24. Reframing the Backlog: Radical Slowness and Patient Gaming

Rainforest Scully-Blaker

Abstract
This chapter presents the findings of an investigation into /r/patientgamers, a forum for those who play video games well after their initial release. In theory, the community's protracted approach to media consumption seems to resist the neoliberal, late capitalist instrumentalization of leisure time. However, upon closer inspection, I found that many patientgamers experience stresses caused by a framing of play as transactional. Users' nostalgia for their childhoods and the exhaustion caused by their gaming backlogs are shown to be emblematic of how play is ensnared by capitalist logics. However, the patientgamer philosophy still suggests that play may radically slow present modes of media consumption with a view to imagining and even enacting more socially and ecologically sustainable futures.

Keywords: slow gaming, exhaustion, labor, leisure, community, critical theory

On November 11, 2011, Bethesda Game Studios released a long-anticipated installment in their high-fantasy RPG series, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011). It had been four years since the last *Elder Scrolls* game and this, coupled with promotional trailers that teased sprawling landscapes and epic duels with dragons atop frigid peaks, meant that it was easily one of the most anticipated games of the year. The choice to release the game on the almost prophetic 11/11/11 was the proverbial cherry on top and a stroke of marketing brilliance. However, for my purposes, the release of *Skyrim* is only the second-most important thing to happen on this day, although it did act as a catalyst for what tops the list.

Op de Beke, L., J. Raessens, S. Werning, and G. Farca (eds.), *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024
DOI 10.5117/9789463721196_CH24

Figure 24.1: A meme from the /r/patientgamers subreddit.

For many, this was a day to retreat from daily responsibilities and embark on what was sure to be one of the most comprehensive virtual adventures ever made. For others, however, such was not the case. On the same day as *Skyrim*'s release, one *Reddit* user made a post to the website's gaming subreddit entitled "Being Poor Sucks." The post consisted of a meme in the "advice animals" style that featured an image of the Pokémon Slowpoke accompanied by the text "I JUST BOUGHT FALLOUT NEW VEGAS. ANYBODY WANT TO TALK ABOUT THAT?" (see Figure 24.1).

Advice animal memes typically feature an image of something accompanied by a line of text that is implied to be spoken or at least emblematized by the thing in question. Here, Slowpoke, a notoriously sluggish Pokémon with a permanently blank look on its face, is used to connote being behind with the times to humorous effect. Of course, just like being on the so-called cutting edge, there is a proper timing to the Slowpoke meme. In the case of this user's post, the joke is that on 11/11/11, this day of days when everyone is

shirking their usual routines to play this shiny new game, this user cannot afford a copy of *Skyrim* and/or the hardware necessary to play it. Instead, they are happily (and sheepishly) occupying themselves with a slightly older Bethesda game.

Perhaps due to the aforementioned hype around *Skyrim*, the post received a notable amount of attention by *Reddit* standards at the time. Engagement with the post ranged from users praising the poster for their choice of game, to commiserating about consuming video games long after their release. The most upvoted comment in the thread, however, came from someone who wrote, "How about a reddit for people who wait 6–18 months to buy a game because they won't\can't pay full price or have an older machine. r/patientgamers or something?" This comment spawned a chain of others that supported the idea and within thirty minutes, the subreddit r/patientgamers was created. At the time of writing, the community has over 487,000 subscribers and is self-described as:

> A gaming sub free from the hype and oversaturation of current releases, catering to gamers who wait at least six months after release to play a game. Whether it's price, waiting for bugs/issues to be patched, DLC to be released, don't meet the system requirements, or just haven't had the time to keep up with the latest releases.

It seems that while patience can be a virtue, it can also be a necessity.

This chapter shares the results of my investigation into the subreddit /r/patientgamers. It is interested in the ways that this community frames slowness and play and uses this "patientgamer discourse" as a means of making wider claims about the nature of play and its contemporary socioeconomic context. After situating this investigation in the wider context of my research on radical slowness and exhaustion in game culture, I identify the fruits of my analysis—what I refer to as a "cycle" of player consumption. This cycle is made up of three distinct parts: comfort, nostalgia, and the gaming backlog, each of which are discussed in turn. I call it a cycle of consumption, but it is equally one of play and one of dissatisfaction. While I initially looked to r/patientgamers as a potential site of players resisting neoliberal, capitalist trappings of impulse purchases and #self-care, what I found instead was a reification of these values.

However, to dismiss the patientgamer philosophy outright would be short-sighted. I conclude by arguing that the philosophy of the patientgamer is one that has merit for reevaluating our relation to video game play, but not if we limit ourselves to an understanding of play as a transaction of money

and time. Instead, through a praxis I call "radical slowness," this chapter concludes by arguing that a deliberate slowing of our relation to play can be put to work in ways that threaten the status quo instead of reifying it, and in a manner that interrogates not only video game machines, but the larger machines of ideology that drive them.

Literatures of slow life and slow death

My interest in patientgaming emerged out of a larger project of mine that orbits a concept I call "radical slowness." This term draws on the work of queer poet and artist Lora Mathis, who coined the term "radical softness" to refer to the deliberate failure to conceal one's emotions in neoliberal, individualistic society, instead "recognizing the power in vulnerability and repainting the image of strength" through the solidarity of shared experiences (Mathis 2016). While radical slowness is similarly concerned with solidarity and community, my site of deliberate failure is that of speed, labor, and productivity. I define radical slowness as *a deliberate failure to "keep up" with the ever-accelerating rhythm of capitalist society as a political act*. To me, refusals such as these are vitally important praxis for navigating the contemporary moment.

The neoliberal, capitalist logics that underpin our globalized world are failing. In North America, tensions are mounting between a so-called labor shortage and the demand for a living wage (Buffam 2021). Down the road from where I work in Irvine, California, the state government litigates the game studio Activision-Blizzard for its deplorable labor conditions and a corporate culture rife with discrimination and sexual harassment (Fenlon 2021), while local rideshare workers continue to struggle for rights (Eidelson 2021). Their CEO stands to receive $400 million from a Microsoft buyout, the biggest deal in industry history (Tan 2022). Our problems are not limited to social and economic disparities, however.

As Alenda Chang reminds us, "economic and environmental concerns are always intertwined" (2019, 147). The rise of carbon emissions can be traced, in part, to the sheer volume of hours we spend at work (Taylor 2019). If our day jobs are not enough to exhaust us, then climate anxiety certainly will as more and more people become preoccupied by impending ecological collapse (McKeever 2021). It is difficult to be surprised by headlines like "56 Percent of Young People Think Humanity Is Doomed" (Galer 2021). Recently, these concerns found perfect synthesis when a GrubHub employee made headlines after being filmed working during

Figure 24.2: Precarious workers in a flooded street.

a massive flood in New York City (O'Neill 2021; see Figure 24.2), signaling a troubling normalization of weather disasters and their impact on the labor conditions of precarious workforces (Kaplan and Tran 2021). Disparate though these events may seem, they are all symptoms of the same socioeconomic trends, clear indicators of which forms of labor are devalued or obscured and the lengths to which many in a profit-driven market will go to adapt to the threat of ecological extinction rather than combating it.

Challenging though this period of history may seem, there are spaces one might find hope. Scholars of hegemony have argued that it is when a population is most under strain that the greatest potential for change emerges (Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Hardt and Negri 2000). But when a significant portion of the population thinks humanity is doomed and those with the resources to address our societal woes are instead seeking an early exit to the cosmos (Jackson 2021), I find such predictions wanting. Those who stand to benefit the most from systemic change are the least capable of calling that change forth. Many people scarcely have enough energy to earn a living and maintain their health, let alone to take stock of the ways that the promises of society are falling short, let alone to "do something" about it. Apt here is Chang's "disquieting sense that the problem is beyond measurement and therefore redress" (2019, 150). We want change, but we're tired.

I am reminded here of Lauren Berlant on "slow death"—"the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (2011, 95). It is this problem of energy and, above all, *exhaustion*[1] which led me to the concept of radical slowness. While critical theory is not inherently up to the task of dismantling hegemony, I am both unwilling and unable to dispense with the possibility that a better world is possible. Here I look to Kara Keeling's critical and temporal occupation of "'as if'" (2019, 14). To act "as if" meaningful change can be attained is to "[hold] in reserve a radical imagination that approaches the limits of knowledge, not as a problem to be overcome, but as the condition of possibility" (14). Radical slowness is an exercise in what Jenny Odell calls manifest dismantling, "a form of purposiveness bound up with remediation" (2019, 192). Like radical softness before it, radical slowness is a *reclamation*, here of when and why we are at rest, and a *deconstruction* of the classed division between taking one's time and having one's time taken.

From an ecocritical perspective, slowness has been framed as an effective countermeasure to the depletion of resources so characteristic of neoliberal capitalism. This is perhaps most evident in the popular Slow Food movement, for whom "eating well can, and should, go hand in hand with protecting the environment" (Honoré 2005, 59), but it is also reflected by literature concerning the Anthropocene, "a new geological age … in which human impact itself has become the dominant shaping force on the planet" (Heise 2016, 253). Given our species' neglect of this responsibility, contemporary advocates of slowness view it as a "willing readjustment of the body" that pursues a "healing of the self and of the environment" through care and contemplation (Choi 2021, 9). Indeed, this relation between rest and reflection informs my own work on radical slowness and the critical potential of play as a force for challenging a game's logics from within (Scully-Blaker 2019).

This is not to say that slowness is inherently emancipatory. Sarah Sharma traces "the multiple temporalities that underlie the social fabric" to argue that "experiences of time are not just the outcome of individual choices," but in fact a privilege of class (2014, 110). She contrasts figures like the "frequent business traveler" whose time is so valued that it "reorganizes the time of others" to those like the doubly "flexible" yoga instructors who "cobble together several jobs" to earn a living (51). Rob Nixon's account of the incremental, "attritional violence" imposed on the global poor by unhindered

1 In my wider project I associate this exhaustion with the term "zugzwang," originally a chess concept which refers to a board state in which any move will put a player at a disadvantage.

environmental collapse suggests the privilege and naïveté of Slow Food (2011, 2). In a games context, we might distinguish between slow gaming as a twee aesthetic of game design and slow gaming caused by outmoded hardware. Returning to the example of the creation of r/patientgamers, then, it is supremely important that this community emerged out of the lived reality that video games are objects of leisure that not everybody can access. Although not every person who posts to r/patientgamers may know this origin story, it is the root of the discourse that circulates within every post.

To best understand the ways that radical slowness might relate to patientgamer discourse, I employed Foucauldian discourse analysis to "study forms of interaction, meaning making, and cultural production" on the subreddit (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 119). I began by surveying the most popular posts, then sought out threads that used specific terms like "slowness" or "slow play" with a view to approximating a "patientgaming philosophy." Soon, though, an unexpected pattern began to emerge: while many posts discussed individual games that had been released in previous years, others detailed how many players tried, and often failed, to slow down their lives in restful ways through play. Consequently, I looked more closely at these players' apparent impulse to treat their leisure time as work, as well as a relationship between what I call *comfort, nostalgia, and the backlog*.[2] It is through these concepts that I trace the transactional nature of play and the ecocritical potential of radically slowing our relationship to leisure time. Here is what I found.

The escape (and conservatism) of comfort

One common type of post on r/patientgamers is the discussion of *cozy games*. One user described the concept as "those games where, whenever you fire them up and begin a new adventure, there's that warm, embracing feeling that says, 'Welcome Home.' … the 'comfort foods' of gaming." And while "comfort" and "coziness" may not be entirely synonymous with slowness, I quickly found that both words here suggest a stepping out of one temporal affect (constant movement and productivity) and into another (consensual stasis and restoration).

My encounters with posts of this sort immediately call to mind the growing popularity of so-called *wholesome games*, titles such as those Brie Code calls "tend-and-befriend" games, which substitute fight-or-flight

2 I estimate that I read through fifty to sixty threads throughout this process.

Figures 24.3 and 24.4: Screenshots from *Dark Souls* (top) and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (bottom). Despite starkly contrasting mechanics and aesthetics, these are both referred to as "cozy games."

logics for ones that drive you to "protect your loved ones, to seek out your allies, and to form new alliances" (Code 2017). This initial association proved misleading, because while some expected titles did make appearances, I was surprised to find that users highlighted many other games that one would be hard-pressed to call cozy at first glance.

Alongside predictable titles like the farming/life simulator, *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016) (one patientgamer wrote, "you're not in competition with anyone, and for me, it scratches my gardening itch when it's winter and can't be in my actual garden") to Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* game series

(another, "I have great memories of playing it back in 2001. I was fresh out of high school and didn't have many responsibilities"), users listed games like *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011), *Diablo* (Blizzard North 1997), *Goldeneye: 007* (Rare 1997), or even *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios 2002) as cozy games. Given that these titles involve nontrivial amounts of demons, monsters, and killing, I wondered at their being designated "cozy," and at my own mixed feelings around this framing of comfort (see Figures 24.3 and 24.4).

While the state of the world doubtless makes most of us yearn for some sort of reprieve, many writers and designers have pointed out the trouble with monikers like *wholesome gaming* (Renadette 2021). While criticisms vary, one central point is that by labeling a new genre of game and creating a set of formal characteristics for what defines that genre, tastemakers in the wholesome gaming community, particularly the @_wholesomegames Twitter account, belie the fact that *wholesomeness* is not only an aesthetic, but a politic. While designers can of course work to tune wholesomeness to the cause of, say, radical softness, the term "wholesome" has troublingly conservative leanings if one reflects on its trappings in discourses of purity or the traditions of the American heartland whose roots lie in White supremacy (Pennacchia 2017). Even comfort itself connotes stasis—why would someone who is *comfortable* seek change? As I began to read more of the discussion, however, it became clear that comfort was more often a desire than a state of being for patientgamers.

Nostalgia for days (and play) gone by

In speaking of coziness, the lack of competition in *Stardew Valley* seems an intuitive enough reason to feel at ease in that game world, but what about a first-person shooter like *Goldeneye*? To whom does one tend and befriend in a game where most character interaction is mediated by guns and explosives? It was in comments like that of the aforementioned *Animal Crossing* player, for whom the cozy feelings stem from a fondness for simpler days when they were younger and had fewer obligations, that something began to click. There, and even for the *Stardew Valley* player who mentions gardening, play serves as a substitute for an experience they cannot readily return to. Both players find themselves longing for the comfort of a feeling or an activity that they enjoyed in the past.

A similar pattern emerges across discussions of nonintuitive cozy games. In discussing *Contra* (Konami 1987), a side-scrolling shooter game, one user

describes "knowing where every enemy is [and] flowing through it on pure instinct and muscle memory." Another writes that *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998) "feels like a second home" to them. The ability to find a game comfortably restful, here, stems from encountering only what one has encountered before, and the feelings of security and mastery contained therein. Faced with life's uncertainties, players here find comfort in turning away.

I came to frame these discussions and replayings of cozy games as exercises in *nostalgia*—that desire which seeks "the repetition of the unrepeatable" (Boym 2001, xvii). While the reveries of patientgamers may be relatively benign, they, like all nostalgic thoughts, are "fantasies of the past determined by the needs of the present," which "have a direct impact on the future" (xvi). In the context of my concern with energy and exhaustion as an obstacle to revolution, I view nostalgia as a site of expenditure that binds us to an idealized version of the past that then poisons our present and often gets carried into the future. We might say that nostalgia engenders celebration of one aspect of something without reflection on the whole. Consider, for example, Carly Kocurek's (2015) work on gamer nostalgia as a reification of hegemonic masculinity, or Annie Kelly's (2017) suggestion that the alt-right owes much of its growth to the idealization of a time that never existed, or indeed recall the ties between wholesomeness and White supremacy noted above. For whom were the "good ol' days" actually good?

Perhaps this is part of what Sharma meant when she wrote that "slowness is suspect" (2014, 111). By shifting their attention from a troubled present to an idealized past, patientgamers, whether intentionally or not, turn away from the possibility of a better future. Following Berlant, the seeking of comfort in nostalgic games is a cruel optimism—"the object that draws [the patientgamer's] attachment actively impedes the aim that brought [them] to it initially" (2011, 1). While the patientgamer's resistance to marketing hype and their intrinsic critique of the ever-accelerating cycles of media consumption both have the potential to be read as ecocritical, anticapitalist actions, this was clearly not a thriving part of the discourse.

Reading on, I began to recognize that many of the conversations between users were still grounded in a transactional framework—beyond lack of money or time, many cited rushed development cycles and unpolished releases to justify waiting for a game to "get good" before ultimately purchasing it. Nowhere was this clearer than in threads discussing the gaming backlog.

The backlog and the transactional nature of play

Video games and indeed all leisure activities are a privilege to which we all have varying levels of access. And while money is certainly one of the most important barriers to entry (consider our proto-patientgamer and *Skyrim*), patientgamers who cannot afford to purchase a brand-new game can still generally afford something else; consider our proto-patientgamer and *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010). In the early stages of my research into the subreddit, I was surprised to learn that it emerged out of a player's limited finances since many of the threads that I had found were about a lack of an entirely different sort—time.

In one thread titled "Gamers above 30: Do you find your ability to game for longer periods of time has lessened as you've aged?" the poster writes that their "ability to play for many hours just isn't there anymore." Elsewhere, another patientgamer writes that they are "becoming an impatient gamer" and "miss having the drive and excitement to play a game for hours on end, forgetting about the world!" These and many other users share an anxiety around the relation between video game play and time, whether feeling that they do not have enough time to play or whether they are no longer able to play as much as they used to. There is definitely nostalgia at work here, but I do not believe that this fully captures why some players feel so discouraged by this apparent shift in their relation to play.

To begin unpacking this, I do not think it controversial to say that video game play is often framed as a transaction. One need only look to the primordial gaming "wisdom" that draws a direct line between the price of a game and its playtime to understand what I mean. While multiple models of game consumption exist, in general a player spends money with the understanding that they will also spend leisure time later and in return the video game confers something in kind. The expected return on investment here is necessarily subjective—"fun," "entertainment," or even something like "gaming capital" all mean different things to different people (Consalvo 2007, 4). Video game play is therefore an investment of both one's money and one's time. But what does it mean to be *invested* in what many consider to be a voluntary leisure activity?

Part of what interests me here is the value players place in *having played a game*, or rather, how players discuss their *not-playing*, specifically the anxieties and the exhaustion that emerge from this on r/patientgamers. To me, accounts from users who describe "playing three games at once in order to finish all of them more quickly" so that they can move on to other titles recall Georgio Agamben's claim that all human activity in the contemporary

moment, even rest and leisure (he uses the term "*menuchah*"), ultimately "aims toward production" (Agamben 2011, 105). In this framing, all leisure is productive in that it offers the body a necessary rest so that it may then do more work. However, for many of these players, their play seems to become worklike in even more pernicious ways.

In *The Art of Failure*, Jesper Juul has no sections devoted to time. Despite this, time comes up repeatedly when he discusses *why* failure in games is something we wish to avoid, which, unsurprisingly, also ties to the notion of play as an investment. "To play a game is an emotional gamble," he writes, "we invest time and self-esteem in the hope that it will pay off" (2013, 14). In leisure as in life, time is a finite resource and so when we play games, Juul argues, we are putting that time on the line and betting that we will eventually achieve success. Cruelly enough, the only option Juul offers (other than the implicit choice of giving up) is to keep playing.

He writes, "when we begin playing a game with a completable goal, we assume the flaw of being someone who has not completed the game yet" (117). If the value that comes from a game emerges in the play, then anyone who has not-yet played a game they purchased is arguably a failure, not just with reference to the video game's metric for success, but with reference to the larger "game" of spending money and reaping a return. Beyond Agamben's sense of the role of leisure, we see that play itself falls prey to the capitalist logics of efficiency and productivity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the concept of the gaming backlog.

Within popular discourse, the term "backlog" refers to "an accumulation of tasks unperformed or materials not processed" (Merriam-Webster n.d.). In the context of r/patientgamers and game culture as a whole, a backlog generally refers to the games one has purchased but not played/completed. However, as is surprisingly often the case, our contemporary sense of the word "backlog" is exactly the opposite of what it originally meant. In the seventeenth century, the term "backlog" emerged to describe a literal "log placed at the back of a fire to keep a blaze going and concentrate the heat" and by the nineteenth century, it was also employed more figuratively to refer to "something stored up for later use" (Harper n.d.).[3] Up until at least the twentieth century, then, the word referred to something that was desirable to hang on to, whether in reserve, or as a base from which something could grow and flourish. Today, it refers to something we seek to minimize instead of maximize.

3 Interesting note for etymology nerds: Harper speculates that this figurative sense of the term could stem from the use of "log" in "logbook."

And so, with the gaming backlog, one imagines the player as a clerk with a slew of games in a *to play* pile and the weight of fatigue on their brow as they work to move games into their *played* pile. Critically, while we may speculate on the various reasons people play games, the contemporary sense of the term "backlog" presents the idea of reducing this *to play* pile as an end in itself. Play here serves to reduce the size of the backlog and with it, the corresponding feelings of guilt and exhaustion around being unproductive players who are not getting enough value out of their transactions. Whether clearing one's backlog actually relieves these negative emotions is another matter entirely.

One of the longest and most upvoted posts on r/patientgamers is an account of one player's efforts to empty their backlog, "to finally be free."[4] After a summer of play and sixteen finished games, the user called their success "the single worst mistake I have ever made in my fucking life," explaining that the project resulted in "utterly ruining the fun and wasting hundreds of hours of [their] own time." They go on:

> Most of you have probably heard that if your hobby becomes a chore, you're doing something wrong. It's the truth, and I learned it the hard way. I don't feel any more accomplished than I did before beating my backlog. Before, I felt overwhelmed with having a list of hundreds of hours worth of content to slog through. Now I feel angry at myself for basically throwing away over two months worth of potentially productive energy, for what purpose exactly?

This user espouses certain implicit values around how one is supposed to play a game and what the proper division should be between one's organized life and one's play in a manner that recalls neoliberal principles of self-management. The onus is on the player-consumer to properly conduct their transactions within the free market of video games. Rather than questioning the origins of their backlog anxiety, then, this user dismisses it.

Implicit here and also explicitly expressed by many on the subreddit is that one's energy could be more productively expended while still playing games, albeit at different paces, with different reasons, or of entirely different sorts. For every thread I read about backlog anxieties and not finding games fun anymore, I found others arguing that games are meant to be enjoyed and recommending other virtual worlds that might be more resistant to

4 Though the post has since been deleted, it can be accessed via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (https://archive.org/web).

instrumentalization, including those threads of so-called cozy games that I discussed above. And while such responses are well-meaning and make good sense in the contexts from which they emerge, if we take a step back, a pattern begins to take shape which makes me doubt that a solution can be so forthcoming.

Conclusion: Making and breaking a cycle

I have described three distinct areas of anxiety expressed by users on r/patientgamers and rooted in the concepts of comfort, nostalgia, and the backlog:

- The existential dread of social, economic, and environmental crises along with the dominant framing of leisure time as a reprieve from such concerns leads many to desire comfort, which some patientgamers seek in cozy games
- The unrealizable promise of a rosier past with nostalgic older games and the thwarting of that promise when the material realities of users prevent them from playing like they used to
- The guilt and exhaustion that emerges around collecting too much of a backlog of games and leaving the transaction of money and time for enjoyment unfulfilled

I view these three discursive threads as constitutive of a cycle. To begin, a player buys a game. In the case of r/patientgamers, it may be to (re)visit a specific comfy title or to rekindle their enjoyment of play, but it is always in service of getting the most out of their leisure time. This instrumentalization of play, coupled with the necessary instrumentalization of the rest of one's life that comes with being a neoliberal, capitalist subject, limits the player's capacity for leisure time, so a backlog begins to form. This leads to feelings of guilt and exhaustion for not getting enough value out of one's monetary investment due to their inability to invest time. Play is reframed as a means of reducing one's backlog. The guilt of the backlog, satisfied largely by reducing one's *to play* pile, cannot be assuaged all that quickly and the nostalgia for one's youth returns (if it ever left), along with its corresponding desire to purchase yet another game, and the cycle repeats.

While I initially hoped that r/patientgamers might house players whose attitudes towards video games and leisure time were akin to radical slowness, instead this alternative way of playing is propelled by the same transactional

framework that drives other, less patient ways of playing. Even so, I do not want to dispense with the patientgaming philosophy. This approach to games has value for the ways it challenges the regime of endless novelty and growth in the games industry and indeed culture at large. That so many on the subreddit found comfort to be temporary and their nostalgia to be unrepeatable makes sense if we reflect on the impossibility of extricating ourselves from a cycle without addressing the root cause of it. And as for the gaming backlog, history (and the dictionary) tells us that there are other, more patient ways to frame such a surplus of games.

In a discussion of games, time, and queerness, Christopher Goetz articulates a critical potential grounded in the video game's "pure wastefulness of energy and time spent outside the narrow strictures of hetero-reproductivity" (2017, 240). Games, in their apparent frivolity, become a site of critical stasis, a *trifling*[5] with the dominant that reorients the player from a (re)productive subject to one that operates apart from or even against hegemonic norms. I agree with Agamben, that games and leisure time necessarily *do work*, that they are *productive*, whether economically, biopolitically, or ideologically. Through Goetz, radical slowness, and the patientgaming philosophy, however, I argue for a more sustainable model of play, one that is not *productive* of neoliberal, late capitalist values.

From my observations, I contend that comfort, nostalgia, and the backlog are not ills in themselves—rather, it is the framing of play as a transaction which brings out the worst in these concepts. Out of a desire to work "as-if" change is possible, then, I advocate for rescuing Juul's state of "not-yet" successful and, following Goetz, call to inhabit that state for as long as possible, perhaps in perpetuity. For those who make up r/patientgamers, this might be as simple as taking one's time with games guilt-free, reframing the backlog as a stockpile of leisure time and not an investment to be capitalized upon. While my framework might implicitly endorse slow play practices, even speedrunning, the practice of completing a game as quickly as possible, represents an anti-productive, even sustainable dilation of playtime, since behind every five-minute speedrun are thousands of hours of practice.

As a player and scholar of games, I know that they are not a waste of time to those playing them, but it is my hope that they can waste the time of those who would see us spend it laboring for them while the world burns and floods simultaneously. While many authors (including a number included in this volume!) have done well to argue for the ways game design can become

5 Here in the sense used by Bernard Suits (2014)—one who recognizes rules, not goals, the institution of the game, but not its claims.

more ecocritical and espouse values that align with sustainability and degrowth, I believe there is more to be done. As McKenzie Wark reminds us, games are not just designed media objects, they are "the very form of life and death and time itself" (2007, 6). This is not solely a problem to be addressed by design—we must also scrutinize how and why we play—both in virtual worlds and the "games" of everyday life.

Through patientgaming and radical slowness, I see the critical potential of the player-consumer becoming a trifler within the larger entertainment complex. By slowing their engagement with the market and lingering with apparently outmoded software, I argue that they work *on* and *at* play in ways that threaten the status quo instead of reifying it and in a manner that interrogates not only video game machines, but the larger machines of unsustainable ideology that drive them. Through such efforts to take one's time before one's time is taken, I argue that radically slow play may allow one the time and space to imagine, and perhaps enact, alternative modes of being which refuse a slow death and embrace a collective flourishing. Who can say where we might start? Perhaps such changes to how we consume media can ultimately impact how we produce that media to begin with. Given the continued efforts towards unionization in the games industry and the growth of workers' co-ops and other more sustainable models of development, the sentiment that games should not be built at the expense of those who make them, or indeed the world we live in, is stronger than ever.

Like slowness, patience is an ambivalent concept. For every instance of someone being patient with others as a show of kindness and care, there are many others in which those at the margins are told or simply forced to "be patient" with institutions, while it is determined whether they are people worth tending to. Perhaps patience may always be a virtue, but through radical slowness my hope is that we might eliminate this sort of necessity.

Ludography

Animal Crossing (game series). 2001–2020. Nintendo. Multiplatform.

Contra. 1987. Konami. Nintendo Entertainment System. Arcade.

Dark Souls. 2011. FromSoftware. Bandai Namco Games. Multiplatform.

Diablo. 1997. Blizzard North. Blizzard Entertainment. Multiplatform.

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind. 2002. Bethesda Game Studios. Bethesda Softworks. Multiplatform.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. 2011. Bethesda Game Studios. Bethesda Softworks. Multiplatform.

Fallout: New Vegas. 2010. Obsidian Entertainment. Bethesda Softworks. Multiplatform.

Goldeneye: 007. 1997. Rare. Nintendo. Nintendo 64.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. 1998. Nintendo. Nintendo 64.

Stardew Valley. 2016. Concerned Ape. Multiplatform.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 2011. "Hunger of an Ox." In *Nudities*, 104–112. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce et al. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Buffam, Robert. 2021. "Island Restaurants Raise Wages to Address Labour Shortage." *CTV News*, July 21, 2021. https://vancouverisland.ctvnews.ca/island-restaurants-raise-wages-to-address-labour-shortage-1.5518076.

Chang, Alenda Y. 2019. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Choi, Myung-Ae. 2021. "The Power of Slowness: Governmentalities of Olle Walking in South Korea." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47 (2): 562–576. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12521.

Code, Brie. 2017. "Slouching toward Relevant Video Games." *GamesIndustry.biz*, March 8, 2017. https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2017-03-08-slouching-toward-relevant-video-games.

Consalvo, Mia. 2007. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1980. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Eidelson, Josh. 2021. "The Gig Economy Is Coming for Millions of American Jobs." *Bloomberg*, February 17, 2021. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-02-17/gig-economy-coming-for-millions-of-u-s-jobs-after-california-s-uber-lyft-vote.

Fenlon, Wes. 2021. "Everything That's Happened Since the Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Went Public." *PC Gamer*, November 16, 2021. https://www.pcgamer.com/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-controversy-timeline-explained.

Galer, Sophia Smith. 2021. "56 Percent of Young People Think Humanity Is Doomed." *Vice*, September 13, 2021. https://www.vice.com/en/article/88npnp/fifty-six-percent-of-young-people-think-humanity-is-doomed.

Goetz, Christopher. 2017. "Queer Growth in Video Games." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, 239–248. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Harper, Douglas. N.d. "Backlog." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. https://www.etymonline.com/word/backlog.

Heise, Ursula K. 2016. "Slow-Forward to the Future." In *Postmodern/Postwar—and After*, edited by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden, 251–259. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Honoré, Carl. 2005. *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*. New York: HarperCollins.

Jackson, Tim. 2021. "Billionaire Space Race: The Ultimate Symbol of Capitalism's Flawed Obsession with Growth." *The Conversation*, July 20, 2021. https://theconversation.com/billionaire-space-race-the-ultimate-symbol-of-capitalisms-flawed-obsession-with-growth-164511.

Juul, Jesper. 2013. *The Art of Failure*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Kaplan, Sarah, and Andrew Ba Tran. 2021. "Nearly 1 in 3 Americans Experienced a Weather Disaster This Summer." *Washington Post*, September 4, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/09/04/climate-disaster-hurricane-ida.

Keeling, Kara. 2019. *Queer Times, Black Futures*. New York: NYU Press.

Kelly, Annie. 2017. "The Alt-right: Reactionary Rehabilitation for White Masculinity." *Soundings* 66: 68–78. https://doi.org/10.3898/136266217821733688.

Kocurek, Carly. 2015. *Coin-Operated Americans*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Mathis, Lora. 2016 "Vulnerability as a Healing Force." *Hooligan Magazine*, June 21, 2016. https://www.hooliganmag.com/features/2016/6/21/vulnerability-as-a-healing-force-j6bxj.

McKeever, Vicky. 2021. "Nearly Half of Young People Worldwide Say Climate Change Anxiety Is Affecting Their Daily Life." *CNBC*, September 14, 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/09/14/young-people-say-climate-anxiety-is-affecting-their-daily-life.html.

Merriam-Webster. N.d. "Backlog." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/backlog.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Odell, Jenny. 2019. *How to Do Nothing*. Brooklyn: Melvin House.

O'Neill, Nathalie. 2021. "Hero NYC Delivery Man Kept Pushing through Floodwater, Video Shows." *New York Post*, September 3, 2021. https://nypost.com/2021/09/03/hero-nyc-delivery-man-kept-pushing-through-floodwater-video-shows.

Pennacchia, Robyn. 2017 "America's Wholesome Square Dancing Tradition Is a Tool of White Supremacy." *Quartz*, December 12, 2017. https://qz.com/1153516/americas-wholesome-square-dancing-tradition-is-a-tool-of-white-supremacy.

Renadette, Brian. 2021. "Exploring the Discourse on Wholesome Games." *TechRaptor*, May 14, 2021. https://techraptor.net/gaming/news/explaining-wholesome-games-discourse.

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. 2019. "Buying Time: Capitalist Temporalities in *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp*." *Loading...: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 20 (10): 90–106. https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/241/255.

Sharma, Sarah. 2014. *In the Meantime*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Suits, Bernard. 2014. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Tan, Huileng. 2022. "Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick Set to Receive Almost $400 Million Windfall Payout from Microsoft Sale after Taking a Massive Pay Cut Last Year Amid Company Scandal." *Insider*, January 19, 2022. https://www.businessinsider.com/activision-ceo-bobby-kotick-400-million-payout-microsoft-acquisition-scandal-2022-1.

Taylor, Matthew. 2019. "Much Shorter Working Weeks Needed to Tackle Climate Crisis—Study." *The Guardian*, May 22, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/22/working-fewer-hours-could-help-tackle-climate-crisis-study.

Wark, McKenzie. 2007. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

About the author

Rainforest Scully-Blaker (he/him) earned his PhD in informatics at the University of California, Irvine, in 2022. His research focuses on how video games inform and are informed by culture and the ways that video game design and video game play can both uphold and dismantle hegemony. His dissertation, "Radical Slowness and the Critical Potential of Play," pursues these goals through the lens of exhaustion, slowness, and refusal, among other concepts.