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The Pleasure of Prohibited Spaces and Action: Playing Student Characters in Video Games

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This article examines the use of the school student character within videogames, focussing on the contextual use of the educational location and the social and cultural mores the games engage with. Using a curated selection of games including characters positioned or explicitly stated as being 18 or under and where play focusses totally or in part on a school setting, the article considers the use of these spaces, casting them as liminal and in part prohibited because of out-of-hours use or adjusted genre deployment, and the ways in which transgressive, dark or taboo play (Stenros 2018) is encouraged within the games. The student character, as defined in this work, asks us to consider the use of child characters within games, and their deployment and playability. Where narratives employ child death as a part of the gameplay or narrative thrust, we can also consider the moralities in play for the gamer and the actions taken by the game designer to limit or emphasise the responsibility of the player. The high stakes of choice during a phrase of identity development, the repercussions of decisions and questions about responsibility all come to the fore in games that represent the student in a school setting where adults are absent, and player explorations are often characterised by engagement with prohibited space and action.

Introduction

When examining game narratives, much research explores how the playable story of a given game evolves, how the player is brought into the play of a game and the expectations of those players when navigating through the created world (Jenkins n.d.; Heussner 2015; Hildebrand 1999). Other research considers the effect of the game upon the player, the ways in which the player experiences the play/narrative and, in wider contexts, the potential positive or negative effects a game might be said to have upon a player (positive effects e.g., Halbrook et al. 2019; Granic et al. 2014; or negative effects e.g., Anderson et al. 2010; Ferguson 2013; Lemola et al. 2011). Certainly, much debate about young people and videogames has focused on their potential risks. This article considers the relationship of the player to the game through the specific *character* of the school student within games. It assesses how the positioning and location of the gameplay are deployed in terms of school students and their contexts and considers how the games narrativise and interpret familiar spaces as opportunities for exploring different personas, actions and experiences. Additionally, the playing of a student character presents a variety of explorations of the agency and power of students within a school setting. The experience of a traditional hierarchical educational system is challenged around a variety of parameters: narrative agency, physical ability and liminal experience of the transitional space that the school setting and role of student implies.

Defining students is an important starting point. Many characters in games potentially read as being relatively young and therefore could be positioned as students solely from an apparent visual age connotation. For the purposes of this work, the idea of the student is based on stated age alongside the use of a site which is specifically linked to the concept of mandatory study. This is not to say a student cannot be over the age of 18. However, for the purposes of this work, 18 as an upper age limit and the restriction of the location to the partially prohibited space of the school are applied. In the UK, '[i]n the context of the *Children Act 1989* (CA 1989), a child means a person under the age of 18' (Thomson Reuters n.d.). In the United States, the age of 18 is the age of majority in most states and so will be used for those games based in that region. There is also a clear school location in the games selected. This does not have to be the defining or sole location in the game, but there does need to be an element of the game played in relation to this type of setting.

The games selected to be considered within this article are *Bully* (2006), *Active Shooter* (2018), *Hogwarts Legacy* (2023), *Life is Strange* (2015), *Lollipop Chainsaw* (2012), *White Day: A Labyrinth Named School* (*White Day* hereafter, 2001) and finally *Persona* (1996 to 2019). This work will also draw on other games to expand upon certain themes in game where child characters are again central to the narrative. These are *The Last*

of Us (2013), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) and *Dead Space* 2 (2011). As already indicated, the titles cross a range of genres and target audiences, and in turn use the characters and the spaces in slightly different ways. In the case of *Active Shooter,* the game is no longer available and was withdrawn very quickly after concerns about the narrative focus and play within the game. However, it is proposed that this is an important iteration of the use of the school student character and narrative as it relates to a gaming style – that of First Person Shooter (FPS). As such it feeds into many expectations of successful games of that genre, whilst also raising uncomfortable questions about the way in which such games work and the importance of context and setting to validate FPS action.

Clearly this is not an exhaustive list of games which use students or schools as the location of the narrative, but the selection offers a good overview of the area and encompasses two key ratings 13 (T) and 17 (M). In terms of the focus games, *Bully* is rated 13 (T) in the US and 15 in the UK, *Hogwarts Legacy* and *White Day* were also rated T, and *Active Shooter*, *Lollipop Chainsaw*, *Life is Strange* and finally *Persona* were all rated M in the US. The ratings broadly reflect the use of a student role within a school space and are indicative of the opportunity to consider what such positioning and specific geographical placement offers the player and in turn the gameplay. The narrative complexities are found in the range of social and cultural stereotypes that can be easily identified and played with, a clear stepping stone through to more complex overarching narratives and gameplay approaches.

Is a place of education really prohibited?

The geography of the school space and in turn the playing of a student within that space raises concepts of social and cultural access. A school space is one built on a hierarchy. In the real world there are expectations of behaviour and of boundary maintenance relating to equipment and spaces, and ultimately a specific set of hours when a student is supposed to be on premises. Therefore, the school space indicates a liminality in terms of occupation and movement through it. In the day, during the working week, a student is expected to be on site, undertaking specified and monitored activities requiring adherence to structure and hierarchy. Outside of these times, through positioning in spaces unwatched or monitored by adults, and through taboo action or out of hours activity, the school space becomes prohibited yet familiar in many of these games. Locations known yet out of bounds can be explored, safety is challenged and adult help is importantly absent in such periods. In turn, when we look at the players of these games, we can also consider their age and so relationship to the school space. As a transitional space, some playing (those who are young students)

will move from fiction to non-fiction through the week as they both attend school and play school-based games. For others, those who have graduated school, the option to play within that space creates a return to a location left behind, a space of memory rather than reality. In each case, the space encourages experimentation through the experience of place, the exploration of expectations held within that space and finally emotional and physical journeys made via the characters. A 2021 study identified that '80% of all US video game players are adults aged 18 or older with an average age of 31 years' (Yim et al 2022: 137). Such a high ratio of adult players suggests that on average those playing school students in a game will be more skewed to those over the age of 18. With this in mind, we can explore the opportunity of return and revision that such positioning suggests.

This article identifies how student characters are used within games where they are the central playable character/s and how the returning of the player to the school environment (as main or one of a selection of playable locations) in the role of the student can be seen to act upon the play and the narrative opportunities on offer. As the title of this article suggests, there is a pleasure in exploring and encountering prohibited spaces (and enjoined actions). The school out of hours, or in an altered context, offers a location which is at once familiar and different, and so serves this small thrill. However, the thrill of illicit exploration is focussed upon the role of the student; an adult character undertaking a similar exploration brings with it a different interpretation and questions of their presence. Such locations and student character types also offer the opportunity to identify actions within the established relationships of these locations and so present the modification of social interaction and allow it to be played with and experimented upon without consequence. The modified school space, therefore, creates an interstice between the known and unknown. Such a prohibited space, this work suggests, gives established locations and rules of engagement while the modification enables differentiated actions.

The context of play

The concept of play also needs some clarification within the context of its use within game theory. In the context of this article, the idea of what is being played *with* is of particular interest. The games selected are focussed upon playing with emotional, moral and social contexts and geographical spaces, encountering prohibition of place and in turn exploring the idea of transgression within play. Obviously, the idea of action within game being sometimes questioned in terms of the activities of the player is one with which many are familiar as a result of ongoing 'moral panics' (Cohen 1972)

regularly hitting the press. As games consider subjects such as child death, murder, suicide and depression, the playability and immersion which games offer have presented critics with ammunition to identify gaming as a concerning pursuit.

The games selected for this work are from a range of release dates, generally have ratings of 13 (T) and 17 (M) and move across a variety of genres and gameplay styles, enabling us to consider the use of location and implementation of a range of character types, narratives and their possible relationship to game certificates. This approach offers the opportunity of considering how the narrative is delivered and, in turn, player approach to their school student role within the game. The games selected also provide examples regarding how the player can shape their interactions within the games through genre and gameplay expectations. In many cases, the game presents the chance for the player to explore character types and approaches, encouraging experimentation with the motivation of their character. This can be achieved in different ways according to the optionality within the game, so it might be based upon such things as narrative decisions undertaken and offered through to the design of your character or their inherent internal drive as created by the player.

Specific study of student characters and their role in games is an underexplored area, the focus on character tending to centre upon other facets of representation, such as gender, race, sexuality or disability, to name but four. The uses of the locations, the characters and the ways in which those characters, and so the player, experience or use the location are of interest in this work, with specific focus upon the use of the student and their surroundings as key elements of the storytelling and play within the game. One of the key questions this article explores is what the use of a school student character brings to a narrative – not simply the use of a child or teen within a narrative arc but the positioning of that narrative in relation to a school setting. At a basic level, the use of the school location and the indicative interactions which are used in most of the selected games focusses upon the concept of 'Brink play', which is when '[t]he social recognition of an activity as play is used as an alibi to be able to do things that would otherwise be socially difficult' (Stenros 2018: 21). Brink play can be conceived as an approach to social experimentation and role play which these games encourage within the narratives and gameplay styles they embrace. In this form, play is not essentially transgressive, but chances can be taken with interactions which would not normally be sought in the real world.

Many of the examples discussed here relate to the concepts of 'transgressive' and 'dark' play. Transgressive play works within the expectations of crossing boundaries. As Stenros identifies, 'transgressive is playing with topics considered too sensitive for games and play to handle because play is seen as trivializing' (2018:19). The use

of characters positioned through location, in this case school, as children inevitably offers the opportunity to consider transgressive play and the encountering of sensitive topics through storytelling and social interaction within the game. Again, the use of children within the narratives, some dealing with themes that could be defined as uncomfortable, moves such conversations to concepts such as 'taboo play', which 'encompasses activities that are ruled out for everyone' (Stenros 2018: 22) and 'dark play', which covers 'content, themes, or actions that occur within games that in some contexts would be problematic, subversive, controversial, deviant, or tasteless'.

The use of the site of a school is one which omits direct parental or consistent/ongoing adult involvement, facilitating exploration and independence within the narrative for the younger characters. Such positioning, alongside narrative circumstances, promotes rule breaking or actions outside of the normal flow of events in the real world. 'Out of bounds' locations are 'both enticing and rewarding spaces where a player feels that important game events will happen' (Totten 2019: 401). This placement allows for situations where children, students in this case, should not physically be at a given time and it enables them, or forces them (and in turn the player) to be wholly responsible for their actions or responses. As Hildebrand identifies, 'stories demand settings that complement the hero's tribulation by making visibly evident some element of challenge: the setting is deficient, one way or another, in support or reassurance' (1999: 84). This deficit is present in each of the games selected for this work. In all cases, adult supervision is absent or dis-empowered and the focus is on the actions of the student. In many of the games, the educational space is more vessel than inherent site of learning in its traditional terms.

Lovin' and Fightin' – student roles in game

Although a little tongue in cheek, the idea of lovin' and fightin' does sum up many of the options for the student character in the selected games. What iterations of these opportunities are used can differ for the game narrative and for the player. It might involve caring for and assisting a character through to romantic love, or it might be fighting for a friend's life or reputation, moving all the way to killing those who stand against you. The games identified in this work present opportunities to explore personas and narratives which, while part of the cultural zeitgeist for the school experience, are not the norm for many. In turn, the games afford a capability to address difficult themes or situations not available to a student in the real world. Narratives performed in the school setting present the chance to explore the politics of those stereotyped yet heavily fictionalised relationships where the player's actions can have consequence. The potential ability to navigate social interactions and roles which differ from lived

experience offer catharsis or opportunity to re-experience such educational spaces and the relationships they demand: 'the trick is to play on those memories and expectations to heighten the thrill of venturing into your created universe' (Carson 2000).

It is also interesting to note that although many of the selected games provide their characters the means to fight back through magic (*Hogwarts Legacy*) or supernatural/special powers (*Life is Strange, Lollipop Chainsaw* and *Persona*), others present the student character in a more realistic manner. *Bully* and *White Day* offer characters who have no special power: 'by far the most common type of character dynamic, and one that has a wide range of applications, is that relating to the player character's attributes. Characters in video games are strongly defined by the things they can do' (Domsch 2013: 95). In these cases, opportunities to act positively or negatively are entrenched in the narrative opportunities offered to the player, with the consequence of decisions made in the game resounding through narratives as the game progresses.

Experimentation with relationships is encouraged in many of the games and takes place in a range of ways that can shape the character's development and trajectory. In *Bully*, you play as 15-year-old Jimmy Hopkins and are tasked with navigating the socio-political aspects of boarding school. You can explore a narrative where you kiss male or female students, you can foster relationships and, contrary to the name of the game, you are the student who stands up to the bullies and so are finding ways to fight back. You can train in the boxing club to get better at fighting but also face situations where using violence will ensure failure, presenting a variety of opportunities to work with character relationships and events. *Life is Strange* explores a range of themes: bullying, depression, mental health challenges and suicide. By building relationships as Max – the teen 'detective' of the game – the player can affect the trajectories of other characters, even the outcome of character Kate's suicide attempt. Max is also able to re-wind time so that wrong decisions can be re-played, again enabling experimentation without real world consequences. However, when Kate intends to end her life, because of bullying and ensuing depression, Max's powers are removed, thereby grounding the situation with consequences for the player that extend to the remainder of the game (Shah 2016). The explorations of these topics using teen characters and the vessel of the school setting feel pertinent as tumultuous emotions and the hinterland of the teen between childish reaction/proscribed action and more adult contemplation/freedom present a myriad of possibilities to play out.

Within the selected games, the ways in which characters can impact their environment and circumstances vary widely: 'gameworlds are heterotopian, not utopian. Rules are played with and broken as well as obeyed' (Giddings 2014: 139). In many cases, the game proffers the opportunity to experiment with relationships and

decisions made. *Life is Strange* extends this potential to play with choices as it offers the opportunity to literally return and review experiences of self-realisation within a school setting – in this case, through the supernaturally powered chance to re-wind time and re-play decisions made. The ability to change events can be seen as an integral one which attaches to a teen character and potentially those playing, who can be in control of an environment where most participants lack autonomy. As Heussner (2015: n.p.) argues 'anybody can engage emotionally with personal experiences because they've been through similar experiences or felt similar emotions. Everyone is an expert on what happens to them, so elements inspired by personal experience are authentic and believable'. The school setting but also the relationships and challenges which form the focus of that experience, through playable extension of these foundations, can be used to explore differing approaches and scenarios where the game allows or encourages. In each case, the location forms a vessel in which core knowledge and understanding of stereotypical characters and relationships creates a jumping off point for the action of the game. This finds most obvious expression through the player exploring optionality, where provided, within the persona of the character being played. As Bateman (2021: 380) suggests, 'the avatar also provides a mask for the player to try on, one that invites them to behave differently, in ways that often make more sense for that character and its world than for the player themselves'. At a basic level, the player already understands the social relationships and stereotypical characters associated with a school. Where decisions are taken, there are concepts of reward and punishment but only in terms of the general application of such concepts within a game, so not achieving or making errors of judgement will be impactful as you play through the game. In *Life is Strange*, your relationship building or the care you (Max) demonstrate for Kate will affect the outcome of her decision to end her life. Concepts of punishment are varied. Not finding a positive outcome is an obvious punishment, but a more nuanced concept found in *Life is Strange* is that there is a clear link to your decisions and the narrative evolution, suggesting the gravity of the decisions made by young students. As a part of the exploration of these school age characters within the formula of school politics, we are also then offered the aspects of brink play, where interactions which might be difficult in the real world can be explored in the game world. Opportunities to explore young sexuality occur in many of the games where dating or flirtatious interactions are a part of the game, offering chances to roleplay with gender and emotion. *Persona*, and there are many iterations, offers the JRPG optionality of pursuing as many or as few romantic relationships as the player desires. There is a focus on getting to know your chosen partner but also helping them find their place in the world. *Bully* offers many variations of romantic relationship, including assisting the teachers in their romantic pursuits and enabling Jimmy to explore his own romantic needs with male and female characters presented.

The two central points to the consideration of the student character in game are based around the power and potential of a student character. The use of the educational setting is a powerful marker for gameplay. Primarily, it is proposed because the school environment is seen as one of safety and protection, a reality which through its game use becomes opposed for character and so player. Placing a combative game within that space changes the relationship of the character and player to that specific environment. Such gameplay offers two clear routes through the narratives. The first is to use the educational space as a vessel for the presence of the child characters, a prohibited location through which to explore and fight using magical or supernatural abilities. The second is the use of the educational setting as one which limits the 'specialness' of the student characters and asks the player to focus upon more tangible relationship building through alliances and discussion. In such circumstances players are 'working with and against games which afford them opportunities to play out stories, rehearse gendered feelings, and try out subject positions in front of audiences connected to them' (Gallagher 2017: 183). In this context, the narratives and ways in which they can be explored offer partial Life Labs (Lak 2015: 155). They are 'partial' because laboratory experiments with social interactions can be made within the boundaries of the game and the options offered through it. This is essentially Bateman's 'legerdemain … of options afforded by strict choices' (Bateman 2021:385). It is important to remember that within video games the concept of choice can be illusory; the game can hold only so many variables and still bring the player to the important narrative points to advance them.

By using a child/student character, we are exploring the school space as partially a prohibited location, transgressing the agreement of the space as one accessed with a specific purpose. *Hogwarts Legacy* presents both allowed and prohibited use of the educational space of the castle and grounds. Lessons and movement around *Hogwarts* are utilised as a part of the development of the student characters, as they learn their spells and extend their knowledge of the 'wizarding world'. Central to the book and so the games, and importantly the most enjoyable part of the playable aspects of the narratives, are the covert trips around the educational wider space out of hours. The pleasure of free, but essentially prohibited, movement using invisibility cloaks and potions is offered within the games, as covert travel through the castle and its grounds at night becomes key to the narrative and quests. *Hogwarts Legacy* offers a travelable and explorable space which goes beyond the walls of Hogwarts, but again is all prohibited within the rules of boarding school. *White Day* also presents the school as prohibited space, in this case one patrolled by possessed janitors and ghosts who pursue your character, Lee Hui-min. Having snuck into the school at night the player explores the out of bounds space without supervision. Importantly, *White Day* offers no special

abilities for Hui-min, and so running, hiding and revisiting spaces when considered safe reflect a relatively realistic experience of the student character and a child's inherent powerlessness when threatened. This means that *White Day* focusses upon puzzle solving but also offers interactions with various other students also trapped in the school. It is these exchanges which present the main optionality within the game, alongside the more specific decisions of where to go and how to not get caught.

A space which enables exploration and foregrounds the concept of learning is functioning here in the playable school place. The privileged nature of the school space – that it is limited to those who are allowed to be there – also offers a range of narrative options. A student on premises out of hours lends itself to the idea of using a familiar space in different ways with differing focusses. The invaded school offered in *Lollipop Chainsaw* (zombies) and *Active Shooter* (school shooter) again suggests a prohibited space and in the case of *Active Shooter* taboo action and narrative. The school in this case becomes part of Totten's '[e]vocative spaces' which 'utilize familiar elements to set a mood, establish the fiction of a game story, or communicate positive or negative events' (2019: 399). The evocation offered in these cases differs depending upon the use of the space and the narratives played out within them, but all on the premise that 'evocative spaces work because of our understanding of the *vernacular*, the architectural language of certain locales, established through symbol-building' (Totten 2019: 400). Through symbol building or semiotic learning, we are offered layout and locations that are familiar both visually and culturally, but through gameplay we must re-learn how these spaces work, what we can do within them as players or characters and where we need to go to survive/win.

The tensions between familiar and safe and unfamiliar and risky are arguably most poignant in student-focused games that include child death. Within all areas of culture and society, child death is a taboo subject, one which makes many uncomfortable and which when it occurs in the real world is a point of grief and at times condemnation. The use of student characters allows specific consideration of child/teen death within gameplay, indicating a line between game narrative action and player action in connection with genre and play approach: 'the vision of the dead child is one of the most horrific images in our cultural imaginations. It is also one of the most pervasive' (Tan 2013: 54).

Where child death is a central tenet of a game, the death is presented differently to that of adults. *What Remains of Edith Finch* presents a variety of child death, seen and through player action. However, the game's approach to these scenes – making each passing joyful, intriguing and beautiful – is cathartic, not morbid (Conditt 2016). Such an approach is seen to engage with child death but not place it within a reality

driven narrative, thus sanitising it for the player when they are involved. Many games use death as a narrative motivator, either through gameplay or through creation of the established story world in which the characters are played. This means that a death within many game narratives cannot be avoided but is not necessarily within the actions of the playable character and so the player. For example, *The Last of Us*, an action-adventure game using zombie infection as a key narrative feature, has a key child death as Sarah Miller is gunned down by a soldier and dies in her father Joel's arms. This key child death is importantly at the hands not of the player but of the game. Within *The Last of Us*, the player is spared having to kill children as only adult zombies are present in the game. Children's corpses do litter the narrative world of *The Last of Us*, mostly by implication however, with the connective conclusion (narratively offered) that their parents killed them to spare their infection. In *Dead Space* 2 (2011), a survival-horror game, the player does have to kill 'crawlers', reanimated infants which can blow up the player if they get close. In this case the 'crawler' does look in part like a baby, however there are enough adaptations from reanimation and infection to present the player with a less than realistic infant combatant. Such is the scarcity of child death in game when we locate games which use it, we can consider fully the transgressions associated.

Active Shooter, the school shooting FPS which was released and then pulled rapidly in 2018, offers particular considerations of morality within gaming. Set in an American school the game presented itself as 'an asymmetrical shooter [game] grounded in real-world elements like realistic AI and settings' (Chalk 2018, n.p.). In this case the prohibition focusses on not only relations to real events in the world but also the deployment of that taboo within the focus of the game world: a school. The active shooter of the title invades what should be a protected space, using real world horrors for entertainment. Adult intervention is present in the form of civilians and police. However, as the name of the game suggests, they are targets for the shooter rather than characters to be avoided. The clearly 'dark' (Linderoth and Mortensen 2015) nature of this game provides tangible transgressive play approaches which are then, in turn, strongly linked to the placement of the action within an educational setting and the interactive nature of what can be termed child death. That the game is implicated in multiple moral panics is clear. The player is enabled to become a school shooter, roaming a school space killing peers, teachers and police. The strong reflection of key massacres which are played out yearly in schools mostly in North America positions the game as too dark, and it was withdrawn. The interactive nature of child death is something which also arises in *Persona* 3, where the player must use 'an Evoker … which was basically a special gun they shot themselves in the head with' (Farokhmanesh 2016: n.p.) to summon their 'persona' for battle. The game dealt with emotional and

social concepts such as ‘death, depression, [suicide] and loss’ (Farokhmanesh 2016: n.p.) all within the high school setting involving school age students in these themes. The dark play nature of some of the actions in the game then becomes disturbing, as they engage with current moral panics or indeed as previously indicated are seen to potentially create them. In the school environment, the potential death or harm to a child/teen becomes more morally controversial than similar danger posed to age-related characters in other games where it is partially mitigated by a different space or, indeed, the genre. For example, *Lollipop Chainsaw* has a teen protagonist who despatches her zombified peers at her high school, but because of the context and genre we do not really question our actions within the game, even though we are actively killing children. This does not mean that the death of a child is easy for the audience to necessarily accept, but within the wider roaming dystopia of infected spaces such deaths are more smoothly integrated into the hostility and danger of a contaminated world. Some players do discuss the morality and acceptability of child death within games where this is an element. The reaction to this is more divisive than might at first be thought when considering the stereotypes associated with gamers. Some respondents to discussions on the topic find it repulsive and unnecessary or, at the other end of the spectrum, an expected narrative element which would be strange to not include if narratively expected (Reddit 2020).

Ideas of the placement of the student narrative within the setting – the locating of a space where, although there are adults, they are not necessarily always available or monitoring the actions of the students – are of importance when exploring the stories in these games. The narrative trope of removing parental influence through destruction or death can be seen in a range of fiction. Within this scenario, young people become self-monitoring or feel they must make adult decisions because of that direct lack of adult influence or a perception that the student must make adult decisions because of their individual impression of events and concept of importance: ‘thinking of himself or herself as the center of attention, the adolescent comes to believe that it is because he or she is special and unique’ (Alberts, Elkind and Ginsberg 2007: 72). Within the realm of fiction such a concept of innate centrality works well when dealing with a playable character within the narrative in the age range of a school student. The placement of the character in terms of action and reaction without adult intervention, or at least with delayed adult involvement or menace, positions the character as in narrative need of activity. In the role of student, the player occupies both instigator and novice as they learn and develop within the game. In different games and roles, the concept of the evolution of the character in terms of skills or knowledge is positioned variously within the game. The narrative expectation of *Harry Potter* and *Persona* means you as a character learn and develop magical/supernatural skills,

which works both in terms of narrative but also in terms of learning how to play the game. In *Bully*, *Life is Strange* and *White Day*, players are positioned to learn the dynamics of the social situations offered within the games, using life knowledge and experiences, alongside how they wish to perform as a character. Again, within this set-up the use of a student character lends itself to the journey that the player takes within the game, offering the opportunity and expectation to develop alongside an existing basis of stereotyped character and action.

Conclusion

School as a prohibited space is a useful one narratively, presenting familiar and recognisable locales alongside the opportunity to explore and play with and within that environment. The thrill of transgressing the many rules and societal expectations of school and teen relationships can be seen in those games which encourage the exploration of and ingress to off-limits spaces and interpersonal relationships. The term ingress is key. It can be either a playful transgression of societal rules or a breaking of and entrance to taboo action when the player is asked to or offered the chance to play a role which crosses cultural and social expectations.

Game has always presented opportunities to play with persona and action in a consequence free environment with no actual physical immediate impact on the outside world. When transgressions within protected spaces such as a school become too closely aligned to real world concerns, then questions are raised and moral panics resurface concerning the potential for play to become realised action. Additionally, games which offer exploration of themes such as suicide, depression and mental health have a responsibility to consider the information they are presenting and the associative states of those playing those games.

Therefore, the use of the space and the characters through the narrative trajectories of the games presents or encourages transgressive play whether handled sensitively or not. Such breaking of social and cultural boundaries within the safe and expectant space of the game offers the potential to experiment with character and decision making, either working to do ‘the right thing’ or play with persona and inhabit many characters and actions you would not in real life. Where some games present the opportunity to revisit actions or decisions as a part of the gameplay, others create irretrievable situations which cannot be repealed or changed and so the consequences, large or small, are experienced in the gameplay and to some extent by the player.

The presence of children in these school-based games ensures that there are opportunities to explore the player’s understanding of emotions and relationships within the space of teen angst and romance, with capacity to explore more serious

experiences of depression, loss and death through interaction with these themes. Such games enable child peril which is engaging as it encourages different styles of play and action, and in the case of some games is narratively central but does not usually encounter the specific calculable loss of a known character at the hand of the player. The use of child characters, playable and non-playable, also creates an environment where we can question the actions a game asks of its players and the context in which some encounters with transgressive or taboo play can be mitigated or discussed as a part of the game play. As identified, some of these encounters are mitigated as the game ensures they take place but not through the action of the player. However, where there are circumstances where it is transgression play that the player must engage with, questions can arise about the ways in which child characters are used.

The presentation of youthful exploration and investigation without adult management offers chances for interrogation of boundaried spaces and actions, the school acting as a vessel for the placement of children and their narrative involvement. When the school space becomes unsafe and adult intervention is absent, then the decisions of teen characters and the momentousness of their own self-concept become a key pivot around which a player can shape their journey through the game. Student characters present a specific set of traits and potential responses to engage the player in different ways to adult characters in similar situations, opening the area of play and the impact of decisions made.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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