The History of "Let's Play" on the *Something Awful* Forums

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INTRODUCTION
In this paper, as part of ongoing research into Let's Plays, we examine the development of the Let's Play community on the *Something Awful* forums. Let's Plays are recordings of gameplay with commentary from the person playing the game. The first LPs were primarily sequences of screenshots with text commentary, and were posted on the *Something Awful* forums (Kapriyelov, 2016). The *SA* forums therefore provide an historically noteworthy site which records the origin and development of the LP genre and of the terms used to describe LPs. Further, as we will demonstrate, they have been influential in shaping the LP genre. Much of the existing research about LPs looks at production and consumption of LPs on YouTube (Burwell & Miller, 2016; Nguyen, 2016) as a form of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Burgess, Green, Jenkins & Hartley, 2009). What this research intends to do is demonstrate how participation in LPs on *SA* manifests quite differently than YouTube based LP communities, and what can be learned from those differences.

Part of our ongoing study into LP involves scraping the forums for data about the community. This data will be studied for thematic content, in order to determine what themes or general trends were involved in the evolution of LPs on *SA*. Applying methods of content analysis to the forums will provide future studies new avenues to pursue in terms of how and why people make LPs. Early participant observation has revealed that self-reflective discussions about LPs in the *SA* community have changed over time, originally seeing the making of LPs as a hobby, and now as a source of financial income. This change in motivations came about with the adoption of monetization systems like Patreon, Twitch.tv subscriptions, and YouTube ad revenue.

By examining the development and early history of LP videos, we turn attention to the practices of the LP community as a site of participatory culture. We show how LPers position themselves as LP practitioners and use the Serious Leisure Perspective (Stebbins, 2014) to describe the trajectories of their involvement in the community. Moreover, we identify LP videos as an important historical tool for studying modern

videogames. Previous work has shown how LPs can be used to study games based on the performance and reactions of the LPer's. Topics covered in this way include ludonarrative dissonance (Roth et al, 2018) and moral evaluations made by players (Piittinen, 2018). The findings we outline in this paper will therefore uncover additional areas of interest for game design and games studies scholars, allowing them to examine player perspectives on design elements in games.

The analysis shows how, within the *SA* forums, standards of quality are enforced through LP specific rules and guidelines. By adhering to these practices, the content produced by the LP community is remarkably different in style to that of mainstream YouTube LPs (Nguyen, 2016). We describe the ways in which Let's Players create cultural and other forms of capital (Thornton, 1995). In particular, we use the *SA* LP forums as a case study example of the evolution of monetization systems for online content, as the community was producing LPs before these systems were widely available. This means that we can observe how they adapted and incorporated emerging innovations into their production practices. In this way, we will demonstrate how content production benefits members of the community, and how that has changed during the community's history.

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