

VIDEO GAMES AS WISH FULFILLMENT: GAMING AS SEEN THROUGH A
SOCIOLOGICAL LENS

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation recontextualizes a variety of sociological theorists and places them into conversation with the medium of video games. The primary aim of this dissertation is to bring a sociological perspective or lens to bear on the topic of video games and their role in the mental health of the individual playing them. Particular emphasis is given to exploring why people choose to play video games, and what about that process interacts with both the individual and their social experience of what can be broadly defined as anxiety or “stress.” This project takes a two-pronged approach to tackling this question. First asking to what extent our society is “stressed out” and what might be some of the major causal factors in that stress. Secondly, it will explore how video game play and use interacts with stress or anxiety, and what its potential benefits, harms, or unexpected impacts might be, and if it has potential efficacy as a kind of intervention to aid individuals in their stress and anxiety management. This dissertation contains an exploration of magic, from the standpoint of Emile Durkheim and Daniel O’Keefe in contemporary society, how it relates to stress, and how video games themselves are magical. It also explores how society comes to be “stressed out” and anxious, and how that stress can work to create both conscious and unconscious channels of desire in individuals, primarily utilizing the viewpoints of David Riesman and Sigmund Freud. Finally, it offers detailed examples of how video gaming interacts with the concepts introduced regarding stress, and how video gaming has the potential to operate either beneficially or harmfully, depending greatly on the social context they operate within.

DEDICATION

To Mollie, I could not have done this without you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation has been many years in the making. I have always been interested in asking *why* types of questions, much to the chagrin of many of my relatives when I was young, so it is only natural I feel that, as a gamer myself, I ended up trying to tackle why people play video games. As an economics undergraduate, I first started to try and answer this question in an undergraduate thesis and was quickly informed by my thesis advisor that what I was doing was in fact not economics, but sociology. Being a naturally inquisitive person, I decided to dip my toes in the world of sociology.

I soon was introduced to Professor Stjepan Mestrovic and Professor Holly Foster, whose courses on religion and criminology were simply inspiring. One thing led to another and I found myself as a sociology graduate student, where I met Professor Alex McIntosh, whose courses proved to be equally engaging. Thanks to these wonderful scholars, I also was introduced to the world of philosophy, and had the privilege of studying under Professor John J. McDermott, who's influence and encouragement I will always be grateful for. It was through Professor McDermott that I was able to meet Professor Gregory Pappas, whose insight, encouragement, and enthusiasm have helped to make this dissertation possible. All of these wonderful scholars have been an excellent committee, and this work has been made far better because of their advice, input, and encouragement.

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NOMENCLATURE

PC	Personal computer, primarily used for gaming
PS3/4	PlayStation 3/4
VR	Virtual Reality
RPG	Role Playing Game
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Game
FPS	First-Person Shooter
RTS	Real Time Strategy

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 What This Project Is About

The primary aim of this dissertation is to bring a sociological perspective or lens to bear on the topic of video games and their role in the mental health of the individual playing them. Particular emphasis is given to exploring why people choose to play video games, and what about that process interacts with both the individual and their social experience of what can be broadly defined as anxiety or “stress.” This project will take a two-pronged approach to tackling this question. First asking to what extent our society is “stressed out” and what might be some of the major causal factors in that stress. Secondly, it will explore how video game play and use interacts with stress or anxiety, and what its potential benefits, harms, or unexpected impacts might be, and if it has potential efficacy as a kind of intervention to aid individuals in their stress and anxiety management. This dissertation has three primary “movements” in tackling these two questions. The first found in Chapter III, being an exploration of magic, from the standpoint of Emile Durkheim and Daniel O’Keefe in contemporary society, how it relates to stress, and how video games themselves are magical. The second, found in Chapter IV, being an exploration of how society comes to be “stressed out” and anxious, and how that stress can work to create both conscious and unconscious channels of desire in individuals, primarily utilizing the viewpoints of David Riesman and Sigmund Freud. The third and final movement, found in Chapters V-VIII will dive into detailed examples of how video gaming interacts with the concepts introduced in the first two

movements, and how video gaming has the potential to operate either beneficially or harmfully, depending greatly on the social context they operate within. These chapters will include in depth examples from a variety of video games to help illustrate the themes introduced in the first two movements. A broad outline of this question will be introduced at the conclusion of this chapter and explored in more depth in later chapters.

It is important to note that while some of the existing research examining video games has attempted to answer the questions surrounding video games and motivation, essentially asking *why* people play video games, and what about them might be aiding in anxiety or stress relief; much of the research surrounding video games has been strongly pejorative, primarily working to identify and analyze the potential negative effects of video gaming. Most research has prominently focused on the relations between video gaming and aggression, social isolation, and addiction or overuse.¹ Further, attempts to answer the *why* question of motivation in video game play have been predominately psychological in their approach, often relying on self-determination theory, flow theory, gamification, or similar approaches.² Sociology as a discipline has had little to say surrounding gaming broadly, and even less regarding the relationship of video games to stress and trauma, despite the fact that the experience of gaming rarely occurs in a

¹ Anderson and Bushman, “Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Scientific Literature”; Carnagey, Anderson, and Bushman, “The Effect of Video Game Violence on Physiological Desensitization to Real-Life Violence”; Anderson and Dill, “Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life.”

² The work seen in McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* is an excellent example of this. It is a wonderful read, but leaves the sociological perspective dramatically underutilized.

vacuum. The series of choices that culminate in the act of video gaming; the purchase of a video game system, the purchase of games to play on said system, and then the dedication of time and financial resources to the gaming process is experienced and lived out in a social context. This is a context which often interacts with and responds to, societal pressures and mechanics. Exploration of these relationships and how they can relate to both conscious and unconscious motivation, and how people can be *driven* to play games as well as motivated have left the sociological component rather underutilized, something this project attempts to remedy.

In addition, we presently, we live in an age of anxiety, depression, and rising rates of suicide. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that an estimated 19.1% of U.S. adults have had an anxiety disorder in the past year, and that an estimated 31.1% of U.S. adults experience an anxiety disorder at some time in their lives. They also report that anxiety is equally impactful for adolescents, with an estimated 31.9% of adolescents (aged 13-18) having an anxiety disorder as well.³ In addition, nearly 40% of Americans report being more anxious than in years prior, and consequently, we have seen rises in the rate of antidepressant use as well⁴. These numbers indicate how much mental illness has rooted itself within our socio-cultural climate. In more extreme cases, the NIMH also reports that 7.1% of all U.S. adults had at least one major depressive episode. Adolescents were even higher with 13.3% of the U.S. population (aged 12-17) also

³ “NIMH » Any Anxiety Disorder.”

⁴ (APA, 2018; Hedegaard H, Curtin SC, 2018; Pratt LA, Brody DJ, 2017)

experiencing a major depressive episode ⁵. In concert with these rising rates of anxiety, and depressive episodes, we see rising rates of suicide as well ⁶. Gaming as a subject of academic research has grown extensively during our age of anxiety, and we are seeing an increase of research examining its role as a positive agent in both psychological and physical wellbeing in response.

1.2 Why Video Games Matter⁷

Video games have rapidly grown to be one of the largest, if not the largest, forms of creative entertainment in the modern world. With revenues exceeding \$152 billion in 2019 alone,⁸ there is no questioning their primacy in the entertainment market. An estimated 75% of U.S. households are home to at least one person who games for more than three hours a week of games. This means that in the United States alone, there are roughly 214 million gamers who play video games regularly. While the common conception of these gamers is often young, teenage males sitting in their parents' houses, the data presents a different picture. The majority of the gaming population is made up of men and women, in nearly equal measure, who are over the age of twenty-five. Further, The Entertainment Software Association's most recent annual report identified that nearly 80% of video gamers find that games not only provide mental stimulation,

⁵ "NIMH » Major Depression."

⁶ Hedegaard H, Curtin SC, "Suicide Rates in the United States Continue to Increase: NCHS Data Brief, No 309."

⁷ All video game related statistics referenced in this section are sourced from the Entertainment Software Association, "The 2019 Annual Report: Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry"; Entertainment Software Association, "The 2020 Annual Report: Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry."

⁸ "The Global Games Market Will Generate \$152.1 Billion in 2019 as the U.S. Overtakes China as the Biggest Market | Newzoo."

but also that games provided them with relaxation and stress/anxiety relief.⁹ It is these numerous individuals who then spend their time and energy, both directly in their gameplay time, and indirectly through their financial expenditure, in the realm of the video game. This then begs the question, why has this particular form of entertainment become so central to the lives of so many individuals across the world, particularly in the United States and other developed countries such as Japan, South Korea, China, Canada, and many parts of Europe; and how is gaming impacting them in such a fashion that the vast majority of gamers find games to be beneficial to their mental health? We will approach this question by looking closely at the nature of the video games themselves, examining how they function as a new form of magic, ultimately acting as a defense mechanism against the social pressures of modern society. It is important to note that the sociological exploration of this information has up to this point been rather sparse. This project takes a two-pronged approach in relation to this discussion. It examines what stress and anxiety the video game player might be experiencing, particularly in relation to their social environment, and how video game play is able to act as a unique tool or intervention to aid in coping in response to said stress and anxiety. It does so by exploring the cultural aspects of the re-contextualized theories of Emile Durkheim¹⁰,

⁹ Entertainment Software Association, “The 2020 Annual Report: Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry.”

¹⁰ Durkheim and Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Emile Durkheim ; Translated and with an Introduction by Karen E. Fields.*

Sigmund Freud¹¹, David Riesman¹², and Daniel O’Keefe¹³ among several others. In particular, an examination of Durkheim’s understanding of religion and magic will be applied to our modern experience of other-directed life as outlined in the work of David Riesman. Further, a recontextualization of both Sigmund Freud’s work on trauma, Durkheim’s perspective on what was later conceptualized by Hans Selye¹⁴ and later Stjepan Mestrovic¹⁵ as stress, and David Riesman’s analysis of other-directed society is explored to move Durkheim’s and O’Keefe’s discussions of magic into the modern age. I synthesize the work of these theorists to explain why video games have come to fulfill deeply set wishes within countless individuals. It is these very wishes which I argue has been a byproduct of the internalized stress or trauma created by an other-directed society, which has led to the rather ubiquitous nature of video games and their role as a tool that can either aid or hinder mental health for countless individuals in modern society. To facilitate this discussion, we now turn to an introduction of the primary theorists and their key work’s relevant to this dissertation. This information is primarily biographical in nature, and is provided to help us engage our sociological imaginations,¹⁶ engaging with both the personal, biographical nature of these theorists, and connecting them to broader, historical and cultural themes that will be explored in detail in this dissertation.

¹¹ Freud, “Creative Writers and Day Dreaming.(Grant Duff, IF Transl.). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. IX: Jensen’s ‘Gradiva’ and Other Works.”

¹² Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*; Riesman, *Abundance for What?*

¹³ O’Keefe, *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic*.

¹⁴ Selye, *The Stress of Life*, 1956.

¹⁵ Mestrovic and Glassner, “A Durkheimian Hypothesis on Stress.”

¹⁶ Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 4.

1.3 The Key Theorists – Meet the Main Characters

1.3.1 Emile Durkheim

One of the primary pillars of theory that this work relies on is the work of Emile Durkheim. A Franco-German Jew born in the year 1858, in Epinal, of what was then known as Alsace-Lorraine, he was descended from a long family line of rabbis. His early education was begun in rabbinical school in the family tradition.¹⁷ While he did not continue the family tradition of becoming a rabbi, he did go on to receive a Ph.D. in philosophy, and to found the world's first department of sociology at the Sorbonne, where he would ultimately publish his major work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. While a sociologist by vocation, Durkheim was sensitive to the religious, philosophical, and moral concerns that his early religious education instilled in him.¹⁸ His philosophical background obtained when he was admitted to the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he studied philosophy, and emphasized a marked appreciation of Arthur Schopenhauer to such a degree that his fellow students took to calling him “Schopen” due to his appreciation for Schopenhauer's work.¹⁹ His work in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* with its in-depth exploration of the origins of religion and magic shows that he was at least scholastically concerned with the origin and impact of these social forces.

¹⁷ Poggi, *Durkheim*; Meštrović, *Emile Durkheim and the Reformation of Sociology*.

¹⁸ Meštrović, *Emile Durkheim and the Reformation of Sociology*, 37.

¹⁹ Lalande, “Allocution Pour Le Centenaire de La Naissance d’Emile Durkheim’,” 23.

Standing as one of the founding fathers of sociology, Durkheim's contribution to this work, and sociology in general cannot be overstated. His works such as *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, *Suicide*, *Moral Education*, and others have contributed greatly not only to this dissertation, but also to the work of other theorists incorporated here as well, such as O'Keefe, whose primary assessment of religion and magic emerges out of the Durkheimian tradition.

Durkheim's approach will be utilized primarily in Chapters II and VIII. In Chapter II, his understanding of religion and magic will be utilized as it is foundational in the approach of Daniel O'Keefe, and one cannot be separated from the other. In Chapter VIII, Durkheim's concept of anomie will be explored, and applied to the gaming environment, with particular focus given to anomic forms of video game play/consumption, and video game production.

There are a variety key Durkheimian terms and concepts that will be utilized throughout this work will primarily be those of Magic and Religion. It is Durkheim's definitions that strongly influenced O'Keefe's work, and by extension this thesis as well. While these terms will be treated in much greater lengths later in this thesis, their foundational impact should be noted.

1.3.2 Daniel O'Keefe

The second theorist this work utilizes as a primary pillar of its approach is Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe. Born in Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1928, and father to Dan O'Keefe of *Seinfeld* fame. O'Keefe was highly educated, receiving his BA from Columbia University and his Ph.D. from the New School of Social Research, in the field

of social research, specifically exploring the sociological implications of magic. Despite his education background, he was not a sociologist by vocation. He spent the majority of his career as an editor for Readers Digest, but nonetheless found time to write his seminal work on magic.²⁰

His work, *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic*, is a synthesis of sociological, psychological, and anthropological research that is heavily built upon the Durkheimian tradition of religious and magical study begun in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and expands it by unifying much of its discussion with Freud's work in psychology. As such, O'Keefe's work stands as an anchor between many of the theorists utilized in this dissertation, providing both context and recontextualization for much of their usage.

The key contributions from O'Keefe will be found in Chapter III, wherein his exploration of magic and its effects will be utilized in my examination of video games as a kind of magical form of entertainment. His work's ability to synthesize and unite a variety of different theoretical approaches and concepts in to one cohesive whole has been invaluable. His synthesis allows this dissertation to take his definitions of magic and utilize them, without having to replicate his entire research process from scratch within this work. It is from this cohesive whole that the bulk of my analysis of video games as magical will stem from.

²⁰ "DANIEL O'KEEFE Obituary - New York, NY | New York Times."

1.3.3 Sigmund Freud

The fourth core theorist of this work is Sigmund Freud. Born in 1856 in Freiburg of the Austrian Empire, Freud spent much of his schooling studying medicine, eventually coming to be the founder of what is now known as psychoanalysis.²¹ While not a sociologist by training his work nonetheless stands as a monumental contribution to the field of sociology, which is distinctly relevant in this thesis. Pioneering the exploration and examination of the unconscious, his work paved the way for much of the discussion that takes place surrounding gaming in this paper.

While leaving a monumental legacy on the field of psychology, his work on religion, culture, and civilization is no less important. His synthesis of both the intimately personal and psychological, with the breadth of society makes his work not only the second key influence on O’Keefe’s text on magic, but also by extension this thesis as well.

Freud provides several key contributions to this work. First and foremost, his analysis of creativity in *Creative Writers and Day Dreaming* forms the foundation for much of the magical argument surrounding gaming in this thesis. Secondly, conception of the subconscious and the ego is integral not only to our argument, but is closely intertwined with O’Keefe’s discussion of magical as well. It is to this discussion of magic, its definition, effects, and implications, that we now turn.

²¹ “Sigmund Freud | Austrian Psychoanalyst | Britannica.Com.”

1.3.4 David Riesman

The third primary theorist that this work utilizes is David Riesman. His impact on this dissertation will primarily be found in Chapter IV, wherein his work *The Lonely Crowd* informs this dissertation's examination of other-directed life in the digital age, in relationship to stress, anxiety, and video games. His work stands as the second primary anchor of addressing the "why are we stressed" part of this dissertation.

Born in 1909 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, we have far more insight into who Riesman was an individual, due in no large to part to his contemporary place in the sociological lexicon, and discussion, and to interviews conducted with him during his lifetime. Interviews which I find help to illuminate his work and help place it in an informative context. Riesman had a self-described unhappy childhood. Of his early life Riesman states:

I would say my childhood was quite unhappy. My mother lived in world in which the only thing that mattered was being first-rate...She viewed my father as second-rate. She viewed me as second-rate.... I was unhappy because I did not satisfy her definitions of worthiness.... Secondly, I was at a school which valued athletics above anything else...I was by school definitions near the bottom in athletics: helpless,...And I should add that my father had the same name as myself—I am a "jr."And this hung over me. There was no place I could go that his name wasn't known... and that put a burden on me I couldn't live up to... He placed other kinds of demands on me. To give you an example, he would bring home on Christmas or a birthday *Twenty Years of Congress* in two volumes and

if I wasn't interested then I failed in his eyes too. I saw him very little. I would say I was not really loved.²²

Of his adolescence Riesman shared similar sentiments. He states, "Socially, I had a few friends and I felt socially as I did athletically: awkward and graceless...I was lonely."²³ Given these experiences, Riesman had strong feelings about his parents and how he had to adjust to their standards. Of this process he states,

How did I adjust? I would say... If you asked my classmates, they would have a different picture than mine. They would think I adjusted well. By my own internalization of parental standards, I did not. Because on my mother's side I had fiercely intransigent standards I could never live up to and on my father's side I had a man whom everyone loved, was extremely popular, extremely gregarious and I had to go forward in order to go backward. When I would bring college friends home they would say what extraordinary parents I had...And I would feel very embarrassed because I couldn't say 'these are very attractive people to meet but not to live with.'²⁴

To further illustrate this point, Riesman noted of his father's neglect that, "...I grew up with rickets—which is shocking. I had pneumonia as a child and nearly died, was constantly bronchitic. I was a sickly child. He took no interest."²⁵ Much of Riesman's

²² Mestrovic, "Reflections upon My Interview with David Riesman," 168–69.

²³ Mestrovic, 170.

²⁴ Mestrovic, 170.

²⁵ Mestrovic, 173.

college years were spent in response to the events of his early life with his parents. He pursued a major in biochemistry to follow in his father's medical footsteps, but it was short-lived, and he ultimately perused a law degree from Harvard Law School. Of this turn in his life he states, "I could never be a professor by their [his parents] standards—that's the last thing I would be. That's why I went to law school. Academic life never occurred to me."²⁶ Riesman's journey to academia was roundabout. Following his law degree, he clerked for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, served as deputy assistant district attorney of Manhattan, and taught law at the University of Buffalo until 1941. During World War II, Riesman spent a brief stint of time working as an executive in a gyroscope manufacturing plant known as the Sperry Gyroscope Company. Following World War II, Riesman found himself teaching social science at the University of Chicago from 1946-1958, whereupon he transitioned to Harvard, where he taught as the Henry Ford II Professor of Social Sciences until his retirement in 1980.²⁷ Riesman's journey is an intriguing one. Despite his professional education as a lawyer, and despite never holding a Ph.D. in sociology, he taught at two prestigious social science programs in the U.S. and became the author of the bestselling sociology book of all time, *The Lonely Crowd*. He was remembered after his death by Orlando Patterson as the last great sociologist, who counted Riesman among other well-known names such as Berger, Bell, Goffman, and Mills.²⁸ The examination Riesman conducts in the *Lonely*

²⁶ Mestrovic, 173.

²⁷ "Guide to the David Riesman Papers 1947-1982."

²⁸ "David Riesman | American Sociologist | Britannica.Com"; Gans, "Best-Sellers by Sociologists: An Exploratory Study"; "Opinion | The Last Sociologist - The New York Times."

Crowd, explores how three primary types of social culture and character evolve throughout society and come to leave far reaching impacts upon individuals and society as a whole is fascinating. While published in 1950, this work is still imminently relatable to our modern day and age, and as I shall attempt to explore, provides incredible insight into the phenomenon of video gaming in our digital age.

Also, of note and to be addressed momentarily, is the close personal and therapeutic relationship that developed between David Riesman and Erich Fromm, during Riesman's time in Buffalo. Riesman's interactions with Fromm gives his thought and work a unique touchpoint to Freudian thought that remarkably integrates the personal, psychological, and the social perspectives into a unique whole. It is to this relationship between Riesman and Fromm that I turn to next.

Riesman and Fromm

Before continuing into an examination of Riesman's understanding of popular culture in society today, it is important to highlight the relatively unexplored relationship that exists connecting Riesman's and Freud's cultural thought. On a personal level, Riesman had a close connection to Freudian and psychoanalytic thought through Erich Fromm. At a difficult time in his life, struggling with the issues of his parents and peers discussed in the preceding section, Riesman was psychoanalyzed by Erich Fromm, and this had a lasting impact on him. Riesman described this impact by stating:

“What saved me was meeting Erich Fromm and being psychoanalyzed by him... I was fatalistic about myself and so I started commuting weekends to New York and seeing Erich Fromm for two hour stretches. Well, it changed my life. We became very

close friends. Enormous friends. We became in a way colleagues even though in a way, you know, his manner of being an analyst was unorthodox... We would have long discussions about Marxism and ideas as well as psychoanalytic sessions. And he was just a tremendous help in dealing with problems both contemporary and from the past... I feel this made all the difference in my life. I feel it saved me, it saved my marriage. I was just 30. I don't think I could have worked with any other psychoanalyst. Fromm touched me emotionally.”²⁹

This personal encounter with Fromm clearly left an indelible mark upon Riesman and translated into Riesman's exposure and interest in connecting psychoanalytic, Freudian thought with social theory. As I hope to explore in my discussion, there are many psychological principles that appear in *The Lonely Crowd* and Riesman's work on culture. In effect, much of Riesman's work can be examined through the lens of “carrying of the torch” so to speak that was set alight by Fromm in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: My Encounter with Marx and Freud*, a uniting of the individual, psychological, and the social. Exploring that the experience of humanity is simultaneously a deeply personal and psychological experience, and one that is undeniably social at the same time. Aside from *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman himself gave several talks in this vein of thought, and also left unpublished writings connecting Freudian, psychoanalytical thought to society at large. This leaves the work of Riesman primed for a continuation of

²⁹ Mestrovic, “Reflections upon My Interview with David Riesman,” 178.

this social psychological approach to understanding society, and open to recontextualizing for the digital age.³⁰

The primary contributions of Riesman's theory to this thesis will be found in his analysis of the cultural shift from inner-directed to other-directed culture. It is this transition, and ascension of the other-directed social type which we shall argue provides fertile ground for both the growth and popularity of video gaming as a distinct form of entertainment not only to the United States, but to any culture impacted by highly Westernized, Occidental culture.

1.3.5 George Ritzer³¹

Born in Upper Manhattan in 1940, George Ritzer has been an impactful, and eclectic figure of American Sociology. His work *The McDonaldization of Society* strongly informs my discussion in Chapter VII, wherein the gaming production process is examined through his cultural perspective. It provides insight broadly into how the recent explosion in the popularity of video gaming has led to potentially unintended, or unbeneficial outcomes in the video game production process.

³⁰ It is also interesting to note that Fromm's approach in *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, is remarkably similar to, and contemporary with, C. Wright Mills' own work in *The Sociological Imagination*. Both theorists approached the idea of integrating the psychological and the social. Fromm linked the Freudian subconscious to the social unconscious, and by extension the social aspects of mental health. Mills took particular note of linking "personal troubles" with "public issues" as well, but sadly, Mills' premature death coupled with the antipathy toward Freud exhibited by Erving Goffman hindered a more full development of this approach in American sociological thought. Chancer, "C. Wright Mills, Freud, and the Psychosocial Imagination."

³¹ Much of the discussion in this section and Ritzer's biographical information are drawn from: Dandaneau and Dodsworth, "Being (George Ritzer) and Nothingness: An Interview."

Ritzer is another contemporary sociologist who we also have a helpful amount of background information on, primarily obtained through interviews, to help contextualize his work. He began his early education at the Bronx High School of Science, which Ritzer described as the kind of place where one would rigorously study science, but also one where, "...we would read a classic novel and then go for a walk of maybe five or ten miles in which we would talk about the book. So we would read *Crime and Punishment* and then walk around Manhattan... It was *that* kind of world."³² It was from this world that Ritzer graduated and ultimately decided to attend business school at the Baruch School of Business in New York. Ritzer performed only marginally during his early business education, a fact which he attributes to the reality that he, "...resented reading what the instructors wanted me to read. I would read what *I* wanted to read, and I would be reading all of the time, but if I had an assignment, I found it very difficult to do it."³³ It was from this self-described marginal undergraduate business school education, that Ritzer ultimately moved to an MBA in Michigan, a decision that ultimately brought him in to a place of employment with the automaker Ford. Ritzer's discussion of his time at Ford is lengthy, but it is during his time there that we can observe a seed of his McDonaldization critique being planted. Ritzer tells a story where during his time at Ford, he was one of three people hired to fill a position due to mainly, a clerical error in Human Resources. He states:

³² Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 85–86.

³³ Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 86.

The assumption was that two of three of us would have turned the job down, but we all accepted. Of course, this is an indication of why the automobile companies are in the crisis they are today. It was like, “okay, all of you come to work,” so we all show up. They give us one office and, literally, we have one job that we have to divide among the three of us! If we had two hours of work a day, it was a lot.³⁴

We can see even in a moment such as this, Ritzer was experiencing the pragmatic, germ-seed of McDonaldization as a concept in his lived experience à la William James and John Dewey during his time at Ford.³⁵ It was during his time at Ford that Ritzer discovered it was ultimately a place where according to Ritzer, one had to, “*look busy*” more than do actual work. Ritzer’s time at Ford was not entirely unhelpful though, as it was ultimately his dissatisfaction with the environment and creative constraint that drove him to apply to Ph.D. programs, a decision which ultimately lead him to Cornell’s program in industrial relations. It was during his time at Cornell looking for a chair/advisor that ultimately connected him with Harrison Trice, a sociologist. This decision was rather fortuitous more than it was planned, as Ritzer stated that his main criterion for choosing an advisor was primarily, “who is the person that is going to leave me alone.”³⁶ He soon discovered that he “loved the stuff”³⁷ though, and quickly

³⁴ Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 88.

³⁵ James, “A World of Pure Experience”; Dewey, “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism”; Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method.”

³⁶ Dandaneau and Dodsworth, “Being (George Ritzer) and Nothingness: An Interview,” 88.

³⁷ Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 89.

became oriented towards the discipline of sociology. It is during this turn of his life, oriented towards sociology, that Ritzer develops the concept of McDonaldization. This was not done in a vacuum though. In the years Ritzer's spent crafting *The McDonaldization of Society*, he spent a good deal of time and effort learning and clarifying a good deal of sociological theory for himself and others. He states:

I have to mention the various theory texts, most now in fifth, sixth, or seventh editions, that I began publishing in the 1980s. I wanted to clarify abstract and obscure theories for undergraduates and beginning graduate students (and in the process clarify a great deal for myself). Generations have learned their theory and prepared for Ph.D. comps using those texts. Over the years, I have revised those books often by learning and writing about new theories.³⁸

This focus on theory was crucial for Ritzer, in regard to this he states, "A colleague, who I highly respect, said to me once that I was probably the only person who had written a sociological theory text who had actually read the sociological theory. I often read things that people have written, and it's clear that they haven't read the original sources; it's second- or third-hand kind of stuff."³⁹ It is during this era of Ritzer's writing that the concept of McDonaldization was birthed. Originally conceived as an article written in 1983, it underwent revision and crafting, and a rather roundabout journey to find a publisher, before finally taking form as *The McDonaldization of Society* in 1992, setting

³⁸ Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 91.

³⁹ Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 84.

the stage for Ritzer to emerge as an emergent critical theorist within sociology.⁴⁰ In particular Ritzer notes that McDonaldization as a concept, amongst his other works, are all one unified thought predominately. Of *McDonaldization* as a text he states, “It’s all really one book actually. It’s all a book about what most worries me and irritates me in the world today. I don’t think I have the sort of burning passion that a Mills or a Marx would have, but there is a sort of development in the social world that I find very troubling.”⁴¹ Of his particular mindset while writing the text of *McDonaldization* and his other works he states:

My mindset remains very Weberian, though. You know, the whole iron cage imagery, and the whole issue of emptiness, and loss, is very central to me... ‘loss amidst monumental abundance’; it’s the same kind of frustration that Weber talks about at the end of *The Protestant Ethic*. This is another way of getting at what concerns me.... What I see when I look around me is obviously monumental abundance. The amount of stuff that exists and, for a large number of people is affordable (largely due to its being dumped on the American marketplace), is incredible. We live amidst monumental abundance, but what are we losing as a result of that?⁴²

⁴⁰ The irony that someone educated as a business major to have such a focus on sociological theory is not lost on Ritzer either. In regard to this he states, “...to me, one of the great ironies is, here I am in a position where I wasn’t trained in the discipline but I have spent much of my life explaining the discipline to others.”Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 96.

⁴¹ Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 94.

⁴² Dandaneau and Dodsworth, 94.

Clearly Ritzer felt quite strongly about the issue of McDonaldization, and sought to anchor his discussion in sociological theory, particularly in the work of Max Weber. It is to the concept of McDonaldization proper, and its broader Millsian “historical” context amidst questions such as these raised by Ritzer, and their Weberian theoretical roots that I shall turn to next.

1.3.6 William James⁴³ and George Herbert Mead⁴⁴

The final two theorists we introduce to our cast of characters are William James, and George Herbert Mead, who operate for the purposes of this dissertation as a “dynamic duo.” The work of both these theorists engages with the idea of the self, with James being considered the father of American psychology (along with an eminent philosopher) and Mead being recognized as one of founders of symbolic interactionism and early forerunners of social psychology within sociology. Further highlighting their interconnectivity, and their connection to other theorists discussed in this dissertation, they both were considered prominent figures within the American Pragmatist movement as well, a movement which Durkheim also engaged with in his work on *Pragmatism and Sociology*.⁴⁵ The primary contribution of both these theorists, regarding the interaction between the individual and the social will be integral to the discussion of video gaming

⁴³ The bulk of the biographic information for James is sourced from “William James | Life, Works, Influence, & Facts | Britannica”; James and McDermott, *The Writings of William James ; a Comprehensive Edition. Edited, with an Introd., by John J. McDermott.*

⁴⁴ Biographic information for Mead sourced primarily from “George Herbert Mead (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)”; Castle, *The Collected Letters of Henry Northrup Castle.*

⁴⁵ Durkheim, *Pragmatism and Sociology.*

and the individual self, found in Chapter V. We will begin with the elder of the two, William James.

James

Born in the Astor House in New York City in 1842, James was the son of Henry James Sr., who was a Swedenborgian minister. His father's religious perspective permeated the James household, and greatly shaped the younger James' outlook and educational experience. James' early education was spent traveling between the Americas and Europe and was quite eclectic. It was also marked by a serious struggle with anxiety and depression.⁴⁶ He dabbled in art under the tutelage of one of the foremost American painters at the time, William Hunt. This passion for art did not stick for any large period of time though, and James found himself bouncing from chemistry to anatomy and other scientific studies at the Lawrence School at Harvard. He tired of this too and interrupted his studies to join the naturalist Louis Agassiz (also the son of a minister) on a trip to the Amazon. James quickly fell ill and disillusioned with the work in the field. He returned to the United States briefly, before departing for Germany in 1867, where he would be introduced broadly to physiology and psychology, the latter of which would become a major passion. By 1872 James was appointed an instructor of anatomy at Harvard, and by 1889 had served as professor of philosophy and was an endowed chair in psychology. During this period of time he wrote the mammoth

⁴⁶ James and McDermott, *The Writings of William James ; a Comprehensive Edition. Edited, with an Introd., by John J. McDermott*, 3–9.

Principles of Psychology.⁴⁷ It was during this period at Harvard that Mead came in to contact with James, and even tutored James' children. It is to a background on Mead that we know turn.

Mead

Born 1863 in Massachusetts, Mead was raised in a devout, Protestant middle-class home. His father, Hiram, was a congregationalist minister, and was descended from a long line of ministers, before becoming a professor and chair of Sacred Rhetoric and Pastoral Theology at Oberlin College. His mother Elizabeth was also involved with religious education and taught at Oberlin as well as serving as president of Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Mead would study at Oberlin from 1879-1883, where upon graduating he held a brief stint teaching grade school for a semester, before working as a surveyor for the Wisconsin Central Railroad for several years. Following this brief derailment, Mead would enroll at Harvard in 1887, which as noted above, brought him into contact with William James as he studied philosophy and psychology. Mead would later move on to studying in Germany, particularly working with the psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, before returning to the United States in 1891 where he obtained a post at the University of Michigan, which ultimately placed him in the same academic environment and context as Charles Cooley, and John Dewey, who both had extensive influence upon the young Mead. By 1894, Mead moved along with Dewey to the University of Chicago where he would teach, with many of his lectures forming the

⁴⁷ James, *The Principles of Psychology*.

foundation of what is one his most well-known works, *Mind Self and Society*,⁴⁸ until his death in 1931. It was during this time that Mead would engage with many of the psychological concepts outlined by William James, but would place them into context with the social world via what Mead would call the “generalized other.” Through this then, Mead then stands as a pragmatist bridge between the primarily psychological thought of William James, and the more sociological thought found in this dissertation, making him an excellent foil to facilitate conversation between these authors. It is due to this that I have paired James with Mead, as not only did James strongly influence the work of Mead, but their work is mutually informative, and for the purposes of this dissertation should be understood as interconnected, particularly in the discussion found in Chapter V.

⁴⁸ Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*.

CHAPTER II

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

2.1 Methods

The methods utilized in this dissertation are twofold. There are several theorists who are being utilized in this work, and I have included for them, as much biographical and personal information as possible. My goal in doing this is not to be trivial but is in fact integral to the first key method of this dissertation. It is an attempt to engage with, and embrace these theorists as whole individuals, and to bring them into dialogue with the topic of video games. I engage with this process much in the spirit of the sociological imagination as outlined by C. Wright Mills. Mills describes the sociological imagination as the ability to understand, "...the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world."¹ To put this succinctly, it is often boiled down to simply, the awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society. This dissertation puts a variety of social theorists into conversation with one another, with myself as the mediating interlocuter between them, anchoring them in the common context of video gaming and digital culture. In placing these theorists in this video game conversation together, I hope to illuminate video gaming in the relatively unexplored and underutilized sociolegal perspective, and emphasize the continuing relevance of many of these theorists in the digital age. In doing so, I am utilizing a kind of hermeneutics, as conceived of by Friedrich Schleiermacher. While Schleiermacher engaged extensively

¹ Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 4.

with religious texts, I employ a kind of secular hermeneutics the likes of which has arisen in a variety of other disciplines,² sociology among them. While obviously being utilized in relation to social as opposed to religious texts, this theory and method of understanding is highly relevant. Put simply, I am engaging in a hermeneutics of gaming and social theory. To this effect then, this dissertation finds itself engaging with video games, and even the act of gaming itself in a postmodern fashion, where video games, the act of gaming, and gamers themselves can be understood as a kind of text to be explored, rich with depth and possibility.³ This approach is in step with other scholars who have also begun to examine Schleiermacher and the method of hermeneutics in light of a postmodern perspective.⁴

Regarding a hermeneutics of social theory, I find it important to emphasize that often, sociological theory is understood as being “objective,” by which I mean a collection of facts, concepts, or ideas to be understood, isolated from the biographic and experiential context of their authors and originators. This dissertation seeks to take a different approach, one that is more novel and hermeneutical in its approach to social theory and theorists.

² Texts such as Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*; Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*; Bauman, *Hermeneutics and Social Science (Routledge Revivals): Approaches to Understanding* provide examples of the impact of secular hermeneutics.

³ The idea of transforming the concept of what a text is can be seen in the likes of Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions*, 25–41.

⁴ See for example Corlew, “Schleiermacher and Romanticism: Ignored Antecedent of Postmodernism?”

Of this hermeneutic process, Schleiermacher himself stated:

...one must first equate oneself with the author by objective and subjective reconstruction before applying the art. With objective reconstruction one proceeds through a knowledge of the language as the author used it.... With subjective reconstruction one proceeds through the knowledge of the author's inner and outer life.⁵

It is to this effort that I wanted to introduce to the readers the theorists utilized in this dissertation. Schleiermacher also noted that any practice of hermeneutics must be informed by an awareness of both the manifest, or linguistic content of a text, which is essentially the shared or in common nature of the language. In addition to the latent, psychological content, which often incorporates many distinct features unique to one particular author.⁶ This approach to understanding the author can be seen for example in Riesman, who engaged with this type of hermeneutical approach, without calling it by that name, in his work on Thorstein Veblen,⁷ wherein he not only examined Veblen's theory, but also explored Veblen's childhood and relationship with his parents. It is in this same vein that we can see within the biographies of many of the theorists discussed in the preceding chapter a kind of religious thread that would have exposed them to this method of hermeneutical thinking as well. Durkheim, James, and Mead, in particular all shared religious backgrounds and educations, that would have exposed them to the

⁵ Schleiermacher, Wojcik, and Haas, "The Hermeneutics: Outline of the 1819 Lectures," 10.

⁶ "Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)."

⁷ Riesman and Veblen, "Thorstein Veblen, a Critical Interpretation."

prominent thinking of Schleiermacher in those disciplines and environments. While they obviously did not proceed into religious vocational or professional work, the sentiment can be clearly seen in the approach and method of their work, with much of their theoretical examinations being seen as a form of secular hermeneutics. Mead in particular made this kind of religiously informed attitude clear in writings to his friend Henry Castle wherein he said:

I shall have to let persons understand that I have some belief in Christianity and my praying be interpreted as a belief in God, whereas I have no doubt that now the most reasonable system of the universe can be formed to myself without a God. But notwithstanding all this I cannot go out with the world and not work for men. The spirit of a minister is strong with me and I come fairly by it.⁸

Durkheim too, was also aware of this dual, hermeneutical nature of understanding, stating in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that “A concept is not my concept; it is common to me and other men... common to all because it is the work of the community.”⁹ This broad hermeneutical understanding is not only integral to this dissertation broadly, but will have strong emphasis in Chapter VIII as well, where we explore Durkheim’s conception of anomie in relation to disordered video gaming.

⁸ “George Herbert Mead (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)”; Castle, *The Collected Letters of Henry Northrup Castle*.

⁹ Durkheim and Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Emile Durkheim ; Translated and with an Introduction by Karen E. Fields*, 435.

The second primary method utilized for this project, is the Durkheimian comparative-historical approach of recontextualization and application of the above-named social theorists, as well as a variety of game studies scholars, to the phenomena of video gaming in contemporary society. Specifically, Durkheim's and these other's theorists will be read as early proponents of the stress concept, and the consequences of stress on society as well as individuals.¹⁰ In addition, analysis of a variety of video games will be utilized to examine the elements of crafted gameplay that interact with the sociological components of interest to this research. I will be recontextualizing Durkheim, the above-mentioned theorists, and other theorists such as William James¹¹, G.H. Mead¹², as cultural theorists relevant to a contemporary society. Further, I shall recontextualize them in a digital environment, vis-a-vis screen culture, as opposed to their original contexts of oral and written cultures as conceived by the theoretical approaches of David Riesman¹³ and Marshall McLuhan.¹⁴ I will apply this recontextualized reading of these theorists to issues surrounding video games and mental health and I will identify certain concepts that will be useful in this analysis. Particular examples will be explored throughout the text, but Chapter VI will introduce a variety of games whose prominence in the gaming community and marketplace, or unique design, allows them to provide a large amount of analytical utility.

¹⁰ Selye, *The Stress of Life*, 1956; Mestrovic and Glassner, "A Durkheimian Hypothesis on Stress."

¹¹ James, *The Principles of Psychology*; James, "A World of Pure Experience."

¹² Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*; Mead, "The Philosophy of the Present."

¹³ Riesman, *Abundance for What?*

¹⁴ Marshall and Quentin, "The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects."

2.2 Literature Review of Game Studies Broadly

Exploring the entire body of video game research is beyond the scope of this dissertation. As noted above, game studies broadly has received an increasing amount of attention, but much of that attention has been heavily psychological in its approach, informed very little, if at all, through a sociological lens or perspective. Within this primarily psychological context research of note to this dissertation's interest regarding video gaming in its relation to mental health, are which have examined everything from extensive studies debating the influence of games on aggression and other harmful effects,¹⁵ learning¹⁶, gender,¹⁷ thinking¹⁸, gaming culture itself¹⁹, MMORPG's²⁰, addiction (in relation to the addition of gaming addiction to the ICD-11)²¹ and

¹⁵ Anderson and Bushman, "Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Scientific Literature"; Carnagey, Anderson, and Bushman, "The Effect of Video Game Violence on Physiological Desensitization to Real-Life Violence"; Anderson and Dill, "Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life."; Ferguson, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: A Meta-Analytic Review of Positive and Negative Effects of Violent Video Games"; Grüsser, Thalemann, and Griffiths, "Excessive Computer Game Playing: Evidence for Addiction and Aggression?"; Sherry, "The Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggression: A Meta-Analysis."

¹⁶ Gee, "What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy."

¹⁷ Cassell and Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*.

¹⁸ Johnson, "Watching TV Makes You Smarter."

¹⁹ Shaw, "What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies"; Wright and Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*.

²⁰ Ondrejka, "Finding Common Ground in New Worlds"; Caplan, Williams, and Yee, "Problematic Internet Use and Psychosocial Well-Being among MMO Players"; Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*; Yee, "The Demographics, Motivations, and Derived Experiences of Users of Massively Multi-User Online Graphical Environments"; Yee, "Motivations for Play in Online Games."

²¹ Charlton and Danforth, "Distinguishing Addiction and High Engagement in the Context of Online Game Playing"; Ducheneaut et al., "Alone Together?: Exploring the Social Dynamics of Massively Multiplayer Online Games"; Li and Chung, "Internet Function and Internet Addictive Behavior"; Ng and Wiemer-Hastings, "Addiction to the Internet and Online Gaming"; Seay and Kraut, "Project Massive: Self-Regulation and Problematic Use of Online Gaming"; "ICD-11 - Mortality and Morbidity Statistics"; Kelly, *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games: The People, the Addiction and the Playing Experience*; Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, "A Meta-Analytic Review of Experiments Examining the Effects of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation."

emotional amelioration ²² to name but a few. Those that have looked at video games through a cultural lens, have done so only broadly.²³ Most of these approaches were not theoretically informed in general, and not informed by the synthesized and recontextualized theories of Durkheim, Freud, Riesman, or O’Keefe which I utilize in this dissertation.

2.3 Definitions of Stress

Up to this point, the use of terms such as stress, have been employed rather loosely, and while the intention of this dissertation is to use these terms broadly, I want to take a moment to provide some context for how this dissertation makes use of these terms for the reader, and define these terms more directly. In so doing I hope to center the reader so that moving forward they have a rooted understanding of this dissertation’s use of these terms in later chapters.

It should also be noted that my definition of what a video game is intentionally broad, and can be summarized as an electronic game that involves interaction with a user interface or input device, such as a joystick, controller, keyboard, or motion sensing devices, to generate visual feedback on a two- or three-dimensional video display device such as a TV set, monitor, touchscreen, or virtual reality headset. This definition can

²² Snodgrass et al., “Restorative Magical Adventure or Warcrack? Motivated MMO Play and the Pleasures and Perils of Online Experience”; Snodgrass et al., “A Vacation from Your Mind: Problematic Online Gaming Is a Stress Response.”

²³See for example Muriel and Crawford, *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*; Crawford, “Forget the Magic Circle (or towards a Sociology of Video Games).”

encompass acts of gaming performed on something as small as smartphone, or other handheld device or as large as a personal computer or a video game console.

In regard to stress, this dissertation has as its focus the synthesis of several sociological theories and approaches related to stress, into a cohesive whole, with applicability to the act of video gaming. The use of the term stress in this dissertation has been informed by several theorists and pieces that I wish to acquaint the reader with so they can better understand my intentions when synthesizing their work, and employing the concept of stress in my discussion, and how I have developed the perspective utilized in this dissertation.

Beginning with stress, we turn first to Hans Selye, widely regarded as one of, if not the first individuals to identify the biological stress process in a laboratory setting. Selye's work, *The Stress of Life*²⁴ is a fascinating read that integrates everything from detailed laboratory experiments, to philosophical reflections by its author on the role of stress in the life course. Selye opens the text by stating of stress, "In its medical sense, *stress is essentially the rate of wear and tear in the body*. Anyone who feels that whatever he is doing—or whatever is being done to him—is strenuous and wearing, knows vaguely what we mean by *stress* [emphasis in original.]"²⁵ While this definition is obviously quite broad, it captures well the general feeling if you will, of stress, and it is this feeling of wear and tear, of being strenuously worn out, that this dissertation makes use of when it discusses the term stress. Selye goes on to say that the response to stress is

²⁴ Selye, *The Stress of Life*, 1956.

²⁵ Selye, 1.

often seen in three stages, (1) the alarm reaction, (2) the stage of resistance, and (3) the stage of exhaustion. The steady maintenance of this cycle particularly of the resistance, is seen as one of the key anchor points of the body's homeostasis.²⁶ He states of this process, "Apparently, disease is not just suffering, but a fight to maintain the homeostatic balance of our tissues, despite damage. There must be some element of stress here,..."²⁷ Selye also notes that the second stage, of resistance, is one which is twofold, and involves either an overpowering of the stressor, or a coexistence.²⁸ This concept of the second stage and its methods should be kept in mind, particularly in the discussion in Chapter III, wherein O'Keefe's understanding of magic as protective is explored as a form of defense or resistance. Finally, in regard to Selye, it is intriguing to note that despite his expertise in the laboratory setting, and lack of training as a sociologist, he was not averse to making sociological-esque comparisons regarding his findings. He states of defensive response in the body, "If we compare inflammation with the defensive reactions of a whole human being, or even a whole nation, we find striking similarities in the over-all pattern everywhere. By recognizing these we may gain more insight into the mechanism and even the philosophy, of defense in general, insight which penetrates far beyond the confines of medicine."²⁹ He would go on to say as well that, "These situations are best appraised by looking at the disturbed unit *from without*, whence you can see its position with a larger context [emphasis original]."³⁰ It is this

²⁶ Selye, 2.

²⁷ Selye, 13.

²⁸ Selye, 114.

²⁹ Selye, 136.

³⁰ Selye, 137.

task of looking at the defense process from without which sociology is imminently well suited, and as such aids his work in finding its place in this dissertation.

The second theorist who has shaped my engagement with the stress concept is Robert Agnew, of the well-known General Strain Theory. In particular, Agnew's concept of what he calls strain, which he defines by stating that is essentially, "relationships in which others are not treating the individual as he or she would like to be treated."³¹ He then further breaks strain down into two sub-categories, the first of which being objective strains, defined as "events or conditions that are disliked by most members of a given group."³² The second category is defined as subjective strains, which he describes by stating that it, "refer[s] to events or conditions that are disliked by the people who are experiencing (or have experienced) them. So, if we state that individuals are experiencing subjective strain, we mean that they are experiencing an event or condition that *they* dislike [emphasis original]."³³ These categorizations, as well as Agnew's observation that often the emotional response of an individual to a strain is most closely linked with subjective strains,³⁴ should be kept in mind, particularly in Chapter IV, where Riesman's conception of the other-directed phase of life is explored.

Finally, the work of Mestrovic and Glassner on stress,³⁵ has also been highly formative in this dissertation. In particular, their focus on expanding Durkheim's

³¹ Agnew, "Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency," 48.

³² Agnew, "Building on the Foundation of General Strain Theory: Specifying the Types of Strain Most Likely to Lead to Crime and Delinquency," 320.

³³ Agnew, 321.

³⁴ Agnew, 322.

³⁵ Mestrovic and Glassner, "A Durkheimian Hypothesis on Stress."

conception of *homo duplex*³⁶ which understands humankind through the perspective of a dualism of the individual and the social. Mestrovic and Glassner point out that this dualism is present throughout Durkheim's thought, and can be found in many of Durkheim's writings.³⁷ Durkheim himself states of this dualism,

“The old formula *homo duplex* is therefore verified by the facts. Far from being simple, our inner life has something that is like a double center of gravity. On the one hand is our individuality—and more particularly, our body on which it is based... On the other is everything in us that expresses something other than ourselves. Not only are these two groups of state of consciousness different in their origins and their properties, but there is a true antagonism between them. They mutually contradict and deny each other.”³⁸

Durkheim goes on to say at the conclusion of this essay that as civilization continues to grow, so too will this antagonism. He states of this, “To the contrary, all evidence compels us to expect our effort in the struggle between the two beings within us to increase with the growth of civilization.”³⁹ This predicted increase in tension or antagonism is important to note, as both Mestrovic and Glassner,⁴⁰ as well as Steven Lukes,⁴¹ note that this prediction is similar to the one made by Freud in *Civilization and*

³⁶ Hynes, “Suicide and Homo Duplex: An Interpretation of Durkheim's Typology of Suicide.”

³⁷ See for instance Durkheim, “The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions,” 2005; Durkheim, “Individual and Collective Representations”; Durkheim and Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Emile Durkheim ; Translated and with an Introduction by Karen E. Fields.*

³⁸ Durkheim, “The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions,” 1973, 152.

³⁹ Durkheim, 163.

⁴⁰ Mestrovic and Glassner, “A Durkheimian Hypothesis on Stress,” 1319.

⁴¹ Lukes, *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study.*

Its Discontents, something we wish to keep in mind, particularly in Chapter IV.

Ultimately, Mestrovic and Glassner conclude that it is the tension of these two antagonistic forces which contribute to the stress experience. They state, “It is not merely that stressful events dislocate persons in social structures, like a tornado uproots a tree, but rather something unique to humans occurs. Amid the social dislocation (or relocation) ... individuality bears a problematic relationship to social existence.”⁴²

Ultimately they conclude that Durkheim’s theory is one of balance. It is intriguing to note this principle of balance carries similar notes of what has been noted by the likes of the architect Buckminster Fuller as “tensegrity”⁴³ a portmanteau of the words tensional integrity, implying essentially that structures can be stabilized by continuous tension, and discontinuous compression.⁴⁴ This principle has been shown to be applicable not only to architecture, but to biological sciences as well.⁴⁵ In addition, it occurs naturally in nature as well, such as with Buckminsterfullerene, named after the architect himself, which is the most common allotrope of carbon, and from which the children’s toy “bucky balls” drew their name. Given these examples, tensegrity appears to occur in nature organically, and it is a small leap to apply it social processes creating a kind of “social tensegrity” through the lens of Durkheim’s *homo duplex*. Indeed, future research through

⁴² Mestrovic and Glassner, “A Durkheimian Hypothesis on Stress,” 1321.

⁴³ FULLER, “Tensile Integrity Structures, Patent 3,063, 521”; Fuller, “Tensegrity, Portfolio and Art News Annual, 4, 112-127, 144-148.”

⁴⁴ For interesting architectural examples of the principle of tensegrity in practice see the Kurlipa Bridge in Brisbane, The Montreal Biosphere, Spaceship Earth at Epcot, and the Science World in Vancouver as iconic examples.

⁴⁵ Swanson, “Biotensegrity: A Unifying Theory of Biological Architecture with Applications to Osteopathic Practice, Education, and Research—a Review and Analysis”; Levin, “Tensegrity: The New Biomechanics.”

Durkheim's may prove fruitful in examples of social tensegrity. This tensegrity principle will be relevant to this dissertation's discussion, particularly in Chapters III and IV.

Having introduced the three primary influences to this dissertation's stress concept, we are now equipped to introduce a synthesis of the three, and arrive at our own unique definition of stress. From Selye, we take the straightforward idea of wear and tear on the body. Particularly emphasizing the intuitive nature of what virtually every reader of this dissertation should be able to relate to in an examination of their own experience, that feeling of being worn down, or wrung out. We combine this with Agnew's insights regarding objective and subjective stressors, integrating that to imply that wearing down can occur due to objective stressors which would wear down most members of a group, or subjective stressors, which may only happen to an individual. Of particular note with subjective strains is how Agnew notes that many individuals will differ in their subjective value on objective strains. Essentially, that some people get more wore down by a stressor than others. This leads us to Mestrovic and Glassner, and Durkheim's *homo duplex*, which informs us that the impact of the wear and tear, subjective or objective, is informed by the tension, the tensegrity, between our individual and social natures, and that the wearing down or differing impact of subjective strains can be due to imbalances in that tensegrity.

Combing these three then, we can say for the purposes of this dissertation, that the concept of stress is utilized in such a fashion that it can be understood as: the wear on the individual, somatic or psychic, that has both objective and subjective impact on an individual, and that the subjective impact is in large part due to the imbalance in the

tensegrity of the *homo duplex* of the individual. Ultimately, I hope that the voices of these authors on stress come together to form a chorus for the reader, greater than the sum of their parts. Ideally providing a fresher, fuller perspective, greater than the sum of its parts, on stress as we move into our discussion in future chapters.

CHAPTER III
DEFINITIONS OF MAGIC AND THEIR SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
FUNCTIONS

3.1 What Magic Is

To begin, we must start by attempting to circumscribe our definition of magic for the purposes of this paper. We shall do this primarily by exploring the definitions of religion and magic laid out by Emile Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, then turning to how these definitions have been echoed and utilized by the other primary theorists of this work, namely Freud and O’Keefe.

To begin, Durkheim defines religion by stating, “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”¹ Essentially then, Durkheim describes a religion as that which creates a kind of unity amongst its adherents based on their definitions of what is set apart, i.e. sacred, and what is ordinary or commonplace, i.e. profane. Magic then, is juxtaposed for Durkheim against this definition of religion. Durkheim describes magic by stating,

“Granted, magic beliefs are never without a certain currency. They are often widespread among broad strata of the population, and there are even peoples where they count no fewer active followers than religion proper. But they do not

¹ Durkheim and Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Emile Durkheim ; Translated and with an Introduction by Karen E. Fields*, 44.

bind men who believe in them to one another and unite them into the same group, living the same life. *There is no Church of magic.*”²

This definition is crucial for the purposes of this thesis, as it highlights the individualistic nature of magic and magical action. Magic is capable of all sharing all of the hallmarks of a religion, but it does not create the unity that is the byproduct of religion proper.

This concept of their being type of highly individualistic form of religion, or to use the Durkheimian term, magic, is echoed by Freud in his discussion of neuroses in his *Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices* where he states,

“... An obsessional neurosis furnishes a tragi-comic travesty of a private religion... In view of these resemblances and analogies one might venture to regard the obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart to the formation of a religion, to describe the neurosis as a private religious system, and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis.”³

This definition is striking similar to Durkheim’s, wherein the religious elements are turned inwards, and no church is formed, but instead, magic is practiced.

O’Keefe then works to synthesize these two conceptions of private religion, this is to say, magic, in his work *Stolen Lightning*, and it is from these definitions that much of our analysis stems from. It is to these definitions that we now turn.

² Durkheim and Fields, 42 (Emphasis original).

³ Freud, “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” 19, 25.

3.1.1 O'Keefe's Definitions of Magic

The first definition of magic O'Keefe provides is, that of magic “in the strict sense.” He defines this form of magic by stating that it is,

“...institutions which are widely designated as magical in many societies, which are derived from religion, associated with religion or respond to religion, which are often of a secret or illicit or peripheral nature, or tend at least to organize themselves separately from (or within) religion, more often on a professional-client rather than community relationship, and which tend to serve fractional rather than fully collective ends, especially those of individuals and of subgroups of any collectivity.”⁴

While this definition is quite thorough, and as we shall see later shares some connections to the world of gaming, it is his second definition of magic that we will spend our time discussing primarily. He defines this second type of magic as being, “in the weak sense,” and it encompasses a variety of forms. In general, magic in the weak sense is, “..several things that are very real on symbolic and psychological levels:”⁵ Of particular interest to us for our purposes is a certain subset of ego actions which he describes as being related to magic by stating, “Certain ego actions of the human self which was [are] nourished historically by magical institutions and retains a magical character.”⁶

⁴ O'Keefe, *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic*, 14–15.

⁵ O'Keefe, 11.

⁶ O'Keefe, 11.

3.1.2 *The Three Hallmarks of Magic*

Both of these definitions share three primary hallmarks that define all of magic. The first is that magic is a form of social action. O'Keefe describes this by stating,

“It is action of a certain kind, namely social action that makes something or change something. It is usually effective in some way. Far from being illusory, magic is among man's first actions, certainly his first individual actions...As the discussion will later demonstrate, magic is the beginning of the individual-and when man totally loses these symbolic powers, he loses his ability to act.”⁷

Ultimately then, magic is something that is imminently done, it requires action on the part of the individual utilizing it, is something they do, not something that simply happens to them.

The second hallmark of magic is that it is symbolic performance. This is to say that magic provides humankind with a tool to engage with and ameliorate many of the stresses of life. O'Keefe describes this process by stating,

“Magic combats the uncertainties and dangers of this symbolic universe by giving man control over some of the most potent of the symbols. Man uses this power in his first efforts to get control of his own attentionalities and emotions and hence organize and direct his behavior and the behavior of others.”⁸

⁷ O'Keefe, 34.

⁸ O'Keefe, 40.

From this we can extrapolate that not only is magic simply an action, it is an action which humankind utilizes to empower itself, providing it with control not only of itself, but also of others as well. This facet of magic in particular will be especially potent in the video gaming magic examined in this thesis.

The third and final hallmark of magic for O’Keefe is that it is rigidly scripted. This is to say that magic has a very distinct ruleset it must follow in order to be effective. O’Keefe argues that this is most likely due to the fact that magic borrows much of its power from religious forces, and as such has limitations. O’Keefe describes this by saying, “It has become more rigid, more fixed. The most likely explanation is that something that has been expropriated from its legitimate context because of the effects it has is preserved with rigid detail *lest those effects be lost*.”⁹ He further reinforces this concept of rigidity with a quote from the sociologist Hugh Dalziel Duncan who states, “Magic spells must be handed down, without change. The slightest alteration from the original pattern would be fatal.”¹⁰

For both of these theorists then it is crucial that magic remain static and unchanging. We shall explore further how video gaming follows this logic as well, and indeed, bears all three of these hallmarks. But first, we turn to the mechanics of how specifically magic takes these three hallmarks, and works upon the individual.

⁹ O’Keefe, 65 Emphasis original.

¹⁰ Duncan, *Communication and Social Order; with a New Introduction by Carol Wilder.*, 318.

3.2 How Magic Works

For O’Keefe, magic works primarily through sociological vectors. He states that, “This is basically how magic works; it systematically weakens the [social] frame to produce some vague experience, and then the small experimental act-as-if magical group agrees to define this experience as significant and momentous.”¹¹

The first explanation that must occur then, is how, according to O’Keefe, “deviation via temporary *relaxation of the of the normal social frame* of orientation” occurs.¹² Essentially, this is addressing how a person’s typical physical and cognitive state of being with in the world on a day to day basis can be altered in such a way that the overall framework becomes more relaxed. The second explanation that must be tackled is how the, “overvaluation and patterning of the resulting experiences by *social agreement*”¹³ happens. Both of these questions and their respective answers in regard to gaming will be answered in the following section.

3.3 Games as Magic

There are several ways that the relaxation of the social frame can occur according to O’Keefe, but the two that primarily relate to video games are the increase of stimulation, and increased alertness or mental involvement.¹⁴ Video games fulfill both of these requirements very well, and as such should lead to a relaxed social framework, yielding itself to magic. To begin, video games are designed to stimulate. They require

¹¹ O’Keefe, *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic.*, 100.

¹² O’Keefe, 100.

¹³ O’Keefe, 96.

¹⁴ O’Keefe, 97.

that the player provide regular, if not continuous input to maneuver their character, within a world that is full of both auditory and visual stimulus, and in some rare cases tactile stimulus as well (as in the case of some VR gaming setups.) High definition screens provide as much visual detail and stimulus as possible, and speakers pump out every gunshot, yell, howl, or music that the game has scored for that particular moment. Secondly, the game demands increased alertness and mental involvement from the player relative to other forms of visual entertainment. The player must constantly be listening and seeing their environment to progress through it, leaving the gamer in a heightened state where every detail matters. This state is maintained for however long the gameplay sessions last, often for hours at a time. Thus, we can see, games appear to meet O’Keefe’s first sociological requirement.

From the second requirement of social agreement, we can see how games facilitate this as well. What this means essentially is that when the gaming experience occurs, it is acknowledged by those around as having been a gaming experience. Essentially, all who participate agree to agree on what the gameplay experience actually is. This happens virtually automatically when gamers play games. Whether it is an individual playing a single player game alone, or in a multiplayer match with others, they, and those around them are agreeing to agree that they are all having a gameplay experience. They bought the game, installed the game, and interacted with the game. This is virtually universally acknowledged as the act of “gaming.”

Having established the mechanics of magic, and how video gaming can satisfy these mechanics, we turn now to examining what exactly according to O’Keefe magic

does for the individual utilizing it. From there, we will proceed to explore what our modern society does that necessitates magical action, and how games fulfill that need.

3.4 What Magic Does

For O’Keefe, the primary role of magic is one of self-defense. More specifically, he extrapolates from Geza Roheim that, “...magic defends the individual against society, against the superego.”¹⁵ Magic then, finds itself in the very odd position of defending the self against the very society of which it is a part. O’Keefe understands this juxtaposition well and highlights it by comparing magics odd role to that of individuals in society stating, “...just as the individual who sometimes opposes society can only exist in its embrace.”¹⁶ Having established that magic acts in defense of the self, we turn now to examine what this “self” actually is, or more accurately, what parts of the self actively need magical defense.

3.4.1 Who Magic is Defending

For O’Keefe, magic is defending the Freudian Ego, that intermediary between instinctive Id, and the social world of the Superego. When the outside worlds becomes too oppressive the ego goes into a type of defense mode, but not of the self of as a whole, only of the ego. O’Keefe states, “The ego cannot really be said to defend the self as a whole: what it defends is its own integrity and equilibrium.”¹⁷ This defense of its integrity is not passive though. It exists and is active in the unconscious. O’Keefe states,

¹⁵ O’Keefe, 263; Róheim, Muensterberger, and Posinsky, “Magic and Schizophrenia.”

¹⁶ O’Keefe, *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic.*, 263.

¹⁷ O’Keefe, 284.

“The ego is a structure of repression which acts by means of the magic principle.”¹⁸ He also states, “...let us simply state that the ego is a structure rooted in repression, which transforms passivity into activity.”¹⁹ Thus we can summarize that the ego is an unconscious element of the self that nonetheless acts in its own defense, often via the principle of magic. This begs the question then, what exactly the ego must defend itself against in the first place. We now turn to answering that question.

3.4.2 What Magic is Defending Against

For O’Keefe, magic defends the ego against a kind of “voodoo death” or more simply, a social death. O’Keefe draws from the Durkheimian tradition the idea that, “...in man, the social is in direct contact with the biological - it can kill him.”²⁰ While this may sound bizarre at first blush, it is not unheard of in our own society. O’Keefe provides the compelling examples in our modern age of the depression and sickness that can fall upon people when they are told they are ill, even if they might not have any disease at all. He also provides the example of someone who fails at their job, and thus finds themselves relegated to an early retirement, or labeled as a “loser” or someone “going nowhere.”²¹ O’Keefe, we argue, correctly states that often times these social pressures and strains are enough to physically make an individual ill or even lead to suicide, something the ego most certainly need to defend itself against, especially if its own identity is being threatened by the Superego. Which brings us to our final point of

¹⁸ O’Keefe, 284.

¹⁹ O’Keefe, 286.

²⁰ O’Keefe, 297.

²¹ For these examples see O’Keefe, 298.

discussion surrounding magic and its mechanics, how precisely magic acts defensively for the ego in the first place.

3.4.3 How Magic Acts Defensively

According to O'Keefe, "...we see magic more visibly at work because magic, as ego's oldest defense, is also its last line of defense."²² Magic as ego's oldest and last line of defense then, must be incredibly potent in its work to allow the ego to maintain itself. It does so in three primary ways.

First, it protects the self against the social. Pulling from the Durkheimian tradition where the social element of society is considered sacred and the individual is profane, O'Keefe states, "...[magic] taboo protects the profane ego from the mortal danger of the sacred-social."²³ Essentially then, magic acts to keep us as individuals safe when the greater whole of society brings its weight to bear on us, attempting to snuff us out. Whether this is bullying on the school yard, the weight of a depressive work environment, or any other type of crushing social pressure, it is magic that provides the ego with a way of protecting itself from the social.

The second way it protects the self is by allowing man to be spontaneous. O'Keefe argues that without magic, "...any departure from the norm would strike terror; and anyone accidentally caught in value conflicts would die of voodoo death."²⁴ This then circumscribes much of the conformity pressures that we feel in our modern society.

²² O'Keefe, 290.

²³ O'Keefe, 316; This principle can be found in Durkheim and Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Emile Durkheim ; Translated and with an Introduction by Karen E. Fields*, 320.

²⁴ O'Keefe, *Stolen Lightning : The Social Theory of Magic.*, 317.

Be this the pressures of fashion or taste, or perhaps the starker political or religious conformity demanded in some countries, magic provides the ego with the tools it needs to remain an individual.

Finally, magic fights helplessness with action. When society, i.e. the Superego is pressing in upon an individual, it is magic which provides the ego with the tools and actions to fight back. O’Keefe summarizes this by stating, “Magic, in practice consists of a *new hypothesis*, which say: act and something will happen.”²⁵ In essence then, magic is what provides the ego with the ability to say “no” whenever society tries to make it lie down in submission. It allows the ego to, as O’Keefe describes, “...aggrandize the self; in magic the self goes over to the offensive, against the superego.”²⁶

If these then are the tools of magical ego defense, and the act of defense is such an intimate process we must now address how something as ubiquitous as video games come to act as magic. The key relationship between gaming and ego defense is the concept of what O’Keefe calls the magical institution. Magic is not an individualistic province. O’Keefe states, “Ego does not have to fight alone. Magical strategies are professionalized by elaborate magical institutions that struggle on its behalf.”²⁷ The gaming industry then, becomes one of these magical institutions.

²⁵ O’Keefe, 319 Emphasis original.

²⁶ O’Keefe, 320.

²⁷ O’Keefe, 324.

Having established the definitions and mechanics of magic, we turn now to examining the social pressure felt in society by David Riesman's other-directed type, and how video games act as the perfect magical ego defense against social pressure.

CHAPTER IV

OTHER DIRECTED TRAUMA AND GAMING

4.1 The Concept of Trauma

To begin with, an examination of how Freud describes the origin of a trauma and how this will eventually connect to video gaming must be undertaken. Freud described trauma by stating, “We apply it (term trauma) to an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way.”¹ But for Freud the idea of trauma was about more than just a singular event. It was an entire process. It was something that continually affected the individual over time. Freud describes this process in detail by stating:

“Every event, every psychical impression is provided with a certain quota of affect of which the ego divests itself either by means of a motor reaction or by associative psychical activity. If the subject is unable or unwilling to get rid of this surplus, the memory of the impression attains the importance of a trauma and becomes the cause of permanent hysterical symptoms. The impossibility of elimination becomes evident when the impression remains in the subconscious.”²

This passage highlights how, for Freud, a trauma only takes root when the surplus affect is unable to be dispersed by the ego. A trauma then is not a singular moment or shock to

¹ Freud, “Fixation to Traumas-The Unconscious, Lecture 23,” 275.

² Freud, “Some Points for a Comparative Study of Organic and Hysterical Motor Paralyses,” 171–72.

the individual. It is a continual process that over times builds into something that the mind and body are ultimately unable to shake off. Freud elucidates this idea by stating:

“It may therefore be said that the ideas which have become pathological have persisted with such freshness and affective strength because they have been denied the normal wearing-away processes by means of abreaction and reproduction in states of uninhibited association.”³

Taking these above passages as a whole we can see that from a Freudian perspective, a trauma is an event which, for whatever reason, has become ingrained within an individual and has remained rooted within them due to the ego’s inability to divest the energy of that event away from itself. Put more simply, the ego has become incapable of wearing away this negative energy through action or thought, and it ultimately becomes repressed into the subconscious of a person. The result of this repression for Freud is known as mortification. Freud describes this process by saying:

“When the superego is established, considerable amounts of the aggressive instinct are fixated in the interior of the ego and operate there self-destructively. This is one of the dangers to health by which human beings are faced on their path to cultural development. Holding back aggressiveness is in general unhealthy and leads to illness (to mortification.)”⁴

³ Freud, 11.

⁴ Freud, “An Outline of Psychoanalysis, Trans,” 7.

Once mortification has occurred, and the impression of the trauma gets moved to the unconsciousness, this opens the way for the creation of a wish. It is this wish, which when it remains unsatisfied, leads to the creation of the fantasy. It is from this principle that the present analysis proceeds. Before we can explore the repressed wishes, and by extension what fantasies members of society experience today, we must first establish what kind of trauma they might have experienced to create those wishes. To do that, we must turn now to David Riesman and his seminal work, *The Lonely Crowd* which explores the transition of the modern world into one of other-direction.

4.2 Trauma in Society Today

Within *The Lonely Crowd* Riesman discussed the transition of American society into one of “other-direction” as opposed to “inner-direction”. From Riesman, the inner-directed was described in the following way:

“As the control of the primary group is loosened—the group that both socializes the young and controls the adult in the earlier era—a new psychological mechanism appropriate to the more open society is ‘invented’: it is what I like to describe as a psychological gyroscope. The instrument, once it is set by the parents and other authorities, keeps the inner-directed person, as we shall see, ‘on course’ even when tradition, as responded to by his character, no longer dictates his moves. The inner-directed person becomes capable of maintaining a delicate

balance between the demands upon him of his goal in life and the buffetings of his external environment.”⁵

For Riesman, the inner-directed individual was one who was capable of navigating life based on their own internal gyroscope, one that allowed them to pursue their own course, and manage the storms of life as they came. Of note here, is the remarkable similarity of the gyroscope to the Freudian superego, and O’Keefe’s conception of magic. Riesman notes in the above quote that it is set by the parents and other authorities, and states later in the text that, “The inner-directed person has early incorporated a psychic gyroscope which is set going by his parents and can receive signals later on from other authorities who resemble his parents.”⁶ In addition he states, “We may say, then, that parents who are themselves inner-directed install a psychological gyroscope in their child and set it going...”⁷This is remarkably similar to Freud’s definition of how the super-ego functions and comes to be in an individual. Freud stated, “Thus a child's super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents' super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the time-resisting judgements of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation.”⁸ Riesman’s keen insight though was that this inner-directed individual of yesteryear was beginning

⁵ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 16.

⁶ Riesman, 24.

⁷ Riesman, 45.

⁸ Freud, Sprott, and Strachey, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 22:95–96.

to fade away, and was being replaced by what he called an other-directed type, a type of individual who was equipped in a far different fashion for the struggles of life. Riesman describes the other-directed type by saying:

“What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those with he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media. This source is of course ‘internalized’ in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early. The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life.”⁹

Essentially, Riesman describes the other-directed individual as one highly in tune with their peers, to the point where they no longer operate gyroscopically, but instead possess what he calls something “like a radar.”¹⁰

We do not need to look far in our modern world to see how true this situation is. Whether it is the television show *Barney & Friends* in the morning, the classroom and schoolyard in the afternoon, or an evening with family or friends, the other-directed individual is submitted to a ceaseless bombardment of peer group opinion and judgment. Children are encouraged to be uniform. Not nameless copies or clones, but simply their

⁹ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 21.

¹⁰ Riesman, 25.

own “unique”, preapproved, heavily sanitized, choose your own adventure self. An individual today has a veritable buffet of options to choose from, but woe to the person who decides they want something not on the menu. Their request could be met with mocking scorn, derision, or even excommunication from the peer group. A child, or an adult for that matter, is free to express themselves however they see fit, so long as they see fit to use the tools, props, and objects that the peer group approves. If they choose otherwise, then peer group goes from friends, to something far harsher. For the other-directed type, the peer group is more than just a simple group of individuals to interact with. They are the jury who decide the very fate of an individual’s social standing. Riesman describes this phenomenon by saying, “In the eyes of the jury of peers one may be a good guy one day, a stinker the next. Toleration, let alone leadership, depends on having a highly sensitive response to swings of fashion.”¹¹ In fact, Riesman also describes the peer group’s primary effort as one that is to, “...cut everyone down to size who stands up or stands out in any direction.”¹²

With the growth of technology, so too has the peer group jury grown: Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, etc. All of these platforms and the dozens that crop up continually expand the peer group of the other-directed individual to include the entire world, or at least all those with access to the internet. There is no escaping these social media platforms for the other-directed individual either. The peer group has deigned them to be fashionable, and as such they found themselves embedded in all walks of life.

¹¹ Riesman, 73.

¹² Riesman, 72.

For the more professional minded, Facebook gave birth to LinkedIn, the Facebook of the business world. If an other-directed person perhaps wants something more personal they have a bevy of options to choose from in the dating world as well. They need only look to Tinder, or one of the many online dating websites to instantly be connected to a host of individuals all eager to judge them and in Tinder's case, quite literally swipe them away.

What then is the impact on the psyche of an other-directed individual in today's modern world, subject the unceasing judgment of the ever-growing peer group? If we follow Freud's model of Id, Ego, and Superego we might see the explosion in strength of the peer group as an empowerment of the Superego and the external world. As it grows in strength it hammers the Ego into submission. The Ego is then left without a way to truly express itself, or even attempt to meet the needs of the Id. The Ego then, already described by Freud as having a difficult task when he said, "The poor ego has a still harder time of it; it has to serve three harsh masters, and it has to do its best to reconcile the claims and demands of all three... The three tyrants are the external world, the superego, and the id."¹³

As the voices of the external world and the Superego grow ever louder and ever stronger then, the Ego's already Herculean task becomes even more impossible. It is this process which then, we posit, leads to a trauma within the individual. Bereft of any opportunity to exert itself or even manage the desires of the Id, let alone fulfill the ever-

¹³ Freud, "The Anatomy of the Mental Personality, Lecture 21."

increasing demands of the Superego, the ego becomes traumatized. It becomes traumatized, as discussed in the previous section, not only from a singular event of judgement from the peer group, but from repeated interactions, and from an inability to forget these judgments. This is a crime which the peer group would never forgive. Ultimately then, kept from any way to possibly wear away this negative energy, primarily due to the inability to move away from, and with no escape from the judgment of the peer group, this trauma then becomes mortified, and is repressed into the subconscious. This repressed trauma then becomes expressed, according to Freud, in the form of a wish. It is this wish, which ultimately connects to the world of video games.

4.3 The Wish

It is not too farfetched to think that the wish generated from this trauma would be one of freedom and authenticity. The desire of the ego, and of the individual as a whole, to be free, even for a moment, of the constant judgment and analysis of the peer group. The opportunity to color outside the lines, order something off of the regular menu, or even just to leave social media for a moment must be a tempting one.

Riesman discusses the very desire for escape in *The Lonely Crowd*, and contrasts it between the inner-directed and the other-directed types. He clearly describes how the inner-directed individual has a much easier time of finding escape from the world than the other-directed individual does. He states:

“The inner-directed individual can afford a certain kind of escape since his character and situation give him a core of sufficient self-reliance to permit dreaming without disintegration. He learns this as a boy when he escapes by

himself a good deal of the time—playing hooky from the dreary and demanding tasks of home and school.... the inter-directed person can let himself go in ‘unsocialized’ ways because in the ways that count, the ways of work, he has a definitely sociable self to return to.”¹⁴

Clearly for Riesman, the inner-directed person learns at a young age that they absolutely can take time away from it all to escape because they will still have a definite self to return to. This principle stands in stark contrast to the type of escape, or lack of it, experienced by the other-directed person in modern society. The bombardment of the peer group and its constant judgement, compounded the ever connectedness of today’s modern technological world has led to an environment wherein as Riesman describes:

“Despite appearances, the other-directed person seems often unable to get away from himself or to waste time with any gestures of abundance or abandon... The other-directed person has no clear core of self to escape from; no clear line between production and consumption; between adjusting to the group and serving private interests; between work and play.”¹⁵

If then, the other-directed person finds themselves unable to escape, even for a moment away from the constant judgment of their peers, then it must only be natural that this desire for escape must exist, and ultimately be expressed in some other form or fashion.

¹⁴ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 119.

¹⁵ Riesman, 157.

This desire then, from a Freudian perspective, must become the internalized wish of the other-directed individual, held almost unconsciously as they move throughout their life.

It is these wishes that Freud argues form the core of all creative writing and expression. Freud describes all of fantasy as being inspired by wishes. Freud describes this process in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” by saying, “We may lay it down that a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality.”¹⁶ If the freedom of the ego and the individual is the wish that comes from the trauma of an other-directed world, then the resulting fantasy must be one wherein the Ego reigns supreme and the individual feels truly free to be itself away from judgment. The fantasy in effect comes to act as defense mechanism for the Ego. One which attempts to deal with the pent-up negative energy forced upon it by the traumatic event, and by which it attempts to if not release it, to manage it. This now leads us to the fantasy itself, proper and its origination.

4.4 The Fantasy

To begin with, we posit directly that video games are a form of creative fantasy much like creative writing or film. They are full of created worlds, characters, and stories that are told in a medium that continually pushes the boundaries of realism. More than music or cinema, video gaming strives for the utmost realism through the use of the highest resolutions, the most detailed voice acting, and has been at the forefront of the

¹⁶ Freud, “Creative Writers and Day Dreaming.(Grant Duff, IF Transl.). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. IX: Jensen’s ‘Gradiva’ and Other Works,” 423.

push towards virtual reality technology. Legions of artists, writers, motion capture specialists, designers, etc. work together to create even the most subtle and simple of video games. Much of the technological advances in modern computing have grown out of the demand placed on them by the desire of the video gamer. It is this principle which allows for Freud's work on creative writing to be recontextualized into today's usage of video games as a creative form of expression. Our first step then, is to begin with Freud's analysis of creative writing and the fantasy present therein, and connect it to the world of video games today.

Freud begins his analysis of fantasy (or phantasy as he spells it) by connecting it to the childhood of the individual. Freud makes the connection that play for a child, is the first step in fantasy formation. He does this by stating:

“The child's best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games.

Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real. In spite of all the emotion with which he cathects his world of play, the child distinguishes it quite well from reality; and he likes to link his imagined

objects and situations to the tangible and visible things in the real world. This linking is all that differentiates the child's "play" from 'phantasying.'"¹⁷

Play or fantasy does not stop with the child, or with childhood. The fantasy is simply a form of play that has been carried forward into adulthood by the individual, and is often used as a defense mechanism to manage a mortified trauma. Freud goes on to say that:

“As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of playing, he now phantasies.”¹⁸

Fantasy then, becomes the serious outpouring of emotion into something which still yields pleasure from its use. The fantasy becomes the vehicle by which the adult person attempts to manage the mortified trauma of their past, and in doing so lighten the load upon his subconscious. Freud describes this process by stating:

“When the child has grown up and has ceased to play, and after he has been laboring for decades to envisage the realities of life with proper seriousness, he may one day find himself in a mental situation which once more undoes the

¹⁷ Freud, 421.

¹⁸ Freud, 422.

contrast between play and reality. As an adult he can look back on the intense seriousness with which he once carried on his games in childhood; and, by equating his ostensibly serious occupations of to-day with his childhood games, he can throw off the too heavy burden imposed on him by life and win the high yield of pleasure afforded by humour.”¹⁹

It is the fantasy which allows the adult individual to look back on what was once play, and replace it with the fantasy. By doing so, as Freud says, they can, if only momentarily, rid themselves of the burden that other-directed life had foisted upon them. It is this momentary escape that forms the core of the fantasy, and what is so desperately sought after in other-directed, modern society. The latent trauma of the suppressed ego must be dealt with somehow, and the video game of the modern age has arisen as just such a vehicle to provide the needed escape.

Holding these principles true then, it is entirely unsurprising that the thirty-five-year-old males and females driving the gaming industry “play” as they do. Denied the learned escape in childhood that the inner-directed type was allowed to experience, the other-directed individual must find an alternative that satisfies the desires of the repressed ego, manifesting their fantasy, while also failing to incite the judgment of their peers. The video game has become the socially acceptable, peer group jury approved, method for entertainment. We need only look at the legions of dedicated fans, or the financial profitability of the market to see that it must be fulfilling a need of society. Its

¹⁹ Freud, 423–24.

success has been found in the game's ability to fulfill the wishes created by the mortified trauma of the other-directed individual and their unique needs and desires. We turn now to an analysis of the video game itself and how it performs this action.

4.5 Video Games as Wish Fulfillment for the Producer

The video game, by which we simply define as a game that involves interaction with a user interface to generate visual feedback on a video device, is in itself composed of several key elements that make it a defense mechanism to aid in those with a mortified trauma resulting from an other-directed, constantly peer judged life. These mechanisms vary between whether one is the producer or the consumer of the game, but both classes of individuals benefit from the video game.

For the producer of the video game, he or she is the modern-day creative author whom Freud describes over a century ago in his work on creative writing and fantasy, with the added burden of inescapable peer group judgement. The video game designer of today has the lofty task of not simply telling a story, but of crafting an entire world, with its own rules, characters, systems, and history. It is the story of print made visually manifest, and at its utmost, must strive to communicate this to the player. The video game designer must tap into the desires and wishes of their audience at large and present to them a world they must want to enter into. The starting point for this process is age old, and unfolds much as it did in the creative writing of Freud's time wherein he described the moment of inspiration by saying:

“A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfilment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory.”²⁰

Essentially, the video game producer of today must tap into a present-day experience, and from that inspiration craft the vibrant, visual story they will tell in visual medium. It is their hope to capture the zeitgeist of generation, and in so doing work out their own latent trauma. If they are successful then not only do they reap the financial rewards of the blockbuster video game, but they also have the satisfaction of knowing their work is being played out on millions of screens across the world. It is their creative process and thought that has captured attention, for once, they become the center of attention, if indirectly. This leads to the situation wherein the video game creator, “sees the actions and sufferings of other people pass before him like a spectator” (Freud 1908 426). Ultimately leading to the situation wherein his fantasy becomes through the watching of others play his creation, “the day-dream, in which the ego contents itself with the role of spectator.”²¹

Even here though, the video game producer has a much more difficult task than that of the consumer. For every product he creates, the ever-present jury of the peers is

²⁰ Freud, 426–27.

²¹ Freud, 426.

ready and waiting to analyze every detail, discover every flaw in the work, and castigate the creator for each and every one without mercy. If he was successful in capturing the latent, subconscious wishes of the population though, then even the most egregious of sins can be forgiven by the peer group as they will find themselves lost in the reverie of fantasy, a fantasy that the ego of the creator can be satisfied in knowing he created. The producer does not even need to be wholly original in his creation. He need only tap into the, “distorted vestiges of the wishful phantasies of whole nations, the secular dreams of youthful humanity.”²²

4.6 Video Game as Wish Fulfillment for the Consumer

This youthful humanity then, of the other-directed age, has a much easier task of relieving their mortified trauma through the video game. Everything in the video game is catered to the express desires of the forcibly repressed Ego. From the most minute detail, to the broadest design decisions, the Ego is the center around which the entire game is designed to orbit. It is because of this principle that the video game has become such a successful form of entertainment. This is done through several key ways. Game design in and of itself, game story, and game realism.

In game design, every element of the game is designed, whether consciously or unconsciously, to appeal to the Ego. Regardless of genre the player is constantly the center of attention. The camera follows their every move, either through their avatar’s eyes, over their shoulder, or directly above them. With a flick of the mouse or joystick

²² Freud, 427.

their character moves, the camera pans, and their desire is made dutifully manifest with no complaint from the gaming device. Camera placement varies from genre to genre, but it serves the same purpose regardless of satisfying the Ego. In the RPG, or role-playing game genre, the camera most often hovers just over the shoulder of the avatar, following their every move like a documentary crew keen to catch every moment of the player's experience. In the strategy genre, the camera takes a bird's eye view, and the player becomes the near omniscient commander, surveying their domain and their throng of loyal units below, who will readily follow any order without complaint. In the genre of sport games, the player is the constant center of attention as well. Every play, every moment, is at their fingertips, and the camera dutifully follows them just as it does the regular players on television. In the shooter genre, the camera is first person, and the player sees through the eyes of the avatar, which is destruction made manifest.

When it comes to the gameplay itself, it is the player character, regardless of genre, who is the most dominant force in the game world. Whether through a twist of fate, advanced technology, or some other gift, when the player takes control of their avatar, they become the most powerful person in the game world. Whether that means they are the most skilled swordsman in the land, the most crack shot, invincible soldier to walk the earth, the most commanding general, or the most skilled coach or player, the individual playing the video game is the center of the action. If anything ever goes wrong the quick reloading of the game, rewinding those erroneous seconds which were incongruous with this tale of invincibility of the player, are quickly wiped away without

a second thought. Within this we find at work yet again the assuaging of the Ego. Freud describes this process in creative writing by saying:

“One feature above all cannot fail to strike us about the creations of these story-writers: each of them has a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means and whom he seems to place under the protection of a special Providence... It seems to me, however, that through this revealing characteristic or invulnerability we can immediately recognize His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day dream and of every story.”²³

Freud’s analysis of creative writing over a century ago has become even more stark and clear in the world of video games today. By the very necessity of design, the player of the video game is the utmost center of the game’s universe, and this serves to fulfill the wishes and ultimately the fantasy of the player, in reliving their surprised Ego.

The story of the game also lends itself to this principle, when the game necessitates one. Nearly every single game of the year award winner, and virtually all of the bestselling video games of all time, have been heavily story based, falling into the category of RPG. In each and every one of those stories the player takes on the role of the hero, the only individual capable of saving the world, stopping a great calamity, or saving the princess. Each and every character in those games exists solely in their relation to the player as the heroic protagonist. The hero has friends, lovers, and allies

²³ Freud, 425.

who aid them in their journey. Those who oppose the hero exist only to be cut down in droves without a second thought. Freud described this principle well yet again when he stated, “The ‘good’ ones are the helpers, while the ‘bad’ ones are the enemies and rivals, of the ego which has become the hero of the story.”²⁴ Those characters which are lauded in the RPG, that become its claim to fame and are forever enshrined in the coveted game of the year award, exist only for the Ego of the player. They are the devoted friend group, lovers, and confidants. They never judge, never question, and they follow the player’s judgement in all things, swearing their undying loyalty, if they would only keep playing the game. It is for this reason that these games have become enshrined as being the greatest form of the art. They speak to the inner wish and fantasy of the other-directed player, and they fulfill that wish with aplomb. Because of the pampering of the Ego that occurs within them, flaws that might sink a lesser game are glossed over by the player. These small errors then, become irrelevant in the face of the monumental accomplishment of the game in appeasing the neglected Ego of the other-directed person. It is this appeasement which has driven these games success. They filled the void in a way that other games simply could not.

Finally, one of the most important tasks of the game is to aid in the suspension of disbelief. This is done so that the gamer may immerse themselves in the fantasy of the video game, and is performed by the maintenance of the utmost level of realism within the game. In order for the game to be an appropriate substitute for reality, to fulfill the

²⁴ Freud, 426.

desires of the suppressed Ego, the video game must accurately approximate real life. To this end the video game has been at the forefront of graphical improvements in computing technology. Extremely high resolutions, professional motion capture, and virtual reality are but a few of the techniques used by the video game to immerse the player in a world all their own. Environments must look real, characters must move, speak, and act like regular people, and if at all possible the video game should sweep the individual away from where they are into an almost dreamlike state. In fact, new research has actually found potential links between video gaming and lucid dreaming, implying that some of the same mechanisms at work in our sleep are also at work when an individual plays video games.²⁵ By simulating a waking dream, a day dream, video games have taken the same principles that Freud discussed a century ago and moved them into the modern age.

Up to this point video games have been discussed rather broadly, primarily exploring how they act as a type of magic, and how they might be positioned to help in the mental health of the individual playing them. We turn now in these next few chapters to some of our theorists, beginning with William James and G.H. Mead for a more concrete and in depth look on how these processes interact with the player, and how they might benefit, or potentially harm, the player.

²⁵ Gackenbach, "Video Game Play and Lucid Dreams: Implications for the Development of Consciousness."; Gackenbach, Ellerman, and Hall, "Video Game Play as Nightmare Protection: A Preliminary Inquiry with Military Gamers."

CHAPTER V

GAMING AND YOU: GAMING THROUGH THE EYES OF JAMES AND MEAD

5.1 Gaming and The Individual - James

We begin with William James, and his discussions with teachers and students found in *William James Talks To Teachers*.¹ Within this text, we find a series of discussion that James had with educators and students, and we also find some wonderfully relatable concepts to employ within our discussion surrounding video games. In particular we will explore from a Jamesian perspective the benefits of gaming with mental health, following that, we will turn to the potential for games to serve in a pedagogical capacity as well. As a point of transition, we examine first what James dubbed “The Gospel of Relaxation.” Within this portion of the text James explores how the American character is prone to anxiety and worry, carrying much of its conversation in the same vein as that of Freud and Riesman as discussed in the preceding chapters, with James’ own early take on what Riesman would come to identify as the other-directed individual. Once this is established, James also presents the reader with some potential panaceas for this problem, which I will extrapolate into our broader discussion on video games.

5.1.1 Bottled Lightning, James and Stress

We begin with James’ early exploration of what would come to be identified by Riesman as the other-directed type, wherein James places himself in conversation with

¹ James, *Talks To Teachers On Psychology: And To Students On Some Of Life’s Ideals*.

both psychology and sociology, and despite writing several decades earlier, we can see the germ of what is later explored in Riesman's work and what James describes as of much of the anxiety and tension in the average American's life. He states markedly similarly to Riesman that, "To explain them, we must go not to physical geography, but to psychology and sociology... show that invention and imitation, taken together, form, one may say, the entire warp and woof of human life, in so far as it is social. The American over-tension and jerkiness and breathlessness and intensity and agony of expression are primarily social, and only secondarily physiological, phenomena. They are *bad habits*, nothing more or less, bred of custom and example" [emphasis original.]² James goes on to state that, "We, here in America, through following a succession of pattern-setters whom it is now impossible to trace, and through influencing each other in a bad direction, have at last settled down collectively into what, for better or worse, is our own characteristic national type."³ James describes this "national type" which already sounds markedly similar to the other-directed individual within Riesman's discussion by stating,

"For by the sensations that so incessantly pour in from the over tense excited body the over-tense and excited habit of mind is kept up; and the sultry, threatening, exhausting, thunderous inner atmosphere never quite clears away. If you never wholly give yourself up to the chair you sit in, but always keep your leg- and body-muscles half contracted for a rise; if you breathe eighteen or nine

² James, 212.

³ James, 213.

teen instead of sixteen times a minute, and never quite breathe out at that,— what mental mood can you be in but one of inner panting and expectancy, and how can the future and its worries possibly forsake your mind?”⁴

While James is describing a physical state of being in anxiety, it is not difficult to think of James’ incessant over-tension in the terms of Riesman’s other-directed individual, who, beset at every side, feels they can never truly sit and be in a place. Combining this with our own stress definition as well, we can see James’ discussion relating to both physical and mental stress on the individual, creating an unhealthy tensegrity. It also contains foreshadowing of the rising rates of my ADHD diagnoses over the past several decades.⁵ James aptly describes this situation by describing it as “bottled lightning.” James’ solution to this bottled lightning problem was not to “muscle” it under control so to speak, but to redirect the energy, and ultimately provide it with new outlets. Of this process he states, “*Unclamp*, in a word, your intellectual and practical machinery, and let it run free; and the service it will do you will be twice as good” [emphasis original].⁶ Within this solution as well, we see James echo the likes of Freud and our earlier discussion of his works. It is in the freeing or loosening that respite is found, and this solution stands in marked similarity with our discussion on daydreaming or fantasy, from which video games have already been suggested as an evolution of creative writing or daydreaming. James does not stop here though, his discussion also explores how this

⁴ James, 211.

⁵ Xu et al., “Twenty-Year Trends in Diagnosed Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder among US Children and Adolescents, 1997-2016.”

⁶ James, *Talks To Teachers On Psychology: And To Students On Some Of Life’s Ideals*, 221.

unclamping of the mind not only has benefits for mental health, but, as benefits a discussion with teachers and students also has pedagogical benefits as well. It is to this topic that we now turn.

5.1.2 Channeling the Lighting – Gaming and Pedagogy

During his discussion with teachers, James spends a large amount of time discussing what any teacher or student for that matter will be intimately familiar with, the gaining, and keeping, of attention and interest on the topic at hand. Anyone who has ever felt their mind wander at an inopportune moment, or who has tried to recapture the attention of that wanderer should be intimately familiar with James' points of discussion. Indeed, much has been studied and written about regarding capturing and retaining the attention of a room and its listeners, and James is no exception. His insightfulness though provides ample room for integrating video gaming into the discussion and as such it finds its place in our discussion.

To begin, James describes that which is interesting to the young person by stating, "The native interests of children lie altogether in the sphere of sensation. Novel things to look at or novel sounds to hear, especially when they involve the spectacle of action of a violent sort will always divert the attention from abstract conceptions of objects verbally taken in."⁷ Already at first blush, this description of what is interesting strikes is being decidedly videogame-esque. In fact, novel research has already found

⁷ James, 92.

that video gaming appears to have positive effects in regards to attention and focus.⁸ While this area of research is still in its infancy, it provides intriguing avenues for exploration, and sociology has much to contribute to the conversation. James goes on to further state that, “Any object not interesting in itself may become interesting through becoming associated with an object in which an interest already exists. The two associated objects grow, as it were, together: the interesting portion sheds its quality over the whole; and thus things not interesting in their own right borrow an interest which becomes as real and as strong as that of any natively interesting thing.”⁹ Stated plainly, Anything can be made interesting so long as it can be related to something that is already interesting to the reader, listener, or game player. James also goes on to note that this process is additive. He states, “The odd circumstance is that the borrowing does not impoverish the source, the objects taken together being more interesting, perhaps, than the originally interesting portion was by itself.”¹⁰

A prime example of this has been the use of the games from Ubisoft’s *Assassins Creed* series within the classroom to teach history and archeology. *Assassins Creed* as a series places the player in a world their character, through the use of fantastical device known as an animus, is able to experience the memories of an ancestor, often conveniently placed at an interesting point within history, and as such they find an ancient world to be their virtual playground. The settings have varied across the series,

⁸ Qiu et al., “Rapid Improvement in Visual Selective Attention Related to Action Video Gaming Experience.”

⁹ James, *Talks To Teachers On Psychology: And To Students On Some Of Life’s Ideals*, 94.

¹⁰ James, 94.

but recent entries have taken place in Ancient Egypt, Greek Antiquity, and 9th century Europe. The games are predominately open-world “Action Adventure” meaning their goal is to thrust the player into a believably realized, animated, interactive world. In their effort to develop an environment like this, the game developers spend a significant amount of time and energy on modeling and rendering compelling and realistic environments. An enterprising decision was made recently by the developer to release within the game a game mode dubbed “discovery mode.” Within this mode, all of the traditional trappings of the action-adventure game are removed, such as combat or quests, and are replaced with narrated interactions with historic characters, who guide the player through a series of environments explaining an examining everything from the construction of the Pyramids or the Parthenon, to a virtual debate with Socrates. Many of these interactions being informed by extensive research with historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and philosophers.¹¹ The result of this fusion is a guided tour through a 3d virtual museum, where the player can not only hear about fascinating elements of history, but they can virtually experience it was well, either on their screen, or in virtual reality. This creates an environment strikingly similar to what James discusses, wherein a game that has already captured the attention of the player, comes alongside and adds its interest to that of history. While research into use of gaming in this way is still sparse,

¹¹ See for example “Discovery Tour Mode of Assassin’s Creed: Origins - Ubisoft Support.”

there is promising work exploring how grounding the player's experience within the game, to its broader historical context has a promising future.¹²

Creative Assembly's *Total War* game series has also found use in a pedagogical context, though with less of an intentional focus on the part of the developer. The *Total War* series is an RTS, or real time strategy game, which is marked by large scale battle with the player controlling large amounts of units, usually in the thousands, commanding them on the field of battle against either an AI or human opponent. Enterprising teachers have found use for this game as well in their classroom, recreating famous battles from history to capture the attention of their classrooms.¹³ Historically centered games have found themselves at the intersection of video gaming and the classroom, as their setting tends to be inspirational to both fields, but their principle in design and promising execution up to this point suggest that future developments in this vein could show promise as well, especially if designed from the ground up with a pedagogical fantasy at their core. At this point in time though, adoption of gaming in this capacity has been limited, though there have been creative uses in fields such as mathematics as well, particularly with the employment of VR in the first-person shooter world of *Half-Life*.¹⁴

While many of these examples have related to particular disciplines, they predominately explore the relationship between game environment and player. With the

¹² Radošinská, "Portraying Historical Landmarks and Events in the Digital Game Series *Assassin's Creed*"; Gilbert, "'Assassin's Creed Reminds Us That History Is Human Experience': Students' Senses of Empathy While Playing a Narrative Video Game"; Politopoulos et al., "'History Is Our Playground': Action and Authenticity in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*."

¹³ "Gaming the Past | Historical Video Games in the Classroom and Beyond."

¹⁴ "Teacher Gives Full Math Lesson in *HALF-LIFE: ALYX* - Nerdist."

advent of the internet and the ability to place a large number of players or characters into a single environment, we can also explore the intersection of interest and pedagogy from a social perspective as well. To do that, we turn to a student of James, George Herbert Mead, whose study in this vein is primed for connection to video gaming.

5.2 Gaming and The Social - Mead

As discussed in Chapter I, Mead is possessed of a natural continuity of thought in relation to William James, owing to their close academic and personal relationship. Of particular interest to this dissertation will be Mead's conception of the self, and its relationship to what he called the "generalized other," which Mead noted found its genesis within the unique relationship between the act of play, and engaging in the act of playing a game, broadly speaking. We will examine briefly the connection between James and Mead relating to these concepts, then dive into our discussion relating Mead's understanding of the game to our own discussion surrounding video games.

5.2.1 Mead and The Self – The I and Me

For much of Mead's key work, *Mind Self and Society*, Mead was deeply concerned with how the individual came to conceive of themselves as person, how their "I" and their "Me" came to function as a cooperative whole, sometimes fusing, but always remaining in balance. At its core for Mead, this process is deeply social. For Mead, the "I",
"...Reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others."¹⁵ It is
"...aware of the social 'me'."¹⁶ Ultimately, this makes the "I" constantly present in the

¹⁵ Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, 174.

¹⁶ Mead, 171.

lived experience of the individual. Mead anchors his discussion of this awareness of the self in a thoroughly “Jamesian” approach. Mead noted that within James’ *Principles of Psychology*, there was an understanding of the individual in relationship to others. That the “self” of the individual was constituted of multiple parts, one of which was the “social self” which James describes by stating, “Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any one of these his images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups.”¹⁷ James was clearly aware of the impact of others on an individual, but Mead in his work took this a step further. For James, the nebulous “group” was rather underdeveloped, something which Mead sought to remedy in his work, moving James’ discussion firmly into the realm of sociology. Mead emphasizes this by stating unequivocally that, “The self is essentially a social process...”¹⁸ Ultimately it holds for Mead that the self cannot develop without an active socialization process. Mead states this as succinctly as possible by stating, “The ‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes.”¹⁹ It should also be emphasized that this is not a passive process either.

¹⁷ James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 294.

¹⁸ Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, 178.

¹⁹ Mead, 175.

For Mead, the “I” and the “Me” are in active communication with one another to form the self. Mead states,

“The ‘I’ then, in this relation of the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ is something that is, so to speak, responding to a social situation which is within the experience of the individual. It is the answer which the individual makes to the attitude which others take toward him when he assumes an attitude toward them....the ‘me’ represents a definite organization of the community there in our own attitudes, and calling for a response...The ‘I’ both calls out to the ‘me’ and responds to it.”²⁰

This active dialogue between the “I” and “Me” then is clearly social, and it is in this dialogue that Mead introduces the “generalized other,” the third participant in this conversation which gives the “me” its voice, and which finds its roots in the act of playing and gaming. In this way it also bears similarity to Freud’s ego, and its dialogue between super-ego and id. It is to this subject of the generalized other that we now turn.

5.2.2 Mead, The Generalized Other, and Gaming

Mead noted that one of the core factors in the creation of the self and engaging with the generalized other was found in the activities of playing, and engaging in games, and as such it makes a fascinating addition to our discussion. Mead noted that this process of play was found in its simplest form in children, but that it was not limited to them. Mead describes this process, which would most likely be familiar to a parent, or

²⁰ Mead, 177–78.

anyone who has spent significant time with a young child by stating, “Play in this sense, especially the stage which precedes the organized games, is a play at something. A child plays at being a mother, at being a teacher, at being a policeman; that is, it is taking different roles as we say.”²¹ This process of play though, is essentially a singular experience for Mead. The child engages in a sort of one-person play, embodying each of the characters, one at time. Mead says of this process, “The child says something in one character, and responds in another character, and then his responding in another character is stimulus to himself in the first character, and so the conversation goes on.”²² Play for Mead is the embodiment of this practice. It becomes a kind of ping-pong match that the child engages in with themselves, and at this point the child is firmly embedded in what Mead dubbed, the play stage. In contrast though, the game stage becomes an evolution of this process. Within the game, the individual begins to take on, and consider, the viewpoints and perceptions of others. Mead states of this process, “If we contrast play with the situation in an organized game, we note the essential difference that the child who plays in a game must be ready to take the attitude of everyone else involved in that game, and that these different roles must have a definite relationship to each other.”²³ The young person then begins to internalize these external attitudes, and it is within this that we find the seed of the generalized other, which ultimately places itself as an interlocuter with the “I” facilitating the formation of the self. This move to the

²¹ Mead, 150.

²² Mead, 151.

²³ Mead, 151.

game stage is crucial, as it is within this stage that the attitudes of others are not only conceived of but are organized in a logical fashion. Mead states of this process, “The fundamental difference between the game and play is that in the latter the child must have the attitude of all others involved in that game. The attitudes of the other players which the participant assumes *organize into a sort of unit*... [emphasis mine]”²⁴ It is from this organized unit that Mead states the generalized other arises, as it provides a solid core for the “me” to engage with. This cohesion though is crucial to the process.

It is here that we find a crucial intersection between Mead, Riesman, and Freud. If the advent of the other-directed turn of life has made the rapid-fire judgments of the peer group, as well as their swiftly changing modes of fashion, then organizing the attitudes of the other players into a cohesive unit becomes more challenging, and as such, the “me’s” dialogue with the I becomes more difficult as well, thus inhibiting the formation of the self. To engage with our definition of stress from Chapter I, the tensegrity of the self has begun to experience increased strain. This has far reaching consequences, as Mead notes it is, “...only by taking the attitude of the generalized other toward himself, in one or another of these ways, can he think at all;...”²⁵ It should be no wonder then that as we look upon our modern, other-directed world that we see the formation of cohesive units of thought encountering more and more challenges. This becomes immensely problematic from a Meadian point of view, as Mead notes that, “The self-conscious human individual then, takes or assumes the organized social

²⁴ Mead, 153–54.

²⁵ Mead, 156.

attitudes of the given social group or community to which he belongs, toward the social problems of various kinds which confront that group or community at any given time...”²⁶ Mead goes on to note that it is this process which allows for community membership, productive work, and even politics to function properly. Without a proper generalized other as an anchor, the self will ultimately find itself adrift, buffeted, much as Riesman noted, by every whim and change of fashion. A process which, as we have already discussed, has the potential for creating immense stress or trauma.

It is in this environment that the game becomes crucial, and we can see that video games stand primed to provide assistance, acting as O’Keefe might note, as a kind of defense mechanism in the face of this increasing stress. Mead notes that, “The game has a logic, so that such an organization of the self is rendered possible: there is a definite end to be obtained...”²⁷ By these criteria, video games excel. They are constructed with a cohesive logic, they provide definite means and ends, and they exist in a structured environment designed by the developer. They provide definite bounds to the player, providing them with clear objectives and goals, and, with the advent of the internet, allow individuals to go through the video gaming process with others. Mead notes that within the game, the participations are able to engage with the perspective of each other, and that, “They are interrelated in a unitary, organic fashion.” There is a definite unity, then, which is introduced into the organization of other selves when we reach the stage

²⁶ Mead, 156.

²⁷ Mead, 159.

of the game...”²⁸ It is this unity which the other-directed world can chip away at, and it is within the game that it’s reinforcement can be found.

Crucially to this point is the contagious like interest that James noted in his talks to teachers. Mead noted that much of the appeal and utility of the game is found in that it, “...lies entirely inside of the child’s own experience, and the importance of our modern type of education is that it is brought as far as possible within this realm...In the game we get an organized other, a generalized other, which is found in the nature of the child itself, and finds its expression in the immediate experience of the child. And it is the organized activity in the child’s own nature controlling the particular response which unity, and which builds up his own self.”²⁹ Here we see echoes of what has been discussed in James, Freud, Riesman, and O’Keefe, who all arrived at the same destination, despite taking divergent paths to reach it. It is in the unclamping of the mind, the daydream, the magic, in *the game itself* that the self of the individual is built up. Video games stand primed to act as a beneficial, pedagogical tool to aid in this effort, but they remain relatively untapped. They present a fantastic resource not only due to their proximity of interest, as teachers of history have found and was discussed above, but in aiding in the relationships of individuals to their generalized other. While no systematic study has been performed to the best of my knowledge, games such as Sony’s 2018 *God of War* which have the player take on the role of a stern but loving demigod father alongside his son, have been noted by individuals to have aided in their

²⁸ Mead, 159.

²⁹ Mead, 159–60.

interpersonal relationships.³⁰ Recent studies have also begun to examine the impact of video games which involve cooperative teamwork such as FPS, MOBA, MMORPG or other team oriented games on real world cooperation.³¹ While this remains anecdotal, expanding, and recontextualizing Mead's conception of the game to include video games stands to provide fruitful avenues of study. In point of fact, it has been recently noted that the average young person, by the age of eighteen, will spend approximately 10,000 hours playing video games.³² This number is intriguing not only due to its size, but also due to the fact that it is roughly half to two thirds of a K-12 education in the United States. Video games present in this sense a wealth of untapped resource not only for simply providing an interest adjacent mechanism to engage students within the classroom, but also providing platforms and spaces which are structured with a cohesive logic and allow students to practice engaging with the generalized other. An opportunity which could prove increasingly beneficial in a world where the stress of other-directed life, and seemingly increasing social distance politically and socially appear to be on the rise.

This is not to say that games stand as some kind of universal panacea or magic bullet to solve the world's woes. As chapters VII and VIII will explore, video games stand at a crossroads, and are just as likely as any another mechanism to experience negative effects, or to utilize their entertaining and engaging spaces not to educate and

³⁰ See for example "Opinion: How God of War Made Me a Better Father - IGN."

³¹ Badatala et al., "The Effects of Playing Cooperative and Competitive Video Games on Teamwork and Team Performance."

³² McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*.

connect, but to exploit and monetize. For now though, we turn to exploring in greater detail how this thread of therapeutic pedagogy can be traced through the videogame experience, and how different videogames, and video game genres could be positioned to provide beneficial effects to their players.

CHAPTER VI

DIVING IN - EXAMPLES FROM GAMES

6.1 Examples From the World of RPG's

As was discussed in the preceding chapter, several video game series, namely Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* and Sony's 2018 *God of War* have already been introduced as having beneficial potential for pedagogical, therapeutic, research or some fusion of both for the player. Broadly speaking, these games fall into the action-adventure/RPG (role playing game) genre of videogames. They are not by any means the only videogames with this potential, as this chapter will discuss, but they do deserve a closer look given their wide player base, and their commercial and critical success in the video gaming world. We will take a deeper, closer look at these games in this chapter, along with other videogames that have the potential to share other beneficial qualities. This will by no means be an exhaustive list or discussion, but it will hopefully provide the reader with a plethora of examples to explore and consider, and broaden the discussion of the role that video games can play therapeutically and educationally in our social world.

6.1.1 Assassin's Creed, God of War, The Legend of Zelda, and the Roleplaying Adventure

Broadly speaking, ARPG's or action role playing games, are one of the most popular game genres at the present. Much as the name implies, the primary focus of this genre is for the player to take on the role of a character, and experience an action filled adventure in a digitally created world. Given that taking on a role and playing through

stands as the primary method by which the player experiences the videogame, they stand as an excellent bridge for our discussion between videogaming proper, and Mead's conception of the game, wherein role taking on the part of the player is the primary method by which the player experiences the videogame.

Assassin's Creed stands as a particularly clear exemplar of this. The entire conceit of the game is that modern people can use a device known as an animus to experience in a hyper realistic fashion the memories of their ancestors. The series of games has proven quite popular, with twelve major game releases, a feature film, and numerous books and comics published under its umbrella. The series takes people to medieval Europe and Middle East, Ancient Egypt, Greece, Renaissance Italy, the 18th century Caribbean, among many other locales. Across the series of games, the player discovers a cohesive story which is a unique blend of mythology and history, entertaining the myths of the past with a coming Armageddon that the player is tasked with preventing. This ultimately presents to the player a world where the keys to save the future, are found locked away in the memories of their, and by proxy, their ancestor's past. In each of their adventures the player (through the avatar of their mythical ancestor) is placed into contact with a variety of AI characters, who often represent real life historic figures such as Socrates, Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Blackbeard, and many others. During their adventure, the player is forced to make a variety of choices, such as to help or to hinder a historical character, to kill or spare an enemy, or even to fall in love or not. In each of these tasks, across a variety of settings, the player is guided into taking the role not just of themselves, but of the character they are playing,

who is faced with their own unique cultural and social context. In this way, the game aids in the practice of role taking, and can function to help the player practice taking the viewpoint of the other.

Sony's 2018 *God of War*, which received both recent critical and commercial acclaim, winning the coveted game of the year award, works similarly, also occupying the adventure RPG genre. In its story though, the player embodies Kratos, the son of Zeus, who is on the run after slaying his father (and most of the Greek pantheon) in a typical Greek, Oedipal tragedy. He finds himself in a mythological Norway, known as Midgard, wherein he attempts to start a new life, falling in love, and fathering a son, Atreus (named after a deceased friend in Sparta.) The player is introduced to Kratos in the opening of the game as he is burying his wife, Fey, who passed away from unknown causes, with his young son who is about 10-12 years old. The player discovers that Kratos' wife dying wish was to have her ashes scattered from the highest mountain in in all the realms, and this sets the character off on their adventure. Over the course of the game, the player is forced into conflict with the Norse pantheon of Gods, who are understandably concerned that a known god slayer has taken up residence in their land. Along the way the player see's Kratos' relationship with his son grow as they bond over their shared grief of losing Fey, as well as learning to work, adventure, and fight as a team, with Kratos offering the "brawn" so to speak of the combat, with Atreus providing the agile, ranged support with his bow. Over the course of their adventure the duo comes into contact with many well-known Norse mythological figures such as Odin, Mimir, Thor, Freya, and Baldur, with Baldur being an unfortunate casualty of Kartos' battle to

protect his son. It is also during their adventure that Kratos slowly comes to terms with his patricide, while desiring to build a better relationship with his own son, who he eventually tells his tragic history too. The game ends in poignant fashion with Kratos impressing upon his son that the cycle of sons murdering fathers needs to end, and that as gods, they can, and must, be better. While only anecdotal, many players found the story of father and son to be incredibly moving, and by playing out the role of the broken, but still caring father, discovered that it acted as the catalyst for the healing or growth of relationships between fathers and their children.¹ While situations such as these have remained relatively unresearched they nevertheless offer unique avenues for exploration.

Another game series which exemplifies the adventuring, roleplaying tradition is Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda*. One of the bestselling game franchises in the world, with its entries consistently found on best game ever made style lists, the series stand as a juggernaut of the gaming world. The series places the character within the mystical world of Hyrule, in the shoes of a continually reincarnated "Hero of Time" who is interestingly enough, named Link (implying the character to be the link between the player and the world.) As Link, the player undergoes a series of trial, most often involving exploring dungeons, solving puzzles, and fighting difficult, "boss" style creatures with treasure and weapons as a reward. The *Zelda* games consistently involve the discovery, and acquisition, of a powerful object known as the Triforce, which is

¹ "Opinion: How God of War Made Me a Better Father - IGN."

made up, predictably, of three pieces, embodying the forces of wisdom, power, and courage. The player's character, Link, is the traditional bearer of the Triforce of Courage, with the series eponymous heroine, Princess Zelda, acting as the bearer of Wisdom. They most often find themselves standing in opposition to the evil, demon king known as Ganondorf, bearer of the Triforce of Power, who's usual goal is to through some nefarious means steal the power of Wisdom and Courage from the young hero and heroine. Along the way in their journey the player experiences a story wherein it is their heroes courage and wisdom which enables them to overcome their obstacles, defeat evil, and seal it away for a time until it once again breaks free and the cycle begins anew.

Within each of these games, the pattern of hero facing mythological enemies, relying upon their wits, courage, and skill to explore a dangerous, and sometimes complicated world is a tried and true formula for the action RPG. Within it, we find clear callbacks to the mythology of our own, human history, placed into context with modern issues and problems. In this we find a kind of modern-day monomyth, ala Joseph Campbell² wherein the player undergoes trials, achieves victory, and triumphs over whatever nefarious evils set out to oppose them. In this cycle we can see not only a demonstrably successful formula for videogame design and worldbuilding, but we see themes that have inspired countless artists over centuries, to continually create, and recreate stories that place the hearer, reader, watcher, and player into environments wherein they take on the roles of others, and in so doing, grown, learn, and explore.

² Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

6.1.2 Making The World Bigger – MMORPG’s, and Multiplayer Roleplaying

With the advent of the internet, many of the classic RPG worlds took on a new character, becoming what is known as MMORPG’s, or massively multiplayer online role-playing games. While the games discussed in the preceding section primarily follow the tried and true formula of the single player adventure, with most of the player interactions coming from scripted and coded characters, several game franchises have made the leap over to player driven interaction.

Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft (WoW)* has been such a mainstay of the MMORPG that it has become virtually synonymous with the genre. Within the game, roughly five million people from around the world have explored it’s fantasy land of Azeroth, made up of humans, orcs, wizards, demons, and many other fantasy character standbys, and in so doing pioneered what has become an incredibly popular genre of video game.³ Within the game, players explore a broad, evolving fantasy adventure that often places them into environments known as “raids” wherein players and their characters, each developed over a long period of time into a specific role, work to challenge the most difficult environments the developers could envision. Within these, the different roles that players take, ranging from “tanks” whose main job is to attract and hold enemy units attention, to “healers” whose main duty is to keep the tanks alive, to “DPS” (damage per second) characters whose main job is to actually defeat the enemies in the raid. These raids usually involve dozens of characters who all must work in concert, not only to defeat

³ “Nearly 6 Million Years of World of Warcraft Healthy for Players’ Brains.”

enemies but to also solve complex puzzles. These pieces of raid content are typically seen as the pinnacle of *WoW* gameplay, and it is a point of pride among players to be among the first to complete them when they are released, and it is not uncommon for it to take quite some time for this happen. These environments not only allow for roleplay in the character and story development, exploring the world of Azeroth, but also in the honing of gameplay as large groups of players learn to work and perform as a team. *WoW's* reach has been so broad that anecdotally, some business have started using raid leaders or guild (large, organized groups of players) leaders as valid skillsets in hiring.⁴ Like many of these examples, the systematic, sociological study of these games has been sparse, though *WoW* has seen more research than other games given its size, there is significant room for development in this area.

Another prominent videogame series, Bioware's (a studio we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter) *Mass Effect* took a hybrid approach. While the main mode of the game was single player, with many of the same hallmarks found within it that one might find in *Assassins Creed* or *God of War*, it also made use of a unique multiplayer experience. While the main story mode of the game had the player character and their allies facing off against extragalactic, malicious robotic threats in typical sci-fi fashion, the player also was presented with a series of choices that played out on a virtual galaxy map. Players could choose to engage in one theater of war over another, to send certain squads of units to one planet as opposed to another, etc. Uniquely though,

⁴ "Does Your Leadership Development Strategy Include World of Warcraft?"

once these decisions were made, other human players would embark on those missions, acting as a fire team so to speak, with each member needing to play their role, much like in a *WoW* raid. The success or failure of these missions had direct impact on the story of *Mass Effect* with the player's war effort against the invading machines being directly correlated to how well the thousands of players playing out those assigned missions performed. This created a unique connection between the decisions made in a single player environment, to the multiplayer one, where players were forced to not only work as a team, but they also had to consider what the ramifications of their decisions might be on other players as well, again, creating a fusion of the Freudian, fantastical escape, with Meadian, game stage performance.

6.2 Broadening The Horizon – Outside The RPG Box

Up to this point, most of the games discussed have fallen broadly under the category of RPG's, or Role Play Games. Much as the genre name implies, these games primarily center around the player being required to embody a set of role(s) and interact with a variety of non-player, or player characters. The practice of role taking, or simply engaging in the structure of Meadian game stage like behavior is not limited to traditional fantasy or sci-fi RPG categories though. While space aliens and robots, demon kings and heroic princesses, all have their place in the classic pantheon, several new games have taken more novel approaches, offering unique gameplay experiences, and ample opportunity for study.

An excellent example of this would be CCP's *Eve Online* and its now famous (or infamous) Bloodbath of B-R5RB⁵. *Eve* is a space simulation game, that, while broadly categorized as an MMORPG, and while it certainly shares some hallmarks with more traditional role-playing brethren, it continues to defy categorization, and often finds itself bucking genre trends and conventions. The general setting of the game is a what is known as a persistent world, meaning broadly that the game is hosted live, 24/7 and player's interact in real time. Players are free to engage in a variety of actives including mining, piracy, manufacturing, trading, exploration, and combat, amongst many others. Performing these activities allows players to earn in game currency, known as ISK, to purchase ships and goods within the game. ISK is interestingly enough, tradeable for real world currency, meaning that activities that players engage in within the game have the potential to create real world profit or loss. Many players have also come together and formed incredibly large alliances, with said alliances often engaging in economic, or militaristic warfare with each other, which brings us to the aforementioned Bloodbath of B-R5RB.⁶ This now well known (at least in the gaming world) event was the result of two large player alliances engaging in combat over a contested star system which was of strategic importance to their overall war effort. The resulting battle lasted for twenty-one real world hours, with many participants leaving work or other real-world obligations to participate. The battle involved more than 7,548 unique players, nearly three times what

⁵ "Bloodbath of B-R5RB - Wikipedia."

⁶ This has lead to some novel research by economist's into *Eve*'s world. See for example "Real Economist Learns From Virtual World - Real Time Economics - WSJ."

the game's servers were able to handle, meaning that many players rotated in and out of the game in shifts to continue the war effort. The in-game losses totaled roughly 11 trillion ISK, or approximately \$300,000 U.S. Dollars at the present ISK exchange rate. These losses included thousands of small vessels, 576 capital ships, 75 Titan class ships, which, should a player ever wish to "cash out" would sell for roughly \$7500 U.S. dollars apiece. While the numeric and financial scale of this battle is intriguing in and of itself, and has in fact produced some novel research from an economic standpoint⁷ *Eve*, like many of the popular video games of today have just begun to have their surfaces scratched, particularly in the vein of social research. *Eve* in particular presents an interesting case given its monetization. And how that monetization provides insight into the priorities, and investment of its players not only into their virtual spaceships, but also to their virtual communities. It clearly provides a compelling, magical escape for thousands of players, and it might also present an environment ripe for exploration in regard to the Median game stage perspective as well.

Having presented several intriguing examples of how videogames and their play spaces might interact pedagogically and therapeutically for their players, we turn now to the "dark side." We will examine how, in the face of their growing popularity and mass consumption, games become McDonaldized or Anomic in the Durkheimian sense, and we explore what can be done to leverage these games, and others like them, for social benefit, as opposed to cost.

⁷ See for example Johnson and Mejia, "Making Science Fiction Real: Neoliberalism, Real-Life and Esports in EVE Online"; Taylor et al., "Alienated Playbour: Relations of Production in EVE Online."

CHAPTER VII

MCDONALDIZED GAMING

7.1 Introduction

The concept of McDonaldization is one which has been widely cited within sociology. At the time of this writing, it possesses over 11,000 citations as recorded by Google Scholar across its various editions, and Ritzer himself has been cited nearly 64,000 times over the course of his career. Clearly then, these (and Ritzer's) ideas have been impactful in some shape or form to academic thought, but for such a broad concept to be explored in a meaningful fashion for this discussion, it must be broken down into "bite size" pieces so to speak. It is this pattern I wish to follow. I will look first to Ritzer the person and his biography, exploring his personal experiences, his development of thought, and finally, examine what drew him to the discipline of sociology. Following that I will turn outward to explore his conception of McDonaldization proper and its theoretical underpinnings anchored in the work of Max Weber. Finally, I will turn toward the applicability of the concept itself, and its utility in examining sociological phenomena in relation to an examination of contemporary culture, with particular focus placed on contemporary digital culture in video gaming.

I will examine in particular a case study in the video game industry of how the immense economic pressures found in McDonaldization have the potential to create an environment wherein stress becomes inherent to the production process, as opposed to stress relieving. This stands as an inverse of the effects discussed in chapters III and IV, and will force us to examine video games in a new way. Ultimately, I will demonstrate

that video games are not in and of themselves a stress removing, silver bullet. They might indeed act from the standpoint of O’Keefe, magically, but we must remember that as O’Keefe noted, magic is ultimately the last line of defense, and there is a thin line between benefit and harm. I wish to use this chapter and the following to explore video games, in light of my Durkheimian tensesgrity principle. If video games are to provide beneficial, or even therapeutic benefits, those benefits must be found in a balance, and an examination of where this balance is *not* found can be just as informative as where it is. It is to this task that we now turn.

7.2 Weberian Theoretical Overview

As mentioned above, McDonaldization as a concept has been cited widely in the discipline of sociology. Having been utilized in a variety of ways, ranging from religion¹, news media², education³, medicine⁴, leisure⁵, emotions,⁶ social services,⁷ criminal justice,⁸ among many others. While the concept has been employed with a wide

¹ Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity, and the Future of the Church*.

² Prichard, *The Making of McPaper: The inside Story of USA Today*.

³ Hayes and Wynyard, *The McDonaldization of Higher Education*; Hartley, “The ‘McDonaldization’ of Higher Education: Food for Thought?”; Parker and Jary, “The McUniversity: Organization, Management and Academic Subjectivity.”

⁴ Reiser and Reiser, *Medicine and the Reign of Technology*; Ritzer and Walczak, “The Changing Nature of American Medicine.”

⁵ Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel*; Bryman, “Theme Parks and McDonaldization”; Stillman Todd, “The Postmodern Ballpark as a Leisure Setting: Enchantment and Simulated de-McDonaldization”; Weaver, “The McDonaldization Thesis and Cruise Tourism.”

⁶ Mestrovic, *Postemotional Society*.

⁷ Dustin, *The McDonaldization of Social Work*.

⁸ for example see Kemmesies, “What Do Hamburgers and Drug Care Have in Common: Some Unorthodox Remarks on the McDonaldization and Rationality of Drug Care”; Robinson, “McDonaldization of America’s Police, Courts, and Corrections”; Umbreit, “Avoiding the Marginalization and ‘McDonaldization’ of Victim Offender Mediation: A Case Study in Moving toward the Mainstream”; Shichor, “Three Strikes as a Public Policy: The Convergence of the New Penology and the McDonaldization of Punishment.”

range of utility, we must first define and circumscribe what the topic itself is and consists of, before we can discuss it in a meaningful fashion. The concept of McDonaldization as envisioned by George Ritzer, is built upon Max Weber's work on bureaucracy and rationalization, it is to the core of Weber's perspective that we turn first, to better understand how it influenced Ritzer's theoretical development.

Ritzer bases his theory upon the work of Max Weber, and his examination of rationality, bureaucracy, and capitalism.⁹ Weber himself was no stranger to the benefits of bureaucracy and rationality, having written extensively on the matter. Weber understood bureaucracies to be highly efficient and productive and saw an exemplar of their function in the United States, which he noted in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Within this text Weber explored the impact of Puritanism on America, and examined its benefits and drawbacks. Weber discusses the focus on efficiency of the Puritans in this text wherein he states, "Sport was accepted if it served a rational purpose, that of recreation necessary for physical efficiency."¹⁰ Weber also noted the love of what he called "quantitative bigness" in the United States as well. He states, "When the imagination of a whole people has once been turned toward purely quantitative bigness, as in the United States, this romanticism of numbers exercises an irresistible appeal to the poets among business men."¹¹ Of the highly efficient and

⁹ The bulk of Ritzer's discussion surrounding rationality stems from Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, and Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Both large texts that we will not treat in detail here, but will highlight, and were highly formative in Ritzer's approach.

¹⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 112.

¹¹ Weber, 32–33.

calculated discipline of workers Weber states, “The ability of mental concentration, as well as the absolutely essential feeling of obligation to one’s job, are here most often combined with a strict economy which calculates the possibility of high earnings, and a cool self-control and frugality which enormously increase performance.”¹² In addition, Weber states of the Protestant ethic and religious certainty that, “...in order to attain that self-confidence intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable means. It and it alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace.”¹³ It is from these Protestant traits that Weber saw much of the capitalistic success of the United States stemming from, and it is from these threads that Ritzer traces much of his argument.

While Weber was careful in his scholarship, he was not averse to making his criticisms of what he saw as the ever-encroaching grasp of the bureaucratic and rationalistic systems either. Simultaneously with his observations of economic success, he also saw the malignant growth of rationality which he summarized by stating, “This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.”¹⁴ This bound order ultimately lead to what Weber dubbed the, “iron cage.” He describes this

¹² Weber, 26.

¹³ Weber, 67.

¹⁴ Weber, 123.

cage in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* where he states, “In Baxter’s view, the care for external goods should only lie on the should of the saint ‘like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.’ But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.”¹⁵ Of this cage he said, “...mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved’.”¹⁶ He further demonstrated his attitude toward the increasing bureaucratization of society in a speech he gave to the Association for Social Policy in 1909 where he stated:

It is horrible to think that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones - a state of affairs which is to be seen once more, as in the Egyptian records, playing an ever-increasing part in the spirit of our present administrative system, and especially of its offspring, the students. This passion for bureaucracy ... is enough to drive one to despair. It is as if in politics ... we were deliberately to become men who need "order" and nothing but order, become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it. That the world should know no men but these: it is such an evolution that we are already caught up, and the great question is,

¹⁵ Weber, 123.

¹⁶ Weber, 124.

therefore, not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parceling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life.¹⁷

If the above quotations did not paint a critical enough perspective, Weber ultimately ended up quite pessimistic in his viewpoint of bureaucracy and rationality. In his text *Politics as Vocation* he states, “Not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness...”¹⁸ It is from this highly critical viewpoint of bureaucracy rationality that Ritzer proceeds with the bulk of his discussion, and it is to Ritzer and his theory of McDonaldization that we now turn.

7.3 Ritzer and McDonaldization

To begin, we must define what precisely McDonaldization is. Ritzer defines this conceptual process by stating that it is, “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world.”¹⁹ McDonaldization, embodying the inevitable march of fast food efficiency into the daily life of the consumer is marked by four distinct traits: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, all of which evoke Weber in their relation to his discussion surrounding rationality.²⁰ The first of these, efficiency, is defined by Ritzer as, “... the optimum method for getting from one point to another”²¹.

¹⁷ Weber, “Max Weber on Bureaucratization in 1909.”

¹⁸ Weber, “Politics as Vocation,” 128.

¹⁹ Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, 1.

²⁰ Kalberg, “Max Weber’s Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History.”

²¹ Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, 13.

While this brings to mind methods of traveling, i.e. a fast car, or an airplane, for Ritzer it encompasses a variety of needs. Efficiently moving from the state of hungry to satiated, as a Big Mac might offer. Efficiently moving from one weight to another, as many popular diets advertise (Lose 30 pounds in 30 days!), or even speedily avoiding the ever-looming deadline of April 15th, a service which many income tax aid corporations claim to provide in their advertisements. For criminal justice, it would include the timely dispensation of justice and a speedy righting of wrongs. All of these things encompass the concept of efficiency from a McDonaldization standpoint.

The second key trait, calculability, emphasizes, "...the quantitative aspects of products sold...and services offered."²² This could cover everything from the likes of portion size or caloric quantities, to delivery or wait times, or even rates of accuracy. Delivery in 30 minutes or less or your money back, more than 99% accurate if used properly, mandatory minimum sentencing, and three strike laws all emphasize the nature of calculability.

The third trait of McDonaldization, predictability, is defined as, "...the assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locales"²³. A Big Mac in Los Angeles should be virtually identical to one purchased in New York. The laundry detergent you purchase in Texas should perform just as well and come in virtually identical packaging to the one you might purchase in Montana. The justice you receive in one part of the U.S. should be identical to what you would receive in another.

²² Ritzer, 14.

²³ Ritzer, 14.

The fourth, and potentially most potent of the traits of McDonaldization is control. Defined as an, "...increased control of humans through the utilization of nonhuman technology."²⁴ This concept of technology is used broadly by Ritzer, and can encompass not just machinery, electronics, and tools, but also skills, knowledge, and techniques. Control can be exerted over both employees and customers. From mandatory uniforms which work to control appearance, to specific seating designed to encourage minimal time spent at the table, the individual is controlled to perform tasks in a McDonaldized fashion. These techniques extend outside of the fast-food world as well and can encompass techniques and processes surrounding employee training, internet traffic observation through "cookies" or even police interrogation techniques such as the Reid technique of criminal interrogation.

It is the growth and expansion of these traits into society that encompass the idea of McDonaldization for Ritzer. Ritzer argues, much like Weber, that the unchecked growth of this process can be dehumanizing and harmful, leading to an iron cage of rationality that stifles what can and should be efficient and potentially joyful experiences. Ritzer's discussion also illustrates how the societal traits and habits noted by Weber in the *Protestant Ethic* are still active in our modern society a century later, possessing similar results as well. The "quantitative bigness" that Weber noted finds its flourishing maturity in the precision of calculability. The need for spiritual certainty blossoms into a predictable system of economic conduct. The Puritans need for bodily

²⁴ Ritzer, 102.

efficiency translates to efficiency of action seen in the work of Frederick W. Taylor and his efficiency experts of the early 20th century, or the in the popular business programs geared towards productive efficiency such as Six Sigma, Scrum, or Lean.²⁵

Much like Weber, Ritzer noted that these McDonaldized traits, while possessing the capacity to produce a great deal of beneficial products, also have the potential to create harmful or inefficient processes as well. Ritzer dubs this the “irrationality of rationality,” his counterpart to the Weberian Iron Cage. Ritzer states, “Rational systems inevitably spawn irrationalities that limit, eventually compromise, and perhaps even undermine the irrationality.”²⁶ Long drive thru lines due to lunch rush traffic, a convoluted hierarchy confusing employees about who to report to, or the oft maligned IVR telephone support systems which route you through numerous sub menus but rarely seeming to connect you with a live human, are all examples of Ritzer’s irrationality of rationality. It is to an instance of irrational rationality in the video game industry, an area of interest to my own research that I shall now turn to, to illustrate this concept at large.

7.4 Irrational Rationality in Gaming: Bioware & Anthem²⁷

The video game *Anthem* had a turbulent development and release process, and has become a testament to how even an excellent developmental pedigree and deep funding pockets can fail to produce a quality product in the face of Ritzerian irrational rationality.

²⁵ “Lean Six Sigma Certification | 6 Sigma Training”; “What Is Scrum?”

²⁶ Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, 123.

²⁷ The discussion in this section leans heavily on the expose by Jason Schreier, “How BioWare’s Anthem Went Wrong.”

Originally code-named *Dylan*, after famed musician Bob Dylan; *Anthem* was the top-secret brainchild of Electronic Arts, (EA) and BioWare that began development in 2012. EA, headquartered in Redwood City California, is a multi-billion dollar video game production company, and the second largest gaming company in North America and Europe. Bioware is an acclaimed video game development studio based in Edmonton, Alberta. It has produced numerous genre defining games, and has several of their creations sitting in the video game hall of fame. In addition, it was for much of its existence, voted one of the best companies to work for in Canada. It was for all intents and purposes a match made in heaven. One of the most talented teams in video game development in the world had access to one of the biggest pocketbooks for funding video game development on the planet. What happened over the next seven years though was a highlight of McDonaldization gone wrong.

The hook for *Anthem* was simple. Give the player a high powered robosuit, much like Iron Man of Marvel, and send them out into a dangerous environment to survive with their friends for as long as they could. The developers themselves described the hook by stating, “We’re going out as a team, going to try to accomplish something as a team, then come back and talk about it.”²⁸ Early response feedback was fantastic, but the development process only got more rocky from there. Two years into the development cycle, in 2014 Casey Hudson, the head designer and director of the award-winning *Mass Effect* game series that helped put BioWare on the video gaming map, decided to move

²⁸ Jason Schreier.

on to a new stage of his career, leaving the *Anthem* team with a much younger leader, with far less experience. In addition, the game engine, the skeleton that the entire game was built upon, was transitioned over to a new game engine named Frostbite, which EA owned, primarily as a cost cutting measure to avoid licensing fees of using game engines developed by other companies.

In early 2015, to help support the now junior team lead on the project, BioWare veteran David Gaider was moved over to the *Anthem* to help flesh out the game's story. Gaider's flair for writing was decidedly fantastical, and leaned heavily on fantasy tropes, a decision that several of the *Anthem* team members felt was the wrong move to make. With no definitive leadership, bickering set in, and a year later Gaider left BioWare entirely, leaving another void in the *Anthem* team, and a total reboot to the game's story. A member of the *Anthem* team is quoted as saying, "As you can imagine, writing for BioWare sets the foundation for all the games," said one developer. "When writing is unsure of what it's doing, it causes a lot of destruction to a lot of departments."²⁹ With two team leads having left the company, the creative leadership team took up some of the slack and attempted to fill in the gaps, but this approach was not without its drawbacks. Given that there were a handful of people now in charge, the vision and direction of the team began to flounder. Decision that should have taken months to iterate, began to take a year. From 2015-2016 the game essentially sat stagnant, constantly changing, but not pressing forward in any meaningful direction. This

²⁹ Jason Schreier.

floundering was compounded by the Frostbite engine mentioned above. Pushed by EA executive Patrick Söderlund, as both a cost cutting measure and for keeping video game intellectual property a secret, Frostbite became the de-facto development engine for BioWare. There was just one problem, Frostbite was not good for building games in. One BioWare employee described Frostbite by simply stating, “Frostbite is full of razor blades...”³⁰ a sentiment that has now come to be shared by many game developers who have worked with EA and their engine. Game ideas that the *Anthem* team had originally been working with, simply were not technically feasible within the Frostbite engine. Anyone who has worked with a piece of frustrating technology can sympathize with this BioWare developer who was quoted as saying, “It’s really hard to make a game where you have to fight your own tool set all the time.”³¹ To compound the problem, EA as befitting one of the largest gaming companies on the planet, had multiple teams working with multiple development studios, and decided to shift some of *Anthem’s* staff over to their *FIFA* division, a sport game named after the International Federation of Association Football. *FIFA* had recently been rolled over to the Frostbite engine as well, and was on an annual release schedule that reflected the sport season, and as such had pressing deadlines. In addition, The *FIFA* team needed help, and the *Anthem* team had developers who had three years of experience with Frostbite. In addition to this, the coordination of staff was centralized under EA’s central Frostbite team. This seemingly efficient setup was designed to centralize communication and allocation of time and

³⁰ Jason Schreier.

³¹ Jason Schreier.

resources, but in reality lead to situations where, “The amount of support you’d get at EA on Frostbite is based on how much money your studio’s game is going to make.”³² A situation that often left the *Anthem* team in a lurch as *FIFA*’s consistent revenue stream and sports appeal led to them receiving top priority.

Four years down the road, near the end of 2016, *Anthem* was due to enter the production phase of the development cycle, akin to the shooting stage of a film. The game is meant to be built out. Many members of the development team felt that this was behind schedule, and began to fear the dreaded “crunch,” a term in the gaming industry that is analogous to “cramming” in the academic world, wherein people would pull long hours to try and polish a game that was behind schedule. Lack of a clear leadership structure due to the constant shifting left little structure though for designers to bring these “crunch” concerns to anyone of consequence’s attention. Developers were quoted as saying, “Hey, the same mistakes are happening again, did you guys see this the last time? Can you stop this?...“They’d be quite dismissive about it.”³³

During Christmas 2016, BioWare sent home a small playable demo to their team to get a feel for the game. A process akin to a prescreening of a film. EA executive Patrick Söderlund also received a demo and was decidedly unenthused. He called an all hands meeting to express his displeasure and called in a special Frostbite specialist team from Stockholm, Sweden to get *Anthem* back in shape. What this led to, was a six week “crunch” to create a demo that was specifically geared to keep EA engaged with the

³² Jason Schreier.

³³ Jason Schreier.

development process and ally Patrick Söderlund's concerns. Game designers introduced a flying mechanic, which made the player feel more like Iron Man, but necessitated yet another rebuild of game to incorporate this.

Fast forward a few months to Summer 2017, and the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, the largest video game expo in the world is in full swing, and EA wants to show off *Anthem* and its tech demo. Despite the fact that, “The demo was not actually built properly—a lot of it was fake...”³⁴ EA pushed ahead with a Fall 2018 release date for the game, a decision that put the *Anthem* team under a significant amount of pressure. BioWare decided to go all hands on deck, to meet the deadline, and pulled in additional staff from their satellite offices in Austin, Texas, and Montreal Quebec. The only problem was, those teams had not been working on *Anthem*, and were hours away, necessitating telecommuting for most of their work together. A technologically limiting reality that further complicated getting the game into a functional state. As problems surrounding communication and execution became more apparent, people began to jump ship. Several veteran BioWare developers left the studio in the summer, with the biggest loss being felt when one of the game's lead designers, Corey Gaspur, stepped away from the company. The Fall 2018 release date began to feel unrealistic, but EA refused to budge, and only grudgingly gave them an extension to March of 2019, the end of the company's fiscal year. This created another “crunch” cycle, and ultimately lead to

³⁴ Jason Schreier.

BioWare cannibalizing several of their other teams, essentially leaving their other projects under development dead in the water, in order to try and save *Anthem*.

Over the next year and a half, BioWare went through a massive amount of “crunch” which only served to further exhaust people. Employees began to take stress leave, often doctor mandated, and former employees described an environment where, “...they would frequently find a private room in the office, shut the door, and just cry.”³⁵ Employees stated that, “People were so angry and sad all the time...Depression and anxiety are an epidemic within BioWare.”³⁶ This ultimately led to “stress casualties” which were described as employees who had breakdowns and would not show up to work for days or weeks at a time. Some would tender their resignation along the way. As EA witnessed this happening, they doubled down on hitting their release date, with EA executive Samantha Ryan even pulling in people from other design studios that EA owned to help wrap up the game, EA was all in. Throughout this process, BioWare experienced an immense amount of attrition and the game ultimately released in an unfinished state, to lackluster reviews, and unprofitable numbers.

This incident is well known in the gaming community, and I believe provides a clear illustration of how Ritzer’s irrationality of rationality plays out in the world around us. EA’s focus on calculability, and control in pressing for the use of the Frostbite engine, to save money and lock down intellectual property or its use of efficiency, predictability, and control to try and hit a deadline for release in March 2019 were not

³⁵ Jason Schreier.

³⁶ Jason Schreier.

bad things in and of themselves. Many of those actions and business acumen helped build the company in to the juggernaut it is today in the gaming industry. They were highly rational, McDonaldized decisions. A unified game engine and staff to oversee it, clear, precise deadlines for a studio that had vacillated for years on deciding what to make. All of those decisions are highly rational, but also led to irrational consequences such as a poor game release that underperformed in the marketplace, a loss of staff and creative talent who moved on to calmer waters, potentially generating profit for competitors, and on a more human level, the stress casualties of people who experienced mental breakdowns, such as crying in closets. Examples such as this one help to illustrate the continued relevancy of Ritzer's work.

7.5 Significance

This relevancy goes beyond simple market value or game development though. While Ritzer himself was slightly self-deprecating in speaking of the importance of his work, stating, "I realize it's not like 'the billion people who are starving in the world' or something like that. I understand where my focus stands... I mean, there are a lot more important problems in the world than "consumption," namely, hunger or genocide in Darfur. But for some reason or other, I have been drawn to this problem, which is very much a problem of the developed and wealthy countries..."³⁷ Ritzer's modesty here belies the potential impact of his work and the impact of a concept such as McDonaldization to large scale ethical issues such as world hunger, genocide, slave

³⁷ Dandaneau and Dodsworth, "Being (George Ritzer) and Nothingness: An Interview," 94.

and/or child labor, and the prison industrial complex. For example, Megan Comfort's work in *Doing Time Together* notes alongside other authors such as Zygmunt Bauman, that control, predictability, and efficiency are all tools utilized by the prison system to maintain their rigid environment. Comfort quotes Bauman in her text, equating the prison system to what Bauman describes as, "factories of order . . . sites of purposeful activity calculated to result in a product conceived in advance . . . restoring certainty, eliminating randomness, making the conduct of the inmates regular and predictable—certain—once more."³⁸ The clear elements of McDonaldization, predictability, control, are evident here as well. In addition, even once people are released from the prison system, studies have also shown that McDonaldized programs to reduce recidivism have little benefit.³⁹ Further, longitudinal studies have revealed that effective change is far more complex, and nuanced, than simply effecting brief, one time solutions.⁴⁰ From an economic standpoint, many elements of a McDonaldization that fuel the efficient, calculable, predictable, and controlled nature of developed, consumption-based economies, utilize supply chains that employ child labor,⁴¹ prison labor,⁴² and in the case of the now infamous Foxconn connection with Apple and HP, labor that can drive

³⁸ Comfort, *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*, 38; Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*, 107.

³⁹ Giordano, Schroeder, and Cernkovich, "Emotions and Crime over the Life Course: A Neo-Meadian Perspective on Criminal Continuity and Change"; MacKenzie, Wilson, and Kider, "Effects of Correctional Boot Camps on Offending."

⁴⁰ Giordano et al., "A Life-course Perspective on Spirituality and Desistance from Crime."

⁴¹ "Child Labour behind Smart Phone and Electric Car Batteries | Amnesty International."

⁴² "[3/24/20] – Prison Labor in the United States: How Prevalent Is It Today?"

individuals to suicide.⁴³ In point of fact, ethical supply chains have become an increasing point of interest for corporations who have at times found that their focus on McDonaldized efficiency has lead them to ethically questionable waters, and has in some cases, impacted their bottom line.⁴⁴ It is no surprise that given these powerful forces that we have discussed, events like *Anthem's* development can occur. When the immense pressure to create a product in a calculable, efficient amount of time begins to outweigh the creative experience, stressful experiences are bound to present themselves. We recall that for O'Keefe magic necessitates a *relaxing* of the social framework, something which videogame play, and creation, are apt to do. We find in McDonaldization the opposite effect, a hardening, and strengthening of the social framework, ultimately resulting in a Weberian iron cage. Bearing this in mind, we will continue in the next chapter our theme of examining video gaming out of balance. We will, through the lens of Durkheim, examine the inverse problem, of a game where the framework is relaxed too much. This occurs when, instead of too much constraint, too little is provided, leading to additive gameplay cycles, financial exploitation, and games which are designed more to empty the wallet of the player then to provide them with a positive gameplay experience.

Ultimately, the irrationality of rationality, and the McDonaldization process carry continued relevancy, a point I hope to have illustrated during my discussion in this

⁴³ "Life Inside Foxconn's Facility in Shenzhen - China Real Time Report - WSJ"; "Apple, H-P Investigating Foxconn's Steps to Deal With Suicides - WSJ."

⁴⁴ Roberts, "Supply Chain Specific? Understanding the Patchy Success of Ethical Sourcing Initiatives."

question. It is my hope that despite the pessimistic perspective of Ritzer and Weber, that we as sociologists can help stave off that irrationality of rationality and revitalize aspects of human experience and culture that have been ossified by rigid adherence to efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Or at the very least, do as Ritzer himself suggests in his text wherein he quotes the well-known poet Dylan Thomas, “Do not go gentle into that good night.... Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

CHAPTER VIII

DISORDERED GAMING AND ANOMIE

8.1 Introduction

The concept of anomie within sociology, has been a uniquely problematic one. It initially received a flurry of activity and was utilized by Parsons,¹ Merton,² and others but has fallen into disuse by and large. Typically defined in the work of the above-mentioned authors as something akin to “normlessness,” this common misconception has continued into sociology textbooks still in print today, often taking on a similar “normlessness-esque” meaning. Parsons defined anomie by stating, “anomie is precisely this state of disorganization where the hold of norms over individual conduct has broken down.”³ His student Merton followed suit, and defined anomie as, “a condition of relative normlessness in a society or group.”⁴ In point of fact, I recently examined a textbook for my own course on the introduction to sociology, and within it anomie was defined as a “vacuum in norms.”⁵ Clearly this understanding of normlessness has still found root in the typical sociological text of today, and appears to show no sign of abating anytime soon. This is unfortunate, as Durkheim’s conception of anomie is rich with depth and theoretical utility, something I shall attempt to explore in this discussion. I will pay particular attention to Durkheim’s conception of anomie as something akin to madness, or an infinite desire, and place that definition into a recontextualized

¹ Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, 377.

² Merton and Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 161.

³ Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, 377.

⁴ Merton and Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 161.

⁵ Newman, *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, 447.

understanding of video gaming addiction, as well as problematic video game development practices. We will examine these practices in light of my tensesgrity principle discussed in Chapter II, and through the lens of Durkheim, will examine practices which relax too much the social framework. We will see that it is practices such as these which ultimately, as discussed in the previous chapter, lead not to beneficial, stress relieving outcomes, but to problematic, and even potentially harmful gameplay and game development habits.

We begin with his conception of anomie as, “a condition of madness or a state akin to sin”⁶ which will be explored in an effort to better illuminate why the distinction between these two definitions is integral for the discipline of sociology. I plan to first turn briefly to a background on Durkheim as an individual, then turn to the etymological roots of his conception of anomie, before finally examining contemporary examples of anomie and presenting how an updated understanding of anomie can be beneficial for the discipline of sociology as a whole, and for future sociologists. It is to a brief biographical overview that I now turn. It should be noted that despite Durkheim’s prominence in sociology, relatively little remains of his personal writings, effects, papers, and notes, owing mainly to their destruction by the Nazis in World War II.⁷ This is unfortunate, for a variety of reasons, but I shall nevertheless attempt to highlight, and reemphasize from Chapter I, several biographical touchpoints of Durkheim’s life to better examine his concept of anomie.

⁶ Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Dereglement,” 81.

⁷ Meštrović, *Emile Durkheim and the Reformation of Sociology*, 19–20.

Born in 1858, in Epinal, France, Emile Durkheim was born to a Jewish family of modest means.⁸ Descended from eight generations of rabbis, he was exposed to religious thought at an early age.⁹ This is a point of interest as it may help us better understand his use of anomie as a concept in our exploration of his thought on the matter. He was admitted to the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he studied philosophy, and grew a marked appreciation of Arthur Schopenhauer, to such a degree that his students took to calling him “Schopen” due to his appreciation for Schopenhauer’s work.¹⁰ He would have been clearly aware of the impact of the “will to life” on the individual. Of the will for Schopenhauer we can say briefly, “Schopenhauer's "will" is blind, tyrannical, and all-powerful, and reason is *its* instrument. Essentially, it stands for passion and desire, what Schopenhauer sometimes calls the "heart", and all that is obscure, unconscious, irrational and emotional.”¹¹ I shall examine later how this affinity for the work of Schopenhauer also plays an intriguing role in Durkheim’s conception of anomie. It is to the etymology of the term anomie that I now turn, to better understand its origin, in order to properly discuss the value of each understanding of the anomie concept.

8.2 The Etymology of Anomie

Before diving into the linguistic breakdown of the origin of anomie, I want to take a brief moment to address why the etymology of the word is important, not just as

⁸ “Emile Durkheim | Biography, Theory, & Facts | Britannica.”

⁹ Meštrović, *Emile Durkheim and the Reformation of Sociology*, 26.

¹⁰ Lalande, “Allocution Pour Le Centenaire de La Naissance d’Emile Durkheim’,” 23.

¹¹ Mestrovic, “Simmel’s Sociology in Relation to Schopenhauer’s Philosophy,” 182.

an academic exercise but in relation to the theoretical thought of Durkheim as a whole. For Durkheim, words operate as collective representations, which ultimately can be interacted with and understood as “social facts”. He states of language, “The notions corresponding to various elements of language are therefore collective representations.”¹² Of social facts he states, “...social facts must be treated as things.”¹³ If then they are things, they can be interacted with, felt, and wrestled with. This process is one which is distinctly collective for Durkheim. He says of language and words, “...if they are collective representations, first and foremost they add to what our personal experience can teach us all the wisdom and science that the collectivity has amassed over centuries.”¹⁴ He also states that because of this, “A concept is not my concept; it is common to me and other men... common to all because it is the work of the community.”¹⁵ It is this collective nature of language that makes it so powerful, but also quite temperamental and on occasion, confusing. Of this nature Durkheim states, “This is why we have difficulty understanding one another... This happens because we all use the same words without giving them the same meaning.”¹⁶ This etymological analysis then is in service of bridging that understanding of anomie, a concept that has been used by a variety of members of the sociological community, but without being given the same meaning.

¹² Durkheim and Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Emile Durkheim ; Translated and with an Introduction by Karen E. Fields*, 436.

¹³ Durkheim, “The Rules of Sociological Method, Trans. WD Halls.”

¹⁴ Durkheim and Fields, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Emile Durkheim ; Translated and with an Introduction by Karen E. Fields*, 437.

¹⁵ Durkheim and Fields, 435.

¹⁶ Durkheim and Fields, 437.

The term anomie itself is often attributed to Durkheim and his work *The Division of Labor*,¹⁷ originally published in 1893. Interestingly though, the term was used prior to this by Guyau, who employed it in 1885 and again in 1887.¹⁸ Guyau utilized the term from the perspective of “moral anomie” essentially implying the freeing of the individual from the dogmatism of religious thought.¹⁹ This was a point of disagreement for Durkheim, who felt that anomie could never exist as something moral.²⁰ This is an important detail that will impact my examination of the term anomie.

Linguistically speaking, anomie’s root word, anomia, is often translated as “sin.” Sin though, is not simply the act of purposefully violating a divine statute, command, or law. It can encompass acts, omissions, even attitudes, that can be either voluntary or involuntary, often focusing on a kind of pollution that profanes the sacred, more akin to sacrilege.²¹ In point of fact, Lyonnet and Sabourin note that, “nowhere in the New Testament is anomia related to nomos, ‘law.’”²² When anomia, or a-nomos is utilized as “lawlessness” it is most often done to imply that someone is without God, akin to the conception of the Gentiles, or the Antichrist.²³ It is understood more broadly as a state that one is in or occupies, than an action that someone takes. Lyonnet and Sabourin state,

¹⁷ Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (W.D. Halls Trans.).

¹⁸ Guyau, *Esquisse d'une Morale sans Obligation, Ni Sanction*; Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Dereglement,” 82; Guyau, *L’irréligion de l’avenir*.

¹⁹ Orru, “The Ethics of Anomie: Jean Marie Guyau and Emile Durkheim.”

²⁰ Durkheim, “Definition Du Fait Moral,” 282; Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Dereglement,” 82.

²¹ Meštrović, “Anomia and Sin in Durkheim’s Thought”; Lyonnet and Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice. A Biblical and Patristic Study*; Lalande, *Vocabulaire Technique et Critique de La Philosophie*, 748.

²² Lyonnet and Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice. A Biblical and Patristic Study*, 48:43.

²³ Arndt and Wilbur, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 71; Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 147.

“to commit sin is not only to make a bad action, it means to commit also ‘iniquity’ to reveal that is, the sinner in his innermost, as a son of the devil, as he who opposes God and Christ...”²⁴ These is language that is decidedly religiously couched, but this is unsurprising given Durkheim’s religious heritage, which very well could have sensitized him to this kind of thinking.²⁵

To continue, the ancient Greeks often used a-nomos in its capacity as something which is lawless or impious,²⁶ but these definitions belie the word’s origin. *Nomos* derives from the Greek word *Moirai*, which itself means a portion or part of the whole.²⁷ Beyond that though, it implied fate, destiny, and in the case of the *Moirai*²⁸, the mythological Fates who wove the threads of every mortal’s life.²⁹ *Nomos* was intricately tied with *Dike Astraea*,³⁰ the goddess of justice, who holds the scales we commonly associate with the constellation *Libra*, which is in turn associated now with blind Lady Justice.³¹ A-nomos then, or *anomia*, is to be without or outside of these things, and in many ways, to be outside of allotted destiny or bounds. A disciple of Durkheim and linguist of Ancient Greek, Louis Gernet noted as well that it was pride or *hubris* that

²⁴ Lyonnet and Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice. A Biblical and Patristic Study*, 48:43.

²⁵ See Meštrović, *Emile Durkheim and the Reformation of Sociology*, xiii.

²⁶ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1140–42.

²⁷ “Moirai | Origin and Meaning of the Name Moira by Online Etymology Dictionary.”

²⁸ “MOIRAE (Moirai) - The Fates, Greek Goddesses of Fate & Destiny (Roman Parcae).”

²⁹ Jeffery, *Archaic Greece: The City States c. 700-500 BC*, 653:42.

³⁰ “DIKE - Greek Goddess Hora of Justice (Roman Justitia).”

³¹ It is interesting to note that the concept of justice and fate go back even farther than Ancient Greece. The Egyptians had a conception of *Maat*, which was both an ethical/moral principle, and a goddess of justice whose feather of truth was weighed against the heart of the dead in the *Duat* to see if they could pass into the afterlife. I find that this ties interestingly into Durkheim’s point that knowledge and language are the product of centuries of collective human activity. For more on *Maat* see Martin, “Maat and Order in African Cosmology: A Conceptual Tool for Understanding Indigenous Knowledge.”

challenged nomos, and that for the Greeks, “nomos is [an] imperative rule derived from a collectivity that represents [etymologically] the principle of distribution.”³² Essentially then, to operate a-nomos, is to operate outside of the imperative. As Durkheim notes in his *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, the dispensation of land, property, law, etc. are sacred tasks, and to treat them or abuse them is in a fashion, a form of sacrilege.³³ It is from this conception of a-nomos or anomia as sacrilege, that Durkheim operates from. Durkheim did not write in ancient Greek though, and as such, he needed to place these concepts into the French linguistic context. How he does this will be what I examine next.

8.3 Durkheim and *Dérèglement*

When Durkheim translated the concept of anomie into his discussion in French, he did so utilizing two primary words, *dérèglement* and *règle*.³⁴ Per Lalande, *règle* as a concept indicts something that must or should be done, typically in a systematic fashion. It is prescriptive, not descriptive.³⁵ *Dérèglement* in turn implies being out of sorts, diseased, or immoral. The *Littre*³⁶, the French equivalent of the Oxford English Dictionary provides several illuminating examples of how this word is used historically, pre Durkheim, in relation to sickness or disease. The first being, “Les maladies ne se

³² Gernet, *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece*, 329.

³³ Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*; Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Dereglement,” 83.

³⁴ Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Dereglement,” 84.

³⁵ Lalande, *Vocabulaire Technique et Critique de La Philosophie*; Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Dereglement,” 84.

³⁶ Littré, *Dictionnaire de La Langue Française...*

forment que du dérèglement des humeurs.”³⁷ Translated, this states “Diseases develop from nothing else but a *dérèglement* of the humors.”³⁸ Implying essentially that it is an irregular or unhealthy state. A second definition states, “Il faut bien des années de dérèglement et de libertinage pour arriver à ce comble d'infamie”³⁹ Translated, this reads, “It takes many a year of *dérèglement* and of leading a libertine life for such utmost infamy to result.”⁴⁰ Essentially implying a kind of lewd or dissolute conduct on the part of the individual. The *Littre* ultimately says of *dérèglement* that it is one of two words that express a kind of moral disorder, its counterpart being *dérangement*. Of the two, *dérèglement* is considered to be the more severe.⁴¹ As a final note, many of the synonyms for *dérèglement* imply vice, corruption, debauchery, torment, malady, and a Tantalusesque infinite desire that evokes the Will of Schopenhauer. These are often wrapped in the understanding of immorality as well, further connecting with the discussion of anomia as a kind of sin, further highlighting the above discussion. In addition, should one look up the word anomie/anomy in the Oxford English Dictionary, they would find similar descriptions. While defined as “lawlessness” examples of its earliest use include statements such as “That were to set an Anomy, and to bring disorder, doubt, and incertaintie over all.”⁴² Another example states, “Men's Lusts,

³⁷ “Littre - Dérèglement - Définition, Citations, Étymologie.”

³⁸ Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Deregulation,” 84.

³⁹ “Littre - Dérèglement - Définition, Citations, Étymologie.”

⁴⁰ Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Deregulation,” 84.

⁴¹ “Littre - Dérèglement - Définition, Citations, Étymologie”; Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Deregulation,” 84.

⁴² “Anomy, n. : Oxford English Dictionary.”

animosities, enormities, Anomies.”⁴³ Clearly invoking images of immorality and sin. Ultimately, what I wish to highlight here is that the word anomie is linguistically loaded and implies far more behind it than simply “normlessness” or “lawlessness.” Further, Durkheim’s usage of the word, given his extensive theological background and philosophical training, would not have been ignorant of this. He did not invent anomie as a word and was sensitive as we noted above to the collective meaning that language possesses. I find that these are important nuances, that once engaged with, provide a unique form of insight into what Durkheim was trying to explore when he utilized the concept of anomie in his work. It is to Durkheim’s application and examples of anomie in his study of society that I now turn.

8.3.1 Anomie in The Division of Labor

While I noted in the introduction that Durkheim was engaging with anomie as a concept early in his career with his critique of Guyau, it is in the *Division of Labor*, published in 1893, that we are able to see his utilization of the concept in full swing. We can observe clearly that he carries his critique of Guyau forward, understanding anomie as something fundamentally immoral. Of this conception of anomie he states, “The sentiment of obligation, that is, the existence of duty, is in danger of being weakened in admitting there is a morality, and perhaps a higher, which rests on the independent creations of the individual, which no rule determines, which is essentially anomic. We believe, on the contrary, that anomie is the contradiction of all morality.”⁴⁴ Further, on just the second

⁴³ “Anomy, n. : Oxford English Dictionary.”

⁴⁴ Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (G. Simpson Trans.), 431.

page of the text Durkheim says of anomie, “It is the anomic state that is the cause, as we shall show, of the incessantly recurrent conflicts, and the multifarious disorders of which the economic world exhibits so sad a spectacle.”⁴⁵ Clearly, we can see that from the outside of his work, anomie was to be of central focus. In addition, while Durkheim addresses economic anomie here, something he explores further in his text *Suicide*, and to which I will turn in a moment, he also states that science is vulnerable to anomie as well. This is intriguing, as it further highlights how Durkheim acknowledged that anomie was not constrained to simply the economic sphere of life or culture. Of this he states:

Methodological rules are for science what rules of law and custom are for conduct; they direct the thought of the scholar just as the others govern the actions of men.... This is where the anarchical state of science in general comes from, a state that has been noted not without exaggeration, but which is particularly true of these specific sciences. They offer the spectacle of an aggregate of disjointed parts which do not concur.... These different examples are, then, varieties of the same species. If the division of labor does not produce solidarity in all these cases, it is because the relations of the organs are not regulated, because they are in a state of anomy.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Durkheim, 2.

⁴⁶ Durkheim, 367–68.

I highlight this quote in particular as it serves to illustrate that Durkheim's work in *The Division of Labor*, is not simply a meditation on mechanical or organic solidarity, and that he weaves his concept of anomie throughout the text. To further highlight this, I quote Durkheim from the second preface to the text where he states, "We repeatedly insist the course of this book upon the state of juridical and moral anomy in which economic life actually is found."⁴⁷ Durkheim notes near the end of the text when discussing abnormal forms of the division of labor, "Just as ancient peoples needed above all, a common faith to live by, so we need justice"⁴⁸ In this we can hear the echoes of nomos, Dike, goddess of justice. Justice, it appears then for Durkheim and much as it did for the Greeks, is the counterpoint of anomie.

8.3.2 *Anomie in Suicide*

Durkheim continues his analysis of anomie in his work *Suicide*, published four years later in 1897. It is in these passages that I find some of Durkheim's most evocative discussion of anomie. Of the anomic form of suicide and anomie in general, Durkheim states that, "The state of *dérèglement* or anomy is thus further heightened by passions being less disciplined, precisely when they need more disciplining."⁴⁹ Again we see Durkheim highlight the concept of duty or constraint in relation to the passions of individuals and society. He goes on to discuss anomie at great length, and I shall highlight some of the intriguing passages. He says of anomie that,

⁴⁷ Durkheim, 1–2.

⁴⁸ Durkheim, 388.

⁴⁹ Durkheim, "Suicide: A Study in Sociology [1897]," 214.

Such is the source of the excitement predominating in this part of society, and which has thence extended to the other parts. There, the state of crisis and anomy is constant and, so to speak, normal. From top to bottom of the ladder, greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold. Nothing can calm it, since its goal is far beyond all it can attain.⁵⁰

He goes on to say that, “A thirst arises for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savor once known. Henceforth one has no strength to endure the least reverse.”⁵¹ Of constraint in the face of this debilitating thirst Durkheim states, “In societies where a man is subjected to a healthy discipline, he submits more readily to the blows of chance. The necessary effort for sustaining a little more discomfort costs him relatively little, since he is used to discomfort and constraint. But when every constraint is hateful in itself, how can closer constraint not seem intolerable?”⁵² Durkheim goes on to note that attitudes such as these are not just anomic, they are *normal*. Of this reality he states,

Yet these dispositions are so inbred that society has grown to accept them and is accustomed to think them normal. It is everlastingly repeated that it is man’s nature to be eternally dissatisfied, constantly to advance, without relief or rest, toward an indefinite goal. The longing for infinity is daily represented as a mark of moral distinction, whereas it can only appear within unregulated consciences

⁵⁰ Durkheim, 216.

⁵¹ Durkheim, 217.

⁵² Durkheim, 217.

which elevate to a rule the lack of rule from which they suffer. The doctrine of the most ruthless and swift progress has become an article of faith.⁵³

The translation here of “rule that is lack of rule” is cumbersome, it is originally written in French as "*règle de dérèglement*."⁵⁴ If we bear in mind our etymological discussion above, this then is a *prescriptive* state of derangement or sin. It brings to mind the character of Gordon Gekko of the film *Wall Street* whose says in his well-known speech, “Greed, for lack of a better word is good, greed is right.”⁵⁵ While Gekko extols the virtue of greed, for Durkheim it is clearly a far more horrid situation. We can see how Durkheim continues to weave the thread of faith, immorality, and justice into his discussions. In quotes such as these we can also see how Durkheim earned the nickname “Schopen.” This discussion of the disdain for constraint, of constantly aroused greed, we find echoes of Schopenhauer, who said of the will and its infinite desire,

...this striving that constitutes the kernel and in-itself of everything, as the same thing that in us, where it manifests itself most distinctly in the light of the fullest consciousness, is called will... It always strives, because striving is its sole nature, to which no attained goal can put an end. Such striving is therefore incapable of final satisfaction; it can be checked only by hindrance, but in itself it goes on forever.⁵⁶

⁵³ Durkheim, 217–18.

⁵⁴ Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Dereglement,” 86.

⁵⁵ Stone, *Wall Street*.

⁵⁶ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:308–9.

Schopenhauer also goes on to say, as a clear inspiration for Durkheim, that “For all striving springs from want or deficiency, from dissatisfaction with one's own state or condition, and is therefore suffering so long as it is not satisfied. No satisfaction, however, is lasting; on the contrary, it is always merely the starting-point of a fresh striving.”⁵⁷

It is through passages such as these that we can see how radically Durkheim’s conception of anomie differs from the colloquial “normlessness.” Just as how for Gekko greed was not normless but was instead good and right. For Durkheim, anomie is the reality of a world where the striving of the will towards an unobtainable goal, outside the bounds of justice, *becomes the norm*. It is this reality that makes a situation or society anomic for Durkheim and makes anomie such a problematic issue that he wrestles with extensively as a sociological scholar. It is anomie which causes many of the social problems that Durkheim examines as a scholar, namely suicide, and the anomic division of labor. His conception of anomie is crucial to understanding his thought in this capacity.

8.4 Contemporary Examples of Anomie in Gaming

To help illuminate this situation further, and to make specific connections to this dissertation’s topic, I would like to provide a few brief examples of anomie in context with our modern and digital age. Drawing on my existing discussion of sociological theorists, namely George Ritzer, and David Riesman, anomie as a concept will be

⁵⁷ Schopenhauer, 1:309.

recontextualized alongside their perspectives as well. In point of fact, many of the issues that I have discussed in preceding chapters regarding these authors demonstrate not just their own unique theoretical perspectives, but also incorporate anomie as well. Ritzer's "irrationality of rationality," as I noted in my discussion of BioWare's development of *Anthem*,⁵⁸ many decisions were made during the development cycle that while highly McDonaldized, also had anomic undertones. In particular the constant pressure to achieve a deadline coupled with excessive crunch time that was leading to demonstrated mental breakdowns of employees whose only recourse was to cry in an empty room or leave the company. This highlights how the unrestrained desire of the company, either to finish production on time, to hit a quarterly profit, or a combination of both had serious human cost, and represents an anomic division of labor.

In addition, in my discussion of the work of Sigmund Freud and David Riesman, I highlighted how games can provide a medium wherein a type of "escape" can be found, but this escape can become anomic if pursued to an unhealthy degree, without proper constraint. Video game addiction is slowly being recognized and is now included in the ICD-11.⁵⁹ Further, there have been rare cases of individuals quite literally, gaming themselves to death.⁶⁰ While addressing this issue has garnered relatively little attention within the United States, countries such as South Korea have taken dramatic steps, such as passing the Youth Protection Revision Act⁶¹ which completely bans people under the

⁵⁸ "How BioWare's Anthem Went Wrong."

⁵⁹ "ICD-11 - Mortality and Morbidity Statistics."

⁶⁰ "The Sometimes Fatal Attraction of Video Games | Games | The Guardian."

⁶¹ "South Korea Pulls Plug on Late-Night Adolescent Online Gamers - CNN"; "Video Games Are Dividing South Korea | MIT Technology Review."

age of sixteen from playing videogames between the hours of 12:00AM-6:00AM, by outright disabling their account access during those hours. While the conversations around the legality of gaming have been centered in Asian countries, the discussion is slowly making its way west.⁶²

Another example from the world of video gaming has been the recent concern that has arisen surrounding microtransactions in video games, specifically those known loosely as “loot boxes.” These boxes are commonly defined as is a consumable virtual item which can be redeemed to receive a randomized selection of further virtual items, or loot, ranging from simple customization options for a player's avatar or character, to game-changing equipment such as weapons and armor. On the surface, this sounds fairly benign. But it is the anomalous implementation of these boxes which should draw our sociological attention. Firstly, it should be noted that while these boxes are often purchased from within a video game, they constitute an entirely separate, real money transaction, separate from the purchase of the game itself. Secondly, it has been noted that design and implementation of these boxes has been highly problematic from both a psychological point of view⁶³ and as we will discuss, the sociological as well.

The boxes themselves are designed essentially as virtual “skinner boxes” designed to create a dopamine loop in the player that causes them to, potentially,

⁶² “Law on Youth Protection for Film and Videogames – SESF Engaged in Consultation » Swiss Esports Federation.”

⁶³ See for examples articles such as “Behind the Addictive Psychology and Seductive Art of Loot Boxes | PC Gamer”; “Gamers Like Opening Loot Boxes Too Much to Stop Now, Even at the Expense of Balanced Gameplay | USgamer”; “The Troubling Psychology of Pay-to-Loot Systems - IGN.”

compulsively consume the product, often to unhealthy excess.⁶⁴ While originally designed for free to play, mobile games, primarily as a way for the developer to recoup development costs, loot boxes, or more broadly speaking, microtransactions, have found their way into full priced, AAA video games as well. Games such as the popular FPS *Overwatch* have cleared over a billion dollars in these in game transactions alone, and it is far from the only game to do this.⁶⁵ While the psychological component of these compulsive purchases have begun to receive attention, the sociological component has, as this dissertation has noted before, remained sadly underdeveloped. Of particular note to this discussion is the nature of how these loot boxes operate in light of Durkheim's anomie concept.

First, the constraint that Durkheim speaks of is nowhere to be found in the present implementation of these virtual goods within many video games. Developers, whose McDonaldized sensibilities quickly discovered the profitability of these mechanics, have incorporated them liberally into their contemporary game production process. Despite the fact the player might have already paid forty, fifty, or even sixty dollars for the game, the developers feel no constraint to cease monetizing their game. In fact, this has led to the idea of "games as a service" to justify these increased commodification of the game, where the video game is no longer a single object which is purchases, but a service which can be purchased repeatedly again and again. In fact,

⁶⁴ "Gamasutra: Sebastien Samson's Blog - Compulsion Loops & Dopamine in Games and Gamification."

⁶⁵ "Loot Boxes Lead Overwatch to \$1 Billion of In-Game Revenue | PCGamesN."

many games have placed no limits at all on these transactions. A player is free to max out their credit card should they see fit on these purchases.

This has led alarmingly to video game players, young and old, child and adult, racking up immense purchase costs of these boxes. To put this in Durkheimian terms, they player is left entirely unconstrained in their purchasing ability, and the developer has, until recently, remained entirely unconstrained in their ability to design the game in this McDonaldized, anomic fashion. This has not gone unnoticed by some governments, and several European commissions have examined the legality of these practices on the part of developers, and have provided some constraint by collectively categorizing these purchases as illegal gambling efforts, in particular when they are found within games primarily aimed at children.⁶⁶ At present, the United States has taken no legal action regarding these transactions, but the discussion has begun very recently about whether constraints and restriction should be put in place.⁶⁷

The second point of sociological interest is how this anomic behavior intersects with extant psychological discussion, and with my own discussion of Riesman. Many game developers have argued that since the objects contained within the loot boxes are “vanity” items, that is to say, items which provide no tangible difference in gameplay, and merely alter the appearance of a character, that ultimately these transactions are not harmful or exploitative. But, as our discussion of Riesman has noted, it is swings of

⁶⁶ “Belgian Gaming Commission Recommends Criminal Prosecution over Illegal Loot Boxes | GamesIndustry.Biz”; “Netherlands Gaming Authority - Study into Loot Boxes A Treasure or a”

⁶⁷ “Hawaii Wants To Fight The ‘Predatory Behavior’ Of Loot Boxes.”

fashion which so specifically weigh upon the other-directed individual, and, if game develops are able to in a McDonaldized fashion, arbitrarily adjust that which is fashionable within the game, then it is only to be expected that the other-directed individual feel the need to keep up with the virtual Joneses. It also provides an interesting, sociological insight into what has perplexed many observers of games such as *Overwatch* and *Fortnite*, which have so successfully capitalized on this phenomenon, and find the bulk of their market in young players, as opposed to older. The intersection of these theorist on this particular topic is fascinating and is worthy of further study in its own right.

All of these issues appear to indicate that “digital” anomie looms on the horizon, and may soon become a topic of interest. I fully expect the discussion to make its way to the United States, and it remains a fertile field for sociology and the recontextualization of sociological theory.

Aside from digital spaces, we do not need to look far in our own world today to see that anomie still has a presence. Durkheim’s conversation surrounding unrestrained greed seems to be particularly relevant and has been a fixture of several presidential elections, particularly surrounding corporate greed. In addition, the recent conversations discussing defunding the police or curtailing their authority and behavior⁶⁸ also serve to highlight that at least for some members of American society, anomie is still rampant and needs to be constrained.

⁶⁸ “NAACP | An Update from NAACP: Our Demands.”

Given this, that anomie was such a prevalent theme in Durkheim's work, and it shows no sign of abating, what then can be done to help ameliorate anomie, if anything, and what does our future hold? It is to these questions that I turn next.

8.5 Preventing Anomie & Durkheim's *Moral Education*

As I have noted earlier, it is the sentiment of obligation or constraint for Durkheim that constrains anomie. A question presents itself then, how does one go about promoting these obligations or duties and constraining anomie? We can begin by examining where anomie is *not* for Durkheim, and we can see how he attempts to address this question by stating in *The Division of Labor*, "we may say *a priori* that a state of anomie is impossible wherever organs solidly linked to one another are in sufficient contact, and in sufficiently lengthy contact."⁶⁹ Indeed, it is this healthy organic solidarity that is the goal for Durkheim and the topic of much of the text. He goes on to say that the key to preventing rampant anomie is to ensure that the organs of the social body maintain regular, healthy contact. Of this process he states, "In effect, being contiguous, they are quickly warned, in each circumstance, of the need which they have of one another, and, consequently, they have a lively and continuous sentiment of their mutual dependence."⁷⁰ To put this in the parlance of our etymological discussion, this dependence is a form of just constraint. Durkheim summarizes this point by saying, "Finally, because the smallest reaction can be felt from one part to another, the rules which are thus formulated carry this imprint; that is to say, they foresee and fix, in detail,

⁶⁹ Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (G. Simpson Trans.), 368.

⁷⁰ Durkheim, 368.

the conditions of equilibrium.”⁷¹ Key to this is the conception of foreseeing and fixing. It is not enough to know how to achieve equilibrium, action must be taken to make equilibrium possible. But what sort of action is society to take? To answer that question, we turn to a work published posthumously after Durkheim’s death, *Moral Education*.⁷² Within this text, Durkheim encapsulates much of his previous work into a cohesive message, outlining how his work in *The Division of Labor* and *Suicide* come together to address the problem of anomie. At the outset of the book, Durkheim occupies himself with an examination of how education can be reformed stating:

“A complete recasting of our educational technique must now engage our efforts.... We must discover, in the old system, moral forces hidden in it, hidden under forms that concealed their intrinsic nature. We must make their true reality appear; and we must find what comes of them under present conditions where even they themselves could not remain immutable.”⁷³

Within this quote we can see yet again the thread that Durkheim weaves throughout his work. His understanding that education, like language, is the product of centuries of people working together, and that within that experience there is aid to be found.

Durkheim spends the first portion of the text laying out the elements of morality as he understands them.⁷⁴ They are the spirit of discipline, attachment to social groups, and autonomy (or self-determination.) It is out of these three building blocks that Durkheim

⁷¹ Durkheim, 368.

⁷² Durkheim, *Moral Education*.

⁷³ Durkheim, 14.

⁷⁴ Durkheim, 17–128.

suggests society can educate a moral, and as such, non-anomic member of society. The first building block, the spirit of discipline, is described by Durkheim when he states, “The meanings of regularity and of authority constitute but two aspects of a single complex state of being that may be described as the spirit of discipline. Here then is the first basic element of all moral temperament—the spirit of discipline.”⁷⁵ The infinite desire discussed above that is deranged, and akin to Schopenhauer’s will, is the result of the failure of the spirit of discipline. He states:

“The notion of the infinite, then, appears only at those times when moral discipline has lost its ascendancy over man’s will. It is the sign of the attrition that emerges during periods when the moral system, prevailing for several centuries, is shaken, failing to respond to new conditions of human life, and without any new system yet contrived to replace that which has disappeared.”⁷⁶

Given this reality for Durkheim, it is easy to see why inculcating a spirit of discipline, again echoing the idea of fate and justice would be the first item on the agenda. Indeed, justice itself is seen as a spirit, invoking the image of Dike discussed earlier.

The second element for Durkheim is forming an attachment to the social group. This is the primary function of solidarity for Durkheim, as outlined in *The Division of Labor*, the discussion of sufficient contact of the organs quoted above serves to reinforce this conception. In *Moral Education* he states:

⁷⁵ Durkheim, 35.

⁷⁶ Durkheim, 43.

Individual and society are certainly beings with different natures. But far from there being some inexpressible kind of antagonism between the two, far from its being the case that the individual can identify himself with society only at the risk of renouncing his own nature either wholly or in part, the fact is that he is not truly himself...except on the condition that he is involved in society. We have shown that the need for containing one's self within determinate limits is demanded by the person's nature. Whenever such limits are breached...we see society gripped by a dejection and pessimism reflected in the curve of suicides.⁷⁷

Here we can clearly see Durkheim calling back to his work on *Suicide*, and how anomie is contained by connecting individuals to those around them. He summarizes this essentially by saying, "Man is the more vulnerable to self-destruction the more he is detached from any collectivity, that is to say, the more self-centered his life."⁷⁸ For Durkheim this social connectedness can operate across a variety of scales. It starts young with the family, but ultimately can stretch to encompass all of humanity, they are understood as "stages that build upon one another."⁷⁹

The third and final component is a sense of autonomy. Of this he states, "Since we are and always will be sensate as well as rational human beings, there will always be conflict between these two parts of ourselves, and heteronomy will always be the rule in fact if not by right. What the moral conscience demands of is an effective autonomy."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Durkheim, 67–68.

⁷⁸ Durkheim, 68.

⁷⁹ Durkheim, 74.

⁸⁰ Durkheim, 114.

Essentially this autonomy involves a knowing understanding of when and how to surrender to the discipline and attachment to the group, and when not. He states, “When, on the contrary, we blindly carry out an order of whose meaning and import we are ignorant, but nonetheless *understanding why* we should lend ourselves to the role of a blind instrument, we are as free as when we alone have all the initiative in our behavior. This is the only kind of autonomy to which we have any claim...” (emphasis original.)⁸¹ Essentially here, Durkheim is encapsulating his conception of the *homo duplex* that is present within his work in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, wherein humanity must struggle to find how the interplay between individual and social forces will play out in their life.⁸²

Bringing these three elements together is the task of moral education. In this process Durkheim puts himself into conversation with theorists such as Piaget,⁸³ Erikson,⁸⁴ and Siegel,⁸⁵ among many others in relation to child development. For Durkheim, this means instilling the spirit of discipline, which is most effective when begun early in the life course. Durkheim states, “There are in fact at least two basic predispositions,...first his character as a creature of habit; and second, his suggestibility,

⁸¹ Durkheim, 118.

⁸² While I lack sufficient space to address *homo duplex* at any great length here, it is a fascinating topic and can be more thoroughly examined in Mestrovic and Glassner, “A Durkheimian Hypothesis on Stress”; Meštrović and Brown, “Durkheim’s Concept of Anomie as Deregulation,” 93; and in Lukes, *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study*.

⁸³ Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child*; Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. (Translated by Marjorie Gabain).

⁸⁴ Erikson, *Childhood and Society*.

⁸⁵ Siegel and Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child’s Developing Mind*.

especially in his openness to imperative suggestion.”⁸⁶ This process should not be mechanical though, a la mechanical solidarity from *The Division of Labor*, he states, “...It will not do to impose it by force or to accustom them to it mechanically. The child must come to feel himself what there is in a rule which determines that he should abide by it willingly.”⁸⁷ Above all, Durkheim notes that this process should not be one that is abusive, violent, or coercive, noting that ultimately, “Corporal punishment is a continual offense to this sentiment.”⁸⁸

Of group attachment Durkheim notes that the starting point of development is found, “...of course, in our faculty of empathy.”⁸⁹ He notes that it is this empathy that allows individuals to develop a sense of altruism. Of this process he states, “We have altruism, as was pointed out, when we are attached to something outside ourselves. But we cannot become attached to an external thing, whatever its nature, without representing it to ourselves, without having an idea of it, a sentiment about it no matter how confused.”⁹⁰ In this process Durkheim reveals his familiarity with pragmatist tradition, a reality which is unsurprising given his authorship of a book titled *Pragmatism and Sociology*.⁹¹ He shares a similar sentiment to the likes of Dewey who states, “For things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and

⁸⁶ Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 134.

⁸⁷ Durkheim, 154.

⁸⁸ Durkheim, 161–62, 182–83.

⁸⁹ Durkheim, 207.

⁹⁰ Durkheim, 215.

⁹¹ Durkheim, *Pragmatism and Sociology*.

endured, even more than things to be known. They are things *had* before they are things cognized.”⁹²

Finally, Durkheim notes that for this process to be effective, and for the morally educated child to be balanced in their participation with society, to operate within their *homo duplex*, two things must occur. The first being that that their conception of morality must be one that is active and vibrant, “It must warm the heart and set the will in motion.”⁹³ Equally important, he says of the entire endeavor that, “Morality demands that we love the group of which we are a part, the men who compose this group, the land they live on—all concrete and real things which we must see as they are, even though we are trying to perfect them as much as possible.”⁹⁴ Throughout this entire process, Durkheim couches the language of the teacher in religious language as well, harkening back to his original understanding of anomie as sinful or immoral. He says of the teacher, “...nothing of arrogance, vanity, or pedantry must enter. It is entirely brought about through the teacher’s respect for his role or, if one may put it this way, for his *ministry* (emphasis mine.)”⁹⁵

8.6 Summary and Final Thoughts

In conclusion, I have explored Durkheim’s conception of anomie, starting with an etymological examination of the word and how it was utilized in his native language of French. I have touched on how Durkheim’s understanding of anomie is couched in his

⁹² Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method,” 265.

⁹³ Durkheim, *Moral Education*, 229.

⁹⁴ Durkheim, 271.

⁹⁵ Durkheim, 155.

religious and philosophical early life, and how that understanding can be found woven throughout his collected work. I have followed the thread of Durkheim's use of anomie through his works, across his academic career, with particular focus given to the dangers of anomie, not just to individuals of Durkheim's time, but to our own as well. I have also examined how Durkheim presents moral education as a potential solution to the problem of anomie. In light of this perspective, it is fascinating to note how Durkheim's perspective integrates with that of Mead, where for both theorists, it is within education that balance, and the relief from stress is found. Indeed, it is in the union of these two thinkers that the hope for a positive, stress relieving use for video games remains alight, as opposed to being snuffed out by the more McDonaldized, anomic aspects of the industry. If video games can be designed, and consumed, with this kind of education in mind, then perhaps a Median game stage that is not anomic can flourish in a new generation of gamers.

Indeed, I believe that it is Durkheim who presents us with a rich, theoretically robust concept that has a deep linguistic and theoretic history contained within it. It allows the sociologist who utilizes it to confront social problems explored in other theories, such as Ritzer's McDonaldization, Riesman's jury of the peers, or other issues of greed, abuse, and injustice with a strong theoretical toolkit thanks to the breadth of Durkheim's scholarship. He presents the reader with a strong concept, couched in language and history that is resonant with the human experience, going back millennia, engaging with the concepts of justice and immorality. He provides the reader with clear examples of how anomie can appear in the economic sphere or the life course. Finally,

he provides a potential cure for this ailment, and gives the sociologist a roadmap for a potentially brighter, less anomic future in his work on education. A roadmap that is couched on empathy, love, and understanding the duality of human autonomy and social connectedness. I have found this understanding of anomie to be resonant with my own experience, but more importantly, I believe it presents the discipline of sociology which embraces this conception of anomie with the needed vocabulary and action steps to actively engage the world around them in a meaningful way, to effect positive change.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Video Gaming and the Sociological Lens

In my hermeneutical reading of a variety of sociological theorists and their backgrounds, I have sought to bring the works of Durkheim, O’Keefe, Freud, Riesman, Ritzer, James, and Mead into conversation with the medium of video gaming. Each of these theorists brings a unique and insightful perspective to examine and explore the implications of the rapid growth and utilization of the video game industry. Secondly, I also undertook a recontextualization of their theories, integrating and synthesizing them to present my own concepts of stress and stress relief, and developing those concepts to explore the beneficial utility of video gaming in a therapeutic as well as pedagogical sense. Finally, I used these synthesized and recontextualized works to also explore the potential pitfalls and dangers of McDonaldized or anomic and unconstrained video game play and development, bringing a sociological perspective to some of the less beneficial aspects of the video game industry as well. Taking these developments and contributions together as a cohesive whole, there are several key elements regarding video games that have presented themselves that I wish to emphasize.

First, that much as O’Keefe noted, magical video gaming can be seen as a last line of defense, and it is unsurprising that we see the rise of magic in the form of video games in the face of much of the documented physical, mental, and emotional stress present in the world. As I noted in Chapter I, the video gaming industry is mammoth in its size, and it dwarfs virtually every other form of entertainment. Clearly, the gaming

industry has attracted and maintained a wide following, which suggests, and I argue, that it is aiding individuals in some shape or form. My exploration and synthesis of this perspective in regard to my own stress concept can be seen with my synthesis of Riesman's examination in Chapter IV of the rise of other-direction, as well as my exploration in Chapter VII of Ritzer's examination of the increasing predominance of McDonaldization all serve to highlight this aspect. In this sense, magical gaming presents itself as a kind of coping mechanism, which allows the ego, the self, to shore itself up in the face of increasingly well documented mental and social pressures.

This is not the only facet of gaming that presents itself though. As I noted in Chapters V and VI, this element of stress relief is not purely individualistic, but it is also incredibly social, and through my recontextualization of Mead, demonstrates that the beneficial elements of gaming take place in a social, pedagogical context. Ultimately, that magical gaming can not only shore up the self in the individualistic sense, but that through the *game*, we can better understand how to engage with the generalized other around us. In this way, the hermeneutical conversation that I place Mead, and O'Keefe into demonstrates that magic does in some way flow into the social relations. O'Keefe was not entirely ignorant of this fact, though he left it rather underdeveloped in his own work. O'Keefe noted that, "Always, magic [the individual] and religion [the social] lead back to each other. Religious revivals revive magic; new religions bring new magics. And magic revivals and new magics strengthen or create religious institutions."¹ I

¹ O'Keefe, *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic*, 150.

examine elements of these social relationships in detail in Chapters V making particular use of James and the potential for social, pedagogical use in the classroom, as well as in a more general, Median sense. In addition, much of Chapter VI explores how video gaming, and the connectivity of the internet, have allowed for large social groups of players to work together and actively invest their time and energy in collective projects, works, and activities.

Finally, in Chapters VII and VIII, I noted through the works of Ritzer and Durkheim how the same mechanisms that make magic, and by extension video gaming, such potent and engaging forms of stress relief, be it individualistic, or pedagogically social, also have the potential to be harmful. Utilizing my conceptualization of Durkheim's tensesgrity principle, I noted that gaming production, or consumption, is not always wish fulfilling, or pedagogically helpful. Indeed, in Chapter VII through Ritzer we saw that McDonaldization has not left the world of video gaming alone, and it has led to increasingly unhealthy, and unproductive video game production cycles. In Chapter VII we saw the inverse problem, where the compelling elements of video gaming can be exploited, often in a McDonaldized fashion by the developer, to create addictive cycles that exploit the other-directed pressures of life. Instead of leveraging the game to educate and affirm the individual or their relation to the group, it creates an unhealthy, anomic need to consume, that if left untampered could have harmful consequences for millions of individuals around the world.

Taking these developments together, I believe that they lay out a roadmap for future sociological research, commentary, and policy shaping. The video game industry is still relatively young compared to many of the other forms of entertainment present within our society. As such, it has received relatively little academic or regulatory attention. I believe as sociologists that we are left with the question of how we can emphasize, encourage, and facilitate the positive, stress relieving, social-self affirming nature of video gaming, and minimize the damage caused by the stress inducing, McDonaldized, and anomic aspects. As Riesman astutely noted, the power of the peer group is still with us, and arguably even stronger than it was when Riesman was writing. So too has McDonaldization continued to extend slowly its iron cage around many industries, video gaming included. And, as I noted in Chapter VIII, anomie, in the Durkheimian, *déréglement* sense remains with us. The video game industry, and sociology's understanding of it remain at a crossroad. We stand at what O'Keefe noted to be a situation where, "Many of the aims and uses of religion [the social] become more and more magical [individual] with the advance of civilization...Religion comes increasingly to serve the magical individual rather than the religious community."² Is the social, pedagogical potential contained within video gaming set to become increasingly individualistic, or does the potential to reinvigorate the social and communal aspects of video gaming still remain? This question is one that sociology is uniquely suited to answer. I have gone to great lengths in this dissertation to not only place multiple

² O'Keefe, 135.

theorists into conversation with each other in unique ways, but to also engage them with the medium of video games, recontextualizing them in new ways, in relation to new technological developments. I also developed my own stress and tensegrity principles to facilitate this hermeneutic recontextualization. Video games still remain rather uncharted waters for sociology though, and it is to potential avenues for future research of this kind that I now turn.

9.2 Directions for Future Avenues of Research

I believe that there are two primary tracks of future research that are prompted by the work of this dissertation. First, explorations of how McDonaldization and anomie are negatively impacting video gaming as an industry, and by extension, the individuals who play them. Second, how the prosocial, beneficial aspects of video gaming can be encouraged and incorporated into, or even help promote, a healthy social and mental life. It is to minimizing the negative aspects that I turn first.

9.2.1 Examining McDonaldization and Anomie

I believe that the concept of McDonaldization provide a wonderful amount of theoretical utility and is worthy of further research in the area of video gaming. As I noted in Chapter VII, McDonaldization has negatively impacted the game development process at least once in the case of *Anthem*. Further qualitative and quantitative research on the game development process, could help enhance this dissertation's exploration of the that impact. Development time and delay cycles, as well as interviews with actual developers are all potentially beneficial avenues of research. Further, the concept of "crunch," which was essentially the accelerated, stressful process noted in *Anthem's*

development is becoming more and more ubiquitous in the video game industry, with many developers mandating it into order to meet an accelerated production cycle.³ Fifteen hour days, seven days a week, is not uncommon to see during these “crunch” cycles, and while this issue has begun to attract media attention, the sociological exploration of this issue and its ramifications remain underdeveloped. Theories such as Ritzer’s McDonaldization, as well as others, along with qualitative interviews, and quantitative data analysis could enable sociologist to engage with game developers and producers on this issue, and could aid in addressing potentially unhealthy or unequitable work environments in the video game industry.

Secondly, the problem of anomic gaming also deserves further research and attention. I have already noted in Chapter VIII that Durkheim’s concept of anomie as *déréglement* has remained underdeveloped, and expansion of the concept into the sphere of video game development and consumption to not only broaden its usage as a concept, but also provide critical insight into emerging issues in the video game industry. Again, both quantitative and qualitative studies are poised to provide beneficial insight. Quantitative studies regarding time spent gaming, money spent, and other such factors could all be analyzed in light of the emerging pattern of video game addiction. In addition, studies addressing problematic development practices that promote unrestrained consumption and compulsive purchasing could also allow for sociology to engage in this emerging psychological, legal, and policy oriented debate that has the

³ “Video Game Industry ‘crunch Culture’ Explained: Epic, Rockstar, EA”; “Video Game Creators Are Burned Out and Desperate for Change | Time.”

potential to alter how video games are developed, deployed, and consumed by future generations. This issue is particularly relevant to U.S. based sociologists where substantial governmental policy initiatives have not even begun to take form as of the writing of this dissertation.

9.2.2 Encouraging Positive Video Gaming

In terms of encouraging positive developments in the realm of video gaming, sociology is equally well positioned to offer substantive feedback. As I noted in chapter V, young people are poised to have spent 10,000 hours of their time playing video games by the time they graduate high school in the U.S. alone.⁴ That is an immensely untapped reservoir of time that if it could be harnessed, could provide a variety of potential benefits, both individual and social. Further research could engage with individuals who play video games regularly, young and old alike, and survey them, expanding on existing data on what they find compelling about the game, and how it aids their mental health. Those discoveries could then have the potential to work alongside other therapies and treatments in a more targeted fashion, allowing sociology and psychology to partner together via an activity that millions already participate in voluntarily.

Further, as I noted in Chapter V, games have the Jamesian potential for pedagogical use as well. While as I noted some developers have already begun to partner with educators regarding world history, there is still much room for growth. Sociologists could engage with game developers directly to not only potentially open up avenues of

⁴ McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*.

utilizing the game space to conduct studies, but to also partner with them in developing games that in a Median sense, help promote healthy social development. Creating a partnership where a game has been designed from the ground up with the perspective of a sociologist. Video games already stand as the favored hobby or entertaining pastime of millions of individuals and learning to harness that latent interest and energy could create a variety of beneficial avenues for gaming to aid in the individual, and their healthy social development. MMORPG's stand as an excellent first choice for this, and indeed, they have already begun to receive some academic attention. In addition to game genres alone though, the video game "modding" world also stands poised to provide a wealth of information as well, and also highlight the emerging social, or in an O'Keefian sense, religious side of gaming as well. Video game mod sites such as Valve's Steam Workshop,⁵ or the popular Nexus Mods website⁶ serve millions of users everyday who, through their own volition spend collectively hundreds of thousands of hours in "labor of love" type projects, wherein they maintain, or expand, thousands of games beyond their typical, McDonaldized lifespans, often breathing new life into decade old games. Communities such as these are remarkably understudied and could provide fascinating insight into the social bonding and cohesion that can form around groups of people who share a passion for a game, with that passion turning into collective action.

⁵ "Steam Community :: Steam Workshop."

⁶ "Nexus Mods and Community."

This collective action has the potential to be harnessed for other social benefits that exist outside of the video gaming world proper. The concept of “gamification” has begun to see development, wherein principles of video game development are employed in other arenas to both broaden appeal, and “crowdsource” resources to achieve goals in markedly faster, or more efficient ways. Websites or games such as Eterna⁷ which, while having existed in a fairly niche capacity, have worked to gamify scientific research for example allow for the development of a large body of citizen scientists, who can use their passion for gaming to not just solve puzzles in their favorite game, but code RNA to help assist in solving medical issues, like aiding in the development of an mRNA vaccine for Covid-19. Further sociological research and engagements with projects such as this, as well as the development of entirely new projects could allow for video gaming and its broad appeal to help in democratizing a variety of research and prosocial projects in our modern world. These are just a few suggestions and are in no way meant to be exhaustive. Video gaming as a new frontier in many ways and will continue to evolve in the future decades.

Final Thoughts

This dissertation was undertaken with the goal recontextualizing a variety of sociological theorists to bring them into conversation with the world of video games. Video gaming as a whole is a relatively new development in the world of entertainment, yet it has become one of the largest driving forces in technological development in our

⁷ “Eterna.”

current era. Many of the advances in virtual or augmented reality technologies have found their genesis in video gaming. It is my hope that this dissertation does its part to not only raise awareness of the rising importance of video gaming in our modern world, but of the importance and need for the development of a sociology of technology in general, of which this dissertation stands as a part. In addition, the hermeneutical approach of this dissertation to examining and engaging with a variety of theorists and concepts is one which is meant to be foundational in providing a unique perspective in examining video game studies through the perspective of sociology. Video games make an excellent vehicle for discussion, but ultimately, I hope that future studies also incorporate hermeneutics in their analysis, not only of social theorist, but of video games, and their creators and players as well.

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