Screening Embodiment:
Let's Play Video and Observable Play Experiences

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for the degree of Masters of Design (Media and Communication)

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

Let’s Play videos are the practice whereby a videogame player records their experience to share with a future audience. They are an emergent form of cultural activity that has been relatively overlooked within the field of game studies. This thesis seeks to ask: how can access to videogame play moments (and performativity) provide insights into the understanding the dynamics of videogame play experience?

This thesis approaches Let’s Play videos as a way in which to expand our understandings of videogame research. To this end, this thesis explores how footage of videogame play experiences-as-experienced offers access to specific play experiences and, in turn, how play can take on various forms of embodiment, gestures, affect and performance. Focusing upon a phenomenological approach to embodiment within the context of the emotional and affective genre of survival-horror, I utilise case studies of the Let’s Play videos created by Markiplier and ChristopherOdd as they play the survival-horror, first-person games Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014) and Outlast (Red Barrels 2013).

The two Let’s Play creators were chosen in part due to the size of their audience followings. Markiplier is indicative of a more mainstream YouTube personality with several million subscribers (over ten million), while ChristopherOdd represents a more subcultural following (under two hundred thousand). However, importantly, in a search for ‘Let’s Play Outlast’ on YouTube, both content creators appeared on the first page of results. Moreover, their videos showcase two different but popular play styles—Markiplier is energetic, excitable, and entertainment-oriented in his videos, whereas ChristopherOdd is focused on presenting the game as the focus of the entertainment, rather than his own commentary. Both channels have their own
following, with an audience that creates fan art, engages with them in social media regularly, and speaks with familiarity in their comment section, and are representational of the results of a search on YouTube for a particular Let’s Play video series.

Unfortunately, at the time of this study (2013/2014), female player representation of both Outlast and Alien: Isolation were difficult to find, and I could not find a channel that had both games featured within the timeframe (this has changed within recent months). As such, the selection process and videogames resulted in two male players. Indeed, the politics of the gender of Let’s Players is a very important topic which undoubtedly informs the types of game play, performativity and their affect. However, within the horror genre, male Let’s Players dominated the genre, which, in turn, reinforces the gendered genre of horror which can be traced in film and TV studies (Clover 1992). These gendered issues will become increasingly prevalent in future studies into Let’s Play. My focus upon horror—as an extreme genre predicated upon eliciting affect from the player—in this thesis is to provide preliminary research into the role embodiment and performativity have in this emergent field of videogame play.

Throughout this thesis I treat each Let’s Play video as a contained narrative videogame play experience, a game-story as told by the author of the narrative, the player. This form of authorship has a unique influence and creates idiosyncratic play-story. This research serves as a preliminary examination into what proves to be an extensive and rich form of cultural expression, how it can assist into gaining further access to videogame play experiences-as-experienced and what that might mean for future videogame play analysis.
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Introduction:

Let’s Play Videos and the Videogame Play

Experiences-as-experienced

I sit down at my computer and type ‘ChristopherOdd Outlast’ in the YouTube search bar. The videos I want are in a playlist at the top of the results—a chronological arrangement of the YouTube content creator ChristopherOdd as he plays the videogame Outlast (Red Barrels 2013). I scroll through the selection to the final video, number twelve in the list. The word ‘END’ in the title lets me know it is to be the final one of his play sequence. Outlast is a survival-horror game and I have difficulty playing them sometimes, due to bouts of both cowardice and a busy schedule. A Let’s Play video allows the experience of playing the game with another. Not the same as watching a video—I empathise with the player, with every jolt and start. I am able to experience the game without the pressure of being in control, needing to be the one to hit ‘w’ on the keyboard. ChristopherOdd takes me with him. Even though I am not the one playing the game, I accompany him in his play experience. He plays the game for me.
A Let’s Play video is a recording of a player’s videogame play experience for the purpose of audience presentation. It is differentiated from showcasing or sharing important or entertaining videogame play moments in that it contains the entire play experience of a videogame, usually spanning over multiple videos. At any time, YouTube can host several hundred thousand videos for the more popular videogames. Even games considered long out of circulation can potentially be found hosted on YouTube. Currently, the most subscribed YouTube channel belonging to a single person is that of PewDiePie—with over 40 million subscribers (see Figure 1.2)—whose main genre of video are that of Let’s Play.
Each Let’s Play video allows access into how a player engages with a videogame. However, this engagement also incorporates a performative engagement with the webcam and the types of affect created when one knows one is being filmed. The audience engagement techniques are also typically accompanied by a player’s commentary, which can be informative, comedic or critical; whatever might reflect the game thematic, appeal, and/or game habits of the player/creator\(^2\). As mentioned, Let’s Play videos can also feature recorded webcam footage of themselves as they play—known as ‘facecam’ (see Figure 1.3). At any point a potential viewer can watch, re-watch, pause, skip ahead, or return to a previous point in a video as long as it is publicly available. This asynchronicity and availability presents the videogame play experience in a manner upon which scholarly discourse can capitalise. Rendering videogame play experiences accessible on such a large scale is especially relevant for research involving player-game relations and videogame play experiences-as-experienced, which this thesis will begin to explore.

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1 This is at the time of writing, in October 2015
2 It is worth noting that there are ‘silent’ Let’s Plays—the ‘silent’ denoting no commentary.
This thesis draws upon theoretical approaches of embodiment and phenomenology, and their role within Let’s Play videos is turn informed by theories of affect and performativity. Within this thesis, the use of performativity is in relation to the presentation of the ‘self’ of the video creator, not as a discussion of any constructed character or fictional performance. Here the notion of performance draws on the work of Richard Schechner (2002) in terms of performance studies. Performance studies brings together anthropological (Clifford Geertz 2005) along with sociological (Erving Goffman 1959) to think through the complex ways in which performance can manifest within everyday life. Performativity here is also a reworking of Judith Butler’s.
notion in which she talked about gender as constructed through a series of regulatory actions (1999, 2004). In the case of game play in Let’s Play, we see a meeting of performativity and performance that in turn foster types of embodiment and affect between the audience and players.

Shinkle (2005) conceptualised a manner in which ‘affect’ can be applied to videogame research that engages with the intertwined and interconnected inputs and outputs that ‘make a game come alive’ (3). Specifically, Shinkle embeds theories of affect with theories of embodiment, defining affect as ‘a full-body, multisensory perception of the game environment’ (ibid) which is an ‘embodied event’ (2 emphasis in original). Specifically, theories of affect apply in fear situations—such as survival-horror games—through the associations made by a player, and between the player and the game. Affect, according to Shinkle, involves intertwining loops of emotional and physical responses—diegetic and extradiegetic (ibid)—which cannot be ‘teased apart in practice’. Shinkle concludes with the statement that ‘affect extends arguments that frames our experience of this world as a form of ideological manipulation of alienation, and suggests ways that we might conceptualize such experience in terms of agency and engagement, of the embodied exchanges that go on between systems of representation and the subjects that use them’ (6).

This is in line with Seigworth and Gregg (2010), in that affect ‘arises in the midst of in-between-ness’ (1, emphasis in original). Affect is both the forces that act upon, as well as the passage and direction of those forces. Importantly, ‘affect’ is largely related to the mind and body of a human element—meaning construction and attribution, for example. Affect, in itself, is a complex interconnected weave of influences, influence-outcomes, and influenced, the definition of which benefits the subject matter at the time. As such, no definition of ‘affect’
provided by this thesis could possibly encompass the entirety of what ‘affect’ is. Rather, it is a definition of affect that benefits the subject matter of this thesis—embodiment within videogame play processes.

Following Shinkle, I focus on embodied expressions and processes within the aforementioned videogames in order to explore videogame play experience-as-experienced. This approach also draws from the works of Bayliss’ (2010), Richardson (2005, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2011), Leino (2009), Klevjer (2012), and Farrow and Iacovides (2012), who embed embodiment not only as vital to understanding videogame play experiences but also inseparable from those experiences. Survival-horror videogames in particular have generated a great deal of discussion on embodiment and its various incarnations within play processes.

‘Embodiment’, as understood within this thesis, is not a term that benefits from a singular definition, but is a process informed by an interconnected network of inputs and outputs. Any attempt to define it benefits only the immediate use of the term at the time. For this thesis, embodiment involves an engagement with both what the physical body of the player is doing in the moment of play, as well as the visual representation—or ‘prosthetic’ (Klevjer 2012)—of the player within the game, the avatar. This approach is benefitted greatly by the perspective offered by Let’s Play videos, which represent the actual in-game play experiences of a player. Let’s Play videos incorporate the ‘self’ of the player within the game-state as well as the physical form before the camera. Embodiment, and to be embodied, is also influenced by the videogame itself, and in turn embodied processes influences the play experience. In an environment where meaning-construction and outcomes are largely psychophysical, embodiment intertwines with the bodily and perceptual philosophy of affect.
Within this thesis I operationalise a notion I define as ‘affective embodiment’—that is, a transferring of textures of feelings and emotions between the viewer and player embodiment. Here the thesis is drawing on definitions of affect by Melissa Gregg (2010), Brian Massumi (2002) and Sara Ahmed (2010). These definitions place meaning-construction in the domain of outcome-related values—the orientation around happy objects, the evaluation of emotion, and the fictional, on-screen representation of real-world, self-perpetuating negativity respectively. I use these definitions to analyse and understand the on-screen representations of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s actions—how they orient themselves around objects in game, my evaluation of their expressed emotions, and how they represent real-world situations with their on-screen actions.

Perhaps most importantly, ‘embodiment’ is approached from the perspective of phenomenological philosophies. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s influential work (2002), phenomenology inevitably embeds an embodied person in the driver’s seat of their own perceptual existence. Following in line with Leino’s (2009) work that uses theories of phenomenology to inevitably embed a player—be they researcher or no—in the first-person perspective of their own play experience. Importantly, as will be discussed, this phenomenological ‘first-person-perspective’ mirrors the framing of the game through the window afforded by the Let’s Play video, which presents the game to the audience in the way the game is presented to the player.

To emphasise the role of embodiment, performativity and affect in Let’s Play videos, this thesis focuses on two single-player, first-person, survival-horror themed videogames—Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014) and Outlast (Red Barrels 2013)—as comparative experiences. ‘Single-player’ is defined as a videogame that prohibits the accompaniment of
another player within the videogame’s fictional environment—a form of videogame that may present difficulties of accessibility to researchers. Another person might be physically present within the player’s physical environment but not digitally within the game. As such, single-player videogames necessitate methodologies that allow researchers to navigate this issue of access.

Some researchers relocate players from the home into environments they can observe (Klimmt et al. 2010; Vachiratamporn et al. 2015); some theorists place themselves in the home environment (Thornham 2011). There have also been works on the authenticity of auto-reflective and autoethnographic analysis on videogame play experiences, positioning the researcher as the primary player (Leino 2012). Other researchers hypothesise an ideal play experience in order to discuss more design-oriented and abstract theories (Ekman and Lankoski 2009; Frome 2008; Habel and Kooymen 2013; Perron 2009; Rouse 2009). All of these approaches—including the resulting data—have yielded invaluable insights into the organic and evolving cultural activity of playing videogames. However, in an analysis seeking to focus on idiosyncratic play—that is, the videogame play experience-as-experienced or to gain further insight into specific player-game relations—Let’s Play videos offer access on a massive scale. It is this access and plethora of performative types that this thesis seeks to explore through the horror genre.

Within this thesis I explore the comparative videogame play experiences of two YouTube content creators, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd3. Markiplier serves as an example of a Let’s Play creator with several millions of subscribers (ten million as of the beginning of 2016) and is thus viewed as an amateur expert. He has a distinct ‘persona’ on YouTube as being loud,

3 In lieu of privacy considerations, this thesis will use only their publicly available YouTube usernames.
exaggerated, energetic, and easily excited. His play style is greatly oriented around keeping his audience entertained. ChristopherOdd represents the smaller and perhaps more select Let’s Play creators. With under two hundred thousand subscribers, ChristopherOdd’s videos place an emphasis on the game themselves, rather than his own entertainment value for the audience.

These two types of Let’s Play curators demonstrate two diverse types of performativity in how the game play, audience, and screen are negotiated. At the time of beginning this thesis, female content creators were minimal and there were no creators around horror genre games such as Outlast and Alien: Isolation. Indeed, there were little to no female Let’s Play creators that featured either of the games within the months of their release. As a representation of what can be found on YouTube, I confined the methodology to two popular survival-horror games—one large-budget release and one small-scale independent release.

Although I selected Markiplier and ChristopherOdd from the first page of the YouTube search results, there remained a level of deliberateness in their choice. In order to streamline the considerations and comparisons within this thesis, I deliberately chose two males from similar global regions, of similar age. I also deliberately chose two channels that present different ‘themes’ of play (entertainment- and game-focused respectively). These choices allowed me to narrow the potential sample pool of games to ones that both content creators had played, with a specific focus on single-player games, in which no one else was present at the time of filming.

The use of single-player games also serves to eliminate elements of sociality in play that, as Bayliss notes in his selection of single-player games, ‘opens up the experience of videogame

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4 Although that has changed within recent months, with a surge of videos created 12-18 months after the release of both games by female Let’s Play creators.
5 There are videos featured on Markiplier’s channel in which he is accompanied by other players. Indeed, cooperative game play has its own category of showcased play experiences on YouTube.
play to the interpersonal’ (Bayliss 2010: 24). Multi-player games complicate ‘the task of the researcher who wishes to study the experience to videogame play as it is experienced… by introducing another level of complexity into that experience which is not directly pursuant to the invariable structures of the videogame being studied’ (ibid). The selection of single-player games thereby assists in the methodology and the demonstration of the access afforded by Let’s Play videos.

Single-player first-person perspective games often lend themselves to phenomenological approaches to understanding experience and its relationship to embodiment. Leino (2009) outlines that all play experiences—regardless of the orientation or nature of the player—are inherently tied to a ‘first person’ perspective within in our own perceptual experience—we are only ever looking through our own eyes. I also explore videogames that do not feature in larger research to avoid reiterating already established conclusions, therefore demonstrating the contributory nature of Let’s Play videos to videogame discourse and analysis. The most expedient manner to achieve this would be to study recently released videogames, between the years 2012-2014.

Survival-horror games emphasise the emotionally manipulative potential of the videogame medium through a focus on eliciting sensations of unease, suspense, surprise, and fear within a player. This is done through the use of design, obstacles, environmental construction, soundscape and visual elements. Importantly for this thesis, most survival-horror themed games are single-player. Through manipulating fear-responses, survival-horror games also assist in visual and audio analysis of videogame footage as they have the potential to render many player reactions obvious to an audience. As such, the affective embodied state of a player
allows a researcher to more easily discern the many elements that go into embodying and being embodied with and within a videogame.

The methods I deploy merge visual, discourse, and textual analysis, as each play experience and each video of that play experience is treated as an encapsulated narrative, with a beginning and an end. This has an influence on how I position the player within the video, and I posit that the player, in becoming the director of their own videoed experience, also becomes the reflexive-narrator, or the author, of their own play-story. The latter half of this thesis features two discussion chapters in which I focus on the visual analytical potential and the verbalised, narrative assistance afforded by a player reflexively. In order to best describe the unfolding events, Chapter Three and Chapter Four, which focus on *Alien: Isolation* and *Outlast* respectively, feature a great deal of descriptive language. I will now discuss the chapter structure of the thesis.

**Chapter summary**

In order to understand the guiding research question of how Let’s Play perform particular types of affective embodiment, this MA thesis has been structured into various chapters. The first chapter outlines the emergent field of Let’s Play as the intersection between cinema, media and game studies. In order to address Let’s Plays as an emergent form of cultural activity, I discuss briefly their history on the internet prior to YouTube. Their current format of video recordings distributed electronically over the internet parallels the success of Web 2.0 in a participatory cultural turn. I then argue that Let’s Play as a medium overlays embodiment, affect and performativity in novel ways, creating a visible play experience that is unique to each video, and each creator. In order to focus the potential theoretical approaches of the thesis, I spend the latter
half of Chapter One discussing embodiment as an element that is inseparable to videogame play experiences. If this inseparability were true, then it would appear in its various incarnations and interpretations within Let’s Play videos. Therefore, through theories of embodiment, including the phenomenological expanse of our somatic state of beings-in-the-world, the framing of videogames and our orientation towards screen, and bodily representation through avatar interactions, I will use Let’s Play videos to explore videogame play experience, specifically as experienced.

Specifically, I utilise Bayliss thesis (2010) that centralises the inseparability of embodiment within videogame play, and emphasises the importance of looking at videogame play experiences-as-experienced. This is also informed by Leino’s work on ‘first person perspective’ in videogame research (2009), which draws on theories of phenomenological experiences. Richardson’s various works on embodiment in the context of mobile gaming (2005, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) also builds on phenomenological incorporation of the electronic into our ‘technosoma’. This relation to the screen is important for my approach to Let’s Play videos because it also serves to explain the manner in which an audience or researcher is oriented toward the same screen as the player, assisting the methodology of this thesis.

Chapter Two outlines this methodology. Within it I detail the selection process of the channels and players for this project. Markiplier and ChristopherOdd serve as the focus for the player perspective. By emphasising the merits of examining the videogame play experience-as-experienced, I can explore the potential insights of looking at a particular videogame play moment, rather than hypothesising an ideal or potential play experience through design-oriented elements. The videogames of focus, Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014) and Outlast (Red Barrels 2013), fall into the category of survival-horror, necessitating, in brief, a discussion of the
genre. Specifically, I discuss the manner in which the highly emotive fear-state renders the reactions of the player visible and audible (such as jolting, screaming, and fight-or-flight reactions within the game). Finally, within Chapter Two, I discuss how Let’s Play videos might be treated as encapsulating narrative progression. I posit that Let’s Play videos allow us to navigate certain issues surrounding the conceptualisation of a videogame play experience as a ‘narrative’, by transforming the play experience to the ‘transpired’, and make it an enclosed narrative process.

Within Chapter Three I use Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014) as a means of demonstrating observable play experiences as presented to an audience. I compare Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s experiences in order to ascertain the idiosyncratic ways in which players can engage with the same environment, and are able to express individuality within a game through the use of programmed variables. The game Alien: Isolation allows players a degree of flexibility, with alternate avenues of entrance into some areas and different means of progressing through and around obstacles. Players are also afforded a selection of tools and objects to utilise in order to navigate around the unkillable primary antagonist, the xenomorph.

How players encounter, engage with, evaluate, and utilise these variables informs their embodied process and videogame play experience. All of which is visible within a Let’s Play video and will be compared in experiences between Markiplier and ChristopherOdd. Importantly for this thesis, in embodying their fear-oriented responses, assessments, and reactions to the survival-horror scenario presented by Alien: Isolation, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd present different contexts to their gameplay experiences. To consider one the be-all-and-end-all of what

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6 In the franchise started by Ridley Scott’s Alien (1979), the xenomorph is the name of the primary antagonist, colloquially known among the fanbase as the ‘alien’ or ‘the Creature’.
can happen within a game directly ignores the differences in the other. It is through watching both, watching the gameplay experience-as-experienced, that we can appreciate the potentials that might arise through divergent play.

Chapter Four serves as a contrast to the observational focus of Chapter Three, in which I utilise the way in which Markiplier and ChristopherOdd narrate their play experience of *Outlast*. I posit that this narrative be called narrative-reflexivity. Narrative-reflexivity is the manner in which a Let’s Play creator narrates their experiences for the benefit of the audience. In this, Let’s Play videos are distinct from standardised play in a player’s deliberate verbalisation of their thought processes, decision-making, questioning and other expressions of embodied processes as conveyed within the game. All of these inform an understanding of how a player interprets their own play experience, and the depth to which that interpretation might go.

Comparing videogames with linear narratives—in which players must complete set tasks in order to progress—allows for a side-by-side comparison of how two players approach the same task. Both games featured within this thesis feature such linear progression in various degrees. In *Alien: Isolation*, players are encouraged to explore their options of progression, which I explore in Chapter Three, whereas *Outlast* features a far more inflexible form of forward movement for players. Regardless, for both Markiplier and ChristopherOdd, even the most minute differences inform a player’s own individual experience. What might be considered trivial, or inconsequential, to a structuralist approach or abstract theoretical understanding of game play processes is now integral to understanding a player’s videogame play experience. Within Chapter Four I suggest a way to examine and understand a play experience at the actual moment of experience is to view it as a holistic, encapsulated narrative unique to the player, to the moment of play, and to the game that is being played. A player’s game-story.
Following these chapters, the final section serves as a conclusion chapter. I briefly discuss and recap the previous chapters, summarising my discussions and related findings. I then pay specific attention to methodological considerations that this thesis could not address, and which might find a place in future research. I reiterate the positioning of this thesis around embodiment as a form of focus in Let’s Play videos, not as defining the theory itself. That is, Let’s Play videos serve as a cultural expression of videogame play that overlap elements of affect, embodiment, and performance in new and innovative ways. Though Let’s Play videos are culturally significant, offering a wealth of new avenues for videogame player culture and participatory cultural analysis, as the thesis conclusion will state, these explorations are best left to works that can properly explore them with the attention they deserve. Instead, this thesis is focused around emphasising the contributions Let’s Play videos can make to videogame play experience and its analysis to contemporary game studies.
Chapter One:

Let’s Play, Embodiment, and Literature

Introduction

This chapter serves as a literary introduction to my project, positioning the topic and analysis within wider videogame theory. Firstly, I discuss the history of Let’s Play videos, their emergence, and their current popularity within videogame culture. Due to the lack of any sort of analysis on Let’s Play videos, much of the scholarly discussions necessarily stems from discourse on Web 2.0, convergence culture, and YouTube itself. Specifically, I address how Let’s Play videos have the potential to form a readily available methodological assistance to videogame analysis. This applies to what can be observed in player actions within the recorded footage and also what the players contribute themselves through narration, as will feature later in this thesis.

The second half of this chapter serves as a literary examination of the theories and utilisation of embodiment that will feature within this thesis, specifically in terms of phenomenological experience. Embodiment, as adopted by this thesis, forms a complex interrelation of numerous phenomenological and sensory inputs. Similar to the manner in which the phenomenological self is informed by numerous perceptual, cognitive, and unconscious associations and processes. As such, embodiment as an affective, associative state—and integrated into videogame play experiences—necessitate an understanding of the phenomenology of perceptual experience. Phenomenology has the added emphasis of
understanding each videogame play experience as inherently idiosyncratic, and valuable to the analysis of what it means to play that videogame.

**Positioning the Research**

In order to know, and not assume through an understanding of structuralist or design-oriented elements of a game, theorists must, in some capacity, see the events of a videogame transpire. In order to explain the importance of the camera in relation to the spirits of *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001) and the monstrous creatures of *Silent Hill 2* (Konami 2003) Ekman and Lankoski (2009) must have encountered some form of the events themselves. To understand how narrative events occur within *Fight Night Round 2* (Electronic Arts 2005), Frome (2008) must have somehow discovered that the videogame’s narrative is a series of boxing bouts. For Perron to know that the protagonist of *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2005) got his head chopped off by a ‘chainsaw maniac, masked with a potato sack’ (Perron 2009: 121) should the player be caught in a situation of fatal failure, Perron must have seen it happen. I stress here *seen* and not necessarily *played*, for though a researcher can—and often does—play the game in question, there remains the potential for them to instead observe the play experience of others\(^7\) (see Figure 2.1).

Since writing his foundational book that defined the videogame genre as a ludic activity (Aarseth 1997), Aarseth has penned numerous works that discuss the potential methodologies of videogame analysis (2003, 2004a, 2007, 2012). Throughout, Aarseth frames a dichotomy of approaches—the ‘critical player theorist’ (2007: 131) that focuses on the game as the artefact of analysis and the ‘ethnographic player-observer’ (ibid), which focuses on players and their interaction with videogames (and the larger social world). Specifically, Aarseth differentiates

\(^7\) In relation to a researcher not implicitly stating the source of their videogame knowledge.
them as ‘those who study players’ and ‘those who study games’ (Leino 2009: 2). However, according to Aarseth often neither to the ethnographic player-observation nor the critical game theorist is ‘lived gameplay carried out by the researcher is not material in itself’ (Leino 2009: 4). Rather, it is a fulfilment of an obligatory necessity. The ‘theorist has to play because that’s the only way to see what the game is like and the ethnographer has to play in order to understand what the other players are talking about’ (ibid).

*Figure 2.1 A YouTube search of Leon's decapitation yields several videos that showcase it, including this one.*
In this conceptualisation, Leino touches on what Boellstorff et al. refer to as the ‘cornerstone of ethnography’ (2013: 55): participant observation. Participant observation becomes inevitable in many game experiences due to the fact that “‘spectator’ is not an option programmed into the game’ (66). The researcher must participate in the game to know it. However, while the player (or researcher) is ‘fundamentally involved in the object of study’ (ibid)—through the act of the game being played, there must be a player—there is a lack of literature dedicated to ‘game content as experienced by the game player’ (Leino 2012: 4). This is a notion that Bayliss (2010) expands upon in his thesis when he explores the potential knowledge that might emerge through this focus, which in itself might go beyond the programmable constraints, expectations, or even capacity of the designers of a videogame.

In recent years there has been an increase in pushing toward investigating videogame play experience-as-experienced (Farrow and Iacovides 2012; Klevjer 2012; Klimmt et al. 2010; Larssen, Robertson and Edwards 2007; Shinkle 2005; Vachiratamporn et al. 2015). Engaging with embodiment as a means of explaining the manner in which our somatic self is already capable of incorporating apparatus, these theories of videogames follow the philosophies of phenomenology. This gives rise to a ‘first person’ (Leino 2009) approach of analysis, which places the player—researcher or no—as inevitably experiencing the videogame as a part of their engagement with the wider world, and through their own eyes. Leino draws on Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualisation of the *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002) in emphasising that player experiences are invariably ‘first person’. According to Leino, accepting the moment of experience, rather than trying to create distance between experience and the researcher’s impartial analysis, can enrich analysis of videogame play experiences.
This is not to say that ethnographic analysis or participant observation are in any way diminished or limited approaches. Boellstorff et al. (2013) dedicate a large portion of their book discussing how effective ethnography makes critical self-awareness and self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher mandatory. In these works, however, the player subject is abstract, the happenings are a description of game mechanics, rather than any sort of deconstruction of actual videogame play experiences. After all, if a player never fails to fight off the chainsaw-wielding maniac in Resident Evil 4 (Capcom 2005), how are they to know that the result is fatal decapitation? Is an experience in which the player never encounters such a fate any less valid than the one Perron (2009) describes? Furthermore, what might we have learned from a player who never dies within the game (and conversely, what would be learned if we relied only on that play experience and not ones in which death occurred)? It is here that I propose the use of the cultural activity of ‘Let’s Play’ to bridge the gap between structuralist and abstract understandings, and real, lived videogame play experiences in order to create richer and deeper discussions of videogame play experiences.

It is the idea of ‘through their own eyes’, mentioned previously, that the emergent videogame cultural activities of Let’s Play videos embrace. A player records their screen, what they see, and presents it to the audience in a video. The audience, therefore, sees through the player’s eyes, at least in terms of where the screen is related. This face-to-screen relevance will be addressed later. For now, I wish to explore the messy history of Let’s Play videos as a cultural activity.
Let’s Play—a cultural shift in gaming

YouTube has become an inseparable part of videogame culture. It hosts any number of trailers, news, reviews both professional and amateur, machinima (machine cinema) and, with increasing popularity in recent years, millions of Let’s Play videos. Let’s Play is an entertainment industry built on watching someone else play a videogame. Popularly, and perhaps simplistically, a Let’s Play video is a recording of a videogame play experience from start to end, for the intent to have someone else watch it. As they are popularly formatted nowadays, Let’s Play videos can vary in content and length but almost all feature ‘two common characteristics: gameplay footage and some form of simultaneous commentary by the Let’s Play producer’ (Mejia 2013: 2). Let’s Play is a hobby-come-professional activity, which has grown into a multi-million-dollar industry for those that manage to make it, and has expanded videogame play experiences beyond playing the game.

Let’s Play, as a titled concept, predates YouTube. It is only through a shift in available media technologies made available to the consumer and amateur creator public that they have taken on their current popular format. The exact chronology of ‘Let’s Play’ in its contemporary format, or the origin of the concept itself, is difficult to plot. As a shared videogame experience, the term ‘Let’s Play’ is largely agreed to have emerged on the SomethingAwful forums, but after that exactness of the emergence of the phenomena falls into speculation. In this format, Let’s Play videos had limited exposure, as the SomethingAwful website required a paid

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8 As mentioned, there are examples of silent Let’s Plays where the video contains no player commentary.
9 It is worth noting that controversy exists amongst the internet community as to whether or not it did indeed emerge there, and heated discussion has circulated through forums as to the ‘origin’ of ‘Let’s Play’.
10 ‘SomethingAwful’ is a comedy-oriented website that hosts a variety of web-based communication, such as forums, blog posts, articles, and edited media images. The website is geared around the concept that ‘the internet makes you stupid’, as is their moniker. Generally, users of the website, who must pay to use it, share satirical or sarcastic commentary on things they find ridiculous, or ‘awful’.
membership. The website ‘lparchive.org’ emerged circa 2008, collecting the Let’s Play threads in an easily accessible location, one that was free to non-members of the forum. According to a creator named ‘balduk’ on the ‘about page’:

A long, long time ago, back in 2006, a little trend started slinking around the Games subforum of [the] Something Awful forums: people were posting up screenshots of themselves playing various old fondly-remembered videogames (such as Oregon Trail and Pokemon[sp]) and including their own humorous commentary. (http://lparchive.org/history)

In regards to the ‘origin’ of Let’s Play as a term, a definitive answer is largely speculative. A Kotaku article written by Patrick Klepek (2015a) discusses a deleted thread created by a forum poster named ‘slowbeef’ in which slowbeef shares a video of his play experience of the game The Immortal (Electronic Arts 1990). ‘slowbeef’ himself wrote a blog post titled ‘Did I Start Let’s Play’ (slowbeef 2013), where he implicitly states that he did not invent the term ‘Let’s Play’. Instead, he attributes credit to a thread titled ‘Let’s Play Oregon Trail’ which specifically invites readers to join the player in a game of Oregon Trail (Gameloft 1971). Readers and posters in the thread could help the player decide what to do next in a co-operative, choose-your-own-adventure style social game. Indeed, Sawyer hits on the fact that the idea of a ‘Let’s Play’ video is something of a misnomer, ‘nowadays, it’s really “watch me play”’ (slowbeef 2013: n.p).

Figure 2.2 The results of ‘Let’s Play Outlast’ search in YouTube – 458,000

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The use of *Origin Trails* and *The Immortal* reflects to nostalgia for the original format of Let’s Plays, which largely consisted of games that were dated and obsolete. This allowed creators of ‘Let’s Play’ to share with others as they revisited past memories and moments in those games\(^{11}\). With the emergence of YouTube as an unexpectedly successful and freely accessible source of video hosting (Burgess and Green 2009), Let’s Play found themselves not only changing format (from written annotations and pictures to videos), but also widely accessible to the general public. YouTube’s origins and popularity is largely owed to its integrated user interface ‘within which users could upload, publish, and view streaming videos without high levels of technical knowledge’ (Burgess and Green 2009: 1). This caused YouTube to align with ‘a user-led revolution’ (Burgess and Green 2009: 4) which parallels participatory sites such as Wikipedia, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter which were ‘based on Web 2.0 principals’ (Flew 2014: 14) and the ‘participatory turn’ (Uricchio 2010: 24)\(^{12}\) of popular media. Let’s Play videos grew to a popularity that paralleled the success YouTube found in contemporary media and participatory culture—Let’s Play videos epitomised a shift of cultural capital from the creator to the consumer.

**Let’s Play Videos, YouTube, and Web 2.0**

According to Flew, the term ‘Web 2.0’ is specifically used to identify:

> developments in internet software and platforms that enabled Web applications to move from being static and based around a push of content from producers to users with limited interactivity to a scenario

\(^{11}\) Perhaps satirically, the SomethingAwful might also share experiences of ‘awful’ games that users intend to ridicule.

\(^{12}\) It is worth noting that despite its parallels through hosting user created content, YouTube ‘fails the “2.0 test”’ (Uricchio 2010 p. 25) due to the fact that it did not allow for users to download content for their use at any time.
where the engagement, participation and collaboration among users themselves generates the content (Flew 2010: 34).

The distinction between creator and consumer is no longer easily discerned (Burgess and Green 2009; Hjorth 2011). The emergence of Web 2.0 as a concept revolved around a ‘series of changes in the new media environment’ (Flew 2014: 13) that emphasised ‘user created content’ (UCC) (34). The proliferation and access to the internet among the general public allowed for a rise in participatory culture where the average consumer had the chance to create their own media content and, importantly, disseminate it to the public without going through a producer (Burgess and Green 2009; Flew 2014; Jenkins 2006).

This ‘alignment and overlap of digital information and services’ (Brookey 2014: 285) created a what is known as ‘media convergence’ (Flew 2014: 79), which demonstrates how contemporary media cultures are ‘learning how to use different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers’ (Jenkins 2006: 18). Specifically, Jenkins defines convergence as a state ‘in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them’ (282). Convergence is not a static thing that can be encompassed and defined within a singular understanding, but is rather an ‘ongoing process or series of intersections between different media systems, not a fixed relationship’ (ibid). This blurring of consumer and creator has yielded numerous discussions on the socio-political power relation of traditional media and information control and the general public, and concepts of co-creation and shared intellectual property ownership. It is in this sphere of co-creation and user created content that Let’s Play videos fall.

Let’s Play videos—and videogame-oriented videos—have had a visible impact on YouTube. Since 2009, when Burgess and Green published their analysis of YouTube, their list of
most subscribed channels has changed drastically. According to VidStatsX, a website dedicated to YouTube Statistics, the top three most subscribed channels are tags, rather than channels (one of which is #gaming)\(^{13}\) (see Figure 1.2). ‘Tag following’ shows every video on YouTube tagged with that word, irrespective of the channel that posted it. However, the first singular channel listed by VidStatsX, ranked fourth, is that of PewDiePie, a Swedish YouTuber whose channel is based around—and emerged through—Let’s Play videos as well as vlogging himself in his growing fame. As of June of 2014 PewDiePie reached almost 30 million subscribers, with a yearly income of almost $4 million a year (Grundberg and Hansegard 2014). Just over a year later, PewDiePie, as of October 2015, has over 40 million subscribers. This makes a Let’s Play-oriented channel the currently most subscribed channel on YouTube.

This hugely popular channel—as well as the #gaming tag which is ranked second on the most subscribed list after #music (see Figure 1.2)—is indicative of the shift in popularity of not just videogames, but the act of watching another playing a videogame. According to YouTube’s blog, YouTube is the most watched platform for gamers, with ‘144 billion minutes of gaming videos and live streams’ (McDonald 2015) watched every month. This has resulted in the launch of YouTube Gaming (Joyce 2015; Petterson 2015), a sub-site of YouTube dedicated specifically to the watchers and creators of videogame videos. It is also a response to the website Twitch—a dedicated website to hosting livestreams of videogames being played—and any videos that streamers make available after the event. Within YouTube Gaming, tags such as #music and

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#news won’t exist, nor will non-game-oriented channels. Instead ‘typing “call” will show you “Call of Duty” and not “Call Me Maybe”’ (Joyce 2015) (see Figure 2.3).

Despite this massive popularity in contemporary gaming and popular culture, there are almost no discussions of the intersections between YouTube and videogames, with a rare exception being machinima. The term ‘machinima’ is derived from a ‘combination of “machine” and “cinema”’ (Nitsche 2008: 199) and described as ‘short films made from content within games’ (Flew 2014: 100). These videos may feature players ‘performing within the given game setting and demonstrating their skills in playing’ (Nitsche 2008: 392) but are more often turned toward creating original content. They do not have to ‘stick to the framework provided by the game’ (ibid) but rather can create their own narrative universes, which can even contradict the original narrative from which they were drawn (such as Red vs. Blue, Rooster Teeth 2003). In an actualisation of Consalvo’s criticism of the ‘magic circle’ (Consalvo 2009a, 2009b), machinima videos demonstrate ways in which players interact with games beyond the desires, constraints, or even expectations of the videogame creators

14. They are also demonstrations of how YouTube, which serves as a primary distribution site for machinima, has contributed to the expansion of game play activities. Still, these are explorations of player creativity at ‘remixing’ (Plothe 2013) existing videogame media and are not actually Let’s Play videos.

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14 It is worth noting that Bungee, the developers of Halo, worked with the creators of the machinima series Red vs. Blue (Rooster Teeth 2003) to assist in the creation of their videos, but machinima still falls outside the immediate ‘play’ experience'.
YouTube Gaming is built to be all about your favorite games and gamers, with more videos than anywhere else. From "Asteroids" to "Zelda," more than 25,000 games will each have their own page, a single place for all the best videos and live streams about that title. You’ll also find channels from a wide array of game publishers and YouTube creators.

Keeping up with these games and channels is now super easy, too. Add a game to your collection for quick access whenever you want to check up on the latest videos. Subscribe to a channel, and you’ll get a notification as soon as they start a live stream. Uncover new favorites with recommendations based on the games and channels you love. And when you want something specific, you can search with confidence, knowing that typing “call” will show you “Call of Duty” and not “Call Me Maybe.”

Figure 2.3 A screen capture taken from the YouTube blog announcing YouTube Gaming.

Perhaps predictably, the relationship between Let’s Play creators and the videogame copyright holders they feature has not always been an amicable one. When YouTube instigated its copyright claims services in 2013 (Good 2013b), a large portion of channels featured through
Multi Channel Networks (MCN) with videos with content that matched copyright ID (such as music, TV and videogames) found their content flagged with copyright claims and the video disabled—even without the original copyright holders making the claim. While Nintendo capitalised upon this\textsuperscript{15}, other companies were adamant in protecting the rights of their community\textsuperscript{16}. Blizzard reached out to its Starcraft II (Blizzard 2010) players in order to assist in retrieving any lost videos (see Figure 2.4). They have since created procedures for the creation of videos featuring their content, with the most restricting limitation being that the audience should not be charged a fee to watch (Blizzard 2015). Similarly, Ubisoft implicitly stated they were working to fix the claims and restore the videos that were otherwise prohibited from being shown on YouTube (Steinman 2013).

![Figure 2.4 A screen capture taken from the official Blizzard StarCraft twitter account voicing their support of YouTube content creators who have found themselves losing their videos due to YouTube copyright systems.](image)

These examples of embracing consumer production and creativity reflect an overall acceptance—and even promotion—of creation and co-creation between producers and consumers that has existed within videogame culture. The game Neverwinter Nights (Bioware

\textsuperscript{15} To mixed success (Good 2013a; Klepek 2016; Totilo 2013a, 2013b)

\textsuperscript{16} Nintendo continues to come into conflict with producers, with the most recent controversy surrounding Super Mario Maker (Nintendo 2015).
(2002) came with an in-game creation mechanic that allowed players to explore and create their own stories, and creator company Bioware has often used this mechanic as a form of employment application. Blizzard has also worked closely with its player base in order to extend the life (and thus financial gain) of its videogame *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) (Glas 2013).

Co-creation, as both concept and practice, is an extension of the participatory culture (Jenkins 2005; Taylor 2002a) in which both videogames and YouTube are deeply entrenched (Burgess and Green 2009; Flew 2014). On YouTube (and largely the internet), the lines between producer and consumer were blurred, allowing for the consumer to take a measure of control over their media entertainment. Even before YouTube and Let’s Play players and corporations were engaged in ever more complex negotiations over intellectual property, especially for online social environments in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORGP) (Taylor 2002a). Taylor’s exploration into how players could author their own experiences within massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG) throws into question concepts of authorship and copyright. Taylor discusses how players author their own embodied self within virtual environments, and to an extent may claim ownership of that authorship. For Taylor, ‘ Appropriation’ is a means by which ‘consumers try to creatively work with and through the cultural artifacts [sp] they encounter’ (2002a: 236), and in doing so generate their own content, independent of corporate involvement—and sometimes against the will of that corporation.
This co-creativity and consumer participation is also expressed within the cultural activities surrounding Let’s Play videos. YouTube personality Generikb posted a series of videos depicting his adventures in the videogame *Stranded Deep* (Beam Team Games 2015), which was released in its incomplete state to the general public for play testing. Several weeks into his series, Generikb noted that there were updates within the game that came not long after he

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17 Note that the restrictions state: ‘Do not take assets from our games (e.g. voice, music, items) and distribute them separately. Unless approved by us, the use of our content in videos must be non-commercial. Do not charge users to view or access your videos. Do not sell or license your videos to others for a payment of any kind. Behave like a decent human being. Absolutely no racist, sexist, homophobic, or offensive content. Please keep your videos focused on our games, and away from overtly controversial topics’. Otherwise, they state that people should ‘feel free’ to create content like walkthroughs and Let’s Play videos.

18 This is popularly referred to as ‘alpha’ or ‘beta’ testing depending on the level of readiness of a videogame at release.
mentioned problems within his videos\(^{19}\). Soon after, Generikb informed his audience that the creation studio, Beam Team Games, had been in contact with him, and was working in conjunction with him to improve their game. Beam Team Games even went so far as to edit Generikb’s game files to retrieve a bugged whale that Generikb affectionately named ‘George’. Generikb was forced to manually delete the whale in the game’s coding due to it constantly swimming ‘through’ his land and destroying his constructed items\(^ {20}\). In the same edit they give in-game names to the various creatures he caught and kept (instead of eating as is the intended use), reflecting the names that Generikb gave to them in his videos\(^ {21}\).

\(^{19}\) At the time of writing this, this video could be seen here at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBh7eIjVrmw&list=PL7j0JO-w0xWklVNUEPRYu51r0769jBz74&index=23

\(^{20}\) At the time of writing this, this video could be seen here at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMdy_TkUgPQ&list=PL7j0JO-w0xWklVNUEPRYu51r0769jBz74&index=20

\(^{21}\) At the time of writing this, this video could be seen here at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UCjvP8HzOk&list=PL7j0JO-w0xWklVNUEPRYu51r0769jBz74&index=21
This expansion into the prior conceptualisations of co-creation, in which players and corporate industries found themselves struggling over the absolutes of intellectual copyright, is but one of many areas that Let’s Play videos might lend themselves to videogame scholarly discourse, in both videogame player culture and videogame play activities. Even consolidating into the genre of survival-horror-themed videogames lends a great deal of potential analytical focuses, such as relation to sound (Ekman and Lankoski 2009; Krzywinska 2002; Perron 2004, 2005, 2009b; Roux-Girard 2011; Toprae and Abdel-Meguid 2011), the dynamic between avatar and player (Ekman and Lankoski 2009; Habel and Kooyman 2013; Kirkland 2009; McDonald and Kim 2001; Perron 2009b), the emotion of fear itself (Frome 2008; Vachiratamporn et al. 2015) and research that is focused on the videogame play experience-as-experienced. With so many potential avenues of focus, it benefits me to utilise a concept that might be considered ubiquitous to videogame play experiences, albeit potentially in different formats. As such, it is to the theories of embodiment within videogame play experiences that I now turn.

Embodiment as a form of critically analysed engagement is one that is embedded in videogame play experiences, although one that comes with its own expansive scholarly baggage. From a philosophically phenomenological approach, to an ethno-cultural approach, to methods that explore the expression of cognitive decision making, embodiment within videogames can take on a variety of forms that could be considered inseparable from the videogame play experience. For the purposes of this thesis I position the approaches of embodiment as they will be conceptualised within this thesis, and explored within Chapter Three and Four.
Phenomenological embodiment—the gestalt of player and game

Like many terms within videogame theory, ‘embodiment’ is one that can mean many things, and can often be used without delineating those meanings. In popular videogame theory, embodiment has often been taken to mean the incorporation of the organic in the game play system and the incorporation of the cognitive self in the game play experience (see Bayliss 2010; Gee 2008; Farrow and Iacovides 2012; Klevjer 2012), and some combination thereof. The incorporation of the cognitive self into the videogame is rooted in the means by which the player is able to actualise their affective agency within the game.

Typically, especially in the games that serve as the focus of this thesis Alien: Isolation and Outlast, this actuation of agency would be rooted in the ‘prosthetic’ (Klevjer 2012) extension of the player, the avatar, which serves as the substitute body of the player within the game environment. Perhaps in a quite literal sense, ‘embodiment’ can come to mean the form the ‘body’ takes within the videogame environment, which can be human, or can be something wholly non-human like a piece of bread. However, this sentiment is not the only definition of embodiment that exists. Some theorists consider embodiment as a form of bodily immersion within a videogame state.

It is a habit of investigations on embodiment as bodily immersion to view it as a hypothesised ‘pinnacle’ of embodiment toward which videogames are—or should be—striving. These theories generally focus on the manner in which a videogame systematically incorporates more and more of the player’s physical body into the playing process. This ‘pinnacle’ of embodiment would eventually result in a ‘whole body interaction’ (Farrow and Iacovides 2012:

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22 I refer to the videogame ‘I Am Bread’ (Bossa Studios 2015).
23 Emergent ‘kinetic’ functions of games, for example, such as the Wii, or the games in which players must synchronise their dance movements with the silhouette on the screen.
a seamless integration between the players’ physical and the game’s virtual place. It is assumed that, if there is correlation between the degree of embodiment and enjoyment (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 2008; Klimmt, Hefner and Vorderer 2009; Klimmt et al. 2010), a whole body interaction would yield a ‘more embodied and thus more immersive, engaging and enjoyable gameplay experience’ (Farrow and Iacovides 2012: 233). While Farrow and Iacovides acknowledge that the move toward the ‘techno-utopian fantasy of total immersion may make sense in terms of a need to provide authentic experiences’ (231), it also has the potential to ‘miss the point, particularly when it comes to the kind of entertainment provided by gaming’ (ibid).

To consider embodiment as a ‘holistic’ process would be to attempt to simulate in-game situations within the human form, not possible with current technology. ‘[C]ontrolling a fictional American soldier taking part in the Normandy invasion… does not equate with them actually storming the beach in north western France’ (Bayliss 2007b cited in Farrow and Iacovides 2012: 224). The enjoyment may not necessarily stem from the mimicry of the fictional situation, but the capacity to safely experience it from afar. It is the separation of experience that may be the key to appeal, not the whole-body incorporation.

This holds particular significance for survival-horror themed games, in which the situations within the game events would be wholly undesirable to experience, but become a form of entertainment for a videogame player. Markiplier and ChristopherOdd are not actually being assaulted by the horrors of the Mount Massive Asylum in the events of Outlast (Red Barrels 2013). They would be disinclined to remain in their chair should they believe they are being stalked by the xenomorph in Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014). As such, though it does feature in the discussion, embodiment as the personification of the player’s physical self in the
game is not wholly appropriate for this thesis, at least not as a singular approach. As Bayliss noted (2007b), embodiment does not necessarily mean that a player is projected into the game’s virtual world, but rather the game play experience becomes a part of the player’s own embodied awareness.

Embodiment is also grounded within own phenomenological experience as beings-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 2002). Merleau-Ponty emphasises that our perceptual self, informed by our inevitably phenomenological perspective of the world, is in turn informed by numerous networks of information and inputs combining into our gestalt ‘self’. This self, or the state of being ‘in-the-world’ (115), assists with informing our understanding of not only ourselves, but also our orientation toward everything around us. As we make sense of the physical world through our own orientation, we—as players—make sense of the game world through our orientation to ourselves. Being embodied within and with a videogame and videogame play experience is not different to being embodied with and within the world around us. Playing a game does not supplant the physical body with the avatarial state, but rather the game play experience becomes a part of our phenomenological bodily and perceptual schema at that time.

The movement toward considering videogame play experiences as an extension of the phenomenological self has gained increasing popularity within the last decade. Building upon Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) concept of a ‘meta communicative sense of play’ (Bayliss 2007b: 99), Bayliss proposes that ‘rather than a player being transported into the world of the game, the game itself instead is drawn out into the player’s’ (ibid). Richardson presents example of this in the manner in which the player-game interface can become an unconscious extension of the player’s body or, the ‘technosomatic’ interface (2005, 2011). As such, embodiment arises automatically through the act of interacting with something, by integrating it into our own bodily
schema; we are embodied, as with Merleau-Ponty’s theories of phenomenological perspectives (2002). This also reflects Bayliss’ (2010) emphasis that embodiment is indispensable to and inseparable from videogame play processes—by the sheer act of playing, we are embodied. Embodiment is, therefore, the meeting of the player and the game.

Klevjer (2012), among others, notes that this meeting of player and game can create a gestalt entity, one that exists in that moment of interaction. Essentially, who we are when we play the game is not the ‘who’ we are when that game has been put down and we have gone to cook dinner. The haptic interface of a videogame and a stove are different, and thus the ‘self’ of the interaction is oriented differently, around a different intent. The ‘intent’ here refers to the way in which we direct our perceptual intention towards something meaningful (Klevjer 2012: 21), something that is ‘purposefully reached for by our senses and actions’ (ibid). Leaning heavily on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of body and bodily intention (2002), Klevjer’s (2012) emphasises that the relationship between player and avatar is determined by the needs of the videogame at that point in time. As such how embodiment is actualised is varied and can be approached from a myriad of differing perspectives, all of which are valid and important to understanding videogames, the videogame play processes, and the videogame play experience-as-experienced.

The variety of embodied expressions is important to emphasise in terms of individual play experiences due to the variability of the media formats with which we might interface. This is due to the fact that, as Richardson notes, ‘our engagement with screens and interfaces is medium-specific’ (2010b: 432). Even in videogames where the haptic interface may be identical, the variability of the needs of that interface—and the desires of the user that is interfaced—alter the embodied engagement. Instead, ‘each screen modality—whether televisual, computer or
mobile—effects a different mode of embodiment, a different way of ‘moving’ and ‘having’ a body’ (ibid).

In discussing the manner in which mobile devices complicate notions of engagement with screens, Richardson (2005, 2006, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) emphasises the manner in which embodiment with and within videogames is embedded in bodily processes. All games require some form of interface around which players orient themselves, which is in turn typically incorporates some sort of screen. This bodily focus reflects the manner in which within popular larger videogame theory embodiment has been taken to mean two things: the incorporation of the organic in the game play system, and the incorporation of the self in the game play experience (see Bayliss 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Crisholm, Risko, and Kingstone 2014; Farrow and Iacovides 2012; Gee 2008; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2012; Lankoski and Järvelä 2012). Even these two statements come loaded with their own ontological complications, as what it means to be incorporated, engaged, immersed, involved in or with a videogame are all terms that can be considered a specific focus of research.

For this thesis, embodiment cannot have one, singular definition with defined borders of what embodiment is and what embodiment is not. It is an interconnected and interwoven system of inputs and outputs. It involves the integration of the body and the videogame in a way that, as stated above, is not unique. Instead, the body—which is always prepared to utilise tools to expand upon skills and capacities that are beyond human functionality—connects to a game through the hands, the eyes, the motor senses, and various other physiological and psychological formats, in order to garner the intended outcome. In this case, playing the videogame. Whether we are actualised within the game as a ‘prosthetic’ (Klevjer 2012) avatar, or whether we are bodily incorporated (Farrow and Iacovides 2012), or whether embodiment is the trans-
positioning of cognitive decision-making into a 3D environment (Gee 2008), the affective state of embodiment is continually influenced within a videogame.

When referring to videogame experiences in terms of affect, Shinkle (2005) emphasises that affect ‘is a synaesthetic, embodied perception’ (3), a ‘full-body, multisensory experience, temporally and corporeally delocalized, incorporating emotions but not reducible to them’ (ibid). In the same way that embodiment is informed by numerous considerations of ‘having’ a body (Merleau-Ponty 2002), affect is in turn informed by numerous elements of ‘being’. The expression of affect, according to Shinkle (2005) (drawing on Massumi’s 2002 work on affect and the virtual) can be related to emotion, but is not emotion itself. Rather, when it comes to emotion, it is ‘difficult to say what the player is feeling, let alone measure it objectively’ (2005: 2), but with affect we are able to at least conceptualise the emotive responses of players based on an understanding of how their diegetic and extradiegetic responses and emotions are expressed.

Emotional expression is ‘qualified’ to form affect, the injection of intensity into something that is otherwise empty, and which we fill up through affect. Within the survival-horror videogame _Alien: Isolation_, the xenomorph is not frightening because it is, in being what it is, an object of fear. It is a series of programmable commands expressed through a graphically rendered object within a virtual environment. However, to a player, it is a vessel of meaning, and we affect meaning to it through being afraid of what it means to us. In this, we reorient the meaningfulness of playing a game. Where wider theory (Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Tosca and Smith 2008) might consider important elements of gameplay as being the meaningful interaction with games, as not all of these interactions are actually meaningful (Bayliss 2010). Affective embodiment allows us to instead attribute the act of play with
meaning-construction, and places the definition of that meaning-construction solely in the hands of the player.

Once we conceptualise embodiment in terms of phenomenology and affect, it becomes necessary to consider that the embodied experience with a videogame is unique to each player. The videogame, sans a player and being played, is an experience in potentia rather than an existent one. It is the act of play, the ordering and meaning-attribution of this potentia that forms the narrative experience of videogame play. As such, though we might be able to understand the possibility of what may happen within a game through a comprehension of design elements and predictable human responses, to know exactly what does happen within a play experience necessitates observing that play experience.

Even should a particular play experience be shared across the experience of others, it necessitates knowing what that particular player is experiencing—through the nature of being a part of a player’s phenomenological meaning-construction, orientation, and definition. Regardless of whether that player is a researcher or not, the play, nevertheless, is only ever applicable to that player, in that moment. And it is here, I stress, that Let’s Play videos offer their most important assistive element to videogame analysis—by letting us see, analyse, and compare those experiences. Just as Merleau-Ponty stresses that we have ‘no means of knowing the human body other than of living it’ (2002: 231), it is through watching the play experience that we can gain insight into what it means to play that particular videogame.

**Conclusion**

Within this chapter I defined Let’s Play videos as a videogame play experience recorded with the intent of sharing it with others. Though it is popularly attributed to originating within the
Something Awful forums, inclusive videogame play activities have long been a part of videogame culture. With the advent of YouTube, ‘Let’s Play’ has since grown to a widely popular cultural activity of intrapersonal videogame experiences. While this opens up numerous potential discussions of player culture and exploration of play activities (playing with play), this thesis focuses on the methodological contribution that Let’s Play videos can have for videogame scholarly discourse. Specifically, in allowing access to otherwise restrictive videogame play experiences of single-player games.

In order to focus the numerous potential theoretical avenues of approach, this chapter discussed the concepts of embodiment and videogame play that will serve as the central theme to the analysis. Let’s Play videos centralise players within the immediate play experience, most significantly within the immediate moment of play. This privileges an examination of embodiment, especially in terms of the phenomenological experiential self as framed for the audience. Embodiment also stresses an inseparability of player to the analysed play experience, even if we simply consider the integration of the videogame interface into the body’s technosomatic schema. This ascribes to Richardson’s various theories involving mobile screens and media, in that we orient ourselves with screens simply through their use, and our understanding of their use.

This idea of screen orientation has particular methodological significance for this thesis. Klevjer (2012) uses the term ‘camera-body’ in orienting the positioning of the perspective of the audience, and for phenomenology this ‘camera-body’ is invariably linked to the eyes. The main strength of Let’s Play videos as a means of gaining access to a videogame play experience is by directly observing what that experience is through a player’s perspective. This will be explored within Chapter Two of this thesis, in which I discuss the selection process and approach to the
videos, the channels, and the genre of survival-horror. I will also discuss how the framing of a game, and screen relation to the face of the player as outlined by Richardson serves to in turn frame the game experience for the audience—we see what they see. I will also briefly address theories of narrative as they apply to this analysis, specifically in terms of my focus of Let’s Play videos as encapsulated narratives of play-stories.
Chapter Two: Methodology

Introduction

By understanding videogame experiences to be phenomenological in nature, I posit that those experiences must then be considered as unique to a player as our own sense of self is to us. In order to understand, not assume, what it means for a player to play that game, rather than a hypothetical player to have the ideal experience, this necessitates a direct observation of the videogame play experience-as-experienced. Let’s Play videos encapsulate the perspective of the player, and synchronize the player’s verbal (and sometimes visual) reactions to the game. In doing so, they offer an avenue of analysis into videogames that might otherwise be restricted to a researcher. This next chapter serves as a methodological discussion of my approach to the selection process, data collection, and analysis of the videos, channels, and games that feature within Chapter Three and Four of this thesis.

In the first section I discuss the selection process involved in choosing the channels and the videogames that were the case studies of this thesis, specifically with regards to single-player survival-horror videogames, and two channels that showed those videogames. Survival-horror videogames are accompanied by a long-established basis of scholarly discussion, which will inevitably assist in the following chapters of this thesis. In terms of embodiment, fear-based stimulation is a convenient assistance to the embodied representation of player experiences, and renders such experiences more visible within the observed Let’s Play experience. Finally, this chapter will touch briefly on how I must treat the Let’s Play videos as narrative experiences, and
essentially media texts. Though the discussion of these videos is largely informed by their status
as played videogames and videogame experiences, they are nonetheless encapsulated video
recordings made available for the audience; a narrative with a beginning and an end.

The Channels

My reasons for selecting two channels, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd, was to be able to
compare the possible play habits of two videogame players, and to demonstrate how one
experience could be considered insufficient to understanding the potential of videogame play
experiences. Both channels demonstrate a different approach to videogame experiences, and the
potential appeal to their audience. Markiplier is known for his entertaining reactions, which hold
much of his popularity and appeal, and a subscriber base of, as of writing this\textsuperscript{24}, over 10 million. He represents the growing popularity of Let’s Play videos on YouTube, but also offers an avenue of approach where reckless and headlong game play styles can impact upon embodied game experiences. ChristopherOdd, on the other hand, is much more methodical than Markiplier, approaching games from a strategic perspective—trying to maximise his effectiveness and success rather than entertainment value. Also of interest with ChristopherOdd is how he does not necessarily enjoy a horror game experience but remains ‘committed’, as he states, to the holistic game experience.

These two channels offer differing approaches to how the same videogame can be played, and how two different people can create wholly different phenomenologically embodied experiences through the act of playing. This comparison could be that of a performance streamer versus an instrumental streamer, except that such a comparison implies that a particular channel may at any point be more one than the other. Such evaluations (performance vs. instrumental) are best suited for a work that gives it the attention it deserves. For this thesis, a great deal must be taken at face value, in the hopes that future research might be able to dig deeper into the rich experiences afforded to a viewer by Let’s Play videos.

\textit{Markiplier}

Markiplier is well known for his comedic commentary and performative nature, and is entertaining in his video content. As of the start of 2015, Markiplier crossed to six million subscribers, and has a net income of seven million dollars per year, making him one of the top ranking YouTube income earners. His entire channel is largely dedicated to his videogame

\textsuperscript{24} January 2016.
experiences, as well as videos that comment on his life and other activities he wishes to share with his watchers (such as conventions and filming). His presence features prominently within his videos, manifesting not only in his habit of talking constantly to fill game silences, but also in the featuring of video footage of himself during the moment of play. Called a ‘facecam’ by the larger Let’s Play community, many channels feature this element that embeds the player’s physical presence within the observed play moment (see Figure 1.3).

Importantly, he also allows for me, the researcher, to see the physicality of his responses to the game, which are important to the methodological approaches of analysing his play experiences—specifically the identification of an emotional response to games. Markiplier’s ‘entertainment’ includes gestures, facial expressions, and directly speaking into the camera (and to the audience). Markiplier represents the growing popularity of Let’s Play videos on YouTube, and also represents one of those channels that is most successful within the online spectatorship community—the audience of Let’s Play videos.
In contrast to Markiplier, ChristopherOdd holds a much smaller subscriber base of one hundred thousand. He does not produce videos to the same speed of Markiplier, nor is he apparently as oriented to performance or exaggerated reactions. Rather, ChristopherOdd’s videos focus on the narrative component of the game play. The entertainment value of his videos is largely what is offered within the game, and ChristopherOdd himself takes a back seat to that priority. This is reinforced by the fact that ChristopherOdd also does not, in any video, feature a facecam. The entirety of each video is focused on his perspective in his videogame experiences, accompanied only by his vocal commentary. It is this narrative-focus that is the main appeal of

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25 At the time of writing this, January 2016.
ChristopherOdd’s channel for many of his subscribers, many of them taking to the comments on his channel to voice their approval of his play style.

The contrasting channels allow for an examination of how two differing play styles have an impact (or do not have an impact) on particular moments within the games that will be examined. For future analysis, exploring more divergent types of players such as female and LGBTQIA+ would provide greater insight into the role Let’s Play function in providing a space for diversity and new types of performativity. It would also benefit future research to note the speed with which male versus female videos are released, as a methodological consideration within this thesis consisted of the inability to find female Let’s Play creators who had played both games within a small time frame of both videogames being released. This potentially reflects the gendered differences within the horror genre at large (Clover 1992), a difference that could potentially be reflected in the reception and content of female-made Let’s Play channels.
Further research might also consist of a researcher entering back into the participatory element of ethnographic and game play analysis by creating their own Let’s Play videos either on new release videogames, or to mimic prior videogames that have been focused on. Within videogame play, Let’s Play videos enter the realm of ‘playbour’ (Kücklich 2005), turning the activity of ‘play’ into a potentially (but not guaranteed) monetarily profitable venture. There is also the concept of competitiveness within the Let’s Play culture, as to who can get videos released fastest, and who can complete videogames sooner, and what might arise from these competitive ventures. As such, no matter what channels, or videogames I chose, there would be numerous other potential avenues or approaches worthy of consideration and exploration.

In following the many potential challenges that might arise through the selection of channels, I attempted to minimise the necessary considerations in order to encapsulate this thesis as a preliminary examination. As such, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd are both males in their mid-twenties and early thirties (respectively), American and Canadian (respectively), and though they feature a variety of videos that put across a general ‘theme’ of their channels, both subjects are experienced with the creation of Let’s Play videos. Both channels predominantly feature Let’s Play videos, and as such have built their YouTube identity around presenting these videos to subscribers (and potential subscribers). Their practice on YouTube is extensive—both beginning in 2012—and they are now skilled at tailoring their game experiences (talking to the audience, progressing with the expectations of their audiences in mind, etc.) to whatever it is

26 ChristopherOdd showcases largely longer videogame experiences of AAA releases, such as X-COM: Enemy Unknown (Firaxis Games 2012) with 75 videos, or The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt RED 2015) with 127 videos. All of these videos are shaped around showcasing the videogame experience as, according to his comments in his first Outlast (Red Barrels 2013) video, ‘the designers intended it’, and the entirety of his experience playing. Markiplier, on the other hand, showcases independent games as well as large-budget productions, and almost all are predominantly horror-related or entertaining in their content, eliciting highly emotional responses, usually anger, such as in the case of I Am Bread (Bossa Studios 2015) or fear, such as with the games that feature within this thesis, Outlast and Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014).
they want to present to their chosen demographic. These elements will feature within the
discussion chapters (Three and Four) of this thesis, as they are inseparable from the videos, and
thus the methodological assistance they offer to researchers. However, for now, I will discuss the
selection of the two videogames.

_Alien: Isolation and Outlast_

In order to focus this thesis, it is necessary to select games that will serve as the primary source
of data collection. I chose to concentrate on two games rather than one; to extend the experiences
beyond the parameters of a single game and to minimise the potential confinement of the validity
of analysis to the single videogame used. When there are quite literally millions of potential
videos and thousands of games available in Let’s Play format, game selection, like channel
selection, is to some extent an arbitrary process.

As mentioned previously, the most subscribed YouTube channel belongs to PewDiePie,
who rocketed to popularity following his play of _Amnesia: The Dark Descent_ (Frictional Games
2010). Both Markiplier and ChristopherOdd featured the same game early in their channels.
Markiplier even uploaded several ‘reaction’ videos along with his first Let’s Plays on _Amnesia:
The Dark Descent_ as his very first videos. _Amnesia: The Dark Descent_ could quite easily have
served as one of the videogames of focus. Its status as an independently developed, small-budget
survival-horror videogame would contrast with a larger-scale\(^{27}\) videogame such as _Alien:
Isolation_. However, Markiplier was new to creating Let’s Play videos when he played _Amnesia:
The Dark Descent_. Choosing a videogame featured later in both channels allowed for the videos
to be situated within an extended period of their channel’s existence, allowing for both

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\(^{27}\) By ‘larger scale’ I mean higher budget, bigger development team, etc...
ChristopherOdd and Markiplier to have experience in creating Let’s Play videos. Though it does not entirely eliminate elements such as nerves, uncertainty, or the changing of tone, it does lessen their probability with videos for established, experienced channels.

The chosen games reflect two of the scopes of popular survival-horror games—Alien: *Isolation* represents a large-budget, triple A survival-horror videogame whereas *Outlast* was developed more independently by a smaller team. Although there are even smaller development survival-horror games—such as the popular *Five Nights at Freddy’s* (Cawthon 2014)—my selection limited by what Markiplier and ChristopherOdd both played. I also wished to confine my selection to videogames that had a plot-driven, linear narrative, in order to emphasise the use of the term ‘play-story’ and to compare how inflexible narrative progression nonetheless yielded visibly different Let’s Play video experiences.
Figure 3.4 ChristopherOdd plays Alien: Isolation in a moment of fatal failure. ChristopherOdd Video 30 minute 12:22

Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014) was chosen to accompany the selection of the videogame Outlast (Red Barrels 2013) due to the fact that the developers of both marketed the videogames as a ‘survival-horror’

Alien: Isolation was released in 2014 by Creative Assembly, is a first person, stealth-based, survival-horror themed game which ties into the franchise begun by the iconic Ridley Scott Alien (1979). The player assumes the role of Amanda Ripley, the daughter of the protagonist character Ellen Ripley of the franchise, who is searching for closure

28 Red Barrels co-founder Phillipe Morin discusses the desire to make a horror-themed game that caused he and several others to depart larger companies (Ubisoft and EA) in order to found Red Barrels and create Outlast. As of writing this, the article can be read in full at http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/234588/Horror_in_the_Making_How_Red_Barrels_outlasted_Outlast.php
following her mother’s disappearance following the events of the first film. Amanda—and thereby the player—journey to the deep space station, *Sevastopol*, to retrieve the black box of the ship upon which Ellen was serving, the *Nostromo*. When disaster strikes, the player must navigate the hostile environment of the space station *Sevastopol*, sent into chaos by the arrival of hostile aliens, in order to escape and survive. The antagonistic forces vary between deteriorating environments, hostile androids governed by a central artificial intelligence (AI) named Apollo, humans of questionable intent, and, primarily, unkillable xenomorphs that stalk the station. The player is able to utilise various sound and light generating distractions and hiding mechanics to navigate around hostile forces, and weapons to dispatch the fallible enemies of humans and android, whilst simultaneously overcoming obstacles and completing various tasks in order to progress and ultimately, to escape.
In *Outlast* (Red Barrels 2013), players assume the role of Mike Upshur, an investigative reporter who has broken into a mental asylum following an anonymous email revealing the corporation in charge, Murkoff Corporation, has been conducting harmful human experimentation on patients. *Outlast*, like *Alien: Isolation*, is a first person, stealth-based, survival-horror game. Unlike *Alien: Isolation*, however, the player has no capacity to fight back within *Outlast*, and must entirely avoid all hostile forces through careful movements and utilising hiding mechanics provided by the game. The game features twisted, demented inmates/victims of the events of the asylum, which have been let loose due to catastrophic events at Mount Massive Asylum. The player navigates through numerous darkened environments using an in-game night vision mode within...
Mike Upshur’s video camera. Recording produces journalistic notes for players to read Upshur’s thoughts, and the player can find reports that uncover the events of the videogame narrative. A player who successfully navigates the game is lead inevitably through the events of the narrative towards the ultimate conclusion—confronting the malevolent force at the heart of what has happened at the asylum and the penultimate creation of the Murkoff Corporation, the ‘WALRIDER’.

Like Markiplier and ChristopherOdd, there is a methodological purpose behind the selection of the two games. When they examine in-game mechanics and rule sets that create the fear affect state, Ekman and Lankoski use two games—*Fatal Frame* (Tecmo 2001) and *Silent Hill 2* (Konami 2003)—to compare the stimuli of sound (as well as the effect of monsters, narrative, combat, etcetera) and its functions to influence emotional states within both games (2009). This thesis seeks to replicate that approach by comparing two games and the manner in which they differ from—and resemble—one another. Moreover, the fact that both games are first person allows the phenomenological perspective, or body-camera (Klevjer 2012), afforded by the avatar/screen.

Many videogames that serve as the focus of horror videogame analysis, such as *Dead Space* (Visceral Games 2008) *Silent Hill 2*, *Resident Evil* (Capcom 2002), and *Fatal Frame* are all in third person, but as Klevjer states, ‘the camera-body of the first person avatar offers the screen itself as the principal prosthetic hook-up’ (2012: 31). First person avatars, according to Klevjer, are akin to tunnel vision, ‘highly focused, highly restrictive and, one could argue, inherently paranoid’ (35). This also emphasises the fear-state of being limited by one’s own binocular, forward-facing visual perception, and highlights embodiment as a phenomenological process.
Another element of consideration is the length of game play. As mentioned previously, Vachiratamporn et al (2015) specifically chose *Slender: The Eight Pages* (Parsec Productions 2012) due to its short duration of play. The unpredictability of each play experience also allowed them to have the same player potentially complete multiple play experiences. As Vachiratamporn et al. note, *Slender: The Eight Pages* has a short duration of play, ‘about 5-29 min regardless of whether the player collects all eight pages or gets captured by the Slender Man’ (2015: 46). Entirely feasible for the qualitative research that Vachiratamporn et al. conducted—allowing a rigorous study of multiple play experiences.

In choosing *Alien: Isolation* and *Outlast*, I deliberately selected videogames that have lengthy durations of play. *Alien: Isolation* itself accumulated a total of just over 11 hours of play for Markiplier (including introduction and closing sequence) spanning 14 videos (see Appendix of Videos), with an average video length of 47 minutes. For ChristopherOdd, his *Alien: Isolation*
experience reached almost 14 hours across 31 videos, with an average length of 27 minutes. This makes *Outlast* far shorter than *Alien: Isolation*, with Markiplier reaching just over 3 and a half hours over 12 videos, with an average video length of 19 minutes, and ChristopherOdd reaching just shy of 4 hours, also over 12 videos, with an average video length of almost 25 minutes.

This, of course, does not take into consideration moments of editing where the creator may have played the game without recording, or removed or sped up footage to minimise what might be considered ‘boring’ to a viewer. Markiplier is far more likely to edit his videos, removing this ‘boring’ footage in which he is trying to discover how to progress (Markiplier Video 1 minute 24:36–24:40), or returning to a location after a death sets him back a long way (see Markiplier Video 23 minute 4:29–4:34 as an example of both). His intent to edit footage is reflected quite often in his remarks to the future audience of his intent to do so (Markiplier Video 11 minute 49:34). This editing of the presented game play experience remains important for a Let’s Play video. It is a selectivity of performance that asynchronous videos allow for, and warrants further exploration. However, for the purposes, and with deference to the limitations, of this thesis, I seek to examine only what is made available to the audience.

**Let’s Play Videos—framing the game for the audience**

Richardson’s approach to screen interface and technosomatic interactions as discussed within the last chapter also lend themselves methodologically to my analysis of Let’s Play videos, and to how Let’s Play videos offer insights into videogame play experiences-as-experienced. In the previous chapter, I discussed how embodiment is inseparable to playing a game—by engaging with it we are in some form embodied in a way that is ‘media specific’ (Richardson 2010b: 432). In terms of an audience-screen interface, we as watchers are exposed to what it is the player is
seeing upon their screen. We are not oriented through some alternate perspective, but rather it is the player directing the gaze of the audience through the use of their perspective. In all Figures presented in this thesis that represent the YouTube video, that video encapsulates the player’s screen.

Both *Alien: Isolation* and *Outlast* utilise a first person perspective, where the player is seeing ‘through the eyes’ of their avatar representation. In this case ‘through the eyes’ is literal in terms of spatial positioning, where the ‘camera’ view parallels the positioning of the eyes of the protagonist characters of Amanda Ripley and Miles Upshur respectively. As mentioned before, Klevjer frames this perspective of perceptual embodiment as the ‘camera-body’ (2012: 30), using the first person perspective to define ‘telepresence’ as being ‘phenomenally present elsewhere’ (ibid). This is somewhat contradictory because, phenomenally, we remain present in our world, regardless. Though ‘telepresence’ serves as a view perspective into a digital 3D environment, that environment is depicted upon a screen which occupies our world—we are not physically located anywhere else but out computer chair or couch. Nonetheless, this serves as an important conceptualisation for Let’s Play videos. Through positioning the player-character as the ‘camera-body’, we are able to think about Let’s Play videos as recording and showcasing not only that player’s videogame play experience-as-experienced, but also what it is they are seeing in that moment. The ‘frame’, ‘window’, or ‘screen’ as outlined by Richardson (2010b) is exposed to the audience—what the player sees, the audience sees.

This has the added benefit of when the player misses something (such as in the opening vignette in the introduction), the audience has the capacity to see that the player had the potential to see, or hear what it was that they missed. As such, this ‘missing’ of the cue, be it narrative, visual, audio, or design in nature, becomes a part of that phenomenologically embodied
experience. For a player, this lack of a comparative experience serves to emphasise the way in which their own exposure informs their embodied comprehension, but for a researcher, the capacity to compare and observe multiple videogame play experiences enriches a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the game at hand. This informed the decision to select two separate videogame players, without complicating it further beyond the preliminary and introductory analysis that this thesis serves to be.

Comparative experiences allow an examination of the manner in which players can affect change upon their gameplay experiences in ways that might appear inconsequential to a structuralist or procedural perspective, but in doing so can greatly alter the course of an entire video for a channel. Even within videogames that disallow for a great deal of player autonomy and choice in the progression, the videos themselves can demonstrate a diversity of occurrences. Within this thesis we are able to explore how this limited comparison can demonstrate the elements of a videogame play experience (both programmed and not) may impact on that experience as it occurs. In this, I would also like to emphasise how these impacts may not be the product of meaningful or deliberate choices, but could potentially be unconscious reflections of idiosyncratic play.

In his discussion of the appropriateness of the use of the term ‘choice’ within videogame theory, as choice ‘implies a decision made between options’ (Bayliss 2010: 39) which not all actions taken within a videogame situation are. As an example, Bayliss uses the research of Heaton (2006) in which he examines the videogame *Burnout 3* (Criterion Studios 2004) and the manner in which some elements of said game preclude active and meaningful choices. According to a ‘hypothetical situation of videogame play’ (Bayliss 2010: 40) illustrated by Heaton, the rapidity of play and fast pace of the racing-themed game would mean that a player’s
‘assessment of the risk and reward would be incomplete’ (Heaton 2006: 5 as quoted by Bayliss 2010: 40), making it either difficult or indeed impossible to make meaningful choices between options. While Bayliss uses this to discuss the manner in which the use of the terminology of ‘choice’ within videogame analysis may not entirely be appropriate, as the aforementioned implication of choice is not always apparent.

For the purposes of this analysis I wish to explore a genre of videogame that would further investigate the expression of decision-making that was not necessarily choice, but more reactionary. Where player agency was expressed, insomuch that they acted in a manner that yielded a form of result within the videogame virtual world, there remains the capacity for reactions to not the incomplete assessment of risk and reward as posited by Heaton (2006). A fast-paced game such as *Burnout 3* allows for such an assessment of incomplete risk-assessment options, or action-oriented games such as the *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* series, especially within the multiplayer game modes.

Ultimately, I decided to utilise a single-player oriented genre that, following the discussions of Bayliss (2010) and Heaton (2006) on incomplete risk assessments, promotes moments of reactive responses within player, rather than deliberate choice. Survival-horror was selected for various reasons, but with particular regard given to its popularity on YouTube, the visibility of responses, and the experiences that were shared between ChristopherOdd and Markiplier.

**Let’s Play and Survival-Horror**

‘Survival-horror’ outlines a ‘lose category’ (Taylor 2009: 46), one ‘unevenly applied by players, journalists, designers, and scholars’ (46-47) and ‘are not always horror… and are not always
about survival’ (46). Like any genre, especially within the multi-dimensional format of videogames, ‘survival-horror is the child of many other genres’ (46)\textsuperscript{29}. For the purposes of this thesis, the term ‘survival-horror’ is defined by two elements: firstly, players are pitted against unnatural or monstrous forces that are significantly stronger—or indeed invulnerable—and second, the deliberate elicitation of a fear-response within the audience. This fulfils the definition of ‘survival’ and ‘horror’ respectively. This elicitation must result from deliberate ludic associations and design elements, such as sound (Ekman and Lankoski 2009), startling intrusions into the player’s sphere of awareness, the heightening of suspense, and elements of violence, violation and contamination; all of which feature prominently in discussions of survival-horror.

Of the thousands of videogames currently in circulation, any of them is likely to turn up a result within YouTube. Videos featuring videogames that predate YouTube by decades, such as \textit{Space Invaders} (Tomohiro Nishikado 1978), can be found within\textsuperscript{30}. The narrowing down of games to feature within this thesis must therefore be somewhat arbitrary—any number would work. As this thesis is focused on the examination of a new avenue of insight into existing theories, it was beneficial to focus on a genre of videogames that is largely studied. For the purposes of this thesis, I selected commercially successful and difficult to access single-player games. Single-player games disallow for in-game spectatorship or inclusion of others in any form by their definition. Even games that feature a co-op mode are no longer classified as ‘single-player’ the moment that another player joins the campaign (such as \textit{Dead Space 3} by Visceral Games 2013 or \textit{Borderlands} by 2K Games 2012).

\textsuperscript{29} For a more comprehensive discussion on the defining and application of the title ‘survival horror’, see Taylor’s work \textit{Gothic Bloodlines in Survival Horror Gaming}(2009).

\textsuperscript{30} An example can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwsKiaK5lp8 by SillyGoosesinc, who also provides the typical commentary of Let’s Play videos.
Within this difficulty of access is where I believe Let’s Play videos offer the greatest opportunities to assist in research. Though I play videogames regularly and recreationally, it is feasible to not be able to play all of the videogames that I would wish to explore. This is in terms of availability, as well as personal capacity. Though I own both selected games (in PC format) in order to prove that I have the capacity to access them should I so desire to play, I did not at any point actually enter either game. The entirety of my knowledge of the videogame play experience is informed by Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s play experience, and other Let’s Play videos I watched in order to be able to more accurately understand what it is Markiplier and ChristopherOdd may have missed.

To choose not to play the game, for any sort of videogame analysis, would be counterintuitive for the analytical process. But in order to emphasise the methodological assistive nature of Let’s Play videos to all forms of videogame play research, I wished to demonstrate the way in which it can open videogame play experiences to those who may also not have the access to or ontological basis of knowledge of particular games. Single-player games serve as an example of restrictive access by demonstrating videogames in which the presence of a researcher is disallowed beyond their own play experience. But it also opens up the genre of survival-horror videogames to people who may not play, or have played, survival horror games. The discussion by players, which features in Chapter Four of this thesis, can also serve to inform a researcher of tropes, clichés, or unwritten ‘rules’ of the genre. It also allows researchers to gain access to games that they do not have the capacity to play, such as consoles that they do not own or cannot access, or older videogames that are now out of circulation. As such, Let’s Play videos are

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31 As an example, though I love survival-horror themed videogames, my heightened fear responses would make analysing the game experience difficult, and I am often forced to take breaks from play.
methodologically valuable to videogame analysis in numerous ways that inevitably broaden and deepen our potential pool of study.

Comparative experiences have the additional benefit of allowing a researcher to see how videogame play experiences can yield a different narrative process. Single-player games have the added complication of offering the phenomenological perspective of that experience only. Should a player completely avoid a circumstance, such as Perron’s (2009) example of Leon being decapitated, their assumption of what might happen is conjecture, not knowledge. This comparative experience and what can arise through such an examination serves as a focus of the latter half of Chapter Three.

As mentioned previously, the genre of survival-horror has been the focus of a great deal of videogame research. From the study conducted by Vachiratamporn et al. (2015) mentioned previously, to more established works such as Perron’s edited essays on the survival-horror genre (2009a), numerous theorists have approached survival-horror to analyse game play processes. Emotive research on other components of game research, such as sound (Roux-Girard 2010) or even emotions themselves (Frome 2008) either focus or draw upon survival-horror in order to present examples of their subjects. Concepts such as embodiment, agency, framing, perspective, empathy, cognition and involuntary emotional responses all feature prominently within the survival-horror genre, and will appear in the discussion portion of this thesis. Another consideration in the selection of the survival-horror genre is that it capitalises upon the emotional manipulation of videogames with often highly visible and recognisable results. This does not merely extend to videogames, but also to the horror media genre itself (Bradley 1995; Clover 1992; Carroll 1990; Hills 2004; Krzywinska 2002). In his influential work on ‘art-horror’, the
artificial construction of situations to elicit sensations of fear for artistic purposes, Carroll describes art-horror responses as:

‘tension, cringing, shrinking, shuddering, recoiling, tingling, frozenness, momentary arrests, chilling … paralysis, nausea, a reflex of apprehension or physically heightened alertness … perhaps involuntary screaming and so on’ (Caroll 1990: 24).  

Figure 3.7 Markiplier’s visible response before the hostile NPC Chris Walker tries to break through the window in front of him. Markiplier Video 35 (0:32)

32 All of these responses can be seen, or heard, within a Let’s Play process. Markiplier physically recoils from the screen when Chris Walker bursts through a window in Outlast (see Figure 16). ChristopherOdd’s screen jolts as the physiological startle response moves his mouse when the xenomorph drops into the vent in Alien: Isolation.
When discussing the expression of emotion generation and its manifestation within game play experiences, Frome notes that any notion of emotional response ‘relies upon the extremely ambiguous term “emotions”’ (2008: 831), and goes on to discuss the many ways in which various theorists have classified emotions. Amongst those listed by Frome is Ekman’s work on facial expression and emotion (1993), which is the work I draw upon in order to recognise the facial expressions presented by Markiplier. This is in combination with LeDoux (1996) and his examination of fear-responses to various stimuli (learned and innate) in order to not only recognise the expressions of fear, but theorise potential origins for it.

LeDoux’s definition of fear stimuli—both learned and unconscious—and how they become associated with their emotional responses becomes particularly important for this thesis and the manner in which players ‘learn’ how to play a game. How Markiplier and ChristopherOdd engage with the game and learn how to effectively navigate the game environment will feature prominently within the discussion. Myer’s ‘recursive contextualisation’ (2010) in engaging, evaluating and reengaging with a game is of particular use, not only in terms of the navigation of the narrative environment, but also in the appraisal of narrative cues and specifically for survival-horror, in how they learn what to be afraid of.

It must be noted that there remains the element of performance and performativity that exists within Markiplier’s videos, which could potentially complicate concepts of ‘authenticity’. If we are concerned with the accurate representation of fear and the effectiveness of survival-horror videogames in eliciting a fear-response within their audience, elements of authenticity and performativity must be addressed within a thesis. However, within this thesis, even exaggerated responses must be taken into consideration in the visual representation of a videogame play
experience-as-experienced. This is due to the fact that ‘un-authentic’ responses to the videogame situations create individual play experiences that depend upon the introduction and inclusion of the player.

Similar to the manner in which Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodiment can be incorporated into phenomenological concepts of embodiment—as discussed briefly in the previous chapter—performative nature of Let’s Play videos parallels Goffman’s concepts of performance in everyday life (1959). Goffman’s theories have been previously applied, at least in brief, to videogame theory. Deterding’s conference proceedings note that Goffman’s work on frame analysis (1974) can inform a ‘systemized[sp] frame analytical account of play, games and video games[sp]’ (2009: 1). Though only cursory in its discussion, Deterding nonetheless makes the point that Goffman ‘expressly pointed out that the framing of a situation does not depend on shred face-to-face co-presence and is not fully created ‘on the spot’, but can be mediated through time and space over media and cultural memory within an individual’ (3). Authenticity of performance, whilst a worthwhile subject that should be explored, is not necessarily a consideration of this thesis, as the performance remains a part of the video being presented.

A narrative of a videogame play experience, in essence, with all the trappings involved. As such it becomes important to discuss the idea of a Let’s Play video as a narrative within the methodology section. It also serves to discuss narrative in terms of textual analysis, because although I am analysing a videogame play process, a Let’s Play video remains a form of videotext.
Let’s Play Videos as Narrative

Narrative, as it will be conceptualised within this thesis, is focused on the video itself rather than the progression of the videogame. Specifically, Chapter Four explores Let’s Play videos as narratives, and the players Markiplier and ChristopherOdd as the authors of those narratives. Of course, using the term ‘narrative’ within videogame theoretical analysis runs the risks of returning to the argument-non-argument of ‘ludology vs. narratology’. I use the phrase ‘argument-non-argument’ because whether or not it occurred depends entirely upon who is asked. Indeed, the notion as to who is perpetuating the non-argument is just as messy. Aarseth is particularly scathing in his condemnation of the pseudo-argument between narratology and ludology, labelling it a result of ‘bad scholarship’ (Aarseth 2014: 188), a misunderstanding that emerged from ‘naïve and untheoretical applications of narratology to games’ (185).

This is in contrast to Murray’s note that ludologists are ‘debating the phantom of their own creation’ (2005: 3). In the formative years it served a purpose in spurring consideration toward the ‘appropriateness of studying games by applying pre-existing theories and approaches, or by devising novel, specific conceptual tools’ (Arsenault 2014: 476). At this point, revisiting the idea of whether or not such arguments occurred, or who perpetuated them, only serves to extend the longevity of what many would claim is a ‘nonissue’. Instead, we should be able to critically appraise and apply approaches of narratology and ludology as methodological tools.

Narratology, the structuralist study of narratives, holds particular use within this thesis not because the videogames featured have narratological merit, but because the videos themselves are a narrative experience. In terms of story, a narrative is the presentation of a sequence of events, be it oral, written, or visual, representing a progression of some kind, be it chronological or non-linear in structure.
It benefits an analysis of embodiment to have access to the immediate moment of play as seen by a player. A recent study that demonstrates this worth was conducted on the affect transitions in survival-horror games (Vachiratamporn et al. 2015). Examining players before, during, and after the introduction of fear stimuli, Vachiratamporn et al. were able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how fear states work within a high stress situation in direct response to the introduction of a fear stimuli. It is possible to conduct studies similar to Vachiratamporn et al., but they were limited in their duration of play (approximately 20 minutes). From here, we turn to Let’s Play videos, their advent into videogame culture, and the manner in which they shape themselves today.

This is not to say, at any point, that a focus on a videogame that presupposes the player actions is in any way lesser or diminished. An approach that emphasises the ‘player as part of the game system, an agent partly definable by the role the game affords’ (Aarseth 2014: 188) yields valuable insights into game experiences, especially ones that exist within the constraints of the game. The limitations imposed by the game’s affordances—and how players encounter, engage with, and evaluate them—will become an integral part of our analysis of Let’s Play videos, informing the resulting narrative process of their game play experience.

As a final note of methodology, this thesis is constructed around examining Let’s Play videos as a means of accessing videogame play experience-as-experienced that are not subject to conditions and restrictions within a constructed test. While this does not exclude the potential of being present as a Let’s Play creator records/plays their videogame experience, that element of methodology was not present within this thesis.
Conclusion

Within this chapter I outlined the selection of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd as channels, and comparative experiences. I then selected two videogame experiences from those that were shared between Markiplier and ChristopherOdd. I specifically wished to choose videogames that would be otherwise difficult to access for a researcher, and emphasised selection of single-player exclusive games. In choosing single-player games, I will highlight the way in which Let’s Play videos frame the videogame play experience for the benefit of the audience—we can see exactly what the player sees as that moment of play. Essentially, Let’s Play videos present us the videogame play experience-as-experienced. The selection of Alien: Isolation and Outlast also has the added benefit of both existing within the same, well-researched field of survival-horror videogames. This will assist in the examination of embodied processes within survival-horror videogames as seen during Let’s Play videos. Finally, this chapter addressed the nature of narrative within Let’s Play videos, as each must be treated, in a way, as a piece of media text, or a form of narrative.

Chapter Three of this thesis will focus specifically on Alien: Isolation as played by Markiplier and ChristopherOdd. In line with Ahmed’s examination of on-screen office life (2010), Chapter Three will concentrate on the observable habits and expressions of idiosyncratic play that is presented to the audience. Conclusions drawn emerge from observations of an audience, rather than verbal contributions of the player themselves. It is within Chapter Four, which discusses Outlast, that I will venture into what I call reflexive-narrativity of the videogame play experience of a Let’s Play video, and how the verbalisation of a player’s thoughts, conclusions, decision-making, and appraisal of their own situation allows for insights
into the player’s state within the game play process. Essentially, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd
will be providing their own version of Vachiratamporn et al.’s self-annotated observational tests.
Chapter Three:

*Alien: Isolation* and Observable Videogame Play Experiences

**Introduction**

In the first chapter of this thesis, it was suggested that embodied processes involve the extension of a player’s phenomenological perception of self, the manner in which they engage with the game, and the game world. Our ability to observe this extension within a Let’s Play video draws on the definitions of affect as outlined by the aforementioned Gregg (2010) and Ahmed (2010) which engages with human relations to emotions and objects. Pairing the concept of phenomenological perceptual awareness and the camera-body as outlined by Klevjer (2012), and the ‘frame’ presented by the screen (Richardson 2010b), the first-person perspective presented by a videogame parallels the first-person manner in which we observe our own world. As such, and in considering embodied processes to be akin to our own sense of constructed self, I emphasise that the videogame play experience is as unique as that sense of constructed self. Just as we can only *know* our own lives by living it, we can only *know* a videogame play experience by examining it at the moment of experience. Let’s Play videos, I posit, reflect a means to examine numerous videogame play experiences-as-experienced, and offer insight into moments that I argue are as novel as the players that play them.

Chapter Two discussed the focus of my approach as being single-player survival-horror games, which assisted in a methodological approach to observable fear states, correlating the cognitive expression and evaluation of fear (Carroll 1990; Hills 2005) with potential embodied expressions of survival-horror gameplay. Within this chapter, we will examine the videogame
Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014) as played by Markiplier and ChristoperOdd, and the manner in which cognitive decision-making, fear evaluations, and expressions of emotional states can reflect evaluations of observable phenomenological embodied experience. Importantly, it is an experience that is unique to either player, regardless of an identical game-narrative progression.

Observable analysis is the emphasis of this chapter, similar to the manner in which Ahmed (2010) drew on the observable habits of the fictional office work environment of a television show in order to provide social commentary on the current status of American white-collar life. For this thesis I explore how, through the watching of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s Let’s Play videos, I can see how their idiosyncratic play habits are expressed through the recorded video footage made available to an audience. Specifically, I focus on the manner in which Markiplier and ChristopherOdd engage with the primary antagonist of Alien: Isolation—the xenomorph—prior to and after gaining the flamethrower weapon against it, and how that changes visible representations of their play habitus. Within this chapter, I wish to particularly explore two elements within Alien: Isolation—fight vs. flight (vs. freezing), and the manner in which players engage with the introduction of the weapon.

Learning to Fear

Alien: Isolation features an environment in which players are afforded several different means of navigation—such as vents in the floor and walls, different doorways, and maze-like maps. This is further complicated by roaming antagonists that present moving obstacles for players. This encourages, and indeed necessitates, players to adapt to their immediate situation and emphasises the need for strategy in order to progress. This is especially true for players to learn how to
successfully avoid the main antagonist, the xenomorph\textsuperscript{33}, which is the most persistent and difficult hostile force around which players must navigate. A hunting\textsuperscript{34} antagonist, as well as numerous avenues of approach, can create entirely unique environments for each player, even if the progression through these environments is identical\textsuperscript{35}. For our conceptualisation of embodiment as a phenomenological process, this is important for our analysis through the literal representation of different paths taken within a videogame play experience within a Let’s Play video. This, in turn, assists in a visual analysis of the similarities and differences between two videogame play experiences.

As demonstrated by Markiplier and ChristopherOdd (Figures 4.1 and 4.2), even entering the same room can be done through different avenues and circumstances—ChristopherOdd (ChristopherOdd Video 10) is pursued by the xenomorph in the vent behind him, and Markiplier (Markiplier Video 6) is still unsure as to where the xenomorph is. Within a single player’s experience, such comparisons are not possible (how could Markiplier know he could come through the floor as ChristopherOdd did without doing so himself?). A removed perspective is more suited to realise the differences between two play experiences, such as that of an observer position for a researcher. This type of perspective does not have to be the impartial view of a researcher, merely the positioning of an audience watching a recorded event—a role that can be fulfilled by the player themselves watching their own play experience, as noted in the methodology employed by Vachiratamporn et al. (2015).

\textsuperscript{33} I refer to the xenomorph as the ‘main’ antagonist due to its constant threat of appearance, and its scripted introduction into moments where it serves as a significant obstacle between a player and their progression or objective. The xenomorph must be avoided, whereas all other threats can be, in some way, killed if the player has the necessary tools (schematics/amunition/etc.).

\textsuperscript{34} I use the term ‘hunting’ here because the programmed AI of the game causes the alien to gravitate toward the player’s approximate location, rather than wander off into an entirely unrelated section of the map.

\textsuperscript{35} The room into which both players enter contains a task that must be completed in order to progress, but both players enter the room under different circumstances.
Figure 4.1 Markiplier reveals a divergent path as he enters a room in an entirely different manner to ChristopherOdd (see Figure 4.2). ChristopherOdd’s location of entry is marked with the blue square (a floor vent out of sight). Markiplier Video 6 minute 22:22

Figure 4.2 ChristopherOdd enters the same room as Markiplier (see Figure 4.1). Markiplier’s point of entry is marked in blue. ChristopherOdd’s point of entry (a hatch in the floor) is marked in red. ChristopherOdd Video 10 minute 26:33
This determination of pathway creates a level of ‘sandbox’ to the game environment\textsuperscript{36}. Sandbox, as defined by Giddings (2014), is an open structure of simulation that ‘encourages a range of possible playing styles, strategies, and outcomes’ (263). A player is also afforded many tools with which to distract, disable, or kill enemies, and it is to be expected that no two players will utilise the same amount of tools, in the same order, in the same location, to the same outcome. Which items are chosen (if any) or where they are used, is left to the determination of the player (see Figure 4.3 for an example), a factor that is further impacted upon by the fact that players may not have all the items at their disposal through their experience.

These elements of variable game play in \textit{Alien: Isolation} presents a milieu that highlights visual differences in a Let’s Play video. Not only do we get to observe the ways in which players unconsciously move within the environment, and how that might differ to others, we are also able to observe the way in which they make decisions within that environment. An exploration into what a player does within a game where they exert a level of determination over any sort of variable benefits from a means of witnessing their decision-making. Vachiratamporn et al. (2015) utilised video to see how a player engaged with the threat of the Slenderman in \textit{Slender: The Eight Pages} (Parsec Productions 2012). Similarly, in the Let’s Play videos of \textit{Alien: Isolation}, we are able to witness the way in which two players navigate the same linear narrative, but utilise their environment and available tools differently. Let’s Play videos also renders visible the manner in which players learn to fear the xenomorph. This learning informs their embodied

\textsuperscript{36} Giddings notes that sandbox simulators have the capacity to allow players to ‘find their own alternatives beyond those anticipated by the game’s designers’ (2014: 263). While designers can impose constraints upon play–for example in the sandbox-oriented game \textit{Minecraft} (Mojang 2009), you can build a great deal of things with the cube-shaped textures provided by the game, but to design something completely spherical or with smooth curves would require the introduction of something not provided with the standard game available textures–the capacity to accurately predict what exactly a player does with a variety of determinable and alterable elements would be improbable, or at the very least time consuming.
processes, and their affective associations, and in turn affects the manner in which they respond to the fear-stimuli.

As Gregg defined (2010), we apply meaning and significance to objects in terms of what they afford us. According to Gregg, an object itself cannot make us happy, but rather the result of that object being introduced to us in some way makes us happy and we therefore associate the object with that happiness. Similarly, the elicitation of fear within a fictional environment—such as a game or film—is ‘object-oriented’ (Perron 2005: n.p.) in that we associate a fear-response with a ‘thing’, but what players truly fear are the potential consequences of that thing. Within Alien:
Isolation, the xenomorph, the titular ‘alien’ of the franchise, presents a very apt example of this dichotomy—the xenomorph is a programmed object within the game environment that is designed to thwart the player’s progression. The penultimate consequence created by the xenomorph is the death of Amanda Ripley and a player’s ‘failure’ at the present task, and not true physical harm. Despite this, when confronted by the threat of the xenomorph, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd exhibit action-oriented fear-responses. Action-oriented revolves around not only the player feeling compelled to do something (such as hiding, retreating, running), but also their unconscious expressions of fear (such as screaming).

Figure 4.4 ChristopherOdd encounters a non-hostile Working Joe. ChristopherOdd Video 5 minute 13:00
Excluding environmental hazards—such as electrocution, fire, or the player getting caught in some of their own makeshift explosives—hostile NPC’s are the main source of danger for the player-character\textsuperscript{37}. While the humans and androids (called Working Joes, see Figure 4.4), serve as antagonistic forces serving to oppose the players’ progress, the xenomorph functions as the ‘monster’ object of the videogame representing the greatest danger to the player. The concept of a literal ‘monster’ being the focus of the primary source of fear—the object—within the game is one that is common throughout survival-horror themed videogames—and indeed the horror genre at large.

‘Designed as disgusting entities, the monsters of horror video games [sp] are dangerous. On the action level, they are physically threatening because they are lethal and have the power to maim and kill. On the narrative level, they become psychological, moral or social menaces by their attempt to destroy one’s identity and moral order’ (Perron 2005: n.p).

When discussing the conceptualisation of fear in terms of the horror media genre, Ekman and Lankoski (2009) draw upon Carroll’s work on ‘art-horror’ (1990) that defines monsters as ‘invoking a unique combination of the emotions fear and disgust’ (Ekman and Lankoski 2009: 181). While fear responses are geared to survival instincts (Ekman and Lankoski 2009; LeDoux 1996), ‘disgust’ ‘relates to actions in which one perceives something as physically or psychologically contaminating’ (2009: 191).

\textsuperscript{37} In Chapter 14 of the game ‘The Nest’, players must navigate around small hostiles called ‘facehuggers’, which are the premature form of the alien. Being attacked by a facehugger results in instant death for Amanda, but due to the fact they only feature in the final hours of play, and only in certain sections, they are not considered one of the primary hostile forces within the game.
The xenomorph represents the allegory of infestation (the facehugger attaching to a host’s face and laying an egg in their chest through an extended proboscis, and the chestburster itself which erupts from a victim’s chest as a larval xenomorph), as well as the very ‘real threat toward the player’s objectives’ (ibid). Importantly, the videogame emphasises that, unlike humans and Working Joes, at no point is the player capable of killing the xenomorph. Successfully navigating the threat largely entails hiding from and avoiding it. Even tasks that result in its ‘death’ (such as Mission 10 ‘The Trap’ featured in Markiplier Video 9 and ChristopherOdd Video 19) require that a player avoid or fend off the xenomorph in order to succeed.

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38 This mirrors the infallible nature of the xenomorph in Ridley Scott’s 1979 film from which the cult franchise spawned.
39 I refer to it as ‘death’ due to the fact that the singular xenomorph drone is detached in a lab and sent drifting into space, but is replaced with multiple drones later in the game.
In order to navigate around the xenomorph, various hiding locations can be utilised, such as lockers, chests, or under tables and beds, but doing so severely limits the viewing perspective of the player (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6). On harder difficulties these hiding places only offer limited safety, as the AI of the xenomorph is given the approximate location of the player and searches the area diligently. Failure to move from one spot can eventually result in discovery and death\textsuperscript{40}. Safety is temporary, and comes with risk of its own.

\textsuperscript{40} One such instance in which the xenomorph, ‘knowing’ the approximate location of the player-character results in it finding the player and killing them is that of ChristopherOdd who, spending too much time in a single vent, found himself discovered and ripped out of the vent from behind, and immediately killed (see ChristopherOdd Video 8).
Visually confirming the presence of the xenomorph risks placing the avatar in a position of being spotted, which typically results in death\(^4\). The safest way to locate the xenomorph within the environment is through sound. The videogame’s design offers various audio cues to assist players in deducing a general location of the xenomorph, such as heavy footsteps, the distinct sound of its movements through the vents, and the noisy sound of its arrival to the environment.

\(^4\) Once spotted, trying to run from the alien typically results in death (See Figure 4.7) as the xenomorph is far faster than the avatar of Amanda Ripley
Sound is a key element to the survival-horror genre. Roux-Girard states that ‘sound is as crucial to the creation of the depicted gameworld’s mood as it is in its undeniable support to gameplay’ (2010: 192), and ‘compensates for the limited sensory capabilities of the medium’ (192). Sound, according to the findings of Vachiratamporn et al. and their developed after affect test (AAT) ‘carries more emotional content than any other part’ (2015: 50) of Slender: The Eight Pages (Parsec Productions 2012). Sound is also tied to the generation and manipulation of emotion.
(Cunningham, Grout and Picking 2010; Ekman and Lankoski 2009; Topare and Abdel-Meguid 2010; Vachiratamporn et al. 2015) and the immersive capacity of the player\(^\text{42}\). Sounds assist players with an evaluation of an event, resulting in a positive or negative sensation known as a ‘valence’ (Ekman and Lankoski 2009: 182 emphasis in original). In a way, sound forms the rules of a game as a player understands them (‘X’ sound is associated with ‘Y’ thing). In line with the survival instincts illustrated by LeDoux (1996), Ekman and Lankoski describe how sound elicits emotions that are deeply tied to survival (2009). As mentioned previously, the distinct sounds that herald the arrival of the xenomorph become fear-stimuli for Markiplier and ChristopherOdd—the calm environment is disrupted by the banging of the xenomorph emerging from the vent, and the player immediately quiets, hides, and attempts to locate the creature.

It is this association-construction that we are able to observe within the videogame play states of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd as they rely on sound to locate the xenomorph within their vicinity. The loud, thumping footsteps indicate that it is, in fact, in the area and can be heard from quite a distance, as well as through walls and closed doors, allowing players to gain an approximate location\(^\text{43}\) (and thus decide whether or not it is safe to use the motion detector without being discovered). Similarly, the game generates threat with a distinct sound of the xenomorph crawling around the ventilation above them, alerting the player to proximity. All of these sounds indicate that the xenomorph is close enough that loud sounds, such as gunfire,

\(^{42}\) Ekman and Lankoski (2009) make note that to achieve full player immersion, it is necessary for the sounds to be suited to the narrative context of the game. In Video 12, Markiplier hears a distant scream and attributes the sound to ghosts, which he states could not be possible as aliens and ghosts contradict one another.

\(^{43}\) At a point, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd associate certain sounds with the xenomorph’s presence so strongly that the game is able to fool them with a similar sound when they enter a room and hear a Working Joe banging against the door of an adjoining room. Their association is confirmed when both players verbalise their (incorrect) belief that the sound is the xenomorph, with Markiplier declaring “I knew it!” (Markiplier Video 7 min 15:55) following his assumption that the alien must be nearby and ChristopherOdd stating “I don’t think that’s an android, pal” (ChristopherOdd Video 13 min 13:28) in contradiction to a hostile NPC addressing the sound as one of the Working Joes.
explosions, or even hitting a maintenance jack against the wall, can draw it to the player’s location\textsuperscript{44}. Each sound has a distinct purpose behind it, and each sound in turn comes with its own threat. Markiplier and ChristopherOdd must learn not only the meaning behind the sounds, but the ‘rules’ associated with the sounds in order to best use them to their advantage.

To avoid undesirable consequences within \textit{Alien: Isolation}, both Markiplier and ChristopherOdd must obey the parameters required in order to succeed, fulfilling Wenz’s description of submitting to ‘the rules of the game’ (Wenz 2014: 312). Survival-horror games are particular in their teaching because players are specifically taught to associate fear with their environmental cues. As such, in \textit{Alien: Isolation}, everything relating to the presence or the threat of the presence of the xenomorph can elicit a fear-response, or become a fear-stimuli. More appropriately, this fear-stimuli falls into the ‘diegetic loop’ outlined by Shinkle (2005), which refers to ‘the player’s conscious interaction with an immediately responsive graphical and narrative interface’ (3), but also demonstrates the manner in which this diegetic loop cannot be separated from an extradiegetic loop. According to Shinkle, an extradiegetic loop ‘involves the player’s corporeal response to the gaming environment as a whole’ (ibid), a response that is informed by their own perception of the diegetic loop.

How players receive and react to these various fear-stimuli—engaging with Shinkle’s diegetic and extradiegetic loops—reflects upon their embodied state with and within the videogame play experience. This includes the manner in which evaluations are made within the game environment, which is expressed not only within a player’s bodily responses as well as

\textsuperscript{44} This necessitates caution from players, as fighting against hostile NPCs can result in the arrival of the alien, as can the sound of the player running. Alternately, players can deliberately (or unintentionally as ChristopherOdd does several times) draw the alien into the area to dispatch multiple hostile humans, but then they must navigate around the more dangerous (but singular) xenomorph.
through their decision-making. Importantly, these embodied reflections are visible within the Let’s Play videos. The observable fear within a player has specific importance to the survival-horror genre of videogames, due to the fact that they are assumed to be able to elicit certain fear-based responses within their player. But as these comparative experiences demonstrate, fear can arise in unexpected situations.

**Comparative Expressions of Fear**

Assuming fear responses within a player from a design-oriented approach—which hypothesises the ideal play experience—serves to potentially ignore ways in which players express idiosyncratic fear associations. For example, players may be frightened by some stimuli unexpectedly, or merely frustrated by some stimuli that were intended to be frightening. Knowing the nuanced reception and expression of fear is key to understanding the idiosyncratic survival-horror videogame play experience.

Vachiratamporn et al. (2015) offer a means to categorise several degrees of fear in the form of three states of ‘pre-fear affects’ (47), ‘neutral’, ‘anxiety’, and ‘suspense’. ‘Neutral’ is defined as ‘no feeling of uncertainty’, ‘anxiety’ as the player thinking the threat ‘is near or is going to appear soon but does not know or cannot imagine how’ that might occur, and ‘suspense’ refers to the player possessing a ‘strong feeling’ about how the threat will appear (Vachiratamporn et al. 2015: 46). Importantly, the manner in which the players represent themselves on the screen is very much tied to their immediate goal, and what it is that takes priority in that moment. Through examining their play, I am able to see when Markiplier or

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45 For example, ChristopherOdd has associated the ‘dripping’ from a vent (Figure 4.11) with ‘something bad’ without actually encountering the alien ambush, and enacts an avoidant response by moving around the vent rather than under it. He fears his assumptions and imaginings without any true stimuli, exhibiting anxiety without knowing if something is even going to happen.
ChristopherOdd failed to speak to the audience due to concentrating, or when something within the environment of the game drew their attention by causing them to fall silent and look around quickly. It is these visible and unconscious expressions of focus that allows me to understand the affective orientation of the player to the fear-state of the game.

Both the presence and impact of these fear states are apparent throughout Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s videos, and allow for an evaluation on their state to be made based on Vachiratamporn et al.’s definitions. The manner and degree to which fear is experienced by the player and the impact this has on the game play experience, conceptualised by Vachiratamporn et al. as ‘fear affect transitions’ (2015), are meaningful embodied processes within survival-horror. These processes afford an observer valuable means to evaluate cognitive associations and decisions made by a player—thus what to fear, and that sensation of fear. Following the introduction of the fear-affect stimuli, Vachiratamporn et al. conceptualise the transition to ‘post-fear affects’ (2015: 47) in terms of low, medium, and high fear-states. Within this chapter, I explore how Markiplier and ChristopherOdd navigate the videogame and states of neutral, anxiety and suspense.

A complete confidence in the lack of the presence of the xenomorph (accurate or no) indicating the state of ‘neutral’ would result in confidence and comfort on behalf of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd. For both Markiplier and ChristopherOdd, this confidence takes the form within the game play arena of standing upright, moving comfortably about the environmental space, taking the time to read terminals and search for collectables, and a complete lack of situational awareness beyond cursory examination. Particularly for Markiplier, his moments of comfort can accompany removing his eyes from the screen before him and looking into the
webcam (and thus at the audience), whereas moments of high tension cause him to devote his attention to the screen (see Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9 Markiplier speaking directly at the audience in Video 1 minute 16:25 vs. Markiplier focusing on an in-game puzzle in Video 3 minute 14:42 and Markiplier feeling comfortable to drink on camera as the game is paused on the menu in Video 12 minute 0:15
Figure 4.10 Markiplier attracts the xenomorph to the area by sprinting, causing it to emerge from the vent (red square), chase him and kill him. Markiplier Video 5 minute 8:14

Through their Let’s Play videos we are able to compare situations in which ChristopherOdd carefully navigates an area with a high degree of stealth and caution to how Markiplier fares in the same situation with a large degree of recklessness and a greater focus on entertaining his audience. Markiplier’s state of ‘neutral’ extends far beyond that of ChristopherOdd. Markiplier appears to either forget or disregard the threat of the xenomorph’s presence46, often resulting in his death47 (see Figure 4.10). This in turn necessitates that Markiplier repeat various tasks upon

46 This can be attributed to the desire to continue progressing quickly in order to keep his audience entertained.
47 See Markiplier Video 13 as an example of repeated failure.
failing, extending his game time\textsuperscript{48}. Comparatively, ChristopherOdd’s cautious nature creates a slower, more methodical approach to the videogame environment. He crouches excessively\textsuperscript{49}, hides frequently, and moves carefully throughout the environment. As such, he spends a great deal of the game without being ambushed by the xenomorph or drawing it to him\textsuperscript{50}, even successfully noticing the indication of its presence in multiple situations (see Figure 4.11 and ChristopherOdd Videos 10 and 11), but also takes a longer time to navigate through the area due to his slower speed of progress.

As a direct example, ChristopherOdd navigates around several hostile humans over an extended period of time (Video 4 minute 5:11 to 16:33) before successfully proceeding to the next area without dying. Comparatively, Markiplier encounters the same situation and, in his reckless movements, dies several times, kills a NPC, and features a jump cut to exclude his lack of success\textsuperscript{51} (Video 3 minute 4:43 to 10:10). Here, Alien: Isolation and Let’s Play videos allow for direct comparisons to the fight vs. flight mechanics when a player is capable of making a choice as to which they do.

\textsuperscript{48} This is an actualisation of the ‘threat of failure’ outlined by Perron (2005)
\textsuperscript{49} A mechanic that makes the avatar more quiet but also slower.
\textsuperscript{50} Markiplier, on the other hand, encounters the ambush mechanic just over two minutes in to Markiplier Video 5 by attempting to sprint past an android. This is long before ChristopherOdd is even aware of the mechanic existing, the first instance occurring in video 10 (Figure 4.11).
\textsuperscript{51} Due to Markiplier’s use of a jump cut, we can only assume at how exactly the events within those moments transpire.
ChristopherOdd’s continuous state of heightened awareness and caution reflects the ‘anxiety’ state defined by Vachiratamporn et al. (2015: 46) which extends far further than Markiplier’s state of anxiety. In response to any ambient noise, either environmental or musical, that might indicate any form of threat, ChristopherOdd crouches and examines his surroundings. ChristopherOdd assists in assessments of his states through his verbalisation of his own internal processes and prior reactions, such as stating something freaked him out, scared the ‘shit’ out of him, or constantly spouting profanities in response to imminent threat.

52 In the seconds directly proceeding this moment we were able to observe ChristopherOdd respond to the splashing sound by checking his surroundings before finally locating the source.
Vachiratamporn et al. define ‘anxiety’ as being the notion that the threat is ‘near or is going to appear soon but does not know or cannot imagine how’ (46). As such, a reminder of the xenomorph’s presence (such as a distant bestial screech upon entering an area), is more relevant to the situation than the sound of it thumping through the vents or stomping through the halls, which are direct references to its presence—the xenomorph will appear if there is sufficient noise and it is heard moving about in the vents, whereas it may not appear if its scream is heard—are more relevant to the ‘suspense’ state as defined by Vachiratamporn et al. (2015).

‘Suspense’ revolves specifically around the ‘strong feeling of how’ (46) the enemy will appear, and once a player learns the mechanics of the xenomorph it becomes relatively predictable as to how it will enter the scene, although not entirely predictable as to what it will do once it is in the scene. Markiplier and ChristopherOdd quickly learn that running through the environment will draw the xenomorph forth, as will explosions and gunfire. Crouching and moving slowly allow a player to avoid bringing the xenomorph into the environment and, if it is in the environment, increases their chances to navigate around it without being detected. If their actions reflect their state, then from those actions I can draw conclusion toward their affective emotional state, and thus their embodied experience in that moment.

In this distinction of emotional arousal, embodiment and cognitive decision-making is reflected through choice: what does a player do when they can choose to fight back? The fight vs. flight choice (one that is absent with the xenomorph for the most part) is one that is reflective of the survival-oriented nature of the mimicry of fear that art-horror (Carroll 1990) seeks to elicit. For the larger part of the videogame, the xenomorph represents an enemy that a player 53 ChristopherOdd, unlike Markiplier, never learns that the mechanic of striking a jack (a hammer/spanner tool that can double as a melee weapon) against a nearby surface can also draw the xenomorph into the area.
must avoid, not confront. Entering a new location, or encountering a load screen, often indicates escape and thus allows the player the acknowledgement of success. The humans and the androids have the capacity to be fought, but as ChristopherOdd demonstrates (as compared to Markiplier), it is not always obligatory to do so.

Fear is largely cognitive in its function and physiological in its expression (Hill 2004; LeDoux 1996; Perron 2005); we evaluate stimuli and have a response to it as a reflection of Gregg’s object association (2010). The cognitive evaluation is emphasised within a videogame, where, irrespective of the realness of the ‘monster’, or the realness of the threat, the fear that players feel remains a real emotional response—at least in terms of the fictionality of the game narrative. As such, a game in which players can choose how to respond to various stimuli is of benefit to examine differences in embodied expressions of cognitive decision-making.

In terms of emotional psychology, the reaction to fear—though potentially varied—are instinctual and involuntary. After all, ‘Escaping from danger is something that all animals have to do to survive’ (LeDoux 1996: 207). Gray refers to fight and flight in relation to ‘three f’s, the third of which is ‘freezing’:

Limiting ourselves to the most general statement possible, we may say that a frightened animal is most likely to try one of the three F’s—freezing (keeping absolutely still and silent), flight, or fight—when he is faced with a punishment or the threat of a punishment; or he may learn something quite new that will terminate the danger to keep him out of the dangerous situation in the future. That most interesting of animals, Man, behaves in much the same way (1972: 10).
Perron draws upon Gray as he discusses the manner in which ‘ludic fright elicits real fear’ (2005: n.p), the ‘ecological emotion’ as defined by Frome (2008). Despite a player’s fear being ‘rooted in the fictional world’ (Perron 2005) it is the perception of the stimuli as though it were real that is the emphasis of embodied processes. LeDoux (1996) compares the human response to animal responses when he describes the psychophysical changes that occur during stressful situations, such as the importance of threat overruling other stimuli. This is expressed in moments of play when the locating or threat of the xenomorph overrides any other prerogatives—such as searching for collectable objects or exploring side rooms/tasks. While players can be taught what is frightening—what LeDoux refers to as the ‘conditioned stimulus’ (1996: 143)—the physiological responses are instinctive and exist independent of any learned stimuli or response.

This reflects the emotional aspects of ‘art-horror’ (Carroll 1990) within the audience, which ‘mirror those of the positive human characters in certain, but not all respects’ (18). As Matt Hills notes, the mirroring means that the audience should empathise with the character’s assessments of their environment (if the character is scared, the audience should also be scared), but whilst the character within the fictional environment believes the horrifying element is real (such as the presence of a monster) ‘the audience obviously does not, given that they are experiencing art-horror’ (2005: 15). Frome identifies this ‘art-horror’ as being ‘ecological

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54 According to LeDoux, ‘it is well known that soldiers in battle fail to notice injuries that would, under less traumatic circumstances, be excruciatingly painful. Similarly, a rat, when exposed to a cat, will fail to notice painful heat applied to its tail (132). In the face of an overall threat, the pain suppression of organisms allows ‘the organism to use its resources to deal with the most significant danger’ (132).
55 The freezing response, however, is not solely present during the exposure to conditioned fear stimuli. LeDoux notes in experimentation with rats and fear responses demonstrate how rats freeze in the presence of a predator (a cat). Even laboratory-bred rats that had never before encountered the predator will freeze in the presence of the cat. Theoretically born of a Darwinian concept of survival, the fact that the response is a universal one regardless of prior exposure to the fear stimuli lends credence to the authenticity of these survival-based fear responses.
emotion’ (2008: 833), drawing the distinction between that and ‘artifact[sp] emotion’ (ibid), which ‘responds to a videogame at the level of representation’ (ibid) whereas ecological emotion ‘responds to what the videogame represents and responds as if it were real’ (ibid, emphasis mine). This ‘fight or flight or freeze’ response reflects the manner in which fear exists as a survival-oriented emotion (LeDoux 1996), and therefore reflects the manner in which players are encouraged to engage with hostile forces within game experiences.

![Figure 4.12 Markiplier prepares to throw a noisemaker to distract the xenomorph. Markiplier Video 5 minute 29:25](image)

In *Alien: Isolation*, various components must be acquired to create improvised devices like pipe bombs, smoke grenades and noise makers, flares, and batteries must be found for Amanda’s
flashlight to be powered. As Therrien notes, in ‘a context where ammunition is hard to find, players are more likely to use these resources very carefully’ (2009: 37) and the ‘scarcity of resources thus favours a potentially more methodological attitude with regards to fighting or shooting mechanics’ (37–38)⁵６.

Markiplier and ChristopherOdd respond to the xenomorph in Alien: Isolation as if the threat were a real one, supporting the rules of the game through their engagement that the xenomorph cannot be killed by any means (aside from scripted events)⁵⁷ by never attempting to do so⁵⁸. Yet the way ChristopherOdd and Markiplier navigate their capacity to fight back against androids and humans, reflects their own nuanced and individualised play style, informed by their cognitive decision making as well as reflecting their unconscious personality traits.

The same sort of recklessness that has Markiplier disregarding the potential threat of the xenomorph could potentially be represented in his willingness to confront enemies when presented with a means to fight back. Once he has a means to fight, Markiplier’s state of ‘suspense’ is reduced to a more ‘anxiety’-like state, or even less. Indeed, in many situations where humans fire upon him, Markiplier shows no visible or audible signs of what Vachiratamporn et al. describe as representing the ‘suspense’ or ‘anxiety’ states (2015), and do not reflect Carroll’s descriptions of ‘art-horror’ (1990). On the other hand, ChristopherOdd

⁵⁶ For Therrien, Resident Evil (Capcom 1996) marked a shift from the combative nature of survival-horror games toward a ‘new attitude toward confrontation’ (2009: 36), where strategic retreat and withdrawal from situations assists in a player’s chances for survival. Indeed, the capacity to flee ‘is actually quite a prevalent action in many horror-themed games’ (ibid), especially with regards to scarcity of resources.⁵⁷ And thus accepting that the way in which they might be killed—as proven within the films—via the use of guns or explosives is no longer applicable to the game experience.⁵⁸ Whilst it might be possible to interfere with the game’s programming to cause the alien to be ‘killable’ or to render the avatar/character of Amanda Ripley as ‘unkillable’—referred to colloquially as ‘godmode’—(and thus engage with Consalvo’s emphasis of ‘cheating’ as being a means to defy game designed restrictions and conventions), both Markiplier and ChristopherOdd only engage with the game as desired by the designers⁵⁸.
remains cautious and apprehensive, verbalising repeatedly his reluctance to fight or be discovered, regardless of his capacity to resist.

For a greater insight into how Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s embodied processes are informed by their awareness of how they can resist the hostile forces of the game, I wish to discuss the addition of the flamethrower to their arsenal—a weapon that allows them to directly attack and drive away the xenomorph (whereas previously they relied largely on distractions or actions taken from hiding. The flamethrower—not available early in the game—transforms the ‘flight’ obligation to a limited ‘fight’ capacity (again, largely optional, players can still sneak around the xenomorph at many points). The question I ask here is: how do their play habits change when they are given the ability to fight back against a previously infallible enemy, and how might this be observed within Let’s Play videos?

The Flamethrower and Adaptive AI

In the previous section I discussed how Vachiratamporn et al. and their definition of the three ‘pre-fear affect’ states (2015: 47) help us evaluate observed game experiences within a survival-horror situation. Their fear affect states of ‘neutral’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘suspense’ allowed us to identify and label the way in which Markiplier and ChristopherOdd engaged with the unkillable threat of the xenomorph in Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014). Within this section, I wish to discuss what happens to those evaluations when their assessment of the threat’s inability to be defeated is changed, when they are offered the ability to fight back.

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59 Even in the moments where ChristopherOdd is forced to kill a human NPC, he apologises to the NPC after the fact.
During Mission 10—‘The Trap’ (Video 8 for Markiplier and Video 15 for ChristopherOdd)—the player gains access to a flamethrower weapon. Thus far, neither Markiplier nor ChristopherOdd have retaliated directly against the xenomorph. As such, cognitive embodied processes are necessarily informed by the understanding that being discovered by the xenomorph immediately results in death, failure, and a forced repetition of the previous section, resulting in future avoidant responses. The introduction of the flamethrower presents a means for the player to ‘hurt’ the xenomorph, forcing it to flee from the player. Comparing Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s videos we are able to observe how players respond to change in available inputs for cognitive decision-making.

Figure 4.13 ChristopherOdd receives the flamethrower. ChristopherOdd Video 15 minute 0:49
Embodiment, as we conceptualise it, is the result of a combination of inputs and outputs, the game acting on the player and the player acting on the game, which in turn affect the ongoing game-play experiences. The example here I wish to use is the differing manner in the flamethrower changes the game play styles of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd. What is immediately and readily apparent for Markiplier is that he becomes more confident in his play. In the previous section I noted his ‘anxiety’ state was far less frequent than ChristopherOdd’s, but with the introduction of the flamethrower, Markiplier almost never enters a state of ‘suspense’, because the imminent arrival of the xenomorph is no longer truly frightening for him and his time spent in the state of ‘anxiety’ is far lessened. Indeed, when the xenomorph arrives within the environment, he returns to his ‘neutral’ behaviours of standing upright and moving quickly about his environment. Except this time, it is to confront the xenomorph, rather than disregarding its implied threat (see Figure 4.13).
Markiplier comments on his own critical self-awareness of his attitude toward the flamethrower when he finally begins to run low on flamethrower fuel (100 units out of a potential 600 total, which would result in about 5 seconds of flame):

I actually kinda like it better now that I’m completely out of flamethrower fuel because it brings back the threat, and the threat is really what makes this game terrifying. It’s just like “Oh my God, I’m dead!” like, all the time. That’s exactly what I want out of this game. So I’m very happy to be out of all my flamethrower fuel. (Markiplier Video 8 min 42:30)
This self-reflexivity and critical self-awareness will feature more prominently in Chapter Four and the case study of *Outlast* (Red Barrels 2013). For now, it reinforces the manner in which Markiplier approaches the addition of the flamethrower to his arsenal—it makes him less frightened.

ChristopherOdd, on the other hand, has his states of ‘neutrality’ and ‘anxiety’ largely unchanged. He remains highly cautious when he is aware that the xenomorph *might* be present, exhibiting the same behaviours as he did prior to the addition of the flamethrower (crouching, hiding, checking his motion tracker, etc.). Resultantly, ChristopherOdd attracts the xenomorph far less than Markiplier, still able to use stealth to navigate around it, and uses the flamethrower quite infrequently. Unlike Markiplier, however, ChristopherOdd often uses the flamethrower pre-emptively, as a result of his panic (See Figure 4.15). This creates a comparative fuel consumption rate within the ‘ammunition’ of the flamethrower to Markiplier. As noted earlier, the loss of fuel equates to the loss of the flamethrower, leaving the player vulnerable to the heightened presence of the xenomorph. For ChristopherOdd, the awareness of this risk causes him to hesitate in using it initially, whereas Markiplier encounters this situation quickly through his reckless use of the weapon.
The utilisation of the flamethrower between the two experiences also had an unexpected impact by demonstrating a change in behaviour of the xenomorph. Like Markiplier and ChristopherOdd, it adapts to the presence of the flamethrower, an adaptation that relies upon the frequency with which the player uses the weapon. For ChristopherOdd, the flamethrower appears to have a consistent result—the xenomorph flees with a small jet of flame (approximately 2 to 3 seconds at maximum). For Markiplier, the xenomorph appears to become used to the presence of the flamethrower, recognising the weapon as it is pointed at it (see Figure 4.16) and can be observed stalking Markiplier from outside the flamethrower’s range (see Figure 4.17).
The xenomorph also begins to attack through the ‘pain’ of the flamethrower. If Markiplier delays using the weapon before the xenomorph get into a certain range, it will charge him regardless (see Figure 4.18). Whilst this is (usually) not fatal for Markiplier, the attack knocks Amanda over, resulting in a momentary loss of control over the avatar and disorientation for the player\textsuperscript{60}. It also has the added result of lowering Amanda’s health each time it does so. A tackle at the appropriately low health will be sufficient to kill Amanda (by depleting her remaining health), and thus cues an ‘execution’ style animation by the xenomorph\textsuperscript{61}.

\textsuperscript{60} The view is forced to look at the ceiling and the avatar must complete a ‘rising’ animation during which the xenomorph is not visible and the player cannot control or direct her gaze.

\textsuperscript{61} These execution animations rob the player of the ability to control the avatar, forced to watch helplessly as the xenomorph dispatches Amanda. A similar situation arises in the paper by Habel and Kooyman (2013) in which agency is utilised as a means of emphasising terror within a player as they are experiencing a loss of control of their avatar, and are left to watch the protagonist of \textit{Dead Space} (Visceral Games 2008) Isaac Clarke, be eviscerated, beheaded, bisected, crushed, or devoured.
Figure 4.16 The xenomorph recoils from the flamethrower, covering its face despite the fact that it has not been used. Markiplier Video 13 minute 55:46

Figure 4.17 Markiplier is stalked by a xenomorph through the hive. The xenomorph follows him slowly, staying just out of the reach of the flamethrower. Markiplier Video 12 minute 1:54
Whilst this is reflective of the design of the game, it nonetheless impacts upon the presented Let’s Play videos for both players. In this, Let’s Play videos showcase how two play experiences encounter an in-game design element—or in the case of ChristopherOdd, do not necessarily encounter it with any direct and obvious impact on their play experience. As such, Let’s Play videos offer value to the structuralist-oriented approaches to games by presenting practical, real-world examples of players engaging with videogame design elements.

For *Alien: Isolation*, the altered behaviour of the xenomorph is reflective of an ‘adaptive AI’, which is a ‘technique that uses AI to learn player’s behaviour and adapts the gameplay based upon this information’ (Johnson 2014: 13). The examples provided by Johnson discuss ways in which the adaptive AI can be beneficial to the player—such as ‘smart’ tutorials provided by the *Elder Scrolls* RPG series by Bethesda (such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* 2013 or *The
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (2006) or companion NPC (non-playable characters) in Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception (Naughty Dog Software 2011)—this AI can also make games more difficult for players.

Game AI can also be utilised by game developers to vary the difficulty levels of a game, usually to the desires of the player. It can be adjusted (usually in the ‘difficulty settings’ of games) to make the game easier or harder, dependant on what the player desires in their game experience. For players looking for a challenge, the AI settings can cause NPC’s to ‘be more accurate in their shooting, or there could be more NPCs attacking a player at once’ (Johnson 2014: 14). A player seeking an easier or more narrative-focused experience can set the AI to have oppositional NPCs ‘less accurate in shooting, move slower, or make tactical mistakes or poor decisions’ (ibid).62

Within Alien: Isolation, the AI of the xenomorph demonstrates the capacity to ‘learn’ from a player’s decisions and actions. This capacity to learn is greater and more advanced on higher difficulties, making the survival-horror experience of Alien: Isolation harder and far less predictable, but are all largely dependent on what the player does within the game.63 If Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s encounters with the xenomorph are accurate, then multiple players should observe this adaptive behaviour from the AI. Indeed, several forum posts on various websites discuss the encounters with the xenomorph and its changing responses to the

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62 An example of this setting dichotomy can be found in the Mass Effect series by Bioware, which allows players to have a challenging ‘nightmare’ mode in combat where enemies would be stronger, hit harder, and be more tactical. The narrative mode had enemies make poor decisions, not utilise cover, have less health or no shields and attack in smaller numbers.

63 The flamethrower serves as an example. Should a player use a single device (such as the flare seen above in Figure 3.) the xenomorph may begin to ignore the flare, learning that it is just a distraction. However this was not properly observed through the experiences of the two players chosen.
flamethrower. A comment by user ‘Will414’ on the gamefaqs.com forum in 2014 (the forum does not provide exact dates) notes how he observed the change in the xenomorph’s behaviour:

It was also interesting to see how the Alien not only recognised the flamethrower, but also began to understand that it didn’t need to fear it. At first, just a tiny puff of flame would send it scurrying, and the threat of flame would hold it back briefly. The more I relied on it, though, the more flame it took before the Alien would back off. By the end I was using 50-60 units before it would retreat, when at first 5-8 was enough.64

Another post (Figure 4.19) corroborated this finding in stating that ‘the Creature’ (xenomorph) behaves cautiously, ‘will only approach slowly’ and charge once it reaches a ‘critical distance’. The author ‘TELVM’, notes that if a player keeps ‘pointing the flamer at it while retreating backwards, maintaining it outside the critical distance, it’ll stalk us creepily’ (Figure 4.15)

Figure 4.19 User TELVM uses YouTube as a means to provide proof for their witnessing of the xenomorph ‘learning’ how the flamethrower works. Taken from http://forums.alienisolation.com/forum/main-category/main-forum/24225-he-xenomorph-learns-to-fear-the-flamethrower

64 At the time of writing this, this post could be read in its entirety at http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/751154-alien-isolation/70278440?page=1
Here, other players lend their experiences to the confirmation of an in-game event that are not experienced by all players. This confirmation occurs within other Let’s Play videos as well, but so too does the experience of ChristopherOdd where the xenomorph does not exhibit such adaptive behaviour. Importantly for this thesis, this divergence cannot truly be appreciated, or even noticed, if only one experience was used for the analysis. Rather, it necessitated the comparison of different play experiences over an extended duration of time. Using Let’s Play videos removes the hypothetical and grounds the experience within a player’s lived processes, processes that are inherently unique, and inherently phenomenological. It therefore benefits a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of videogame play experiences to treat those experiences as being as phenomenological as our own lived ones.

This is what I would argue is a primary concern with procedural or structuralist oriented approaches that hypothesise an ideal player, or player-researcher positioning. Insight into what it means to play a game can be lost or missed due to merely never being exposed to them. The player’s influence upon the game invariably impacts on the videogame that is played. If we were to consider ChristopherOdd as the hypothetical researcher, then it demonstrates how a single experience of *Alien: Isolation* presents only a limited perspective. Alternately, if we considered Markiplier as the player-researcher, the adaptability of the xenomorph might be construed as ‘scripted’ and inevitable in their occurrence. In ascribing to phenomenological theories of embodiment, all videogame play experiences are valid. But should we consider that each one is limited in its exposure, comparing experiences is the only way in which to gain a more holistic understanding of what it means to play a videogame. It is here, I posit, that Let’s Play videos contribute in an invaluable and indispensable way to methodologies of videogame play experiential analysis.
Conclusion

This chapter involved comparing the observable play experiences of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd through the videogame *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly 2014). Using two experiences to compare and contrast, I emphasise the manner in which a researcher is able to visually analyse the gameplay experience-as-experienced. I focused on fear behaviours and responses within both players in relation to the unkillable antagonist (the xenomorph) and applied Vachiratamporn et al.’s theories of ‘pre-fear affects’ (2015). I compared these visible behaviours to those that emerge after the introduction of the flamethrower and how this influenced their videogame behaviour.

Through comparing the play experiences of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd, I was able to directly observe the difference between the actions of the xenomorph’s programmed AI ‘learning’ the flamethrower as a weapon. This adaptation of the AI had an impact on each play experience, but one that cannot be known within a single play experience. Without comparing one experience to another, a player might assume that the behaviour was simply normal of the game’s progression. Here, Let’s Play videos emphasise the importance of gaining access to videogame play experience-as-experienced—unexpected developments that can only be understood through comparative videogame play experiences.

This idea of variability of presented narratives is one that I wish to explore within the next chapter. *Alien: Isolation*’s programming allows for the visibility of this change, as the altered behaviour of the xenomorph falls within the confines of the behaviour of the antagonistic NPC. However, in the videogame *Outlast*, there exists much less room for variety. Indeed, from a proceduralist standpoint, there is very little within the design constraints of the game that allow for any sort of individual determinism on behalf of a player as to what their play experience is.
Nonetheless, within the Let’s Play videos observed, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd still exert idiosyncratic alterations on the events as they transpire, and as they are presented to the audience. As such, within Chapter Four of this thesis, I wish to posit that a Let’s Play video, in encapsulating the embodied game processes of a player, is presenting a play-story to the audience.
Chapter Four:

Reflexive Narrative and *Outlast*

Introduction

This dissertation has been an exploration into how the cultural activity of Let’s Play videos may allow researchers access to videogame play experiences-as-experienced. In order to present an example of this, I narrowed the focus to processes of embodiment within survival-horror videogames. Using the play experiences of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd within the game *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly 2014), the previous chapter explored the observable experience within a survival-horror game. Within this chapter, I wish to explore how the player’s verbalised commentary—which I will call ‘reflexive narrative’—assists a researcher into gaining insights into player processes and experiences.\(^{65}\)

This articulation takes the form of verbalisation of a player’s thoughts, conclusions, assumptions and decisions. Moving away from the controversial discussion of videogames and narrative analysis that ask whether videogames are stories, or whether stories can be videogames, I instead posit within this chapter that the videogame play experience-as-experienced is a player’s own narrative process. In playing, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd order the experiences of *Outlast* (Red Barrels 2013) from a *narrative-in-potentia* to their own unique play-story.

\(^{65}\) Remaining focused on embodiment as a phenomenological process, I approach these experiences through the concepts of avatar and character oriented embodiment within the videogame environment, especially in terms of player and avatar-character fusion. This will be defined solely by subjects Markiplier and ChristopherOdd, demonstrated through verbalisation of their ‘I/he’ relationship with the avatar-character Mike Upshur.
Self-Evaluative Play

“I don’t wanna do this anymore already.”

- ChristoperOdd Video 32 minute 18:06

When discussing his brief methodology of game selection, Bayliss concluded that external elements of gameplay, defined by Salen and Zimmerman’s four modes of interactivity as ‘cultural participation’ (2005: 70), are not relevant to examining the videogame play experience-as-experienced (2010: 37-38)66. Non-single-player games introduce a social and intrapersonal element to the videogame play experience that, according to Bayliss (2010), complicates matters for a researcher. Whilst I acknowledge that non-single-player games indeed require at least a concession to the engagement between players, the cultural contributory nature of Let’s Play videos are very relevant for this thesis.

Recording Let’s Play videos for the intent of uploading to YouTube potentially create a distinct element of play as the player verbalises their own internal processes67 for audience benefit. Both Markiplier and ChristopherOdd heavily narrate their game experiences and even directly speak to their future audience, deliberately and specifically addressing the intent to later upload the video to the internet for the purposes of viewing. This manifests itself within the opening few moments of both of their play experiences of Outlast, as Markiplier and ChristopherOdd both greet the, at the time, non-existent audiences68:

66 This is in regard to cultural activities that are external to the videogame play process (such as fan communities, forums, etc.), but also in terms of online or multiplayer games.
67 It is worth noting that there are ‘silent’ or ‘unspeaking’ Let’s Play videos where the player does not verbalise their presence at all.
68 It must be noted that the scope of this research did not include the observation of either player playing a game without the intent of uploading it; therefore whether or not they continue these behaviours as a part of their standardised play experiences must be assumed. However, for the purposes of this project, the fact that they do verbalise their experiences offers critical insight into their play processes.
I’ll just give you a quick–uh–overview of how I play these games. I tend to be extremely thorough. I try to find everything that I can and uh, I’ll read all of the notes, any books that we find, whatever it is. I’ll make sure I go through all of that stuff, because I feel that that really fleshes out the story. Uh. I won’t be rushing through it and, uh, I will not be doing a facecam because I want you guys to really focus on the game play as the developers intended it. (ChristopherOdd Video 31 minute 0:26)

Hello everybody! My name is Markiplier and welcome to let’s play: Outlast! Now I’ve been waiting for this game for a long time and I’m sure that many of you have as well! It’s one of the–uh–really big upcoming horror titles. It’s gonna be a longer let’s play so get settled in for a nice enjoyable ride. I know that says continue but I only clicked on the ‘new game’ button–uh–once. I’ve not played this game at all. I’ve actually intentionally avoided any sort of gameplay or trailer about this game. (Markiplier Video 15 minute 0:00)

Both of these sequences serve as an introduction directed specifically to the audience, and have little to no bearing on the game play experience itself. There are moments within the videogame that they once again directly address the audience, usually to explain something that they themselves have done, or decided to do. This chapter serves as an examination into how these verbalisations allow a researcher to explore the game along with the player, and how their monologue clearly iterates their logic.

If we consider the interface and the manner the player engages with it, as an element of embodied processes, how players first encounter and engage the particular interface controls the game. It also demonstrates how players encounter and perceive the rules of Outlast.
ChristopherOdd confesses to his audience: “I don’t know anything about this game, how it’s played. I don’t know… what type of mechanics there are. So I’m gonna be playing this along with you. Completely lost.” (ChristopherOdd Video 32 minute 4:36). As such, a player, and a researcher, will be able to directly observe how he engages with the rules. Within a game (any game) rules form the core of what is permissible as well as what is prohibited, and a player ‘is expected to follow strict principals of conduct in order to play a game’ (Perron 2014: 74). Within a videogame, the rules follow an even stricter adherence and as such, how a player engages with them informs their videogame play experience, thus their embodied processes.

In the opening sequence, an audience accompanies Markiplier as he discovers some of the interface mechanics. As the playable character lifts a video camera, transforming the view to see through the camera perspective, he notes: “Oh, I am playing through a camera! Hello! Miles Upshur. My nice press pass. I have night vision mode. Okay that’s pretty cool. So I got a couple tools at my disposal. Especially for recording.” (Markiplier Video 15 minute 3:00). As he explores a security booth he discovers the leaning mechanic, “Okay so I can lean to the right and to the left…” (minute 3:31) which he proceeds to explore back and forth briefly. He then approaches a gate, noting: “Alright so I don’t know what the interact button… Um. ‘Press the left mouse button to open the door slowly’.” (minute 3:40) Upon being informed by the instructions upon the screen, he proceeds to obey, experimenting with the mechanics as presented to him. He also does this when the screen presents a prompt on how “you can zoom in and out with the mouse wheel” (minute 6:12) (see Figure 5.1).
In terms of the camera, he almost immediately attempts to figure out the rules of using it, revealing the fact that he expects there to be some kind of drawback to his reliance upon the camera: “I don’t need this up. I don’t know if I have a battery or something.” (minute 4:40), and realising eventually that the night vision (which he incorrectly refers to as ‘infrared’) requires batteries, not the video camera itself, which he notes is an “interesting mechanic” (minute 8:20). He also quickly becomes aware that “I only have a very specific amount of battery for the infrared light, I need to just take that cautiously” (minute 8:28), showing that within the first ten minutes of his recorded play experience he is able to deduce that there is a consumable resource
for what might be an important mechanic. It is not yet apparent to Markiplier how important the mechanic of the night vision truly is, as there are parts of *Outlast* that are designed to be entirely lightless, and require the night vision to navigate.

Similarly, ChristopherOdd deduces “Oh. Only the night vision uses battery! Or maybe it just uses it more…” (ChristopherOdd Video 31 minute 8:43) by exploring the darkened environment with the night vision. At another point, when ChristopherOdd discovers a flashing (and thus interactable) battery, he obeys the on-screen command to pick it up (hit the ‘e’ key) and surmises “So when you pick up a battery when you have a *full* battery, it looks like you get an extra.” (minute 13:27)69.

69 ChristopherOdd demonstrates (see Figure 4.2) the importance of the night vision (and the camera) when he compares the environment without and with the night vision mode engaged. Note the timestamp (8:59 and 9:00) of the same video, looking at the exact same environment.
Figure 5.2 A comparison of the darkness versus the night vision in the game. Note the HUD that appears in the latter screencap. ChristopherOdd Video 31 minute 8:59 and 9:00 respectively.
The way that Markiplier and ChristopherOdd engage (and narrate this engagement) with a mechanic as simple as the fact that the night vision requires a battery demonstrates the way in which Bayliss, as mentioned previously, outlines ‘the manner in which a player takes action to implement their choices’ (2010: 36) In turn, this represents how the ‘progression from perception, to emotion (or motivation), to cognitive activity, and finally to motor action’ can be expressed within a game process, ‘blend[ing] and blur[ring] together’, ‘not consciously separated’ but rather a ‘part of the greater experiential whole’ (37). Markiplier understands that the night vision will, in some way, be important and that batteries are needed to power it. Due to the fact that he has limited batteries and must find new ones to replenish diminished ones, he decides to conserve the batteries by refraining to use the night vision on the video camera.

This process of engagement, evaluation, and reengagement—conceptualised by Myer as aforementioned ‘recursive contextualisation’ (2010)—provides an understanding into the actual interaction process. Myer explores the idea of ‘play’ as a means of engaging with the rules themselves, in playing around with the limitations of the game, not simply as a term to define the manner in which players navigate the game state. Even when engaging in ‘bad play’ in terms of simulations vs. games (22-23), players continuously exercise play in terms of recursive contextualisation. Play is, by the very nature of it being an active and personalised engagement, an ever-shifting and changing element of encounter, interpretation, and reencountering. Should a player break the rules of the game (such as in Consalvo’s work on cheating 2009a, 2014) they are still acknowledging the ‘contextual (or experiential) function of those game rules’ (23). As such, how players engage with a videogame’s rules are relevant to any videogame analysis, regardless of focus, especially for one that engages with embodiment.
Another more extensive example is a moment in video, where Markiplier spends several minutes moving around the area, clicking the interface in an attempt to accidentally discover something interactable that will allow him to progress. Ultimately, the time it takes Markiplier to enter the area (Video 18 minute 5:30) to locating the means to ascend to the next level (minute 8:26) spans almost three minutes. During this time, Markiplier narrates his own thought processes on how to advance:

What do I do? What am I doing? What am I doing, what am I doing? Just tell me what I’m doing. Ah, I don’t know what I’m doing. Am I trying to find something? Am I trying to find something? … There’s gotta be—there’s gotta be something in here that I need to find, right? Something I need to find… There’s gotta be something in these cells that I need. I mean, why else would I… why, why else would I do the thing?
(Markiplier Video 18 minute 6:45)

Markiplier voices his frustration and confusion at his scenario—intermittently commenting on the eeriness of the NPC following him around, which he considers to be among the more frightening things he has experienced within the game. Eventually, he simply approaches cells and begins clicking in an attempt to open them, noting “Can’t open that one” (7:41) before beginning to even question whether or not he is meant to be in that location (7:44). Finally, he discovers the means of progressing—a gurney positioned to allow him to ascend to the next level, “Maybe I can climb up? Can I climb up? Yeah! There we go! Okay. That should have been obvious. I’m a total idiot.” (8:24). Markiplier’s difficulties here present a unique moment to his game play experience, not only in how he encounters them but also in how he navigates them. Even in the event of a designer believing that the area might be difficult to navigate, they could not be expected to even guess how a player might try to figure out how to proceed.

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deductions include the fact that he must have some purpose to be in the area (such as stating repeatedly that there must be a reason for him to be there), a trial-and-error attempt to ‘accidentally’ successfully progress (repeatedly clicking the interface in an attempt to find something interactable), and even discussing various rules of the situation that might be presented to him (the guard on the floor and a playing card that might have been important).

A proceduralist or structuralist approach to the videogame moment of experience will note that the exact same sequence of events is required to be completed in the same order for a player to continue (player enters the room, approaches the gurney, hits the correct button in the correct location and thus ascends to the next floor). ChristopherOdd completes this sequence in under a minute (Video 35 minutes 15:42-16:34). That minute is spent circling the room, listening to and commenting on the various things the imprisoned patients are saying and at no point does he become aware of the straightjacket clad patient that is following him. This is even despite the fact that he can hear the footsteps (as they can be heard by an audience), and he is briefly seen in frame as ChristopherOdd turns around to locate the gurney. Here, ChristopherOdd, despite being given the same stimuli as Markiplier, not only successfully navigates the area much faster, but also incorrectly interprets, or completely misses, the visual and audio cues given to him. In this moment, Markiplier’s fear experience is subjectively worse than ChristopherOdd’s, merely through a series of unintentional observations.

A similar moment occurs when Markiplier, distressed by the threat of Chris Walker potentially catching and killing him, misses the escape route presented by the game (See Figure 5.3). Instead, Markiplier attempts to jump through the window through which Chris Walker gained entrance, a mechanic that has appeared previously in the game. The result is his death as Chris Walker corners him. The second time around, Markiplier immediately notices the vent—
no longer startled by Chris Walker’s sudden intrusion, as he knows it is happening. As he notes, “Oh! Well that would have been helpful to see! Instead of being mashed to death... I would have liked to have seen that vent open up!” (Markiplier Video 18 minute 1:14). Comparatively, ChristopherOdd immediately locates the exit of the vent and climbs into it (ChristopherOdd Video 35 minute 9:50), successfully escaping Chris Walker without the death experienced by Markiplier.  

Figure 5.3 Markiplier’s screen frames the potential escape route. Markiplier Video 35 minute 9:50

It would be unfeasible for me to spend this entire thesis annotating the discovery process of Outlast between Markiplier and ChristopherOdd. A great deal of it would be transcribing their navigation of the same sequence, with alternate dialogue over the top. However, this does not in any way diminish the importance of focusing upon the individual experience.
Here, we are able to address Bayliss’ ‘deeper question about the nature of their experience of videogame play—those invariant structures of experience that makes the videogame available to the player as an experience of videogame play’ (2010: 23-24). It is the ‘moment to moment unfolding of experience that arises during the course of videogame play’ (35) which a focus on a videogame’s ‘audio-visual qualities, level of challenge, and fictional content’ (Bayliss 2010: 34) ‘cannot by themselves, account for the actual experience of videogame play’ (35).

Let’s Play videos translate the narrative-in-potentia to the narrative actualisation. It becomes a matter of practicality to select, from the numerous expressions of embodied processes within the play sequence, a few important elements that reflect the narrative assistance that Markiplier and ChristopherOdd can contribute. As such, it would benefit this project to explore immediately visible, and perhaps primary representations of, embodied processes which is the manner in which the player is able to interact with the videogame environment through their ‘prosthetic’ extension (Klevjer 2012), the avatar.

**Avatars and Agency**

The protagonist character that the player controls in *Outlast*, Miles Upshur, serves as the surrogate body within the environment of the videogame, to which the torments of the Mount Massive Asylum are inflicted. How a player associates with (and through) this surrogate is indispensable both to embodiment and affect, therefore essential to understand in terms of the merging of the two in affective embodiment.

One of the biggest advantages games have over other media is how immersive a gaming experience can be. Since players are, to some extent,
able to determine the actions of the main character, while playing a game they project themselves into the main character much more than any other medium. (Rouse 2009: 21)

When ChristopherOdd notes, “He’s cutting off my fingers!” (ChristopherOdd Video 37 minute 13:56), it is quite obvious that the hostile NPC Doctor Traeger is not, in fact, removing ChristopherOdd’s fingers, but the fingers of the avatar Miles Upshur. When he declares, “Get me outta here!” (minute 14:11), ChristopherOdd is not the one tied to the chair, Miles Upshur is. Nothing happens to ChristopherOdd at all in that moment. He remains seated safely at his computer in his home in Canada. Nonetheless, ChristopherOdd uses the interface to ‘record’ the scene of the carnage and once again refers to the injuries inflicted to the avatar as though they had been inflicted to him: “This is the chair where he did it. This is where he cut my fingers off.” (minute 14:48). Again, when the player is treated to seeing the hand of the avatar pressed against a wall, ChristopherOdd notes with great discomfort: “Look at my hand!” (minute 15:16), despite the fact that it is not his hand (see Figure 5.4).
Similarly, ChristopherOdd refers to his potential permanent death, despite the fact that the death would be that of the player-character Mike Upshur, and the game would simply restart upon the death of Mike Upshur. “I figure that I might as well videotape as much as I can so that when I die—which will probably happen—whoever finds it will know exactly how it happens.” (Video 32 minute 1:40). There is a level of ambiguity of the ‘I’ to which ChristopherOdd is referring to within the first half of this sentence, but it is clear that when he refers to dying, he is referring to the death of Miles Upshur, as ChristopherOdd himself is never at risk of dying. He also
immerses himself more fully in the role of Miles Upshur as he contemplates *permanent* death, despite knowing that the game will simply restart at an automated checkpoint if he dies. Similarly, Markiplier also associates himself with being the avatar when he responds to the NPC Father Martin when he asks: “Well who are you, then?” with “Mike Upshur! Investigative reporter!” (Markiplier Video 15 minute 13:54).

Both Markiplier and ChristopherOdd verbalise these moments as if they were the character of Miles Upshur. Whilst this might be treated as a location displacement, or a merging of the player and character, to do so would enter into the notion of ‘immersive fallacy’ as raised by Salen and Zimmerman:

> The Immersive Fallacy world asserts that a player has an “immersive” relationship with the character, that to play the character is to *become* the character. In the immersive fallacy’s ideal game, the player would identify completely with the character, the game’s frame would drop away, and the player would lose him or herself within the game character. (2004: 453 emphasis in original)

To consider the player as *becoming* the character within the game would be at odds with how this project conceptualises embodiment—that it is an extension of the player’s phenomenological perceptual sense of self, not a complete transplant into a digital representation. A player never loses sight of the fact that they are playing a game and that they are not, in fact, in the game. If ChristopherOdd truly believed that his fingers were removed, he would be going to the hospital, not continuing to play (with fingers that now no longer exist). Indeed, if he thought his fingers

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72 As Farrow and Iacovides (2012) note, to consider a player totally immersed physiologically, perceptually, even cognitively, within a game’s digital environment would require technology we do not have, to the point of becoming a ‘techno-utopian fantasy’ (231).
were going to be removed, he would likely remove himself from his chair rather than sit and watch it happen.

This is the empathetic ‘art-horror’ outlined by Carroll (1990: 24) where players empathise with the positive character on-screen. ‘As the protagonist will be frightened by a monster, we will be scared (empathy), but we will also be concerned by the fact she is in anguish (sympathy)’ (Perron 2009: 135). Perron outlines survival-horror games as being an ‘experience of the self’ (ibid), in which the player, through integrating with the system via the interface (controller in Perron’s case), engaging with the avatar/character on an emotional level and being engaged with the game in a more sensory manner, is able to experience a ‘gestalt’ existence. But for this thesis, it has an even greater meaning for the potential of embodied processes within the game.

The player’s duality of experience ‘oscillating between identifying with the character as an extension of self, and relating to it as a separate, fictional entity’ (Aldred 2014: 355), or the ‘double-consciousness’ (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 453), grounds the player as the player, but with a connection to the avatar/character on the screen. Here, I would emphasise Klevjer’s (2012) concept of the phenomenological ‘prosthetic’ within the videogame state, where the ‘prosthetic agency’ (3 emphasis in original) acts as an ‘extension or a prosthesis of the player’s body’ (ibid). In the moment where ChristopherOdd regards the avatar’s finger as ‘his’, through the integration of the play state into his phenomenological bodily schema, it is, indeed, his finger.

To declare that it is not privileges one ‘finger’ over the other due to its physical properties. Indeed, if we are to talk about semantics, the ‘finger’ within a game is not a finger at all. It is a set of programmed variables that visually represent a recognisable finger. But through
perceptually assessing that it is, indeed, a finger, that is exactly what it becomes to
ChristopherOdd. Through phenomenologically assessing that the avatar is attached to him, in
some way, through the perspective shown through Miles Upshur’s ‘camera-body’ (Klevjer
2012), the finger phenomenologically becomes ‘his’, as indicated by his verbalisation.

![Figure 5.5](image_url)

*Figure 5.5 The camera is 'broken' from being dropped, distorting the corner view of the screen when a player looks through it. Markiplier Video 25 minute 1:21*

Klevjer (2012) centralises the role of the avatar in the embodied process of play, both as an
extension of the player’s phenomenological perceptual awareness and as the representation of the
player’s body within the game environment. For the latter, playing through an avatar ‘means
belonging to and being affected by the screen-projected environment—otherwise there would be no ecology, no threat or obstacle, no struggle, no being-in-the-world, no game’ (32). It is through this avatar that players are able to enact their agency; agency being ‘a perceived causality between one’s actions and the events in the game’ (Ekman and Lankoski 2009: 188). For Salen and Zimmerman, meaningful play ‘in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome’ (2004: 34).

Through agency, we would expect the player to be left with a ‘feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player’s intention’ (Mateas and Stern 2006: 649 emphasis mine). I emphasise intention here because we can then relate it to theories of embodiment by Klevjer (2012) who, following in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception (2002) describe the ‘intention’ as the orientation toward which the player’s direct their hybrid game body, which can be anything that takes their fancy at that time. This intention does not have to reflect the game’s goal at that point in time. Instead, it is entirely decided by the player, as to what they want to do, what they will attempt to do, and why they will attempt to do so.

This is particularly relevant for this thesis due to the fact that a Let’s Play video is the entirety of the narrative to which we are now exposed. From the first minute of the video to the last, an audience—recreational or analytical—is exposed only to what the player exposes them, thus influencing their viewing perspective through the shaping of their own. Let’s Play videos offer the direct, accurate and immediate description of the game in the moment of play. Importantly for this thesis and for our definition of embodiment, this game in the moment of play is narrated, for various reasons. As explored briefly in the previous chapter, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd’s self-reflective analysis allowed me to make estimations of their relative
emotional states in various situations. This is specifically in reference to Vachiratamporn et al. and their concept of ‘pre-fear affect’ states (2015: 46-47) of ‘neutral’, ‘anxiety’, and ‘suspense’. However, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd also demonstrate manners in which a Let’s Play creator narrates their game experience outside these affect states, and still inform the observer/researcher.

Labelling the verbalisation of their videogame play experiences as ‘narration’ has an added and perhaps unintended effect on the framing of videogame theoretical approaches. Narratologist Genette defined ‘narration’ as ‘the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place’ (1980: 27). Of course, engaging with videogames in narrative terms would risk entering the arena of the pseud-argument of narratology vs. ludology. Nonetheless, in the two decades since the emergence of videogame scholarly discourse, there are numerous works that would engage with such controversial subject in a far more comprehensive way. Rather, it is my stance that it is time to move past it and to acknowledge that both ludic and narrative elements are crucial for understanding important aspects of videogame play experiences, specifically in terms of considering a Let’s Play video as a player’s own narrative experience.

The space between player and videogame acting and reacting to and upon one another becomes one unique to them, one that exists only in that moment. Merleau-Ponty refers to a potential ‘space’ of action before a body as ‘free space in which what does not naturally exist may take on a semblance of existence’ (2002: 128). This ‘free space’—used by Merleau-Ponty to describe abstract movements—is occupied by the game, and that which does not ‘naturally exist’ becomes existent within the game play experience-as-experienced, encapsulated by the Let’s Play video.
By adding the element of ‘narration’, we can begin to conceptualise this moment not as merely a videogame play experience at the point of experience, but the construction of a linear event that can only progress in one way—forward. I propose here that a way of treating Let’s Play videos is not to consider them as the encapsulation of a game moment, but the telling of a videogame play narrative, acted upon by both player and the game, one that is essentially unique to the player at that given time. The videogame is not an ‘interactive narrative’, nor is the player the ‘reader’ of that narrative. Rather, both game and player are joint authors of a unique moment, retold in full within a Let’s Play video.

**Videogame Play Experience as Authorship**

As Salen and Zimmerman succinctly surmise: ‘Discussions of games “as interactive narratives” predictably fall into polarizing debates about linear vs. non-linear storytelling, of *games as stories or stories as games*’ (2004: 379). Here, Salen and Zimmerman are falling into the same category of focus as many others in the decade since in treating the game as the object of study. This thesis does not intend, in any way, to revisit or rekindle the contentious discussion of narratology vs. ludology. Instead, I wish to redirect the focus of the debate entirely, not toward the game nor the player, but the gestalt state that emerges from the union of the two—the videogame play experience at the moment of experience. For the final part of this thesis, I wish to propose that Let’s Play videos allow for a conceptualisation of the play experience as a singular, unique story, as told by, not navigated through, the player. The player orders the non-linear text with its infinite variables into a single narrative progression. It becomes the player’s story.
According to Myer, ‘narratives are a sort of semiotic template, recording and communicating the results of some previously completed human meaning-making’ (2010: 72). The reason that Myers stresses that videogames are ‘anti-narrative’ is due to the fact that this meaning-making process is ‘never previously completed but always presently ongoing’ (ibid). It is not the purpose of this thesis to engage with this discussion of the narrativeness of videogames, but the definition offered by Myer in terms of a videogame’s process of meaning-creation is nonetheless relevant.

A Let’s Play video’s asynchronous state allows a researcher to access the narrative of a player’s game play in the past, and thus enters the ‘completed’ state as defined by Myer. Similar to how Kirkland states that exploring ‘survival-horror in terms of narrative reveals much about the nature of the genre’, exploring it through the view of a Let’s Play as a narrated narrative process reveals much about player engagement. At the point of watching a Let’s Play video hosted in an asynchronous manner, it transforms the gameplay state into a past event, a completed event, and one that can be accessed by a researcher. In essence, it transforms the videogame experience into a narrative that allows us to experience the game play along with the player. In this section, I want to discuss the manner in which they narrate their own experience when engaging with the videogame’s various ‘rules’.

In his foundational work on cybertexts, Aarseth notes ‘I want this text to tell my story; the story that could not be without me’ (1997: 4). In his approach to videogames and narrative rules, Backe identifies Aarseth’s sentiment as a ‘struggle for narrative control’ (Backe 2012: 248). This struggle generally reflects the concept that the game developer(s) could be considered authors of the videogame narrative ‘story’, which in itself can be difficult to define due to the fact that videogames can often be developed by massive teams (Rouse 2014: 86-87). Contention can exist
between players and game developers, as Taylor discusses in her work (2002) on negotiated authorship in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) environments (2002a) using case studies as well as her own ethnographic experiences within the game *EverQuest* (Daybreak Game Company 1999).

Taylor addresses the struggle for author rights between the corporate owners of the videogame and its intellectual property, and the player who, through attributing meaning, character and story to their online avatar and their play experience, are authoring their own avatar-oriented narrative. Taylor addresses this ‘collective authorship’ (2002a: 238) as a delicate relationship between copyright and appropriation, and consumer creativity. Nonetheless, it is relevant for this thesis insomuch that it acknowledges the player as being a creator of their game experience. For this project, however, what is created is a unique single-player experience made available to an audience, and allowing a researcher insight into the videogame play experience-as-experienced.

More appropriate for this thesis is the work of Pearce who, in her paper on a ‘play-centric approach’ (Pearce 2004: 144), emphasises the manner in which videogames centre on the act of play and discusses the role of narrative in terms of a ‘shift in the definition of “author”’ (151). For Pearce, the *experiential narrative* is the ‘emergent narrative that develops out of the inherent “conflict” of the game as it is played, as it is experienced by the players themselves’ (145). When she discusses narrative in terms of interactivity, she stresses that an interactive narrative ‘must have a visibly different manifestation with each user’s individual input’ (152). If the visible difference that Peace refers to is a wholly unique narrative progression, then certainly the play experiences of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd in *Outlast* would not qualify. The scripted events that must transpire within the programmed order must still transpire in those orders so they may
progress. But this does not mean that their play experiences are not visibly different, as Pearce would require.

For example, within *Outlast*, Markiplier and ChristopherOdd encounter the requirement to locate a security key card in order to access the security control differently. Markiplier, in exploring his environment, accidentally encounters the key card on a guard (Markiplier Video 16 minute 2:36) prior to encountering the security control room (and thus the locked door). As a result, Markiplier announces, ‘Okay! I got a security card—what that means I do not know.’ (Markiplier Video 16 minute 2:36), demonstrating verbally that he has no basis for understanding why it is he requires the key card. Though someone knowing the events would already be aware, for Markiplier there is only the presumption that the item he picks up is important in one way or another due solely to the fact that he could pick it up.

ChristopherOdd, on the other hand, finds the security control first, and ventures into the rest of the floor of the asylum with the purpose of locating it. Specifically, he begins searching the bodies of guards that he had previously discovered, demonstrating a narrative assumption as to its potential location, “Oh nice!” (ChristopherOdd Video 33 minute 10:44, see Figure 5.6), verbalising his success upon finding it. Here they share the same sequential event (find the key card to gain access to the security control), but as written, two different moments based on the unconscious and unintentional choices and made by Markiplier and ChristopherOdd. In these sequences I have only written the events as they transpired for the player, using their own verbalisation of the moment.

It would not be possible to say that their choices were deliberate, as neither had any understanding of the opposite choice of what direction they decided to explore, beyond that they might be able to go somewhere else. “I think I’m s’posed to go this way!” (Markiplier Video 16
minute 0:54) is Markiplier’s declaration as he unintentionally heads toward the location of the security key card, in the opposite direction of the door. ChristopherOdd, on the other hand, mistakenly encounters a locked metal door and believes that way is obstructed (ChristopherOdd Video 33 minute 9:40), thus leading him to turn around and see an open corridor, toward the security control room.

Beyond individual interpretation and cognitive understanding, their exposure to the in-game elements alters their perception of their own chronological play. This experience is entirely unintentional, one that can be ignored by structuralist approaches, but in terms of narrative
analysis it reflects the *fabula* of play—the logic of events (Backe 2012). This goes beyond the player fulfilling a role of a detective or investigator, and instead instates them as the author of whatever narrative they have before them. As such, the ‘meaning’ that defines a player’s agency is one determined by the player, rather than the game, or the game designers. The idea of the player as the author is not a revolutionary one.

Bunting Jr, Hughes and Hetland (2012) discuss ‘hybrid-reality games’ (HGR) which they define as mobile games that transform physical spaces ‘into interactive game boards’ (de Silva 2006: 3) through the use of GPS (global positioning systems) and mobile technologies. In doing so, they present the player as an author, the creator of their own narrative or ‘game-story’. Bunting Jr, Hughes and Hetland focus on mobile games being the core of authorship in videogame play experiences, in which the ‘non-linear narrative’ of the haptic game interface and the designed elements of the videogame environment are the ‘canvas upon which all players’ various game-stories can be told’ (2012: 147).

This idea of a videogame as a game-story is highly relevant for Let’s Play videos, as Bunting Jr, Hughes and Hetland define game-story as ‘the experience of playing a game as opposed to the game’s “story”’ (159). It is an ‘outcome of the struggle between player agency and *ludic* gameworld’ (147 emphasis in original), and this struggle ‘generates the game-story of the player’ (ibid, emphasis mine). Whilst it is inevitable to draw on the importance of the game design in the unfolding of the narrative events of the game, the construction of the setting and the mechanics of the game itself, the Let’s Play video encapsulates Bunting Jr, Hughes and Hetland’s definition of ‘game-story’, and transforms the game experience into a delineated narrative with a beginning and an end, that is specific and unique to that player. Within the
context of the Let’s Play videos, the unintentional, the fortunate accidents and complete mistakes all inform the narrative chronology of events, the fabula (Bal 2009: 7).

In narrative theory, these minutiae serve as ‘catalysers’, a structuralist narratological term that describes the consecutive function between two cardinals (Backe 2012). A cardinal deals with ‘events that have consequences’ (246) and as a result catalysts serve to give the narrative cohesion that Ekman and Lankoski state must logically fit into the environmental narrative of the game (2009). These elements may appear small to narrative analysis, considered ‘not crucial and could be omitted or changed without significantly altering the story’ (Backe 2012: 246). It is, in essence, that player’s videogame experience story, or what I propose to call the experiential-narrative, all of which are informed by the decisions, the actions, the successes and the failures, the intent and orientation, the haptic and technosomatic interactions, and the sediment of sociocultural self that is imparted from the player into the gestalt entity that is the videogame play experience-as-experienced.

In my introduction, I opened with a vignette of how ChristopherOdd failed to recognise that the night vision mode of the game, established as being central to being able to progress (see Figures 5.7 and 5.8), allows him to see the WALRIDER, the main antagonist of the videogame. Similar to the xenomorph from Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014), the WALRIDER cannot be defeated or killed except for scripted events. Instead, a player must escape from it. In this moment, the comparative play-story of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd becomes identical in that they both appear to miss the fact that they can see the WALRIDER with the night vision. As such, these two comparative experiences are not sufficient for a holistic understanding of what it might mean to play Outlast, as neither demonstrate the capacity to observe the chasing swarm of nanomachines.
Here is where I emphasise that more, in-depth analysis of Let’s Play videos, across a greater number and variety of players, would contribute to additional comprehensive knowledge of the potential variables of play. In no way does their inaccurate assessment of the mechanic diminish or reduce the play-story of Markiplier or ChristopherOdd. Either through accidentally misinterpreting the events, or forgetting them due to the threat of imminent death, their stories become oriented around something far more prevalent than watching the WALRIDER—running from it.

Figure 5.7 ChristopherOdd watches the sequence in which the WALRIDER kills the other, main antagonist Chris Walker (Video 50 minute 11:21). Note that the form on the ground (Chris Walker) appears to be alone.
I am not, at any point, stating or suggesting that videogames are a story. I do not wish to revisit the pseudo-argument of narratology vs. ludology. Rather, I wish to explore the manner in which both ludic and narrative theories can contribute to a better understanding of videogame play experiences. If we are to understand Let’s Play videos as a narrative story, then it is one that must be approached with the understanding that the subject matter is a videogame. Returning to the example in Chapter One, it is the idea of what might arise from an experience in which a player never encounters the fatality of failing to fight off the chainsaw-wielding, sack-wearing maniac in *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2005).
It is the necessity of looking up alternate Let’s Play videos to see the WALRIDER in the night vision mode in *Outlast* that both Markiplier and ChristopherOdd fail to notice. It is the very fact of watching different Let’s Play videos of the exact same videogame, where the only difference is watching another player. Not just in entertainment, but also in how this might inform a more holistic understanding of not what *can* happen within a videogame, but what *does* happen in any one videogame play experience.

**Conclusion**

Within this chapter I sought to explore the manner in which players lend themselves to an external researcher observing their play processes, both by analysing their own experience and verbalising their thought processes. This was a complement to the previous chapter, which relied upon observable trends within the Let’s Play video, and emphasises a particular means of contribution that Let’s Play videos have for videogame play experience-as-experienced—players talk to their audience. They speak about their thoughts, their decisions, their conclusions and their appraisal of the situation.

This chapter was in no way able to convey anything but a preliminary, introductory examination of what Markiplier and ChristopherOdd experienced within the videogame *Outlast*. Though I wished to, I could not properly discuss the way they engaged with sound, cognitive decision-making, exploration, the way in which they attempted to make sense of their surroundings using narrative, or indeed the various tropes of the survival-horror genre that they discuss.

This chapter, like this thesis, is a preliminary exploration into what is a rich source of data for videogame play experiences, and cultural experiences. In the previous four chapters, I
have attempted to open up Let’s Play videos as a potential for extensive future analysis, which can dedicate the time and effort that Let’s Play videos, in all of their forms and focuses, deserve. Let’s Play videos, as well as a methodological assistance into videogame play experiences-as-experienced, also represent an important cultural shift in play activities and wider gamer subculture. As such, it is not possible for any one analysis to cover the entirety of Let’s Play videos as an activity, just as it is not possible for any one analysis to cover the entirety of videogames as an encompassing and unilateral definition. Instead, embracing Richardson’s concept of ‘medium-specific’ engagement, Let’s Play videos deserve as much individual attention as the videogames they demonstrate, and the players that play them.
Conclusion:

Let’s Play Videos and Videogame Play

Experiences-as-Experienced

This thesis has used the Let’s Play videos created by Markiplier and ChristopherOdd to gain insight into the single-player experiences of *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly 2014) and *Outlast* (Red Barrels 2013). Through these insights, I have posited that approaching embodiment from a phenomenological perspective creates an entirely unique play experience for each player, one that can serve to alter the experienced game narrative for each player in entirely different and unpredictable ways. Importantly, it emphasises that embodiment can only be understood through directly witnessing that experience. More procedural or structural theories of videogames only hypothesise an ideal player, rather than grounding play within actual, lived experience. The emergent cultural activity of Let’s Play videos, whilst an important evolution of videogame play themselves, offer researchers a means to access to these videogame play experiences-as-experienced.

The Story Thus Far

This thesis argues that embodiment is a process that is not only inseparable to the play experience through the virtue of being engaged with by a player, but one that is inherently phenomenological. Rather than try to position or separate play from everyday life—the ‘magic circle’—to play a videogame is to incorporate it into your lived experience, your technosomatic
interface, your sense of self in that moment. Let’s Play videos privilege a phenomenological conceptualisation of embodied play experiences due to the fact that a Let’s Play video is framing the first-person perspective of the player. What a player is seeing an audience is seeing. Importantly, what the playing is doing, and the resultant cause-and-effect of that doing on the game experience is also what the audience is seeing.

Through an analysis of two single-player games that can be considered inflexible in their narrative progressions, I was able to draw direct and distinct differences between the experiences of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd. When recorded, the phenomenological moment of play becomes ordered into a chronology of events that can be revisited/read/watched by an observer—the narrative-in-potentia to the narrative actualisation—and in doing so, the recording of a game creates the narrative of play—a play-story.
Much of videogame analysis has been mired in the baggage of adaptive terminology. Perhaps the most fundamental example of such is the argument-non-argument of ‘narratology vs. ludology’. Indeed, though this thesis did not in any way wish to address this out of date debate, it required discussion in the context of addressing narrativism and storytelling in relation to videogames. However, I wish to move beyond the idea of looking at the videogame as the narrative to be told, and the inherent jockeying for authorship between the player and the videogame designers.
Instead, I want to encapsulate the videogame play experience as the story being told, and what insights we may gain into what it means to play a particular videogame through examining that play experience. Throughout this thesis, I have posited an examination that is enabled through the window of a Let’s Play video. In this, ludology and narratology both have great insights in contributing understanding and further analysis of a videogame play experience-as-experienced, and must be considered tools in a much larger kit.

I attempted to tentatively label these videogame play experiences-as-experienced as ‘play-stories’, which are authored by a player’s ‘reflexive-narrative’. I use the term ‘reflexive’ as a means of emphasising the fact that it arises through the videogame play experience, but is only given meaning because of that videogame play experience pairing. Within a Let’s Play video, a player narrates their own play experience for the benefit of the audience, pairing their own processes and understanding of those processes with the visual representation of play. The reflexive narrative of Markiplier and ChristopherOdd within Outlast (Red Barrels 2013) served as the focus of Chapter Four of this thesis, whereas the visual representation of play in Alien: Isolation (Creative Assembly 2014) served as the focus of Chapter Three. The separation of these two approaches into their own chapter was not to delineate their contribution, but rather to consolidate the discussion on each one. The intent is that, within a Let’s Play analysis, the two would combine into a holistic approach that enriches the findings of that analysis. I discussed the methodological considerations behind videogame selection in Chapter Two.

This is not, of course, an attempt to replace existing analytical approaches that focus on procedural or structural elements of a videogame. Rather, in analysing videogame play experiences-as-experienced—and treating each unique and idiosyncratic expression of a play-story as being just as valid as another—we are able to enrich existing understandings on not what
it means to play any videogame, but offer extra insight into videogame play experiences-as-experienced through allowing a player to tell an audience (or researcher) what they are experiencing.

By ‘extra insight’ I couple Let’s Play videos with existing methodologies, both in containing play experiences in controlled environments (such as the methodology employed by Vachiratamporn et al. 2015 or Klimmt et al. 2010), as well as participant-observation oriented approaches (such as Taylor 2009), and emphasise that Let’s Play videos do not replace existing theories, but rather enrich them. In the hypothetical play situations outlined by researchers (such as Ekman and Lankoski 2009; Frome 2008; Habel and Kooyman 2013), the imagined player can be compared to real players through the use of direct, observable and embedded play experiences that are readily available. The player without the decapitated end, to use the example of Leon in Resident Evil 4 (Capcom 2005) by Perron (2009).

Treating a videogame play experience as phenomenological, one that is inevitably informed, and formed, by the specific contribution of the player, means that a design-oriented understanding of a videogame can only serve to create a hypothetical play experience. Similarly, should a researcher position themselves in the place of the player in order to understand what it means to play a game, a reliance on their own play experience supplants the hypothetical player with themselves, creating the same issue of singular exposure to a game as being limited in its capacity to know what might happen within a game. It is here that I propose that Let’s Play videos can assist in videogame play research.

In terms of methodology, however, it must be noted that no single thesis or study could hope to encompass the potential insights into videogame play activities that a methodology including Let’s Play videos might achieve. Nor, indeed, could I discuss within this thesis the
nature of Let’s Play videos as a larger cultural activity—either in their creation or their consumption.

Methods Reflections

This thesis has demonstrated but one example of many ways in which Let’s Play videos offer a rich avenue of analysis into contemporary videogame play activities, as well as insight into the videogame play experience as it is experienced. Of course, it serves only as an introduction to one potential utilisation of Let’s Play videos as a means of gaining insight into videogame play experiences, and was not able to address the richness of Let’s Play videos as a cultural expression of play and social gaming activities. As addressed briefly in Chapter One of this thesis, Let’s Play videos represent an emergent (and in some cases perhaps established) cultural entertainment industry that, in the case of some like PewDiePie and even Markiplier, earn their creators a substantial income.

Within this thesis, I only used two channels, and two videogames. The potential use of more channels, or more videogames (or both) remains possible. Taking consideration of the expansive and archival nature of YouTube, researchers could potentially find any gameplay experience in video format, going back many years. It would also be possible to explore the methodological assistance this availability of past videogame play experiences might be for future works. An example had the potential to rise when Markiplier and ChristopherOdd both made direct references to other videogames in their play experiences. Markiplier, especially, mentioned several prior play experiences, such as *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games 2010), *Vanish* (3DrunkMen 2014), and *Dead Space* (Visceral Games 2008) within his videos of *Alien: Isolation* and *Outlast*. Importantly, Markiplier’s channels feature play experiences of
Vanish and Amnesia: The Dark Descent, and this emphasis on asynchronicity and archival play footage could certainly serve as the focus of future analysis.

I explore the idea that we might be able to look at the player not as the reader of a narrative, nor the game as the narrative, but as the writer of their own narrative context, presented to an audience through a Let’s Play video, and unique to them and that play experience. I stress here ‘to that play experience’ because should the player return to the same game at some point in their future, that play experience will inevitably be informed by the one prior, in an actualisation of Myer’s ‘recursive contextualisation’ (2010) regardless of the space of time between experiences.

Larger videogame critical theory that approaches videogames from the perspective of narrative or co-authorship would regard both the player and the designer as cooperative authors. Indeed, the nature of the game and the designs implemented by the videogame developers must be taken into consideration when the videos are analysed. So too must ludic theories of the active nature of videogame participatory elements. However, that is best left for future research, as this thesis only served as a preliminary exploration into conceptualising the player as the author of their own narrative, that narrative being the Let’s Play video, not the game.

Let’s Play videos also enter the realm of ‘playbour’ (Kücklich 2005), and demonstrate ways in which players are exploring cultural activities and interpersonal gamic relations. With millions of watchers even within individual channels, Let’s Play videos also overlap with the arena of e-sports and spectatorship, turning videogames into forms of amateur serialised entertainment. Even when not discussing the activities or the content of the videogames or specific videogame play experiences, Let’s Play videos are rich in unexplored territory for cultural and social activities that extend even beyond the videogame subculture itself.
Figure 6.2 The Playlists offered by ChristopherOdd, organising his Let’s Play videos, an example of the sheer amount of videos available to a researcher.

Let’s Play Videos: Playing with play

Perron (2009) used an example of a chainsaw-wielding maniac in Resident Evil 4 (Capcom 2005) decapitating the main character, Leon, should the player fail to successfully fight the maniac off. However, it is entirely possible that a player might continue through the entire game without ever failing to make that fight, and thus would never know that the result is decapitation. It could be any number of gory ends, bisecting, impalement, perhaps an incomplete saw through the torso that left the screen showered in a fountain of blood. The assumption can be made, of course, that a player experiences in-game death from failing, but there might be a chance that the failure could result in the ability to retry this event several times before eventually dying.
There is also the chance that death might not be the result at all, instead a scripted sequence results in which the game wins for you. These hypotheticals could of course be circumvented with a knowledge of the design elements of the videogame, but in an approach from a purely single player-oriented perspective—in which one only knows what happens within the videogame by playing it—there is the risk that a player (be they researcher or not) will only experience a limited perspective.

For a researcher\textsuperscript{73}, this necessitates a comparative experience when their own play experience may not account for all the potential variables that might exist within any one videogame play experience, even within games that disallow for variables, and especially within games that emphasise them—such as the popular \textit{Mass Effect} (Bioware 2007, 2010, 2012) series that emphasises such differences. Furthermore, it is only through accessing these various videogame play experiences at the moment of experience that we are able to appreciate even the most nuanced of differences.

Within this thesis the analysis has been qualitative in nature. Let’s Play videos also offer the potential for quantitative analysis of play experiences. An example, perhaps, is the amount of players that select renegade versus paragon options in the \textit{Mass Effect} (Bioware 2007, 2010, 2012) series of games. Male versus female character selection in \textit{Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six: Vegas} 2 (Ubisoft 2008). Or, keeping in line with this thesis, whether or not a survival-horror videogame experience was able to elicit a reliable fear-response within its player base.

These are just a few potential future analyses that Let’s Play videos afford to researchers. The size of this thesis limited the analytical capacity and necessitated an exclusion of a number

\textsuperscript{73} This of course refers to a researcher that is not also the developer of the game.
of potential elements of focus. Indeed, it is not possible within any sort of singular research to cover the entirety of the substantial scale of potential approaches to Let’s Play videos, either as a means of insight into videogame play or as a cultural activity in and of themselves.

*In finis*

Let’s Play videos offer an immediate and readily accessible source of footage of videogame play experiences-as-experienced. We are not only able to witness how Leon might die in Perron’s example, but we might also witness a play experience of the videogame *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware 2015) where a player never even takes damage. We might experience the glitches and bugs that players are not aware of that alter the play processes—or even see how our own games are unexpectedly bugged. We can experience a speed run, where a player blows through a game in the fastest possible way. We can watch a player complete a higher difficulty than we are capable of. We are also able to see dozens, if not more, of the exact same videogame, played in the exact same way, all of which serve to miss a key design element that the game developers perhaps thought was entirely obvious.

Let’s Play root play experiences in the practical, the actual, and the real, showing researchers, other players, and designers what might have happen if you choose left instead of right, up instead of down, yes instead of no, or happen to glance behind you at that particular moment with the night vision up to see the spectral form of the WALRIDER chasing you down the hallway. As such, Let’s Play videos do not demonstrate what players can do within a game, but rather show what players are doing in a videogame play experience at that given moment.
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Appendix of videos

Markiplier

Alien: Isolation

Video 1
ALL BY MYSELF | Alien Isolation–Part 1
Published Oct 8 2014
Runtime 0:32:02

Video 2
GUESS WHO? | Alien Isolation–Part 2
Published Oct 9 2014
Runtime 0:25:29

Video 3
ANIMATRONICS + MANNEQUINS!? | Alien Isolation–Part 3
Published Oct 10 2014
Runtime 0:27:29

Video 4
STOP CHASING ME!! | Alien Isolation–Part 4
Published Oct 11 2014
Runtime 0:29:47

Video 5
ALIENS ARE FREAKIN TERRIFYING | Alien Isolation–Part 5
Published Oct 13 2014
Runtime 0:51:23

Video 6
BURN BABY BURN! | Alien Isolation–Play 6
Published Oct 14 2014
Runtime 0:49:20

Video 7
BACK TO THE BASICS!! | Alien Isolation–Part 7
Published Oct 16 2014
Runtime 0:58:34

Video 8
FLAMETHROWER HELL!! | Alien Isolation–Part 8
Published Oct 18 2014
Runtime 1:00:02

Video 9
GOODBYE FOREVER? | Alien Isolation–Part 9
Published Oct 20 2014
Runtime 0:54:09
Video 10    TOO MANY FEELS ;_; | Alien Isolation–Part 10
Published Oct 22 2014
Runtime 0:52:54

Video 11    GUESS WHO’S BACK?! | Alien Isolation–Part 11
Published Oct 23 2014
Runtime 0:54:58

Video 12    WELL EVERYTHING IS HORRIBLE NOW | Alien Isolation–Part 12
Published Oct 26 2014
Runtime 0:58:31

Video 13    DIE! DIE! DIE IN A FIRE!! | Alien Isolation–Part 13
Published Oct 28
Runtime 0:58:31

Video 14    RIPLEY, SIGNING OFF … | Alien Isolation–Part 14 (ENDING)
Published Oct 30
Runtime 0:58:31

Time
Total:  11:02:06
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Average: 00:47:18

Outlast

Video 15    Outlast | Part 1 | THE TERROR BEGINS
Published Sep 4 2012
Runtime 0:16:45

Video 16    Outlast | Part 2 | LEAVE ME ALONE ;_;
Published Sep 4 2013
Runtime 0:23:02

Video 17    Outlast | Part 3 | MONSTERS AROUND EVERY CORNER
Published Sep 5 2013
Runtime 0:21:17
Video 18  Outlast | Part 4 | SCARIEST MONSTER YET!!
Published Sep 5 2013
Runtime 0:19:19

Video 19  Outlast | Part 5 | STALKED IN THE SEWERS
Published Sep 5 2013
Runtime 0:19:57

Video 20  Outlast | Part 6 | CRAZY DOCTOR (SHUT UP NURSE!)
Published Sep 6 2013
Runtime 0:17:57

Video 21  Outlast | Part 7 | HERE LITTLE PIGGY…
Published Sep 6 2013
Runtime 0:17:06

Video 22  Outlast | Part 8 | JUMPSHARE!!
Published Sep 6 2013
Runtime 0:18:15

Video 23  Outlast | Part 9 | BASEMENT OF NIGHTMARES
Published Sep 7 2013
Runtime 0:16:01

Video 24  Outlast | Part 10 | MARKIPLIER LOSES EVERYTHING
Published Sep 7 2013
Runtime 0:19:27

Video 25  Outlast | Part 11 | THE SACRIFICE
Published Sep 7 2013
Runtime 0:20:54

Video 26  Outlast | Part 12 (Final) | THE END?
Published Sep 8 2013
Runtime 0:24:21
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Christopher Odd

Alien: Isolation

**Video 1**  
Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 1–Memories of Nostromo [HARD]  
Published Nov 9 2014  
Runtime 0:36:43

**Video 2**  
Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 2–A Friend In Axel [HARD]  
Published Nov 10 2014  
Runtime 0:26:51

**Video 3**  
Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 3–It Has Arrived [HARD]  
Published Nov 11 2014  
Runtime 0:20:17

**Video 4**  
Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 4–The Black Box [HARD]  
Published Nov 12 2014  
Runtime 0:28:06

**Video 5**  
Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 5–The Tail [HARD]  
Published Nov 13 2014  
Runtime 0:26:05

**Video 6**  
Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 6–Work Around The Working Joes [HARD]  
Published Nov 14 2014  
Runtime 0:29:04

**Video 7**  
Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 7–LIFE! [HARD]  
Published Nov 15 2014  
Runtime 0:19:26

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Video 8  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 8–Wait For It.
[HARD]
Published Nov 16 2014
Runtime 0:21:19

Video 9  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 9–Only The Manliest
Scream [HARD]
Published Nov 17 2014
Runtime 0:23:45

Video 10  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 10–Putting Out Fires
[HARD]
Published Nov 18 2014
Runtime 0:27:47

Video 11  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 11–Kaboom [HARD]
Published Nov 18 2014
Runtime 0:26:26

Video 12  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 12–Requisitions
Android [HARD]
Published Nov 20 2014
Runtime 0:28:17

Video 13  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 13–Marshal Waits
[HARD]
Published Nov 21 2014
Runtime 0:26:04

Video 14  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 14–The Origin?
[HARD]
Published Nov 22
Runtime 0:24:51
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<td>Video 15</td>
<td>Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 15–Flamethrower [HARD]</td>
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Published Dec 8 2014
Runtime 0:40:31

Video 30  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 30–Contact [HARD]
Published Dec 10 2014
Runtime 0:35:08

Video 31  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Alien Isolation [BLIND]–Part 31–Ending [HARD]
Published Dec 10 2014
Runtime 0:09:52

Time
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Max: 0:49:02
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Outlast

Video 32  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 1–Can I Outlast This Game?? God I Hope So! [BLIND]
Published Sep 4 2013
Runtime 0:19:02

Video 33  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 2–Chris Walker is a Big Mfer [BLIND]
Published Sep 5 2013
Runtime 0:23:13

Video 34  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 3–Father Martin [BLIND]
Published Sep 5 2013
Runtime 0:22:51

Video 35  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 4–Find A Way Out Of The Showers!
[BLIND]
Published Sep 6
Runtime 0:21:56

Published Sep 7 2013
Runtime 0:23:17

Video 37  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 6–The Torture Room [Gameplay Walkthrough Playthrough]
Published Sep 7 2013
Runtime 0:21:04

Video 38  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 7–I had to burn it. All of it [Gameplay Playthrough]
Published Sep 7 2013
Runtime 0:18:54

Video 39  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 8–The Sprinkler System [Gameplay Playthrough]
Published Sep 8 2013
Runtime 0:15:47

Video 40  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 9–Is This What Slender Is Like?
Published Sep 8 2013
Runtime 0:31:44

Video 41  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 10–Nazi War Crimes
Published Sep 8 2013
Runtime 0:31:52

Video 42  Mr. Odd–Let’s Play Outlast–Part 11–God Always Provides A Way
Published Sep 8 2013
Runtime 0:31:06
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