Survival Themed Video Games and Cultural Constructs of Power

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Abstract

Studies of the relationship between games and culture have often considered the empowering effect of games on the player. Studies have related this empowerment to individual character growth as well as broader geopolitical action (e.g., the conquering of nations). Few studies, however, have considered the emergent and increasingly popular survival genre of video games. In the current inquiry, through an analysis of past and current examples of games in this genre, we explore how survival games disempower players and discuss the potential implications for this shift in terms of cultural attitudes toward the current state of the world, individual prospects, and optimism/pessimism about the future. The goal of this piece is to explore and converse with the existing state of the literature and exemplars from the survival genre, creating a typological framework for future empirical and theoretical development in the area of games, culture, and (dis)empowerment dynamics.

Author Keywords

Game Studies; Games and Culture; Empowerment; Survival; Millennials

Introduction

In Mike Meginnis' short story "Navigators" (2011), a fictional role-playing video game is described in which, as the player progresses, they lose abilities, items, and even the ability to see. This model is antithetical to the traditional empowerment model of free form role-playing found in some video games (e.g., Bogost, 2010, p. 43; Ferguson, 2010), but it sets the stage for a powerful story about a father and son who become engrossed in the game as a metaphor for the struggles of their real lives.

Though shifts in genre-popularity and genre-evolution are an inevitability in gaming, just as in any other entertainment medium, causes (e.g., cultural) often underlie these shifts and evolutions (Squire, 2002; Straubhaar, 1991). Thus, the goal of the current inquiry is to serve as a sociological "think piece" (Roberts, 1993) examining the relationship between empowerment, culture, and the rise of the survival video game genre. The connection between life and game explored in Meginnis' story sets the stage for the current inquiry, in which we consider how the survival game genre reflects broader, extra-game social, cultural, and economic realities. Survival games, like the game presented in Meginnis' story, challenge the traditional model of empowerment in games, presenting players with odds that often seem insurmountable; many of these games, such as *Project Zomboid* (2013)*,* notify the player up front that "this is how you die".

While the notion of dying in video games is not new (e.g., SEGA's 1990s American and European ad campaigns about game difficulty (Stuart, Wall, & Perry, 2014)), and game difficulty has been impacted by some interesting factors, including regional attitudes, marketing, and even laws (see Torres's 2012 article on the examiner.com), we consider whether the inevitable downward spiral of a character in a survival game serves as a metaphor for a world that is presented by the media as inching ever closer to economic, environmental, and geopolitical disaster. Does the reality of economic prosperity being disproportionally out of reach by the millennial generation (Ross & Rouse, 2015) make the notion of empowered characters dominating their surroundings distasteful and unrealistic? In this inquiry we consider these questions by reviewing the history, evolution, rise, and current state of the survival game genre, examining and comparing several popular titles in the genre, and discussing how developers, players, and the gaming media reception and discourse around these games and the themes and mechanics common to them. Ultimately, we provide speculation and future direction for research regarding broader concepts related to power, culture, game genre, and consumption.

Games and Culture

In order to explore the relationship between a particular video game genre and culture, it is important to first establish the relationship between gaming and culture more broadly. 'Culture' in this paper refers to the selective re-presentation of artifacts, symbols, and language that sometimes (but not always) manifest in the form of norms and ideologies, and specifically as they are produced by and/or emerge within popular culture mediums such as video games (Hall, 1997). Therefore, culture is reproduced through the symbols and elements presented, distributed, taught, and preserved within video games (Martin & Deuze, 2009).

'Genre' in this paper refers to a category of composition for video games defined by gameplay interactions and challenges, rather than setting, tone, or content, and in this way could be framed more with respect to a ludological turn, however, as we expand our discussion to interrogate the

evolution of the narrative qualities of certain games and series (e.g., *Fallout*), we deploy genre in a hybrid ludological/narratological method, as advocated by Apperley (2006). In other words, by necessity (because many of these games lack stories and are "sandbox" in nature) and according to how survival games seem to be defined by users and the game industry/media, we construct a series of parameters (discussed below in reference to the examined games) that relate mostly to ludic mechanics (i.e. searching for scarce resources, or permeant character death) that characterize the broad genre of survival game, but consider how narrative and aesthetic qualities resonate across this genre as well (e.g., post-apocalyptic or horror settings). Both approaches to genre, we suggest, support the notion that survival games represent larger cultural trends and attitudes.

In the following sections we examine extant scholarly positions on this relationship and then focus on the oft-studied relationship between video games and empowerment. Anchoring our inquiry in these bodies of literature establishes the importance of evaluating games and culture and provides a point of contrast to which survival games may be compared.

The act of play, or gaming, is a "cultural phenomenon" which transcends across multiple mediums of entertainment, and social development and expression in general (Bateman, 2015; Corliss, 2011; Huizinga, 1970, p. 18). "A game is a formal construct that provides the environmental, stylistic, generic, structural, and semiotic context for play" (Krzywinska, 2006, p. 121). According to Koster (2012, as cited in Bateman, 2015), playing a game is grounded in the idea of "solving". This notion is substantiated by research on player-game interactions that suggest video game play is typically very goal-oriented (Oswald, Prorock & Murphy, 2014). Games, regardless of the medium in which they are played, can be perceived as a reflection of society's hopes and fears (Williams, 2003). They are "cultural products with deep roots in the culture they stem from" (Kücklich, 2006, p. 104) and provide the users a view into the socio-political climate of the time in which they were created (Krzywinska, 2006; Williams, 2003). Electronic media, developing technology, and innovation are a major factor in the production and reproduction of sociocultural identities (Williams, 1974). Therefore, culture is created through the reproduction of culturally based symbols and elements that are distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved (Martin, 2009). Video games, a form through which these elements are distributed, evaluated, and learned, have the ability to provide a gaze into the culturally perceived futures built upon the fears, wishes, and anxieties of the present (Lutz, 2001).

A Reflexive Relationship

Video games have a reflexive relationship with culture; they "function as both culture and cultural object[s]" (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 98) acting as a reflection of reality and history (Hong, 2015). Games are sites of cultural production and imagination; though sometimes criticized for

reinforcing ethnocentrism (see, e.g. Lizardi, 2009), they remain a potential location for transnational processes and discourses, to influences to the creation of the games (Lindtner & Dourish, 2011). The video game industry "produces culture and culture produces an industry" (Negus, 1998, p. 359). Subsequently, games are often used as vehicles to discuss broader social issues such as violence and aggression, as they are designed to mimic the sociocultural environments around them (Steinkuehler, 2006).

Video games represent more than consumption. Their creation, or at the very least the creation of their cultural meaning, becomes a communal process of social construction (Rodrigues, 2001). In relation to the viewer/player experience, playing video games has often been compared to watching films; however, the act of playing is less about watching the scene in front of the individual and more about anticipating the next image (Atkins, 2006). Games allow for a visualization of how players influence and shape the culture in which they participate (Steinkuehler, 2006). The fact that virtual spaces can so often mirror cultural realities results in a "naturalization" of the virtual worlds (Kücklich, 2009, p. 341). The line between "real life" and games, at least with respect to cultural meaning, becomes less opaque. Many previous studies on video games have regarded them as a particular cultural niche, as opposed to a reflection of culture, however, video games should be perceived as items that are created through a lens of culture (Shaw, 2010). Cultures, in a reflexive manner, dictate the types of games that are valuable for individuals to play (Bertozzi, 2014), and as communal representations of play that are deemed important and worthy of inclusion in the cultural milieu, games are increasingly a reflexive mechanic in creating, understanding, and experiencing culture.

Empowerment in Games

A number of studies have examined the ability for video games to empower players in virtual worlds, encouraging and enabling them to seek high social standings in the virtual culture and quest to battle and find objects of significance (Aldred & Greenspan, 2011; Krzywinska, 2006; Kücklich, 2009). Video games can represent an attempt to reproduce reality (and the scarceness and finite nature of physical and symbolic capital, i.e. power), or they can be an attempt to transcend the perceived real world in order to create a 'better' reality, while still maintaining sociocultural influences from reality (Schulzke, 2014). Previous generations of video games, both single and multi-player, on average maintained a focus on players becoming more than themselves within the virtual realm. Popular in this era of video games were utopian set environments, which represent a world that transcends the world in which we currently exist (Schulzke, 2014). Contrary to these optimistic, questing, and achievement-centered environments and mechanics are the current fatalist, post-apocalyptic, and survival themed video games of the last decade. Categorized more as dystopian environments, these games often represent a world created around the embodiment of fears and anxieties existing in the present

culture (Schulzke, 2014). These genres reflect a fatalistic mentality creating survival-based experiences where death is immanent.

One advantage of fatalistic games, particularly those focused on predation – be it human, animal, or monster – toward the player is that it allows for the confrontation of the player's fears (Bertozzi, 2014). These confrontations often manifest around the belief that "players need an enemy they can shoot down with enthusiasm" (Hitchens, Patrickson & Young, 2014, p. 10) and, therefore, in predatory games the enemy tends to be numerous and homogenous in appearance. They appear quickly and en masse, causing the player to need to respond quickly or die (Hitchens et al., 2014). Predatory games are often set in environments that have a scarcity of resources; therefore, not only is there a need to survive against the enemy, but a need to fight for the limited supplies available. Resources can vary from ammunition to water, food, and medical supplies. A player's ability to perform within a game environment is important, and players tend to be knowledgeable about their achievements and failures within any game world (Bertozzi, 2014). These games are also designed so that death is not finite, but instead allows the gamer to re-spawn and consider different strategies for when they enter the game again (Bertozzi, 2014). Because of this, players of predatory games are often not put off by defeat within the game, as defeat is not, in most play modes, permanent (Bertozzi, 2014).

The Current Inquiry

Moving a step further from what Bertozzi (2014) labels as predatory games – in which death is nearly an inevitability, but not an end-point for the player's journey – is the survival video game genre. This genre overlaps with the "rogue-like" game concept, and often incorporates the permanent death mechanism common to it. In our inquiry, we are interested in the cultural representation of not just the inevitability of death in an entertainment medium once typified by player-character empowerment, but also the incorporation of and focus on the bleak contexts in which these player-driven narratives play out. By exploring the history of the survival game genre, its rise in popularity, and its current state (along the way, pointing to some notable examples) we inquire into and speculate about the relationship between genre and culture: why have survival games seen such a rise in popularity; what major thematic elements make them differ from previous genres; what might this reflect in a generation whose social, cultural, and economic outlooks are fundamentally different from the gamers of the 1980s and 1990s?

It is important to note that the games explored in this inquiry represent only a small number of the total survival games available, and since the time of this writing it is likely that several new survival games have been released that are not included in this discussion. It is also important to note that the source of the games referred to in this paper is Steam (2016); therefore, many console only video games from these genres are not included in this discussion. Some omissions that could be considered survival games based on certain elements (though perhaps not when

assessed holistically with respect to genre) include *The Last of Us* (2013), the *Dark Souls* series, and perhaps even *Metal Gear* (1987) (which as recently spawned its own specific survival game: *Metal Gear: Survive* (2018)).

Survival Games: Types and Their Meanings

While we considered one hundred and three games labeled by player-contributors on *Steam* and *Giantbomb*'s game databases, we begin our inquiry by presenting an overview of a select number of survival games that we will discuss further throughout this inquiry.
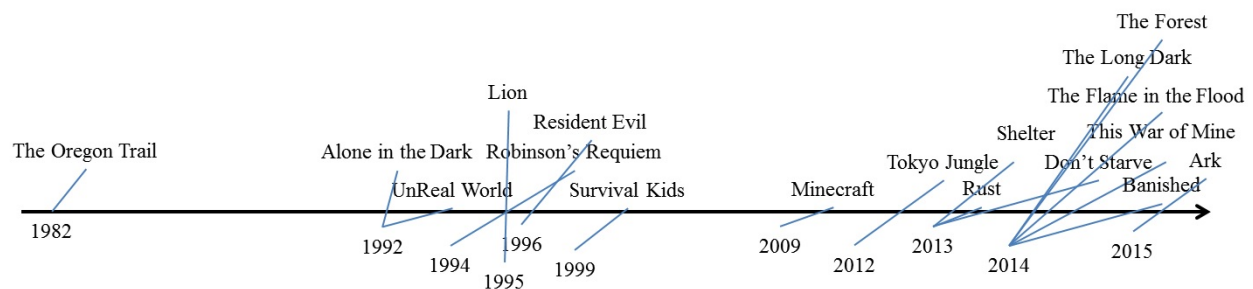

Figure 1: Timeline of the emergence of the survival themed video game genre

It is noteworthy that while this figure contains only a small fraction of survival games, the general trend of a lull in the genre's presence in gaming from 1982 to1992, and then a huge increase in releases from 1992 to present, is still consistent when all one hundred and three games we accounted for are added.

As illustrated above, survival games have existed, in some form, for several decades. *The Oregon Trail* (1982) is perhaps the earliest, and certainly the earliest commercially successful game that includes survival elements, such as acquiring and managing scarce resources, permanent death and/or injury of player characters and companions, and confrontations with human, animal, and environmental threats. These elements remain central to the genre, and in summation can be viewed as a specific design orientation toward player agency, its recognition, confinement, and role in player experience, but also as reflective of player demand for and acceptance of a fundamentally different orientation to power within games.

Given our contention that survival games reflect societal attitudes about prosperity or the lack thereof, the notion of confined player agency within survival games is an important genre element to consider. The concept of player agency is important to game studies for many reasons, not least of which is its role across both ludic and narrative conceptualizations of games (Joyce, 2015). The construction of digital space and even "nonplaces" reflect design choices with

impacts on player control (Crawford, 2015). A purposefully designed ludic system can create narrative opportunities that are dynamic within a controlled but player-driven environment such as a survival game, where players must work against a defined threat (e.g., starvation) but have multiple, open paths through which to fend off said threat (Lindley, 2005). These types of systems create "emergent play" through which the player constructs meaning within the game and connected meaning to extra-game ideas and concepts, including societal ones (Montola, 2012).

Emergent play can yield power of its own (Pearce, Boellstorff, & Nardi, 2009, p. 280). The survival game genre presents an interesting opportunity to examine a nuanced form of this type of power to emerge, evolve, and both engage and restrict the player simultaneously. We contend that this dynamic spans beyond game rules and interface, and is a fundamental component of the survival game design, and beyond this, a looking glass that reflects cultural fears about scarcity and inevitable downturn. When this image is turned toward the stereotype of an all powerful game avatar, that avatar and the game they inhabit may seem quixotic to a player whose own social and economic reality is perceived as tenuous as the pioneers on the Oregon trail or the marooned space captain struggling to survive in a hostile alien world.

In suggesting that survival games compel player engagement through a high level of certainty that their character(s) will fail, we contend that an "uncertainty aesthetic" (Bateman, 2015) is an important element of contemporary gaming as it relates to culture. While Bateman suggests that "It's not an entirely plausible suggestion that the audience hope for things to go wrong" when players return to a game (p. 402), we contend that it is precisely the uncertainty of success and precarious nature of the environments and situations in survival games that motivate players to connect with them. These uncertainties are an aesthetic link to the cultural, social, and economic realities as they are presented in other forms of entertainment and news media.

Survival Horror

Kelman (2004) defines survival horror as "games in which the player usually takes the role of a normal human in an environment overrun by demons, zombies, ghosts etc." (p. 231). In 1992, the first commercially successful survival horror game, *Alone in the Dark* was released. *Alone in the Dark* plays much like a point and click adventure, popularized in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but requires the player to avoid monsters in a Lovecraft inspired setting. The player has limited ways of confronting enemies, and the most successful approach is often to avoid them altogether. The player character is extremely vulnerable, and the game presents a narrative and environment that impresses upon the player that their character is alone, frightened, and overwhelmed by supernatural opposition. Survival is the best, if not the most likely, outcome – domination of one's foes and environment are not options.

In 1996, an even more commercially successful and now widely recognized franchise, *Resident Evil*, was released to much critical acclaim. *Resident Evil* adopts a similar setting (a large mansion) and gameplay elements as *Alone in the Dark,* but places more emphasis on the acquisition and management of scarce resources such as ammunition and herbs used to heal the player character. Like *Alone in the Dark, Resident Evil* heavily employs puzzles that are similar to point and click adventure games. One such adventure game, depicted by live-action actors, *Phantasmagoria (*1995) is not strictly a survival horror game, but depicts the role of gothic horror and romance in the survival horror game genre "by forcing the player into the role of the heroine and victim of the story [thus enacting a] psychoanalytic drama" (Chess, 2015, p. 391).

That a victim of overwhelming and horrific circumstances and threats can, and in fact must, become their own savior, is a central tenet of the survival game genre as a whole. It is our contention that as the genre has evolved into its current form, this component has come to reflect more and more a view of the world as harsh, uncertain, and unlikely to provide the help one needs to overcome these odds – they must go at it alone, become their own liberator through normal, mortal, even mundane means.

Wilderness Survival

For an understanding of the survival game genre's focus on the aforementioned dynamics in its modern form, one must look back (to *The Oregon Trail*), but also consider several less-known wilderness survival titles released around the same time as the birth of the survival horror genre. In 1971 *The Oregon Trail* saw its first commercial release on the HP 2100. It would later go on to garner critical praise and be used in classrooms in the early 1990s as an "educational game". A critique of *The Oregon Trail* in an educational capacity points to its emphasis on the player's encouraged exploitation of the environment and other actors in order to reach their objective and survive, noting that, "for example, the Indians' term 'mother earth' [compared to] The Oregon Trail term 'natural resource'" (Bigelow, 1997). While it is beyond the scope of our current inquiry to critique the cultural biases embedded in survival games, this observation is important in establishing the cultural resonance of scarcity, competition, and self-sufficiency that is central to the genre.

Another wilderness survival game with an interesting history, *Unreal World,* was first released in 1992. Developed by a team of just two part-time developers, *Unreal World* was originally conceived of as a fantasy role-playing game but evolved into a wilderness survival simulation and is still in active development. That the themes present in *Unreal World* now resonate strongly enough with the gaming community in 2016 for it to see a well-received release on Valve's Steam platform is telling. After over thirty years of development, *Unreal World* is perhaps more relevant to the current climate of gaming – and we argue the current cultural climate for a large group of gamers. This relevance and popularity, we posit, can be linked to the

aforementioned paradox of disempowerment with empowerment. Like the gothic horror romance, the player in wilderness survival games is both the victim of an overwhelming, and in some cases a metaphorically or even overtly (such as in *Don't Starve,* 2013) supernatural wilderness.

Emerging Types and Hybrids

This War of Mine (2014)	Survival, War, Atmospheric, Simulation	protect everybody from your shelter or sacrifice some of them for longer-term survival. During war, there are no good or bad decisions; there is only survival. The sooner you realize that, the better.
Banished (2014)	City Builder, Strategy, Simulation, Survival	In this city-building strategy game, you control a group of exiled travelers who decide to restart their lives in a new land. They have only the clothes on their backs and a cart filled with supplies from their homeland. The townspeople of Banished are your primary resource.
Stonehearth (2015)	Early Access, City Builder, Strategy, Voxel, Survival	With nothing but their wits and strength, your hardy band of hearthlings will carve a place in the wilderness. Watch a clearing become a camp, and then a town… and soon, a thriving outpost of civilization! There are no limits on what you can build… what your settlers can imagine, they can create.
Sheltered (2015)	Early Access, Survival, Post-apocalyptic, Strategy	Sheltered is a post-apocalyptic disaster management game that gives a whole new meaning to the term "nuclear family". Given a head-start over the billions lost in a nuclear holocaust, you must gather as many supplies as possible en route to the concrete underground shelter that will soon become your family home for the foreseeable dreary future.
Sunless Sea (2015)	Exploration, Survival, Lovecraftian, Adventure	LOSE YOUR MIND. EAT YOUR CREW. DIE. Take the helm of your steamship and set sail for the unknown! Sunless Sea is a game of discovery, loneliness and frequent death, set in the award-winning Victorian Gothic universe of Fallen London.
Shelter 2 (2015)	Adventure, Survival, Simulation, Open World	The game follows the life of a mother lynx, starting as a pregnant animal, giving birth and continuing in to a journey of parenthood where nurturing her cubs is paramount for survival. Shelter 2 includes more elaborate gameplay features than its predecessor, such as stamina, different types of movements, jumps and a variety of prey to kill. Besides hunting there are several maternal and hunting features, such as calling the cubs closer, smell for prey, making sure they drink water from rivers and lifting and carrying your cubs from harm's way.

Figure 2: Game synopses drawn from publisher descriptions and genres from Steam user tags

In Figure 2 we present some examples of hybrid genre survival games. These games incorporate numerous thematic and ludological elements present in earlier titles, and in some cases attempt to bridge the survival genre with other, more traditionally empowering genres and mechanics. This hybridization is important to considering where the genre might evolve, particularly if one is interested in linking ludology/game mechanics and culture (e.g., Raessens, 2006). As the recent survival game examples above illustrate, a common genre hybrid between simulation and survival exists, but the emphasis on community management in games such as *This War of Mine* (2014)*, Banished* (2014)*, Stonehearth* (2015)*,* and *Sheltered* (2016) represent survival mechanics and themes moving into traditionally empowering city-builder games that have historically overlapped with "god games".

It is the move from an over-watching deity to a struggling, ground-level manager of individual settlers and survivors that is perhaps most telling about the emerging hybrid survival game subgenres. Even in *Sunless Sea* (2015)*,* one must manage a crew of almost certainly doomed

sailors as they chart across an unforgiving Lovecraftian world. Again, the presumptive victim-status of either a player character or multiple characters overseen and guided by the player strays from the traditional notion of the player character as powerful.

Within these hybrid genres there are many aspects that are compiled together from the other contributing genres. There is often an emphasis on limited resources, predators of some variety, and an environmental threat whether it is cold weather, poor air quality, or dangerous terrain. These genres are often situated in a real world as opposed to fantasy setting. These hybrid genres also reflect an emphasis on building, and thus reify the notion that the land must be exploited in order to survive – that it must be tempered and reshaped. Whether this tempering and reshaping constitutes taming and subjugation, akin to games where players must colonize "foreign" lands and landscapes (Magnet, 2006) is unclear, but an inquiry into the cultural perceptions of gamers regarding the "otherness" of the post-apocalyptic, otherworldly, or even grittily portrayed "reality" of nature will be fruitful in further establishing the link between game genre popularity and cultural attitudes.

Another emerging type of survival game that fell outside the scope of this inquiry (where we look mostly at single player games, because during the time of study they prevailed) is the quickly popularized player-versus-player survival game. Two included examples, *Rust* (2013) and *Ark* (2017), offer interesting insight into the cultural linkages between survival gaming and real-world concepts as broad as slavery (in both games, it is not uncommon to find players working for other, more powerful players, under duress). The *Battle Royale (*inspired by the cult 2000 Japanese film) is a quickly emerging type of survival game that pits players against, typically, at least 99 other players in a last-person/team-standing battle where players must collect resources quickly as a barrier closes in on them, forcing confrontation. While these games emerged just after our study concluded, future research should consider how the themes they embody relate to the linkages discussed below.

Cultural Linkages

Viewing gaming culture and broader culture separately runs the risk of essentializing games and gamers as a niche of entertainment and entertainment consumers (Shaw, 2010), and failing to recognize the important interplay between games and culture (Chen, 2013). Part of this failing, we argue, can be in examining game genres without considering the interplay between genre and culture. As Arsenault (2009) suggests:

> far from being reducible to a simple checklist of specific game mechanics, video game genres play the part of the middle-man in a complex ecosystem of functional considerations and aesthetic ideas.

That game genres reflect aesthetic ideas is a particularly salient point to the current inquiry. Kirkpatrick (2011) posits that aesthetics in video games can yield stories and meaning through play itself, irrespective of a narrative. Here, we suggest that the cultural background and "evolution" of genres are (Arsenault, 2009), at least in the case of survival games, linked with cultural attitudes. Thus, attitudes about individual, community, and global prospects influence not only genre content, but also the prevalence of genres. If this holds true, then it stands to reason that gamers' increased interest in the survival genre can tell us something about this linkage.

If we consider the economic trends from roughly 2007 to present, it is evident that while middle-class households have, on average, maintained their status, lower-income households have faced more dire prospects (Pfeffr, Danziger & Schoeni, 2013). This situation, combined with the reality that lower-income households are at least, if not more, likely to own video-game consoles as middle and upper class households (Tandon, Zhou & Sallis, 2012) suggests that the relationship between games and culture is likely also a relationship between games and culture *as influenced* by economic prospects. Indeed, even among middle class persons, since the recession of 2007, the availability of credit, especially to young people, has declined, making financial realities available to their parents and former generations unobtainable (McKernan, Ratcliffe, Steuerle, & Zhang, 2014).

These economic realities coincide with notions of the millennial outlooks on the future. While millennials remain optimistic about their future according to some research, data on optimism about the future conducted by the GlobeScan Foundation (2015) shows rates of pessimism regarding future generations on earth began increasing while rates of optimism began decreasing around 2009, with rates of pessimism surpassing optimism in 2013 (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). During this same time, according to player-labeled genres for games that we reviewed, the number of survival games on the market increased dramatically compared to the ten years prior to this period (1999 to 2009).

Perhaps it is the idea of unbridled prosperity that no longer seems realistic to a generation faced with underemployment, delayed financial independence (Davis, Kim, & Fingerman, 2016), and an "always on" media window (Chan-Olmsted, Rim, & Zerba, 2013) that facilitates global sharing in near or actual real time information (Lee & Ma, 2012) that has led to an increased interest in this genre. In other words, we speculate that a keener awareness of the reality that success and power is no longer an absolute domination of one's surroundings may have created an appetite for games that reflect this reality. Indeed, millennials have taken a more "balanced" approach to understanding their prospects for the future, incorporating optimism with realism (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

An example of game (dis)empowerment reflecting a balanced, suffering-aware assessment of the world, portraying "the other side of war," is *This War of Mine* (2014). It illustrates the confluence of such attitudes, depicting survivors in a war-torn environment as they must scavenge for scarce resources and even confront other survivors, making difficult choices about whether to steal from them, and even whether to kill them if confronted. The player's small group of characters, struggling to exist, is a sober reflection of the human cost of war even beyond lost soldiers. Previous antiwar games have tended to focus on soldiers with the power to kill with ease (e.g., one of the earliest anti-war gaming efforts, *Cannon Fodder*, 1993), but the survival game's emphasis on scarcity, uncertainty, and disempowerment makes these depictions carry both new narrative and ludic weight, forcing players to make decisions that tell their story and the story of their characters in a world where power comes from obtaining a loaf of bread, or crafting a makeshift light source, not conquering a nation or smiting untold enemies. In this new era of empowerment, perhaps surviving against the odds and economically managing finite resources is analogous to the demi-god like empowerment of gaming's past.

Another example of game (dis)empowerment spans beyond the player's character to the themes portrayed about the direction of the world more broadly. Where games such as *Oregon Trail* and many survival horror games depict either natural or unnatural scenarios that require survival against difficult odds, an increasing number of games portray post-apocalyptic worlds through which the player must navigate and often compete for scarce resources. An example of this type of game, though not necessarily a survival game by the standards defined here, is the *Fallout* series (1997-2015) which provides a critical assessment of our world, both past and present, and portrays the aftermath of nuclear war. This series (based off the 1988 video game *Wasteland*) illustrates the world post-nuclear fallout where the surface is a wasteland and survival underground is the safest option in order to avoid mutated humans and animals. In each game, you play as a different member of a fallout shelter, having survived the nuclear fallout and now being forced to face the Wasteland in search of family, resources for your community, or simple survival. The *Fallout* series represents a microcosm of evolution in gaming's attention to survival as a theme and mechanism. The early entries in the series played as fairly standard isometric role-playing games, albeit still in the bleak, apocalyptic setting, whereas newer entries require resource management, community building, and (in the latest version) crafting a new world. The series even spawned a spin-off, pure (colony) survival game, *Fallout Shelter* (2015).

This sub-genre of survival games set in post-apocalyptic environments has gained prevalence lately, perhaps to raise awareness to the current state of our socio-political environment and draw attention to what could happen. Many of these games, like the *Fallout* series, highlight the worst-case scenario, and leave the player to find hope in the new world – if they can survive it. Within this new world you can be a ruler, a soldier, or an unseen shadow. The freedom to control your impact on the story and the outcome of the game, while still struggling to manage the scarce resources, adds a comparable reality for many individuals playing these games.

Whether it is being stranded at sea, trudging through a war-torn country, battling zombies, or avoiding radiation poisoning, it is not the setting that matters to the gamers as much as the struggle for survival. The "realness" of resource management, crafting, and the threat of death, whether by exposure, starvation, or attack, makes games that were once considered fantasy now seem grounded in a digital reality to many players.

Implication for future research

As Apperley (2006) suggests, a more nuanced engagement and critical assessment of the notion of video game genre may further an understanding of the interplay between narrative and ludic game elements. Here, we have provided speculation regarding the connectivity between generational attitudes, culture, and the survival game genre. In doing so, we have suggested that genre evolution is not merely an aesthetic artifact of technological growth, but a cultural aesthetic transformation based on fluid social, economic, and cultural conditions. As Bateman (2015) points out, uncertainty is one element of gaming motivation. These relationships can be explored in future research at both macro and micro levels. At the micro and qualitative level, research could come in the form of assessing play-driven narratives through, for example, player "after action reports". Such reports can be used as a lens into the connection between players' experienced cultural realities and gameplay. More macro level understandings of the games/culture nexus may benefit from cross-cultural and cross-generational examinations of gameplay experiences and game consumption in general. Ultimately, a combination of macro/micro and quantitative/qualitative inquiries can add texture and nuance to game studies' understanding of genre significance, and also contribute to knowledge of past and current cultural conceptualizations of power, fairness, and prosperity.

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