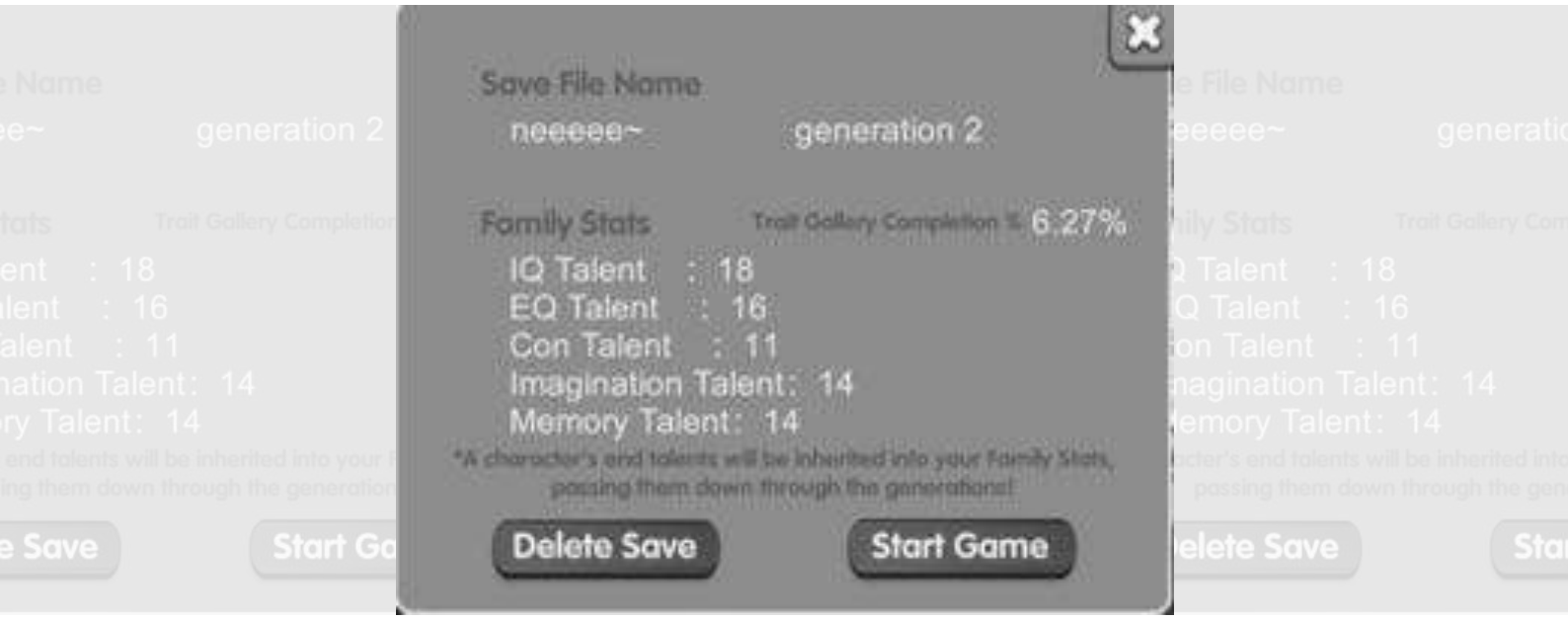
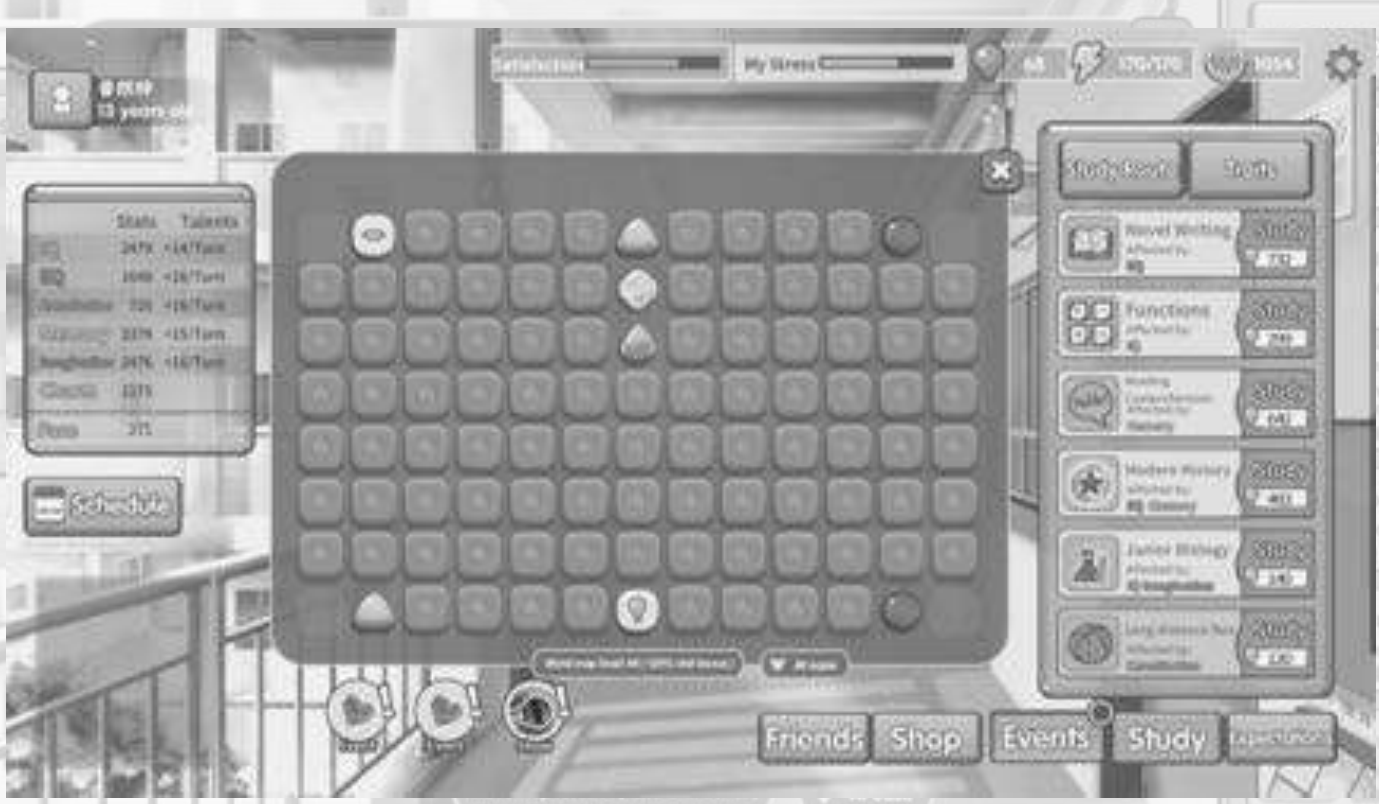


Figure 3 One of "my kids" family stats

Another tool *Chinese Parents* employs is nostalgia. The game's events reference a series of Chinese drama, entertainment, and memories of trivialities. Especially in these trivial memories, the designers call for a vote to see how many people share similar memories. Other indicators lie in the "Store" page and the study/entertainment page. The selected digitalised objects presented in the store change as the player moves into a different stage of life. Combining the play experience with those artefacts, one can piece together the lifestyle of a Chinese child.

Figure 4 A screenshot of the store inventory

This moves us to the question: how Chinese is such an experience? I will answer this question from two perspectives. First, is this experience exclusive to Chinese children? After investigating comments, walk-throughs and reactions from non-Chinese players, the answer is no. The struggle of study, "genetic buffs", balancing study and play are shared. That's why many non-Chinese gamers relate to and recognise such experiences. Thus, "Chinese" in *Chinese Parents* is more like a recognition than an identification. It is necessity rather than sufficiency. This leads to the second perspective: who are the Chinese parents or Chinese children? The simplified lifestyle might be shared, but the detailed experience is not. Given the references, such a lifestyle is based on a child born between the late 1980s and the early 2000, living in the city, from a middle-class family (if you are a good player, after several generations, your kid could be from an elite class or with even higher social status). Thus, the "Chinese Parents" experience, though representative in a way, excludes several generations and social classes.


Satisfaction
My Stress
68
170/170
Schedule
Friends
Shop
Events
Study

Satisfaction
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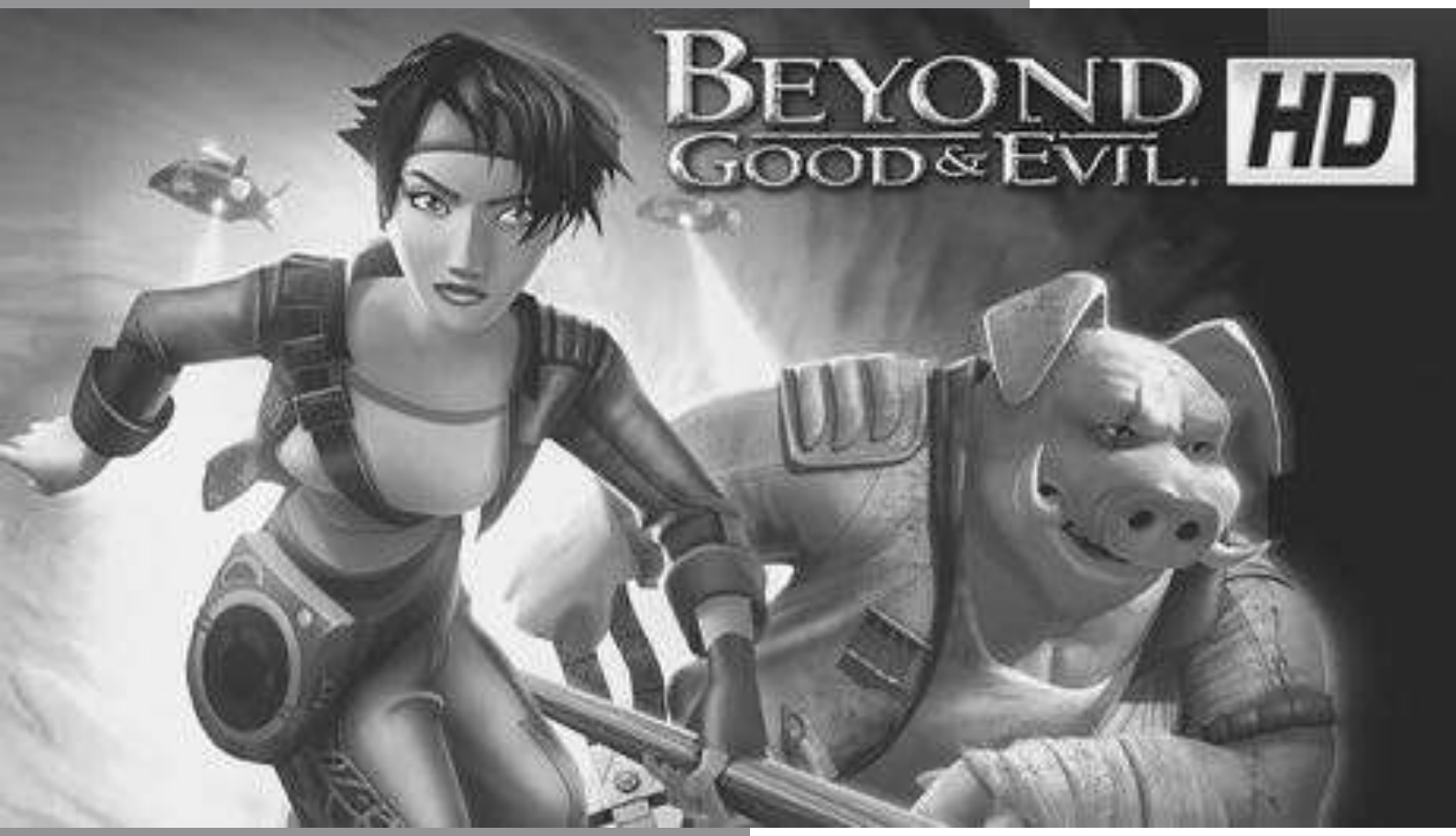
ON DIGITAL GAMES INCORPORATING "MATERIAL" GAINS



POPPY WILDE

Poppy is a Lecturer in Media and Communication at BCU. Her work focusses on what it means and how feels to be posthuman, by exploring how posthuman subjectivities are enabled and embodied. She has conducted autoethnographic projects exploring the lived experience of MMORPG gaming with particular focus on the avatar-gamer as an embodiment of posthuman subjectivity. In her current work she is extending this to explore posthuman conceptions of death, considering whether game environments allow a space to think differently about dying. She is also currently working on an exploration of the contemporary media fascination with zombies, considering this as a posthuman preoccupation; a rejection of neoliberal and capitalist expectations.

The ways in which materiality and digitality go hand in hand are important to consider through the study of videogames. All too often outside eyes view videogames as "immaterial" when this is clearly not the case – videogames involve physical machines, bodies, controllers, and the classic reminder that zeros and ones weigh something is pivotal, especially when we consider the ever expanding cloud storage and servers required for online games. Much of my own work explores the affective, embodied experiences of the avatar-gamer, and the ways in which these account for a posthuman subjectivity – a subjectivity in which different entities intra-act and are mutually reliant upon the other to form gameplay experience (see Wilde and Evans 2019; Wilde 2018). The materiality of the hardware is another component that forms this intra-action, and in a posthuman view we should privilege neither human nor machine, but consider them as components that cannot meaningfully be separated from one another.

From this perspective, it is interesting to see the ways in which materiality itself becomes a "theme" or narrative tool in videogames. Whilst it would be possible for an avatar to be "pre-packaged" with powers or abilities, or for the avatar attain those powers or abilities in ways that are not "held" through an object or attire, the majority of videogames make use of our inherent understanding that "stuff" has value – and, of course, this acquisition is what creates a "quest", thus exemplifying our own joy at finding these materials too.

In the videogame Beyond Good and Evil (Ubisoft, 2003), the player-protagonist, Jade, is a staff wielding photojournalist who ends up working with a rebel organisation to expose the infiltration of the alien "Dom-Z" in her homeland. Jade's "individuality" is disrupted through her reliance on "others", be they human or nonhuman. Her "tools" are part of her subject formation and the affordances granted to her in the game, thus further complicating the subject/object binary.

Jade is proficient in a form of martial arts, and utilises her Daï-jo combat staff to engage in fights with the alien forces. Whilst at times she has aid from her comrades, she is often the lone fighter against multiple alien foes. Through the player's use of keyboard/controller, Jade is able to engage in co-ordinated attacks against her enemies. Her abilities allow her to wield her staff in a variety of attack moves; Jade can collect the energy of the Daï-jo which stores it temporarily before releasing a super-attack function that inflicts more damage on the surrounding enemies.

Furthermore, Jade is not able to operate as a photojournalist (through which she makes a living, earning credits which can be spent in-game) without her camera, and therefore both camera and Jade are equally important to the formation of this subjectivity. This links back to Barad's (2007) consideration of agency not as a possessed quality, but as ongoing material-configurations in the world. Rather than Jade possessing the agency to become a photojournalist, it is precisely through her intra-action with the camera that this subjectivity is possible.

Her skills are therefore not simply an implied mastery on her own part, but a confluence of the "objects" that she uses. These enable her to operate in different subject positions, and allow her different abilities within the game. However, Jade's efficiency at fighting and photography is brought into being in part through the gamer's proficiency at the game itself – i.e. their skill in the use of the physical game controls, be they keyboard, mouse, or console controllers.

Where videogames could have the power to circumvent "stuff", they instead draw on our pre-existing understandings of materiality. I'm interested to explore how this operates in a variety of ways, on the one hand potentially reaffirming a capitalist, consumerist worldview, on the other hand perhaps enabling a consideration of new-materialism and "thing-power" (Bennett 2010).

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ON THE MARGINS: PARATEXTS OF VIDEO GAMES

REGINA SEIWALD

Dr Regina Seiwald is a post-doctoral research fellow at Birmingham City University (BCU), where she researches narratives and textuality of video games. She has studied English and American Studies, German Philology, and General and Applied Linguistics in Innsbruck and Birmingham, and subsequently undertook a PhD at BCU, which she successfully defended in August 2018. Alongside presenting at numerous conferences, Regina has published several articles and book chapters on narrative structures in video games and contemporary fiction and is the co-editor of (Not) In the Game: History, Paratexts, and Games (De Gruyter, 2023).

When Gérard Genette (1997, 1) proposed that the paratext 'is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to [...] the public,' he probably could not foresee the scope of applicability of this concept. Nonetheless, this statement is as true for video games as it is for literature. While paratexts, as companions to the text, are undoubtedly key components of video games, their status in relation to the game and their unique materiality due to the medium's interactivity are not considered comprehensively. Game studies uses the term paratext to denote discourses arising from games or to unify various epitexts under one umbrella term. In a reconsideration of Genette's and other critics' theories of paratexts, the functions paratexts fulfil in the creation of the game-world, the presentation of the game as artefact, and how paratexts influence the player's reception of the game can be determined.

Genette (1997, 1–2) thought of paratexts as thresholds rather than strict borders, which implies a text-paratext relationship marked by fluidity and interdependence. Video game paratexts are elements surrounding the text that do not grant the player agency in the game-forwarding process, while the player might interactively engage with the paratext; paratexts influence the way we perceive a game and its related elements, many even prior to playing it. The text, on the other hand, consists of those game elements in which the player has game-forwarding agency. Text and paratext thus share key elements yet utilise them differently. This makes it difficult to draw a line between the game itself (text) and other elements (paratexts) because the latter can utilise ludic structures to the effect that they become part of the game.

But can't we just ignore video game paratexts? No. While it is possible to overlook some paratexts in literature (e.g. skipping the preface), those in video games often cannot be ignored – an avatar has to be created (if this is a rule of the game), a cut-scene cannot be skipped (yet players can look away). This echoes Alexander Böhnke's (2007, 8) observation that literary paratexts are structured spatially, while filmic paratexts are constructed temporally. It appears that video game paratexts are structured in a spatio-temporal matrix: spatially because they are located in a predefined, yet varying, distance from the text (e.g. developers tend to be named before the difficulty level is set); temporally because some paratexts need to appear before or after the text (e.g. introductory cut-scenes appear before the game). The nature of the spatio-temporal relationship between text and paratext is problematic since it raises questions regarding the textual inside and outside, undermining the text-paratext hierarchy (which isn't necessarily negative).

Where do we go from here? We can now consider the potential functions of paratexts in exemplary video games. I am particularly interested in self-reflexive paratexts because they have a strong impact on the creation and reception of the game-world. The reason for this is that they not only present the game as an artefact or material object to the player but simultaneously reflect on artefactuality and materiality. Such paratexts emphasise ludological and fictional concepts, modes, and mechanics. Through taking a closer look at the functions of paratexts, their relationship to the text, and their self-reflexiveness, their impact on the creation of the material game-world and how they influence the player's reception of the game can be established.

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DIGITAL MATERIALITY AND NEW FORMS OF INTERACTION

ZUBY AHMED

Zuby is a seasoned game developer and manager, with a career spanning over 20 years, 15 years of which have been focused within the Games Industry.

Starting as a freelance writer for Edge, Zuby went onto work for Digital Image Design, Warthog Games, and EA Games.

In 2006 Zuby founded SmashMouth Games (SMG), with a focus on making innovative 'pick up & play' games whilst also starting his career in Higher Education as a lecturer. Zuby has taught graduates who have gone on to have successful careers, working for companies which include Sony, Ubisoft, TT Games and Rockstar North.

When the opportunity came in to contribute to this pamphlet, I was busy working on the collaborative project I'm going to talk about here, at a perfect place for a moment of reflection. So this piece is brought to you by a combination of Driscoll's (1994) 'Model of Reflection' and Gibbs' (1988) 'Learning by Doing Reflective Cycle', echoing the 3-phase 'Reflective Process' of Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985). Fun stuff!

And this materiality is what?

I'm working collaboratively in my spare time, with Lucas Hughes, Course Director for Landscape Architecture and two undergrad students from Games Film and Animation, Jade Langton and Henrique Teixeira. We're developing a brand-new virtual solution, which is a digital representation of BCU; its campus(es) whilst considering its functions and purposes. The project is fundamentally exploring innovation in interaction. Leonardi (2010) argues that 'when materiality is understood to represent the practical instantiation and the significance of an artifact, digital artifacts can clearly be seen to have materiality'. This is where I believe our project will hopefully have exciting potential and impact.

Figure 1, our virtual BCU project with version plan

So what's the big deal?

Considering the COVID19 situation, this project was originally designed to demonstrate graduate work in a virtual space, but now it's working out to be so much more! I'm so excited by the potential and also really pleased with the feedback we're getting, along with how many people want to get involved! As the project's been taking shape since its conception, the team and I have been very careful and considerate towards how we interact with each other to create the project; we're using an iterative development approach, combining Agile Project Management with the Double Diamond.

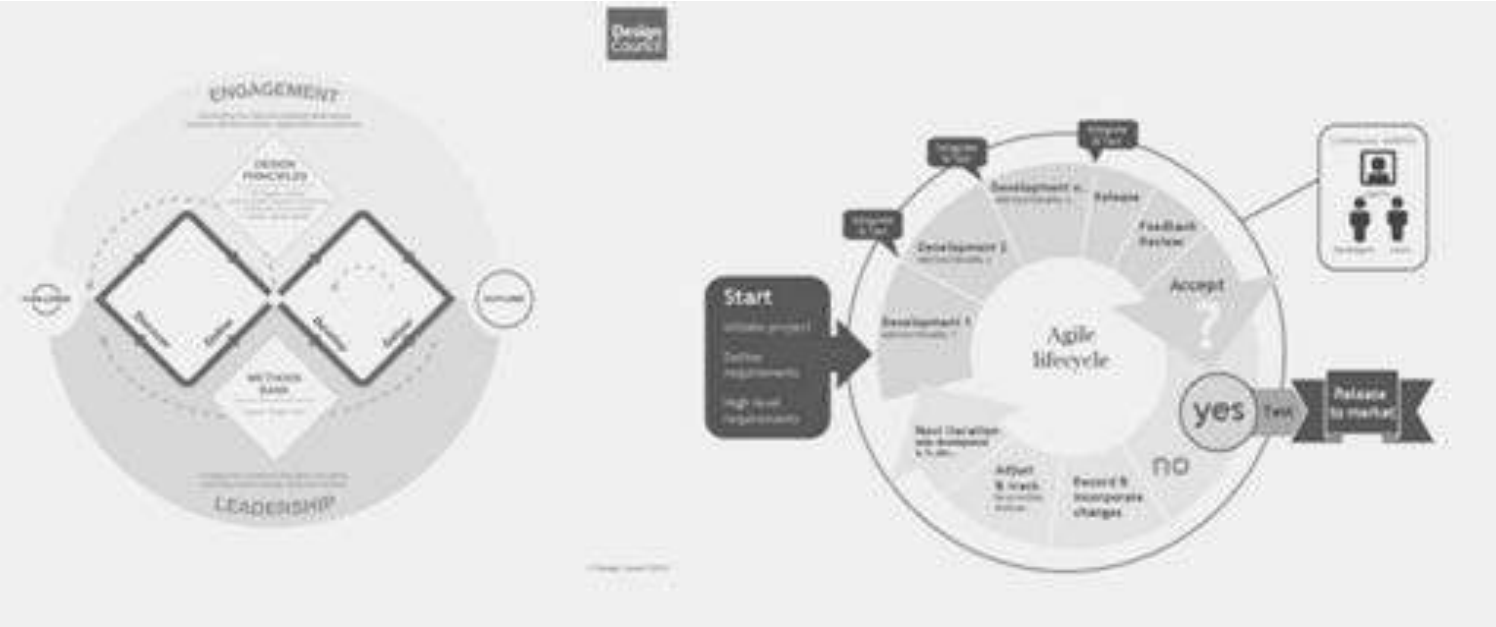

Figure 2, Our design and production process: The Double Diamond and Agile Project Management using Scrum

As a development team, we are also taking deeper dives into each other's intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Herzberg, 1959), channeled within our personal goals (Pink, 2010). This has resulted in us interacting within affective work processes, whilst considering our audiences to interact in these physical and digital spaces, ultimately within a gamified educational setting (Giannetto, Chao & Fontana, 2013; Juul, 2003; Veale, 2015).

Now what?

I'm hoping that this new virtual representation of the actual physical space(s) of BCU will allow individuals the opportunity to explore innovative methods of interacting, with both the physical and digital simultaneously and symbiotically. I'm excited to see how researchers use what we are creating to further explore the notion that 'what may matter most about "materiality" is that artifacts and their consequences are created and shaped through interaction' (Leonardi, 2010). The potential to develop new processes and methods for interaction using this work is already proving popular. New collaborations are emerging, exploring opportunities to work cross faculty and with industry partners to, say, create virtual shop fronts for actual physical stores, selling digital representations of actual physical objects. These interactions will allow people to establish new networks, new processes and routines, and ultimately explore the creation of new organisations and institutions of practice.

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:-:-:-:

To play the game, go to the final page and turn the pamphlet upside down

:-:-:-:

9.

CHORUS (FENDT ET AL.): A SIMPLE, WELL-WRITTEN STORY CAN CREATE A WIDE-RANGING AND COMPLEX SENSE OF AGENCY. THE MEANINGFULNESS OF CHOICES CAN BE UNDERPINNED THROUGH THE SEVERITY OF THEIR CONSEQUENCES.

Were these meaningful choices? Did they make a difference? Can we close the circle connecting agency to both materiality and meaningful choice, and connect meaningful choice to materiality?

If so, can meaningful choice make research material? Has your agency, through these choices, made this work matter?

Close the book.

:-:-:-:

8.

You enter the pit. Surprising no-one,
you are eaten by rabid dogs.

Close the book.

:-:-:-:

7.

With a shiver of relief, you walk past the pit.

You follow the corridor for a short distance before emerging into a sunlit meadow.

Turn to page 9.

:-:-:-:

6.

As you move forward, you notice an inscription on the wall.
Given no other options, you walk along the corridor.

ALL: A CHOICE IS MEANINGFUL WHEN A PLAYER IS AWARE THAT THEY ARE MAKING A CHOICE, AND WHEN THAT CHOICE HAS CONSEQUENCES WHICH ARE REFLECTED IN THE GAME.

CHURCH: AGENCY IS RECOGNISED THROUGH PLAYER INTENTION IN RESPONSE TO THE GAME SITUATION AND A CLEAR REACTION FROM THE GAME WORLD TO THE ACTION OF THE PLAYER.

MURRAY: AGENCY IS THE SATISFYING POWER TO TAKE MEANINGFUL ACTION AND SEE THE RESULTS OF OUR DECISIONS AND CHOICES.

CAN A CHOICE BE MEANINGFUL IF ITS OUTCOME IS IMPERMANENT?

Make a (meaningful) choice.

To continue past the pit, turn to page 7. To climb into the pit, turn to page 8.

:-:-:-:

5.

Passing through the door, you find yourself in another corridor. Behind you, you hear grumbling, and a key turns in the lock.

Given no other options, you walk along the corridor.

Reflecting on what you have been told, it seems we might imagine agency as a little bit like impact, as producing some kind of change if it is present.

But…

If agency is emergent…

an aspect of a relationship between a game and its players…

Surely agency does not exist in its own terms? It can't be enough for a game simply to present opportunities for action. Players also have to ***understand*** *that they have agency.*

But this means that agency is as much a perception as it is a property. So when we talk about agency in games, are we actually talking about players' ***perception****, their* ***sense****, of agency?*

The sound of barking dogs is much louder now, and as you continue along the corridor you see why. To your left is a deep pit, at the bottom of which circle four (4) slavering hounds.

Will you continue past the pit, or climb into the pit? Make a decision and turn to page 6.

:-:-:-:

4.

You enter the room beyond to see a sage sat behind a desk, wearing robes and a pointed hat. He holds a heavy tome open before him. A door leads out on the other side of the room.

He looks up…

Aha, students! Excellent! Come in, come in, sit down.

…and you sit down.

Now, yes. Hmm. Pay attention.

He begins to read aloud.

The concept of agency as a relationship between player and game echoes and intersects with Miller's thinking about materiality. Here, materiality is not a quality of an object but instead a quality of a relationship between subject and object. Miller accepts Latour's conception that objects can have agency through their effects in the world, but he is unwilling to dissolve the 'common-sense' dualism between people and things, as ordinary humans make everyday use of subject-object distinctions to construct meaning.

Our sense of materiality is therefore produced through a subject-object relationship in which both may have agency, with objects exercising restrictions upon the agency of the subject. Materiality emerges not simply in the agency of my action to touch, nor in the agency of an object's resistance to that touch –the physicality of its existence – but in the interaction of that touch with that physicality.

Got that? Good. Now get along with you, I'm sure you have chores to do.

He ushers you out through the door behind him.

Turn to page 5.

3.

You turn right and walk along the corridor.

Ahead, you see an archway. From beyond it, you hear muttering and the occasional cough. Inlaid in the surround of the archway, you see:

MATEAS: AGENCY IN GAMES IS A PROPERTY OF THEIR FORM.

To go back and go the other way, turn to page 2.

To walk through the archway, turn to page 4.

:-:-:-:

2.

You turn left and walk along the corridor.

After a short distance, you come to a door. Carved into the wood, you see:

TULLOCH: STRUCTURES AND RULES DO NOT DENY AGENCY, THEY PRODUCE ITS POSSIBILITY.

To go through the door, turn to page 4.

To go back and go the other way, turn to page 3.

:-:-:-:

1.

You are shaken from your reverie by the sound of dogs barking in the distance. It is dark. You are unsure where you are, or where you were.

A soft glow begins to emanate from the walls. You realise you are in a corridor, leading left and right.

Scratched into the wall before you are several lines of text.

TULLOCH: GAMES ARE ABOUT AGENCY. THEY ARE ABOUT GIVING PLAYERS CHOICE AND OPPORTUNITY.

GIDDINGS: AGENCY IS A CRITICAL PART OF VIDEO GAMES' CLAIM TO BE INTERACTIVE MEDIA, FACILITATING HUMAN ACTIVITY AND AGENCY.

CHORUS (FENDT ET AL.): AGENCY CAN BE ILLUSORY.

ALL: THE OPPORTUNITY FOR AGENCY HAS TO BE AFFORDED BY GAMES, THROUGH THEIR STRUCTURE.

To go left, turn to page 2. To go right, turn to page 3.

:-:-:-:

:-:-:-:

To play the game turn the pamphlet upside down

Turn the page to play the game

:-:-:-:

Over the course of the 2019/20 academic year, researchers from the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (BCMCR) have been working in response to the research theme of **Materialities**.

Colleagues from each of the BCMCR's research clusters were asked to create short pieces of writing which capture some of the thoughts, ideas, and discussions which have emerged over the course of the year in relation to the **Materialities** theme.

This work forms the basis of a series of pamphlets which capture the ways in which the theme has shaped / changed thinking within each cluster.

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The Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (BCMCR) was established in 2009 to develop excellent research as a core activity within the Birmingham School of Media. Currently, BCMCR has over 30 research-active staff and 30 research degree students. The Director of the centre is Nicholas Gebhardt, and the Associate Directors are Kirsten Fokert and Dima Saber.

The BCMCR aims to produce distinctive, collaborative work within the field of media and culture research. in the previous Research Excellence Framework process for assessing the UK HE sector, the majority of BCMCR research environment and activities were judged as of a quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

We welcome visiting researchers from across the world and hold regular research seminars which mix presentations from staff, students, and speakers from a range of our collaborative partnerships. Please feel free to contact us if you have a research enquiry.

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