

Simone Knewitz, Stefanie Mueller (eds.)

# **The Aesthetics of Collective Agency**

Corporations, Communities and Crowds  
in the Twenty-First Century

**[transcript]**

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# Constraints and Community in Multiplayer Video Games

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Marco Caracciolo

Digital media and the Internet raise new challenges for the definition and practice of the collective.<sup>1</sup> Political discourse and activism rely on the distributed network of social media, creating unprecedented possibilities for collective organization on a national and transnational level (Postmes and Brunsting). For audiences of artistic or entertainment practices, the forms of the collective are changing as well. Readers of fiction are increasingly using services such as Goodreads.com to share impressions of the books they read, on social media-like platforms that are easily monetized by corporations such as Amazon (which owns Goodreads).<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on a mode of collectivity that is even more fundamentally bound up with digital media and the Internet: namely, the practices of online or “multiplayer” gaming. Combining play and narrative engagement in a shared, intersubjective context, online games are a microcosm illustrating many of the dilemmas that underlie digital communities—the promise of decentralized cooperation but also the ever-present threat of irresponsible or predatory behavior.

My approach to video games is inspired by New Formalist work in literary studies. As argued by Caroline Levine, the forms found in creative practices are never merely formal in a narrow sense: On the contrary, forms such as hierarchies or networks of collaboration abound in social processes and play an important part in cultural meaning making. Therefore, New Formalism is sensitive to the ways in which the forms of cultural artifacts (such as novels, films, or video games) resonate and engage with the forms inherent in social practices at large. While the New Formalist framework and the language of form originate in literary studies, this approach can be readily extended to video games. In this medium, the concept of “form” spans a

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1 This article is a revised and expanded version of chapter 4 of my book *On Soulsring Worlds: Complexity, Digital Communities, and Interpretation in Dark Souls and Elden Ring* (Routledge, 2024). Reprinted with permission.

2 See Milota for an empirical study of online commentaries on Goodreads, among other similar platforms.

broad range of devices, from the basic rules and objectives of the game to the representational and narrative strategies implemented by the developers. In the case of multiplayer games specifically, the possibilities of interaction created by the developers through formal devices can shape players' intersubjective experiences both during gameplay and in other Internet-based practices that revolve around games (for instance, discussion groups, Reddit threads, and so on).

On the level of basic gameplay, games can create multiplayer experiences in profoundly different ways. Players can share a physical space, at a LAN party or when a game allows for "split-screen" multiplayer on the same computer or console system. More frequently today, though, multiplayer gaming involves sharing a virtual environment remotely, through an Internet connection. Multiplayer gaming spans a broad spectrum from pure competition (a free-for-all "deathmatch," in which every player is fighting for themselves) to purely cooperative experiences (in which all players work together to achieve a certain goal). Team-based multiplayer games fall halfway on this spectrum: They combine competition (against the opposing team or teams) and cooperation (within the team). In most of these games, players act within the same simulated environment through the mediation of the player-character or "avatar" (see Vella, "It's A-Me/Mario"): A representation that players control directly and that allows them to interact with the game world—for example, by collecting resources or fighting other players (or computer-controlled enemies).

Across this range of multiplayer experiences, two features tend to remain constant. The first is that players have to be connected simultaneously to play together: As in real-life interaction, their avatars need to occupy the same digital environment synchronously to compete or collaborate. Second, players are allowed and even encouraged to communicate directly, either through in-game chat or by using external voice chat services such as Discord to coordinate their actions. However, some games challenge these conventions, either by allowing for asynchronous multiplayer or by placing considerable constraints on communication. This article focuses on how these innovative ways of bringing players together can create uniquely rewarding experiences and also overturn some of the stereotypes and assumptions surrounding gaming culture. I will argue that asynchronous gameplay and constrained communication are instrumental in cultivating more responsible and critical practices in online communities, not only during active gameplay but also outside of gameplay proper, when players discuss gameplay strategies or interpret the games' narrative and atmosphere. Of course, correlating a certain form (in this case, two game mechanics) to an effect is always tricky: Many factors shape the community surrounding a certain game, and it is difficult to both generalize about a certain community and trace all of its features to the developers' formal choices. Yet asynchronous multiplayer and constrained communication appear to have a significant defamiliarizing potential: By encouraging players to reconsider what they took for granted about multiplayer experiences, they open up spaces for reflection that lead

to more profound or meaningful forms of online collectivity than are typically found in mainstream gaming.<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably, this focus on asynchronous and constrained-communication multiplayer leads me to privilege certain kinds of games in my discussion. Astrid Ensslin introduced the term “literary games” for video games whose complexity is comparable to literary works, particularly (in Ensslin’s discussion) at the level of their creative or unconventional use of verbal language. I propose extending this concept to any game that displays the complexity typical of literature, not only in the verbal domain but also in narrative, emotional, and ethical terms.<sup>4</sup> My examples of asynchronous and constrained-communication multiplayer in the next section, *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019) and *Journey* (thatgamecompany 2012), are literary in this extended sense, but they also belong to very different strands of the gaming industry—the former being a major production by famed Japanese game creator Hideo Kojima, while the latter is an “indie” game with a distinct arthouse feel.<sup>5</sup> Despite these differences in positioning within the landscape of contemporary gaming, *Death Stranding* and *Journey* converge in adopting an innovative approach to multiplayer experiences: They create unusual forms of online togetherness that challenge the dominant culture of “hardcore” gaming, which is defined by shallow interactions and potentially toxic behavior.

After discussing work on uncooperative behavior in online gaming, I turn to my main case study, *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware 2022), a critically acclaimed game that builds on FromSoftware’s earlier *Dark Souls* series (2011–2018) while presenting the player with a vaster, more open world and more nonlinear progression. Like the three *Dark Souls* games, *Elden Ring* features a sophisticated multiplayer system, combining both synchronous and asynchronous elements. My discussion will focus on how each playthrough is shaped by asynchronous and constrained interactions with other players. This is another literary game that rewards careful excavation of its universe and backstories: I argue that, together with the game’s narrative complexity and signature difficulty, the multiplayer mechanics in *Elden Ring* contribute to more thoughtful practices in online communities. Moreover, I show how FromSoftware

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3 Of course, this difference may also reflect a difference in the demographics (social background, education, etc.) of the audiences addressed by these games. While I cannot rule out this possibility in the article, it seems to me that the wide appeal and impressive sales figures of FromSoftware games suggest that they are not only catering to a niche of “arthouse” players (who may be less inclined to toxic behavior than mainstream gamers). However, the issue of audiences is certainly worth exploring further from an empirical perspective.

4 Relevant in this respect is work in film and media studies on narrative complexity, which involves nonlinear or multilinear strategies that challenge storytelling conventions (see, e.g., Buckland). That kind of complexity is an aspect of what I am calling literary gaming here, although of course games realize it in different ways from film.

5 For a comprehensive study of the aesthetics and rhetoric of independent games, see Juul.

games create unique integration between two experiences of community that are, in many games, distinct from one another: interactions with other players during active gameplay and the post-hoc discussions that surround games on various Internet platforms. The narrative and gameplay difficulty of these games contributes to bringing these typically separate experiences into close alignment.

## Introducing Asynchronous and Constrained-Communication Multiplayer

At first glance, it would not be unusual for players of Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions) to think they are playing a single-player game. The player-controlled character, a deliveryman named Sam Porter Bridges, is asked to traverse a postapocalyptic wasteland where only few pockets of human society survive. The core gameplay involves building or rebuilding infrastructure to connect these settlements while Sam makes his way across the United States. If infrastructure is a visible manifestation of the collective, then *Death Stranding* centers on the problem of rebuilding community in a postapocalyptic world destabilized by supernatural forces—a set-up that resonates with contemporary anxieties of climate disaster and supply chain disruptions.<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite this focus on community, the world of *Death Stranding* feels vast and empty when I traverse it. The sense of loneliness is increased by the fact that negotiating this visually striking landscape is never smooth or self-evident, because I need to juggle multiple bulky packages while crossing difficult terrain, climbing mountains, and fighting off bandits. When visiting the urban centers or in cutscenes, the player encounters a large cast of computer-controlled, non-player characters (NPCs), but they never cross paths with other players' avatars.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, when I play *Death Stranding* in the "online" mode my world is pre-filled with structures such as bridges and ladders built by other players. These structures are clearly marked as different from those I have built: They appear in each area after I restore the Internet-like "chiral network"; their presence makes the task of navigating the landscape significantly easier. In fact, playing *Death Stranding* offline greatly increases the difficulty level, because I have to start from scratch instead of benefiting from community-built infrastructure. Algorithmically (and to some extent randomly), the game selects some structures built by other players and includes them in my game world, along with the builder's username. In turn, some of the

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6 For more on this reading of *Death Stranding*, see Caracciolo, *Contemporary Narrative*, chapter 8. Rubenstein, Robbins, and Beal discuss the literary relevance of infrastructural thinking, adopting a New Formalist method that ties in with my approach here.

7 Throughout this article, I use the "we" form or "the player" to refer to basic in-game experiences that are likely to be widely shared across players, whereas I switch to the first-person singular when the emphasis lies on my own experiences and responses to the games.

bridges or roads I build may show up in another player's world, although I have no direct control over that process. This is an excellent example of what video game theorist Ian Bogost calls "procedurality," "the computer's special efficiency for formalizing the configuration and behavior of various representative elements" (13). In the case of *Death Stranding*, the system was designed to procedurally distribute player-built structures, with a limit of structures per game area (so as not to make the gameplay too easy). The algorithm also seems to take into account the "like" system, which allows players to show appreciation for particularly useful structures.<sup>8</sup> The result is a unique form of asynchronous, algorithmically driven cooperation between players: I cannot intervene in other players' worlds directly, but the infrastructure built by others serves as a trace or echo of their gameplay, evoking community even in the impossibility of direct interaction. Emotionally, this strategy complicates the loneliness of gameplay, because we realize that the game's central problem—rebuilding community—demands teamwork, but we are ultimately unable to share the landscape with other players: Whatever interaction we can have with them is filtered by an abstract infrastructure-sharing algorithm. The combination of impressive vistas, postapocalyptic setting, and asynchronous multiplayer is responsible for the game's melancholy atmosphere, which is its main claim to literary complexity—much more so, in fact, than the convoluted plot and the characters' heavy-handed rhetoric.

If verbosity is, as noted by many critics and commentators (e.g., Frushtick), one of the factors making the experience of Kojima's game less enjoyable, the same cannot be said about *Journey*, my example of constrained multiplayer communication. In fact, this is a completely wordless game. The player's goal is to navigate a series of interconnected spaces while solving puzzles: Like *Death Stranding*, this is a game of landscape traversal, but the atmosphere of this vast desert is very different from Kojima's postapocalyptic game. A poster child for "indie" and arthouse games, *Journey* uses pastel colors and delicate textures to evoke a vaguely Orientalist world, with ruins of a mysterious civilization strewn across a deserted landscape. Contributing to this atmosphere is the fact that this world is mostly devoid of anthropomorphic presences; the creatures we encounter repeatedly in the course of our playthrough are made of fabric even when they resemble animals (for example, a jellyfish).

Yet, occasionally, we can sight in the distance another traveler wearing clothes similar to our own avatar. Initially the player will wonder whether this is a multiplayer situation—that is, whether these characters are controlled by the computer or by other players, but there is no way to know for sure. No name is displayed, and communication is extremely limited: There is no voice chat here, and while the travelers can exchange sounds known as "chirps," the other's responses could easily be procedurally generated. In fact, the only in-game confirmation that these figures are player avatars (and that this is a multiplayer game) comes after the end credits, when

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8 See Reynolds for a detailed description of the game's multiplayer systems.

the game's paratext reveals the name of the other users we shared part of our *Journey* with. Because these players are randomly selected by the game and their usernames not displayed until the end, it is difficult to make contact with them outside of the game. Instead, players have devised creative ways of communicating, for example by tracing messages in the sand. Sharing the landscape with a player who remains completely anonymous is a unique experience afforded by *Journey*'s asynchronous multiplayer system. The constraints on communication contribute to the metaphysical qualities of *Journey*'s gameplay: somewhat counterintuitively, the sense of intersubjective sharing is intensified by the impossibility of direct verbal communication.<sup>9</sup> While *Journey*'s arthouse approach will not cater to all players' tastes, its silent multiplayer helps create a distinctively contemplative atmosphere.

## Toxic Behavior and "Grief" in Online Communities

Any generalization about a place as divided as the Internet is of course bound to invite disagreement, but it seems safe to suggest that gaming communities, in general, have a rather poor track record when it comes to respectful behavior. The culture of hardcore gaming is strongly (if stereotypically) aligned with notions of hypercompetitive masculinity. Even if gaming audiences (and games themselves) have become far more inclusive and diverse over the last decade, the controversies surrounding "GamerGate" in 2014–2015 demonstrate that sexist assumptions are still entrenched in at least some gaming communities.<sup>10</sup> GamerGate was a harassment campaign launched by online commentators who targeted female developers, particularly well-known figures in the indie gaming industry whose games engage with issues of social justice or contemporary politics. Writing before GamerGate, Mia Consalvo already noted "a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position" (1). While it would be unfair to see GamerGate supporters as representative of the "average" gamer, their response is symptomatic of larger rifts within the world of gaming, which can easily spiral into irresponsible or toxic behavior.

If we focus more narrowly on multiplayer interactions, problematic behavior is not hard to come by. A longitudinal study by Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang offers a comprehensive picture of players' experiences with the online game *Team Fortress 2*. Their point of departure is that "several studies have found negative social interaction to be common within online games [...] and more broadly in gamer culture" (4058). The results, based on diary observations by a relatively small number of participants (n =

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9 For more on how this kind of implicitness can enhance empathy and "sharing" in engaging with fictional characters, see Caracciolo, "Fictional Characters."

10 For more on the GamerGate, I refer to Melissa Kagen's helpful discussion.



38), broadly confirm this idea. Verbal aggression—in the form of teasing “trash-talk” or downright harassment—is frequent, with around 76 percent of players reporting that they have experienced or practiced such behavior.<sup>11</sup> A player’s perceived lack of skill is one of the main reasons for this kind of harassment. Toxic masculinity and sexism are two more themes emerging from the qualitative data.

A study by Jonas Heide Smith highlights two patterns that contribute to uncooperative behavior in multiplayer games even in the absence of direct verbal harassment: cheating and grief. The former means interacting with the game in a way that was not intended by the developers, usually by exploiting a coding error in a way that gives the player an unfair advantage in competing against others. “Grief,” by contrast, is gaming jargon for destructive behavior targeted at other players that does not result in any strategic advantage for the player performing it. In a survival game, for example, grief could involve destroying or damaging a structure built by another player just for the sake of bullying them. For Smith, the frequency of cheating and grief in online gameplay places severe limitations on multiplayer collaboration. These behavioral patterns introduce intersubjective tensions and dilemmas that potentially destabilize online communities. Smith understands these destabilizing forces through the lens of the concept of the “tragedy of the commons,” first introduced by ecologist Garrett Hardin and later picked up by many economists. In essence, the tragedy has to do with how, if left unregulated, shared resources are bound to be exploited by one individual or group acting out of self-interest. In the case of multiplayer games, of course, resources are rarely finite in an absolute sense: Even if an online world runs out of a particular material, it is always possible to reset or restart the game.<sup>12</sup> The “tragedy” of online gaming thus has more to do with social capital than with resource usage, with harassment, cheating, and grief being the most significant challenges to cooperation and fair competition in multiplayer contexts.

The answer, as Smith highlights, is more regulation—and indeed that is what asynchronous and constrained-communication multiplayer provide. Before I expand on those elements in *Elden Ring*, it is worth stressing that toxic or uncooperative behavior during gameplay frequently translates into unsupportive or hypercompetitive online communities: the “trash talk” that defines multiplayer game experiences spills over into Reddit threads, YouTube comments, and so on. Obviously, the link between in-game behavior and the larger collectives built around games is not always straightforward; but in my case study, *Elden Ring*, there is a clear connection between the two, as we will see in the next section.

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11 Another study by Ballard and Welch, also with a focus on massively multiplayer online games and a larger sample size (n = 151), found that 52 percent of the participants experienced cyberbullying.

12 See Alenda Chang’s insightful discussion of ecological collapse in video games (chap. 5).

## Forms of Community Building in *Elden Ring*

Developed by Japanese company FromSoftware, *Elden Ring* came out in early 2022 to virtually universal acclaim. The continuities between *Elden Ring* and FromSoftware's earlier games, particularly the *Dark Souls* series, are hard to miss. Most of the game's core mechanics are shared with *Dark Souls III*, and while *Elden Ring* takes place in a different universe from the earlier games, players familiar with the series will notice numerous parallels between the two. In both *Dark Souls* games and *Elden Ring*, the player starts out as a lowly everyman condemned to cycles of death and rebirth, a "hollow" (*Dark Souls*) or "tarnished" (*Elden Ring*) creature. The fantasy landscape is desolate and punctuated by impressive cathedrals and castles modeled on European medieval architecture—but often in ruin, as if to signify past glory. We are faced with a world in a grave crisis: In *Dark Souls*, the fire keeping the land alive is about to go out; in *Elden Ring*, the godlike "Greater Will" has been upended by a catastrophic event known as the "Shattering." By advancing through the story and defeating some of the most powerful creatures (known informally as "bosses") of this land, the player-character slowly gains influence.

The narrative of these games is frequently obscure, and the intricate backstories of the main characters are contained in item descriptions, making up a vast body of "lore" that players can ignore or spend a great amount of time dissecting, depending on their inclinations.<sup>13</sup> Environmental storytelling, in Henry Jenkins's phrase, plays an important role, too: In FromSoftware games, stories frequently emerge from the physical layout of the locations explored by the players or from other spatial elements that provide information on the game world and its inhabitants. In any case, reconstructing the games' lore requires significant gap-filling and even speculation, with active members of the FromSoftware community frequently sharing lore "theories" in online settings such as Reddit or YouTube. I will return to these online communities: For now, suffice it to say that, by the end of the game, the player is asked to make a choice whose implications (due to the obscurity of the game world) are not always explicit or easy to follow. What is clear, though, is that the player's final decision shapes the fate of the whole universe: Should the fire or the Greater Will be restored, or should the player's actions usher in a different age, with new gods and ideologies?

Advancing the game to this turning point is not straightforward, either. The gameplay of both the *Dark Souls* series and *Elden Ring* is defined by an unusually high difficulty level. Progressing through the games' areas requires careful planning and repeated attempts, because every enemy can be deadly and knock down the player-character in a few hits. Every time the player dies, they are returned to the

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13 "Lore" refers to the backstories of a game world and its characters, as opposed to the narrative that is told by or entangled with the player's actions; see Krzywinska for discussion.

nearest save point, but most of the regular enemies (including those just defeated) are also revived: Effectively, every time the player dies, they must clear an area from scratch. The bosses tend to have large amounts of hit points and can also deal substantial damage, requiring the players to study their attack patterns and chip away at their health pool in extended, nerve-racking encounters. Controversially, FromSoftware games have no difficulty setting, so that players need to put in the time and effort to master the difficulty level intended by the designers. The result is that death is an extremely common event in FromSoftware games, much more so than in comparable action games.

Needless to say, this can prove to be a deeply frustrating experience: YouTube is full of “rage quit” videos with players abandoning a FromSoftware game after failing to beat a boss by just a handful of health points, after countless attempts. In part, the frustration is relieved by the games’ focus on community building, which is realized through a number of sophisticated multiplayer systems. While my focus is on asynchronous multiplayer here, it is important to note that *Dark Souls* games and *Elden Ring* feature synchronous multiplayer as well, in which players can share the game world with other players. Like everything else in FromSoftware games, this synchronous multiplayer does not follow the conventions of most multiplayer games. There is no “match-making” menu where we can easily find co-players here, no way of simply inviting a friend to our game world with one mouse click. Instead, synchronous multiplayer involves using a complicated series of in-game items. For example, in *Elden Ring*, an object called “Small Golden Effigy” is required for cooperative multiplayer, whereas the red equivalent is for player-versus-player (PvP). These items can be used anywhere in-game, but activating an effigy near a statue called “Effigy of the Martyr” will increase the chances of summoning another player. If we want to enlist another player to help us fight against a tough boss, we need to consume another item, called “Furcalling Finger Remedy.” None of these items is available from the start of the game: We need to find them through single-player gameplay.

Given these complicated subsystems, one would expect a clear explanation of which item does what, but this is a game that steers away from any form of hand-holding: Instead, players are left to figure out how the multiplayer mechanics work by themselves—or, more likely, they will need to look up a guide on the Internet.<sup>14</sup> This is the first way in which *Elden Ring* builds a strong connection between in-game experience and a larger community of players: Its gameplay workings and narrative are so murky that the player is essentially required to use Internet resources to make

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14 See also Daniel Vella’s (“No Mastery”) reading of the first *Dark Souls* game (FromSoftware 2011): “[F]or the majority of time she spends engaging with *Dark Souls*, the player will be acutely aware of the limits of her knowledge in the face of elements or behaviours in the game that the cosmos she has established cannot account for.”

the most of the game—and indeed one can find extremely detailed information not just on how multiplayer systems work but also on the location of special items, secret doors or passageways, and so on. Of course, discussion fora and online guides exist for many if not most games; but in the vast majority of these games, a reasonably competent player can get away without using those resources systematically: In *Elden Ring*, by contrast, one is likely to miss a significant number of in-game encounters and experiences without engaging with the community, during gameplay (for instance, through the messaging system discussed below) and on external websites.

Note that the game's inherent difficulty plays a central role in the community. Difficulty here covers every single aspect of the game, from the extreme challenge posed by the boss fights to the intricate narrative universe, where very little is spelled out for the player, and the arcane gameplay mechanics. Virtually all of these dimensions of the game require paying attention to what other players are saying or writing. The result, as I mentioned, is close integration between gameplay and resources that are external to game experience. This integration also leads to a collaborative culture that is unparalleled in other areas of contemporary gaming. In an informal survey I ran on Reddit in September 2022, 42 players were asked: "How would you characterize the Internet community surrounding *Dark Souls* games and *Elden Ring*? Include one or more keywords." Words such as "helpful" or "supportive" were used by twenty of the respondents. Only seven respondents expressed more negative feelings, with some of them complaining about the "elitism" of those who routinely disparage other players' lack of skill.<sup>15</sup> Of course, it is important not to idealize the FromSoftware community, which is afflicted by many of the problems noted in the previous section. But the atmosphere does seem comparatively more supportive than in other games, and that is in no small part due to the complexity of the games' storytelling and ludic mechanics. Moreover, the integration between gameplay and community is deepened by the games' unique asynchronous multiplayer and messaging system, to which I turn in the next two sections, with *Elden Ring* as my main example.

## Bloodstains and Ghosts: Asynchronous Play

*Elden Ring* is unlike most other games in that it does not draw a clear distinction between single-player and multiplayer mode at the level of the interface. Instead, a multiplayer session can only be started within the world of a "solo" playthrough. But the boundary between game modes is also blurred by a number of asynchronous elements, traces or echoes of other players' worlds that are visible, as long as the player is connected to the Internet, even if they are not actively seeking multiplayer

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15 I distributed this survey on the subreddits for the three *Dark Souls* games and *Elden Ring*.

experiences. These asynchronous elements fall into two categories: bloodstains and white ghosts. When I enter a new area and notice a large number of bloodstains on the ground, I know that I am about to face a difficult boss or group of enemies. Interacting with the bloodstains shows me how a fellow player died: The player enters my world as a red ghost, immortalized for just a few seconds at the time of their death. Similar to the community-built infrastructure of *Death Stranding*, the process that governs the appearance of bloodstains is algorithmic and inscrutable, but it can provide me with valuable information on how to survive the next encounter. When I find numerous bloodstains near a drop, for example, I know that the fall cannot be survived, and I look for another spot to climb down. More importantly, though, the bloodstains are a tangible trace of the difficulty of the game, they suggest that my struggle with the game's infuriatingly hard bosses is not an exception—not merely the result of my lack of skill—but rather a shared experience.

In addition to these bloodstains, while I am exploring the sprawling world of *Elden Ring* I come across ghostly shapes that move, jump, and fight much in the same way as I do. I am unable to interact with these ghosts directly; in fact, they vanish after a few seconds. It is unclear whether these ghostly sequences are prerecorded from other players' playthroughs or live snippets from another user's gameplay. But the difference is inconsequential, because no direct interaction is possible: I can see the other player, but they cannot see me. As a player on Reddit puts it, "I honestly love the Ghosts, even if it's not in real-time, it makes such a deadly world feel less depressing knowing there are others adventuring alongside you."<sup>16</sup> Another player on the same subreddit explains the ghosts in terms of overlapping temporalities: "you may have failed and someone else took your place in a different instance in the future, as well as those who did it in the past." Just as the game's backstories are arranged in a multitude of temporal planes, these ghosts—the red ones accessed through bloodstains and the white ones that appear on my screen from time to time—evoke a long history of struggles against the game's difficulty: They involve me in a community that, while not physically present while I play, supports my efforts by showing that many others have tried, failed, and presumably succeeded in the end. Even when I am not engaged in online gameplay, the *Elden Ring* community maintains a ghostly, benign presence in my game world. Also important in this respect is that the appearance of other players' ghosts is randomized: Much like the community-built infrastructure of *Death Stranding* or *Journey*'s companions, the ghosts are controlled by an algorithm that remains, largely, inscrutable to the player. This algorithmic unpredictability makes chance encounters even more meaningful and poignant, because it resonates with the game's mysterious atmosphere.<sup>17</sup>

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16 See u/Jokerchyld for the entire thread.

17 On the topic of algorithmic unpredictability, see Ed Finn's insightful discussion.

## **“Praise the Message”: Constrained Communication**

The messages left by other players on the ground go even further. In *Dark Souls II* (2014), which implemented a similar mechanic, a character asks the avatar early on in the game: “Did you notice any letters on the ground on the way here? These are messages that have jumped the fissures between worlds. [...] If your will to soldier on falters, try leaving a message. Somebody out there is sure to listen.” In *Elden Ring*, too, my game world is strewn with glowing markers on the ground or floor of the locations I visit: When I interact with them, a message pops up on my screen. I can rate these messages as “good” or “poor” depending on their usefulness or emotional value. I can leave a message for other players, too, and my health bar is topped up every time another player likes one of my messages. This is asynchronous communication, since there is always a delay between the creation of a message and its appearance in another player’s world; whether that happens or not depends (like the ghosts discussed in the previous section) on the game’s algorithms. But the messages are also a constrained form of communication, since I cannot type any text but I have to pick from a word list and arrange the terms within a fixed syntax. The templates include “Praise the ...,” “Why is it always ...?,” or “... ahead,” while the word list covers basic actions (attacking, healing, etc.), situations (battle, hiding place, danger, etc.), places (cave, river, etc.), and so on. These constraints ensure full interoperability of the messages across languages, because my text in English will appear in (for example) German or Japanese to those who are playing the German or Japanese version of the game. The constrained nature of the messages limits questionable behavior including hate speech or trash talk directed at other players; but it also poses a creative challenge, in that players are asked to work with the fixed syntax and word list to convey meaning.

Some of these meanings are practical and serve as in-game advice: Just before entering a room, for example, I may come across the message “Group ahead,” which tells me that I have to heal up and prepare for a tough fight. Other messages provide clues for some of the game’s most difficult puzzles, which would otherwise be difficult to solve without using an online guide or walkthrough (unless the player has hours to spend on trials and errors).<sup>18</sup> Thanks to the messages, I do not need to quit the game and consult Internet resources; I can simply follow the advice provided by other players in-game. Due to the constrained nature of the messages, solving the puzzle will still require some guesswork, because the other players cannot tell me what to do in plain language. Thus, the messages are unlike a step-by-step walkthrough in that they do not completely spoil the pleasure of discovery, they just gently nudge the players towards the solution. Effectively, this system builds into the

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18 For an example of how messages can assist with puzzle-solving, see Rebekah Valentine’s discussion of a puzzle that requires players to use the “Erudition” gesture.

game world the community advice one would normally find outside of the game itself, on specialized websites or discussion groups. But it does so in a way that preserves immersion and also does not completely take agency away from the player.

Importantly, the messages are not purely utilitarian. On an emotional level, the messaging system contributes to a focused experience in that it makes certain emotional evaluations or expressions more likely than others. When I emerge from a difficult boss fight at the end of Stormveil Castle, for instance, I find myself on a hill overlooking a new area called “Liurnia of the Lakes.” The view from this clifftop is striking, with rocky outcrops dotting the lakes and the spires of a far-off town shrouded in mist. It would not be far-fetched to see this panorama as a reference to Caspar David Friedrich’s quintessentially Romantic painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*: After all, this game brims with allusions to European art history. While I admire the sublime landscape of Liurnia, I notice a message on the ground which tells me in simple words: “Gorgeous view.” This, of course, does not add anything to my technical understanding of the game, but it does enhance my experience of *Elden Ring* through a sense of sharing this sublime feeling with the community—and that is only possible because “gorgeous” is one of the adjectives made available by the developers. In other instances, the intersubjective sharing enabled by the messaging system relates to the more grueling aspects of the game. A comment on a YouTube video essay on *Dark Souls* games reads as follows: “You know what makes me happy about these games? When I defeat a boss after hours of trying and I read the messages on the floor saying ‘I did it’ or ‘good job’ it makes me feel like I am part of a group that struggled together and made it through.”<sup>19</sup> The messages build community in the absence of direct interaction; the loneliness of “solo” gameplay—the countless hours spent learning the patterns of a single enemy—amplifies the emotional resonance of these words.

Of course, not all messages are meant in earnest: Some are deliberately misleading (“hidden passage here” where there is no hidden passage), some are humorously self-referential (“by the way, praise the message”). After a boss fight in which we confront our own doppelganger (a “mimic tear”), a player reportedly came across the following message: “didn’t expect weak foe, therefore time for introspection.”<sup>20</sup> With some experience of the game, even the most bizarre or misleading of these messages become an in-joke, a quip that creates bridges across worlds and players’ experiences. Through asynchronous gameplay and constrained communication, *Elden Ring* succeeds in building a community that is supportive both practically and emotionally. Perhaps the conclusion of an *IGN* journalist, Rebekah Valentine, is not too idealized, then: “With a community dedicated to earnest, altruistic information exchange, a lack of feedback for misinformation and trolling, and no real direct way

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19 See “How Souls Games Save You.”

20 See the subreddit by u/Fabrimuch for this and a number of other examples.

to bother other players who don't want to be bothered, *Elden Ring* has established an information system that can, by and large, be trusted. What other social network can say that in 2022?" (Valentine). In no small part, that success is due to the game's combination of three factors: the complexity of its multiplayer, which weaves together single-player experience and community building; the unpredictability of the algorithms controlling the players' asynchronous interactions, which makes these interactions more meaningful because there is no simple way of knowing when or where we will encounter the ghost of another player; and the game's unusually high difficulty level, which can only be mastered through intersubjective sharing of both information and emotional resources.

## Conclusion

In today's digital world, the definition of community straddles real-life intersubjectivity and the possibilities offered by Internet-based communication. This article has offered a case study on community building in the context of multiplayer gameplay, focusing on the affordances of two mechanics that defamiliarize the conventions of online gaming: asynchronous multiplayer, which enables interaction across a spatio-temporal gap, and constrained communication. As Smith argues, multiplayer games are afflicted by a version of the "tragedy of the commons" first theorized by ecologist Garrett Hardin: Selfish behavior is the norm unless there are checks and balances in place that make such behavior costly. In online gameplay, players frequently engage in irresponsible or antisocial actions such as cheating or harassing other players—a trend that mirrors the toxicity of hardcore gaming culture. *Elden Ring* and other games (such as *Death Stranding* and *Journey*) implement mechanics that are aimed at reducing this toxicity and creating a supportive gaming environment. This feat becomes even more remarkable if we consider the inherent difficulty and complexity of *Elden Ring* and other FromSoftware games, which do not spoon-feed the player but rather present them with worlds full of mystery and intricate systems. These are literary games that reward patience and attention to detail.<sup>21</sup>

The more complex the game, the more the community is asked to fill in the gaps by explicating basic mechanics, reconstructing the narrative and its implications and elaborating on the rich mythology or "lore" of these universes. FromSoftware games are thus an example of how a literary level of nuance and sophistication can make it into a popular medium, become highly successful, and create a dedicated player base. This success is due to many factors, of course, but important among

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21 In Caracciolo, "Materiality," I capture these features under the rubric of "archaeological" gameplay, with *Elden Ring* as an example.



them are the formal devices that steer players towards certain kinds of interaction: Both the asynchronous multiplayer elements (the ghosts) and the messaging system immerse gamers in an intersubjective world of shared joys and frustrations—a system that tends to discourage irresponsible behavior. It could be argued that From-Software games such as *Elden Ring* provide a “sanitized” experience of collectivity by disrupting direct interaction with other players. However, this reading does not take into account the fact that these games do include a more direct form of multiplayer, in the form of competitive “invasions” or of collaborative, “co-op” gameplay. These interactions contribute to opening up the player’s experiences to less constrained forms of collectivity, but they are still oriented (emotionally and ethically) by the devices I highlighted in this article. Further, the player’s experience is enriched by the close integration between gameplay and participation in the online practices that surround these games: More than in most other games, the community builds itself around the difficulty and depth of in-game experience, leading to a sense of sharing and belonging that transcends direct engagement with the games. The takeaway here, also beyond the world of gaming, is that more responsible forms of online togetherness can be cultivated through innovative formal design: that is, by adopting strategies that reward collective problem solving rather than individual (and potentially selfish or solipsistic) responses.

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