Productive Distrust: Playing with the player in digital games

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores how digital games can be designed to betray a player's trust to positive effect through engendering "productive distrust". Three types of productive distrust are examined, each illustrated by a case study of a recent game: (1) distrust in sensory perception; (2) distrust in authorial voice; and (3) distrust in other players. While acknowledging the importance of fostering trust in game design, this paper aims to highlight the positive role that *distrust* can have as well. Ultimately, we suggest that distrust can be utilized as a game mechanic to foster meaningful experiences, critical thinking and entertainment value in digital games.

Keywords
Trust; distrust; digital games; The Stanley Parable; Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice; Rust

INTRODUCTION
> "At the heart of things, a surprising amount of game design is about trust."
> (Scheurle, 2019)

The trustworthiness of game design has come under increased scrutiny in recent years. In particular, concerns have emerged that digital games might be breaking players' trust through deception and covert influence. Researchers and journalists have investigated instances in which "dark game design patterns" (Zagal et al., 2013) have been used to manipulate trusting players into betraying their own interests (Halverston et al., 2019; King and Delfabbro, 2018; Søraker, 2016).

For those wanting to understand how games can and should engender trust, there is a great deal of literature to draw on (see e.g. Hoffman, 2019; Scheurle, 2019). Less has been written, however, about the ways in which games purposefully foster distrust to benefit the player. Entire genres of game design—such as the "traitor game" (Engelstein & Shalev, 2019, 19–20)—revolve around the deliberate creation of distrust between players, and this can be an enjoyable feature of the game experience (Eaves, 2013; Koster, 2018). This casts doubt upon the assumption that it is necessarily a good thing for a digital game to inspire trust in its players in all respects.

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In this paper, we coin the term "productive distrust" to describe instances in which a digital game's design causes players to distrust some aspect of the game experience for a positive purpose. As an initial exploration of the topic, we identify three types of productive distrust: distrust in sensory perception, distrust in authorial voice and distrust in other players. We explore how these forms of distrust are engineered through game design with case studies of three recent videogames: *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Antoniades, 2017), *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden & Pugh, 2013), and *Rust* (Facepunch Studios, 2018).

DISTRUST IN SENSORY PERCEPTION: *HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE*

In the action-adventure game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, the player follows Senua, a warrior who journeys to the underworld to save her deceased lover's soul. At the beginning, players are warned that the game "contains representations of psychosis"—Senua is tormented with hallucinations, a never-ending barrage of internal voices that whisper to her, and delusional thoughts. The voices are sometimes helpful, sometimes mocking and cruel.

The creators of *Hellblade* reportedly consulted with psychiatrists and people with psychosis to inform the creation of a game that would give players a meaningfully representative experience of the condition, in which one is not able to trust one's own sensory perceptions (Antoniades, 2016). This sort of distrust has a productive aim: namely, to generate empathy and decrease the stigma associated with psychosis.

DISTRUST IN AUTHORIAL VOICE: *THE STANLEY PARABLE*

The Stanley Parable is a single-player narrative-driven game in which the player controls an office worker, Stanley, while a disembodied voice narrates Stanley's story. The player may act in ways that are contradictory to this narration, which causes the narrator to respond in a bemused or frustrated fashion, sometimes "resetting" the game state.

In this paradoxical ludic environment, the player learns that they can trust neither the narrator nor themselves as an authorial voice. As Sarian (2018) describes, *The Stanley Parable* prompts players to ask "What should I do?" yet provides no definitive answers, throwing players into a state of uncertainty that forces them to interpret and reflect on their status as "choosers" (Sarian, 2018, 17). As such, productive distrust is fostered by prompting players to reconsider the "generic, formal and cultural conventions of videogames" alongside the game itself (Fest, 2016, 2), engaging their critical capacities in a meaningful way.

DISTRUST IN OTHER PLAYERS: *RUST*

In the multiplayer online game *Rust*, players start the game as a completely naked character. Initially equipped only with a rock, they must gather food, water and other necessities to survive. *Rust* features character death (Carter et al., 2013), meaning that when a character dies the player must start again with effectively a new character. Players are in direct competition for resources, and can even kill and eat each other to stave off hunger; consequently, merciless behavior within the game is the norm. It rarely pays to trust a stranger in *Rust*, and for a player to survive they must be both alert and suspicious.

Paradoxically, this fearful state is core to the appeal of multiplayer survival games like *Rust* (Allison et al., 2015). The environment of pervasive distrust is generative, in

that it sets the conditions for emergent narratives (Aylett, 1999) in which all social interactions are imbued with a heightened sense of risk and consequence (Carter and Allison 2017). By encouraging players to distrust each other, *Rust* creates a space in which the decision to trust another player can be meaningful.

CONCLUSION

The games discussed above have very different styles of gameplay, but each one provides an experience of productive distrust. *Hellblade* provokes distrust in the senses to promote understanding of other people's sensory experiences. *The Stanley Parable* provokes distrust in authorial voices to prompt critical engagement with interactive narratives. *Rust* provokes distrust in other players to allow for meaningful experiences of cooperation and betrayal. This cursory analysis of three case studies demonstrates that distrust deserves to be viewed as an important and often productive feature of digital game design that can encourage critical thinking, foster meaningful experiences and increase enjoyment.

BIO

Lucy Sparrow is a PhD candidate in human-computer interaction at The University of Melbourne. Focusing on ethics and technology, her primary research examines the overlapping norms and values surrounding online multiplayer games.

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Martin Gibbs is an Associate Professor in the Interaction Design Lab, School of Computing and Information Systems, the University of Melbourne. He was a Program Chair for DiGRA 2017 and DiGRA 2018. His recent book, *Death and Digital Media*, was published by Routledge in 2018 and features a chapter on commemorating the dead in digital games. His forthcoming book, *Digital Domesticities*, will be published by Oxford University Press in 2020.

Michael Arnold is a Professor in the History and Philosophy of Science Programme at The University of Melbourne. His on-going research activities lie at the intersection of contemporary technologies and daily life.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See Carter (2015) for a relevant discussion of player motivations for engaging in "treacherous play" in the multiplayer game *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003). Carter and Allison (2018) also note the "paradoxical" attractiveness of transgressive play in the multiplayer survival game, *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive, 2013).

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