

# “It takes food to make food”: survival and sustainability in *Don’t Starve*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Players of *Don’t Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013) wake up in a meadow in a procedurally-generated world, where their mysterious antagonist Maxwell instructs them only to find food, fire and shelter before nightfall. In the days that follow, players’ survival will be determined by their ability to manage their hunger, sanity, and health in a hostile and lonely world. As the game’s title suggests, finding and maintaining a supply of food is a key challenge.

This paper analyses the design, coding and use of food politics in *Don’t Starve*, through the lens of “food values”: the competing judgements about food quality, health and benefits that we bring to bear in our everyday life (Lusk, 2011; Lusk and Briggeman, 2009). More explicitly than in other forms of media culture, game designers, systems and players make assessments about the merits of different foodstuffs, techniques, and means of sustenance, in ways that can inform our understanding of the politics of food systems in everyday life. Studies of food in games to date (e.g. Chess, 2012) have focused on “casual gaming” and the gendered politics of food production and consumption. The capacity for serious games to prompt reflection on sustainable development is also a growing area of research (Stanitsas, 2019). While there have been studies of other media formats’ representation of and contribution to food sustainability (e.g. Stevens et al., 2016), this is little work on how mass-market videogames can inform, perform and reform food systems.

I draw on three kinds of resources to support my argument. The first is attention to play and procedurality: what does *Don’t Starve* ask of its players, what does it care about, what elements are inside and outside of its frame? Second, I analyse documents produced by designers, including patch notes, interviews and forum posts, to see how they justify their design choices. Third, player-created texts like forum posts, fan art, and tutorials give a sense of what players are doing in *Don’t Starve*, how they respond to its various challenges, and how they might wish them to be otherwise.

This paper highlights three aspects of food values in *Don’t Starve*: the statistics of different “recipes” produced by players in a cooking minigame, the tastes of player and non-player characters (NPCs), and the game’s temporal rhythms of abundance and scarcity.

- *Don’t Starve* allows players to combine raw ingredients in a crockpot to create 58 different dishes. Each affects the avatar’s health, sanity and hunger

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levels differently. This cooking minigame rewards players for experimenting, sourcing and researching different combinations. Players can hide the otherwise noxious “monster meat” in dishes, or preserve nutrients for long periods away from camp. The different values applied to these recipes is a key driver of player strategy throughout the year.

- NPCs will also react to food offered by the player with anything from adoration to abhorrence. The “Bunnymen,” for example, may be powerful allies to players who can adopt a plant-based diet.
- In winter crops will not grow; in summer they may spontaneously catch fire. Food rots, losing its appeal until it is only good for the compost heap. Refrigeration, drying and cooking are all ways to delay this deterioration. Each day lasts only 7 minutes, so players must learn how to adapt to the changing cycles of night and day, heat and cold, abundance and scarcity (cf. Costello, 2017).

Studying these different dimensions of food values in *Don't Starve*, I argue, helps us to understand interactions and possible compromises between different ethical frames, regimes of taste and food systems. Contemporary food politics is a site of fracturing publics, contesting claims and intersecting values, and playing with food in the medium of games is one way to start to untangling the “messy ethics of eating” (Probyn, 2011) in contemporary life.

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