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# Post-casual Play

## Affect, Demand and Labour in Digital Gaming

Dale Leorke

### Abstract

*This article examines the concepts of “casual” and “hardcore” games in order to complicate the distinctiveness of these categories. While casual games have become a significant boon to the games industry, radically reconfiguring the composition of its audience, financial models and aesthetics, hardcore approaches to play are increasingly evident in games typically designated as “casual”. Meanwhile games targeted at a hardcore audience of players are integrating features that enable them to be played casually. In light of these concomitant developments I introduce the notion of “post-casual” to describe how game design and gaming cultures are able to draw on both casual and hardcore elements with very little conflict or friction between these seemingly opposing notions. The article will examine and discuss the game design and player cultures of several AAA “hardcore” games, such as Xenoblade Chronicles 2, and popular “casual” games such as Pokémon GO, in order to map the confluences that have emerged. I draw on existing interview data, game analysis, and from formal and informal reviews of games conducted in online press and communities. This data suggests three emerging trajectories within post-casual play: “fluid play”, “background play” and “extreme play” that together point towards the post-casualisation of digital games.*

### Keywords

*casual games, hardcore games, post-casual games, game design, player experiences*

## Introduction

As numerous game scholars and writers have pointed out, the terms casual and hardcore are ideological constructs that say more about how the labour and affective investment of players is valued than providing any meaningful insight into game design or player practices (Chess/Paul 2019; Hjorth/Richardson 2020; Vanderhoef 2013). Yet these terms remain doggedly in place with games journalism, scholarship and popular discourse—even though the games and players they supposedly encapsulate are increasingly converging and overlapping, rather than diverging or

fragmenting. Casual games have moved beyond free-to-play smartphone games and exercise games to influence virtually every gaming platform and genre, including those traditionally associated with “hardcore” play like JRPGs (Japanese Role-Playing Games). Meanwhile, casual games like *Pokémon GO* in turn often require levels of time and commitment to complete that would more commonly be described as “hardcore”. Far from fitting themselves around players’ existing schedules and being played as intermittent “snacks” (Alexander 2014: 196), casual games often produce an “affective entanglement” by weaving themselves into players’ daily lives through content and features that demand continual engagement (Keogh/Richardson 2018). Although the categories of casual and hardcore long been contested, reinforcing stereotypes and biases around gender and player practices, any discrete, linear understanding of these terms is becoming increasingly redundant as the games and players they encompass intersect and merge.

In this article, I unpack this convergence of casual and hardcore play in digital game play and propose the term “post-casual play” as a way of understanding this shift.<sup>1</sup> Post-casual play does not represent a period “after” casual games or signal the “demise” of casual players as they are absorbed into the mainstream game-playing audience more broadly. It captures a turning point where game design has adapted to assimilate both the casual and hardcore, furthering eroding the arbitrary opposition between these terms and reflecting their ongoing complication through game design, marketing and player practices. On one level post-casual play suggests that games have truly moved into the mainstream. Developers have successfully “captured” virtually every demographic of players, rather than creating games designed to appeal primarily to a “hardcore” or “casual audience”. But the post-casual turn is also connected to the demands placed on players in terms of the time and labour they commit to the game, as well as the affective experience—pleasure, frustration, gratification—that they derive from it. As such, post-casual play requires paying attention to how digital games figure into our shifting understanding of the relationship between work, leisure and play and the increasing inseparability of these realms (Gregg 2011; Johnson 2020; Kücklich 2005). But it also means going beyond a narrow focus on gameplay as a purely instrumental form of “playbour” to consider the affective experience and motivations of players as well (Anable 2018).

To accomplish this, I draw on analysis of game design and mechanics, quotes from forums and interviews and survey data from my previous research to trace how post-casual play is influencing all facets of digital gaming. This data reveals three trajectories within gameplay that capture the intersection of casual and hardcore game design in the post-casual era. First, “fluid play” has become possible as game difficulty is increasingly responsive and adaptive to players’ gaming skill and literacy. This fluidity is breaking down barriers and opening up

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1 Thanks to my colleague Tom Apperley for suggesting this term to me.

traditionally hardcore genres and franchises to a wider audience. Second, “background play” unfolds around idle games and idle features that fold play into the background “ambience” of everyday while also requiring sporadic but persistent input from players. This reshapes the flexibility of casual games into a continuous affective relationship that defies categorisation as either casual and hardcore. And third, “extreme play” occurs when seemingly casual games elicit behaviour and levels of commitment from players that they themselves perceive as “extreme”. This extreme play suggests the recuperation of hardcore investment in games through casual game mechanics. Together, these trajectories expose the arbitrary nature of casual/hardcore binaries, suggesting a re-examination and re-opening of player practices beyond these distinctions.

## Revisiting the hardcore/casual binary

The term “casual gaming” has carried a lot of baggage since its emergence in the mid-1990s (see Chess/Paul 2019: 109). It typically refers to the rise of games that are more accessible, interruptible and flexible with players’ time—enabling these games to appeal to people with less previous knowledge of gaming and available leisure time than digital games have demanded in the past. Casual gaming thus represents a turning point in videogame history, as game designers increasingly reached beyond the medium’s perceived “core” audience of teenage males to attract new demographics.

This shift was driven by three key developments: the growing ubiquity of smartphones and social networking platforms, the rise of digital distribution platforms like Steam and smartphone app stores, and the adoption of accessible game interfaces and input devices like touch screens and motion-sensor controllers. These developments all converged during the 2000s and together reduced the barriers of entry for gaming—in terms of owning a gaming device, having the knowledge and confidence to play them, and creating and distributing games. They opened up game design to smaller teams of independent developers, not just large, well-financed studios, who could release their games as apps or digital downloads. And they created a market for games that were more mobile, haptic, affordable and easily embedded within people’s daily routines.

Virtually since the term entered popular discourse, game journalists, commentators, players and the games industry itself have used the emergence of casual gaming to differentiate between “casual” and “hardcore” games and players. On the surface, these terms seem neutral: hardcore supposedly refers to challenging games that are played intensely, while casual encompasses games with accessible interfaces that are played in shorter bursts. But as Shira Chess and Christopher A. Paul (2019) note, while these terms were initially used lightly in gaming discourse, by the mid-2000s they were inflected with deeper meanings.

At this point, gaming magazines and websites increasingly ascribed negative connotations to casual games: they were labelled as “easy”, “shallow”, “kitsch” and “cheap” because they are usually “free to play” with profits earned through in-game purchases or ads (Anable 2018: 834). These connotations extended to the players of these games, trivialising their play as irregular, fleeting, fickle and lacking commitment or seriousness. Like a casual relationship and job, casual play is positioned through its *lack of investment* emotionally, mentally and in terms of labour and time.

Hardcore games, in contrast, invoke the image of intense, frantic, challenging and immersive play. They are therefore framed in gaming discourse as the purview of hardcore players—those prepared to hone their skills and dedicate serious time and effort to them. Hardcore play is qualified by its *extreme investment* in terms of labour and mental effort, imbuing it with a privileged status. As dictionary definitions of “hardcore” imply, these are the permanent, dedicated, faithful and unchanging “core” or nucleus of a group or movement; an unyielding or intransigent element that resists change.<sup>2</sup>

This hardcore/casual binary also perpetuates gendered stereotypes about gaming, with gaming discourse frequently situating hardcore within a masculine “gamer” identity while linking casual games with femininity, passivity and ignorance of gaming culture. Vanderhoef starkly outlines this discourse in his essay “Casual Threats”. He traces the term hardcore to a “masculine vulnerability” around gaming rooted in the medium’s deep culture of sexism and lack of diversity—which continues to persist today, despite relatively recent grassroots challenges. For a vocal subset of male “gamers” who have long felt the need to defend their medium from its representation in mainstream culture as “infantile” and “immature”, hardcore play represents the pure, “proper” style of gaming. As Chess and Paul argue, hardcore becomes synonymous with “hard work and skill, [tapping] into dominant cultural notions like meritocracy and the protestant work ethic” (2019: 109-10). Vanderhoef (2013) posits that these qualities compensate for gaming’s “low cultural status as a medium” in the minds of this vocal subset, elevating it to the level of a masculine sport or trade.

Meanwhile, casual games are routinely framed in games advertising, industry events, journalism and online commentary as feminine in terms of both their content and player base. They are often depicted as the domain of mothers or busy professional women looking for a momentary reprieve from stress. These stereotypes are subsequently deployed in social media posts and online comments

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2 See for example the Dictionary.com and Merriam-Webster online definitions: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hard-core>; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hardcore>. The former even includes a meaning for hardcore related to gaming, which defines it as applying to games “mastered through advanced skill” and their players.

to denigrate casual gaming and represent their players as non-serious dilators illiterate in gaming culture and therefore outsiders or intruders to gaming culture. In this perverse ideology, casual games are not a welcome expansion of gaming's diversity and reach. Instead they represent a threat to its (hard)core audience—culturally, in terms of gaming's perceived legitimacy and exclusivity as a masculine pursuit, and practically, in terms of its quality, share of retail space and coverage in gaming news outlets.

As a result, casual gaming is not merely a market segment, type of game or style of play. It is a highly loaded term that, for a deeply entrenched subset of the gaming industry and community, represents a threat to both the “gamer” identity and the industry itself. This discourse positions hardcore games and players as part of the “traditional”, “core” audience for digital gaming and casual as the “other”—everyone and everything else outside this core. It achieves this by framing both the *labour investment* and *affective engagement* of casual players—their skill base, time spent playing, knowledge about gaming and attachment to it—as *inferior* to their hardcore counterparts.

Game studies researchers have consistently shown that such distinctions are based on stereotypes about gender and player behaviour that are easily debunked by empirical research. Even as these terms first started to assume their current ideological connotations, Mia Consalvo (2009) and Jesper Juul (2010: 8-10; Ch 7) demonstrated that casual games often attracted amounts of labour and play time that could be described as hardcore, and vice versa. Brendan Keogh (2016: 44) builds on these discussions to argue that casual and hardcore are better described as “a spectrum of forms of attention, with many games falling somewhere in between”.

Lina Eklund's (2016) survey of Swedish players, which clusters games into casual, traditional and dedicated based on genre, shows that both casual and traditional games are “engaged in almost equally by men and women”, while dedicated games are less evenly matched but still represented by women players (26). Her research reflects statistical analysis of the U.S. market (Yee, 2017). Meanwhile, theorists like Aubrey Anable (2018) and Chess have recuperated the feminisation of casual games by exploring how they reflect the marginalisation of women's labour, gender inequalities in the workplace and the broader casualisation of work.

This research all points to casual and hardcore as extremely loose categories that many games and players move between fluidly, and that do not easily map on to particular demographics or communities. Games industry discourse has begrudgingly begun to reflect this blurring of the casual/hardcore dichotomy. For example, one blog post divides mobile games into four categories: core, midcore, casual and hyper-casual (Heinze 2017). Midcore has emerged as a descriptor for games that combine elements of both casual and hardcore play. But as Chess and Paul (2019: 116) note, it still perpetuates a hierarchical structure within the games market, positioning core games at its centre and casual on the periphery, with midcore as kind of mediator in-between.

Meanwhile, hyper-casual refers to games that are extremely simple in design and make money from ads rather than in-app purchases. But like casual games, they are imbued with negative connotations—they are “instant”, “minimalistic” and “require no commitment from the user” (Heinze 2017: n.p.). And they are reported on prominent websites with headlines like “Hypercasual Female Gamers Are Taking Over the Industry” (Anderton 2020) that (perhaps unintentionally) echo the discourse outlined above, which frames casual, feminised gaming as a threat. Rather than breaking down the hardcore/casual binary, terms like midcore and hyper-casual reflect the dominant game industry’s attempts to continually reposition emerging game genres and practices within this binary opposition.

As illustrated by both the game studies scholarship cited above and the game industry’s shifting terminology, the games and practices that casual and hardcore supposedly encompass are increasingly converging and overlapping—not diverging and fragmenting. Furthermore, this convergence is only accelerating as the number of people who both play games and have access to the tools for making them grow, solidifying certain game design elements and trends but also opening up new ones (Consalvo/Staines 2020; Witkowski 2021). Importantly, this shift is most visible in terms of the labour investment and affective engagement of players—precisely the traits that are repeatedly deployed in gaming discourse to distinguish between hardcore and casual players. This is evident in three shifts across game design and player practices, which can be summarised as *fluid play*, *background play* and *extreme play*.

First, whereas hardcore games have long been heralded as challenging and requiring a high level of gaming literacy in contrast to easy, accessible and “pay-to-win” casual games, in reality game difficulty has always been *fluid*. And game play is only becoming more fluid and responsive to players, as games across all genres and platforms embrace malleable difficulty settings such as “custom” and “assist” modes. These modes are opening genres typically deemed hardcore to new players and styles of play.

Second, while casual games are often dismissed as “distractions” from everyday life and hardcore games privileged for the attention and mastery they demand, the growth of “idle games” and “idle modes” reflect the way games have always captured their players’ attention in different ways. Mobile devices enable games to become more “ambient” and move into the *background*. But idle games and modes accomplish this in a way that makes them no less pervasively and deeply entangled in their players’ everyday practices, defying their categorisation through either casual or hardcore characteristics.

Lastly, research consistently demonstrates how some games deemed “casual” attract levels of time and commitment from players that are more akin to “hardcore”, especially from people who do not usually fit this stereotype. As games reach new audiences through accessible mechanics, interfaces and inputs (e.g. touch screens), it is unsurprising that a certain number of players will become invested in the game to lengths that they might deem *extreme*. But this extreme

investment stems from neither the game's "hard" difficulty nor interest from stereotypically "core" gamers. Instead, it reflects how casual games have always been played in non-casual ways, attracting a dedicated subset of players prepared to go beyond their usual levels of commitment and investment.

Together, the growing fluidity of game difficulty, prevalence of background play and extreme investment from certain players reflects what I term the *post-casualisation of play*. This term encompasses these three shifts, which illustrate both the ongoing bleed between casual and hardcore traits and the growing difficulty in separating them. Post-casual play does not literally mean the end of casual gaming, nor does it represent the absorption of so-called hardcore games into the mainstream, casual market—although I am wary that it might invoke these connotations for an ideologically skewed proportion of players. Instead, post-casual play is the *convergence of hardcore and casual styles of play within game design and practices, collapsing binary distinctions between them*.

Importantly, post-casual cannot be categorised according to specific gaming genres or player demographics—it is innate across all conceivable types of games and players. As a result, this means post-casual does not sit alongside existing categories like core, midcore or hyper-casual. Nor can it be positioned on the outside, periphery or even at the centre of gaming culture—it crosses these supposed divides and hierarchies. And perhaps most importantly, post-casualisation is a dynamic, ongoing *process* that brings to light the different levels of labour and affective investment that games have always demanded from players. Following the rise of casual gaming, the terms casual and hardcore took root as ideological expressions for the labour and affect involved in play. They arbitrarily separated these elements of game play into two diametrically opposed categories. Post-casualisation represents their opening up once again, as the distinctions between games and players that these terms encapsulate destabilise and the fluid, contingent and varied nature of play they have long suppressed return to the fore. In the next three sections, I discuss how each of these three trajectories accomplish this destabilisation of the hardcore/casual binary in turn.

## Fluid Play

Everything about *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* (Monolith Soft, 2017) for Nintendo Switch emphasises size and scale, signalling that it is only for the most devoted players. It is a JRPG set in a sprawling, open-world environment where humans live on the bodies of roaming "Titans", surrounded by a fathomless "cloud sea". It takes between approximately 64 to 258 hours to complete (How Long to Beat, n.d.) and features countless combat mechanics, battle combos and customisable weapons. And like its predecessor, the game offers several hundred seemingly indistinguishable side quests (Notis, 2020).



But players who own the game's Expansion Pass have access to a patch released in mid-2018 that added a new difficulty setting to the game: Custom. This setting, which players can utilise immediately after the game's tutorial, enables them to tweak a wide range of *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*'s parameters, customising its difficulty as they see fit. These parameters range from the enemy's damage, HP and attack frequency to the player's own HP, HP regeneration and combo multipliers (Xenoblade Wiki, n.d.). As one forum poster writes,

Want to farm thousands of SP in less than 10 minutes? DONE! Defeat the [level] 130 Kurodil [boss] with a level 20 party? DONE! [...] this mode is so good for reducing all grind and training your builds. I was first unsure of this beauty but now I'm really feeling it.<sup>3</sup>

Custom Mode does not remove the sprawling scale of *Xenoblade Chronicles* or the need to progress through its story linearly. But it does radically reconfigure its architecture to transform the game into, effectively, a seamlessly malleable adventure that can be played "casually", with players breezing through bosses and amassing XP and resources at vastly faster rates than most RPGs allow. This malleability recalls the "training modes" of games like *Super Smash Bros.*, where players can improve their skills by practicing against an NPC using a menu to adjust its aggression, passivity and health. But here it is extended throughout the entire experience of an open-world RPG—a genre that is built around laborious grinding for resources and XP to confront progressively tougher opponents and challenges.

Of course, players can also adjust these parameters to make the game more difficult, and Custom Mode was released alongside a more typical extreme difficulty mode called "Bringer of Chaos". But by enabling players to fluidly "mod" almost every aspect of the gameplay in real-time and implement their own "hyper-easy mode", the time and labour demanded of players drastically shifts. In the process, a game that would normally be a 60-hour-plus investment and accessible only to experienced players is opened up to new styles of play and potentially new audiences.

Most stereotypically "hardcore" games and genres have now implemented variations of a "casual mode". This mode typically adjusts the game's difficulty momentarily so players can pass a difficult enemy, area or obstacle. Often players are prompted to activate this mode after dying a certain number of times and it usually provides a form of "assisted play". This is the case in *Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition*, a remastered version of the first *Xenoblade Chronicles* game released in 2019, which prompts players to turn on "casual mode" after repeatedly dying to make various parameters easier.

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3 <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/204208-xenoblade-chronicles-2/76846640>

In the *Resident Evil 2* remake (Capcom, 2019), after dying several times the player is prompted with “assisted mode”, which makes enemies weaker, gradually restores the players’ health over time and activates “aim assist” to make weapons more accurate. Meanwhile, in the notoriously punishing platform game *Donkey Kong Country Returns* (Retro Studios, 2010), repeated deaths prompt the “tutorial pig” character to arrive offering a “super guide mode” that automates play entirely. It replaces the player’s avatars, Donkey and Diddy Kong, with the Super Kongs—computer-controlled versions of the characters that clear the current level as the player watches, albeit without receiving the items they collect. The Nintendo Switch version of the game’s sequel, *Donkey Kong: Tropical Freeze* (Retro Studios, 2018) reverts to a more traditional form of assisted play called “Funky Mode”. It enables players to control Funky Kong, who has more health, immunity to environmental hazards like spikes and a surfboard that aids movement.

This growing malleability of game difficulty modes represents the first tenant of post-casual play: fluid play. These modes more intricately customise the game’s difficulty than traditional easy/normal/hard modes, which reinforce the casual-hardcore binary. While this binary arbitrarily distils the labour of players into two extremes, with “hyper-casual” at one end and “masocore” at the other (Schweizer, 2016), casual modes fluidly adapt the game’s difficulty depending on the player’s demands at the time, fitting it to accommodate their skills rather than imposing a fixed difficulty setting. This enables them to play regardless of their gaming skillset and literacy, making the game—as a review of *Tropical Freeze* puts it—more “accessible, but not ‘easy’” (Farough, 2018: n.p.). Echoing the *Xenoblade* player quoted above, one *Resident Evil 2* player describes how the assisted mode opened up a previously inaccessible genre for them:

I’ve never seen a Resident Evil game to completion before by myself. I’m absolutely horrible at shooters, especially survival horror games. [...] The game was still extremely challenging for me, but I’m glad that I got to at least enjoy the story and ride it out to the end without being tied down by a lack of supplies/ammo or super tough scenes. I also enjoyed the fact that I could focus more on solving puzzles and backtracking than on dying constantly. This made the game much more realistic to me. I was able to beat the game in about 7 hours or so. I can’t wait for the 2nd run! And I might even play the game again on harder difficulties now that I know what to expect.<sup>4</sup>

Casual, assisted and Funky modes allow a greater degree of fluidity than previous difficulty settings. But they are still discrete settings fixed by the game’s algorithm, offered as an “opt-in” setting to make the game more accessible, rather than being wholly under players’ control. They are also activated by repeated deaths, explicitly

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4 [https://www.reddit.com/r/residentevil/comments/apj8jr/re2\\_remake\\_thank\\_you\\_assisted\\_mode/](https://www.reddit.com/r/residentevil/comments/apj8jr/re2_remake_thank_you_assisted_mode/)

linking them to the avoidance of failure and “wasted time” that are discursively framed as barriers for casual players. As Conway contends, they can also be a form of “hypo-ludicity”: features that partly or entirely automate aspects of gameplay, such as auto-saves, “matchmaking” players in multiplayer games based on parameters beyond their control and context buttons that automate character movement. While these features can be “empowering” and make the game more accessible for some players, Conway argues that through them “the danger inherent in losing and winning [becomes] subsumed beneath the protocol’s totalitarian heuristics.” In this sense, casual modes connect to familiar debates around freedom, agency and “counterplay” in games—the extent to which player’s actions can be opposed to, or are simply dictated by, the game’s algorithm (see Apperley/Dieter; Dyer-Witford/de Peuter, 2009). Conway writes,

If hyper-ludicity offers empowerment, through momentary ‘power-ups’ [...], rare in-game items and progression systems, and contra-ludicity offers resistance, through ‘power-downs’ [...], increasing enemies or a hostile environment, then hypo-ludicity offers nothing but absence: of empowerment, of resistance, of agency (Conway 2012, 38).

Conway clearly positions hypo- and hyper-ludicity within a casual-hardcore continuum. His article bemoans the decline of “real games” (Consalvo/Phelps, 2019) through casualisation, deliberately harkening back to the arcade—with its unforgiving binary win-loss state—as well as roguelikes and *Souls*-like games as the ideal of gaming. But I would argue fluid play has only complicated these distinctions further as casual modes blend customisation, automation, flexibility and hyper-, contra- and hypo-ludicity in virtually all genres of gaming as part of the post-casual turn. Rather than supplanting difficulty with accessibility and convenience or transforming “hardcore” games into casual ones, they represent the way casual play has refashioned game design in much more nuanced ways.

Casual modes enable fluid play, while still retaining the discrete difficulty settings that have long been embedded in game design. *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*’s Custom Mode represents a further evolution of this fluidity by opening up the game’s architecture to enable players complete, seamless control over how easy or challenging—“casual” or “hardcore”—the gameplay is. Custom Mode is still a discrete mode to be toggled on and off, but it further complicates the boundaries between hardcore and casual by flattening difficulty settings, rendering them present but redundant. At the same time, it also builds on the long history of modding games, whereby game environments and assets are tweaked into new experiences or adapted into entirely new products. Historically, modding has been associated with PC games, given their more open and modifiable architecture, and positioned as a form of creativity and counterplay. But more recently modding practices have been co-opted into game design through mainstream console and handheld game games, such as *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule, 2008), *WarioWare D.Y.I.* (Intelligent Systems, 2009) and *Super Mario Maker* (2015), that

provide players with toolkits to create their own content (see Johnson, 2020). Custom mode, then, extends this assimilation of modding into game design by enabling players to alter the game's parameters, under the rubric of the growing flexibility and customisation of gameplay that is a central tenet of the post-casual.

## Background Play

*Donkey Kong Country Returns'* aforementioned Super Kong mode is a kind of idle or auto-play mode, where players sit back and watch—or leave the game and return to it at another point—as the game “plays itself”. Although Super Kong Mode is designed to help struggling players effectively “skip” a difficult level, players must watch as the Kongs complete the level from start to finish, rather than immediately jumping to the next one. And it is possible to watch the entire game play itself this way, as long as the player enacts enough agency to kill their character several times at the start of each level. In this sense, although it is implemented to make the game's difficulty more fluid and responsive to players, it also overlaps with what I call background play—another category of post-casual play that is increasingly reshaping game design.

As Sonia Fizek (2018: 203) notes, most digital games today involve some level of automation, from crunching statistics and calculating damage or scores to the game subtly taking control over the avatar for key actions or scenes. But she also notes that automation in contemporary digital game design is traditionally obfuscated from the player, preserving the illusion that they have control over the avatar and game environment. The game might take agency away from the player during cutscenes or interactions with NPCs, but this is a momentary disruption that is continuous with gameplay. Some games and mods deliberately subvert this continuity, for example *Sim Settlements* (Livingston, 2017), a *Fallout 4* (Bethesda, 2015) mod that turns the game into a “city-building algorithmic spectacle” where the player is a “bystander” to the action rather than active agent (Fizek, 2018: 204). But more often automation has been used to support gameplay rather than take over it entirely.

With the emergence of “idle games”, however, automation is being more extensively incorporated into game design, opening them up to new audiences and enabling them to fit more flexibly into players' lives and daily routines. Idle games typically only require the player to interact with menus to initiate tasks, from gathering resources to undertaking battles, that are then automatically played out by the game's algorithm. Players can either watch them unfold in real-time or, more often, flip between windows or put their phone away and return when the task is complete to spend their resources or upgrade their characters before initiating the next set of tasks. Depending on the game and the player's investment in it, this absence might last a few moments, a few hours or even a few years at a time as the game “plays itself” with minimal or no input from the player.

In game studies, idle games have mostly been examined from a posthuman perspective. Ruffino (2018) and Fizek (2018) both note that these games' lack of concern for players' presence challenges anthropocentric notions of the "inherent" interactivity (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005) of games that "places the human at the center, or at an equal hierarchical importance" to the game's algorithm (Ruffino 2018: 2; see also Fizek, 2018; Giddings 2005). By decentring the player and relinquishing their control over the game's algorithm, idle games remind us that games are always a confluence of human and non-human actors (Galloway, 2006; Keogh, 2018). But they also invite reflection and speculation around the connection between humans and non-human and more-than-human species—particularly when climate change has highlighted both the destructiveness of anthropocentrism and the fragile interdependence between species. This is especially the case in games like *Everything* (O'Reilly, 2017), which enables players to move fluidly between more-than-human and non-human entities, from microbes to solar systems and everything in between, playing itself when left idle for more than a few moments. Meanwhile, as Ruffino (2018: 2) posits, idle games also invoke the possibility of games that continue to play themselves even after the extinction of humans, "shed[ding] light on the situatedness, temporality, and partiality of [...] both humans and games."

While this perspective is valuable, it also overlooks the way in which idle games and auto-play remain entangled in practices of labour and players' affective relationship with the game. In some cases, idle games and auto-play liberate the player of certain laborious tasks that would typically be demanded of them. They can "sit back" and "supervise" instead, as demonstrated by "hardcore" games from *Donkey Kong Country Returns*, whose Super Kongs momentarily help out players, to "casual clickers" like *Endless World* (Radiance Games, 2019) that collapse expansive, normally labour-intensive role-playing game worlds into a "casual clicker". *Pokémon GO*'s "Adventure Sync" is also a kind of "idle feature" since, when turned on, it counts the distance walked by players (in metres) even when the game is closed. This provides weekly rewards and allows players to hatch eggs and earn extra candy to level up Pokémon. Conversely, players can also use mods that hack the game's algorithm to automate and therefore bypass these kinds of tasks that would normally demand their time, presence and even physical mobility. Movement-simulation bots for *Pokémon GO*, for example, enable players to get "Adventure Sync" rewards without ever leaving their home, effectively expanding an idle feature into an idle game.

But idle games and auto-play can also be used to demand *more* labour from players and capture their time and attention in more subtle, but no less pervasive, ways than other digital games. As Keogh and Richardson argue, these games recede into the *background* of players' everyday lives, but also remain "in the background of the player's mind—not forgotten, but not the focus" (2018: 16). This makes them a type of "ambient play", flitting between the background and fore-

ground of players' attention and intermingling with their mundane practices and daily routines (2018: 19-20).

This happens most overtly when they are extensions of "traditional" or "hardcore" games. For example, *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) is the much-hyped final entry in the *Mass Effect* sci-fi trilogy that enables players to "import" their characters and decisions into each iteration. On its release it featured integration with an iOS app, *Mass Effect Datapad*, through the player's EA account and encouraged them to complete an idle minigame called "Galaxy at War". Via an interactive map players sent spaceship fleets on missions that took between 1-6 hours to complete, providing rewards and counting towards their overall "readiness" for *Mass Effect 3*'s final battle. Crucially, if the player's "readiness" level was between 50%-100% this dragged down their in-game capabilities to the same percentage as well, reducing their odds of success in the final mission. Their readiness also slowly diminished over time, so it needed to be continually boosted until players tackled the final mission.

Players could also increase their readiness by playing online multiplayer missions or the more traditional 3D shooter spin-off game *Mass Effect: Infiltrator*, also on iOS. But the *Datapad*'s idle missions offered players an automated and less time-intensive option for accomplishing this (see *Mass Effect Wiki* n.d.). By linking their in-game capabilities to a "readiness" modifier that was calculated through external play and by penalising players who didn't invest in it, the *Datapad* extended the *Mass Effect 3* world even more deeply into players' lives outside time spent playing the game. Checking the *Datapad* every few hours arguably made the game's high stakes—saving the entire galaxy—feel more important and even immersive, particularly as readiness declined after periods of inactivity. But it also ensured players' attention was continually captured by the game in-between play sessions, creeping into their non-play time every several hours via their smartphone.

*Mass Effect 3*'s *Datapad* is a very particular intrusion into players' lives through casual play that involves a fairly sophisticated networked infrastructure consisting of a blockbuster game, two apps—*Infiltrator* and *Datapad*—and an EA account that links them together. But most commercial, free-to-play idle games operate according to a similar logic, demanding that players intermittently but regularly check in to achieve progress and receive the gratification that comes from their "investment". Idle games allow gameplay to be more flexible around players' time—a core tenant of casual games (Juul 2010). But they also fragment the player's labour and spread it out across brief but consistent intervals, becoming a sporadic but ever-present preoccupation.

Paradoxically idle games minimise players' time spent with the game while also ensuring it is embedded into the routines and structure of their entire day. This is reinforced through notifications that appear on the smartphone or desktop screen updating them on task progress. Just as smartphones have allowed work to intrude into every facet of one's "intimate" life (Gregg 2011), idle games weave

casual play into every aspect of players' lives. This intimacy is also often bodily, tactile and affectionate. A buzz of the phone in the player's pocket against their leg alerts them a task has been completed, while later they might check a mission's status in bed before laying the phone down next to them. And of course, players can usually spend money through microtransactions to speed up missions or accumulate resources faster, reducing or eliminating entirely these waiting periods.

Far from decentering the human player or bringing about a world where games "play themselves" without human intervention, many idle games instead use these periods of idleness to bring expand gaming into players' lives through background play. Just as time is increasingly parcelled and measured in chunks of screen time and activity—commutes, meetings, Netflix episodes, workout routines—that are quantified, planned out in advance and regulated by apps, idle games package casual play into its most time-efficient and minimalist form. Through evenly and predictably spaced-out periods of reward and gratification they conscript players into an ongoing affective relationship that defies categorisation into casual or hardcore modes of play.

### **"Extreme" play**

The aforementioned movement-simulation mods of *Pokémon GO*, which allow players to hatch eggs and earn Pokémon candy without having to physically walk, reflect a desire to bypass the labour and "grinding" often required even in casual games. *Pokémon GO* offers players ways to speed up this process by purchasing items like "super egg incubators" that hatch eggs faster. But it requires players to either spend money or leave their Pokémon in gyms to earn coins—investing even more time in the game. The potential to avoid grinding by spending money—whether through microtransactions or lootboxes—reflects the growing fluidity of difficulty in games and what some perceive as the replacement of "skill" with "hypo-ludic" and pay-to-win features (Conway 2012). But it also signals, as Juul (2010: 8) has already pointed out, that so-called casual games are not always played casually. The time and investment they demand from players, while more interruptible, fluid and pervasive, is often still substantial—especially if players are unwilling or unable to spend real money or use mods to reduce it.

Location-based games like *Pokémon GO* in particular often tie rewards to movement, requiring players to physically move as well as interact with the game's interface to progress through the game. As I've argued elsewhere (Leorke 2018), the business model of most commercial location-based games is built around scarcity, where players must spend real money on bundles of items (Pokéballs, potions, energy, etc) required to play or grind repeatedly to earn them. And while many location-based games can be played sedentarily, collecting rare items or creatures usually requires that players explore their surroundings. So in location-based

games, grinding means not only tapping repeatedly at the smartphone screen, but also literally grinding the pavement.

Most commercial location-based games use the GPS tracker on the players' smartphone to track their movement, generating new content—creatures and items—as they move. Some location-based games, particularly fitness games like *Zombies, Run!* (Six to Start, 2012), also use the phone's accelerometer to count the number of steps and calories burned. And as noted in the previous section, *Pokémon GO*'s "Adventure Sync" uses the accelerometer as well as GPS to "ping" players' location up to 13 times per minute to calculate how many metres and steps they've walked (D'Anastasio/Mehrotra 2019). This provides tiered weekly rewards, plus eggs hatch and Pokémon buddies earn candy after a set number of kilometres. In location-based games, the player's commitment to the game is even more bodily—their movement converted into rewards, their every footstep and sometimes even heartbeat integrated into the game interface through GPS satellites and wearable devices like Fitbits.

Depending on how attached they are to the game, players might be encouraged to go to "extreme" lengths—both physically and through the game interface—to achieve these rewards. While behaviour like grinding, intense play sessions and gaming addiction are more commonly associated with "hardcore" games and players, they are just as prevalent in games that are branded "casual". This is evidenced by frequently recurring news stories about players accruing massive bills for free-to-play (but expensive-to-win) games like *Clash of Clans* (e.g. Kleinman 2019). But in location-based games, extreme behaviour might also be bodily—especially when rare items or creatures can only be obtained through "chance encounters" rather than in-app purchases.

Much has been written about how *Pokémon GO*'s success is tied to its successful blending of the *Pokémon* franchise with "casual" gameplay and a style of play that easily fits into the player's daily routine (see e.g. Keogh, 2017). But it is also an incredibly in-depth game with a vast—and continually growing—number of features, collectables, achievements and events that would require literally thousands of hours of gameplay to acquire. At the time of writing there are over 720 Pokémon that are mostly encountered randomly—many with "shadow" and extremely rare "shiny" versions that normally only have a 0.2% chance of appearing (The Silph Road, n.d.). There are also over 75 medals, each with four tiers to unlock, as well as daily research tasks, event-based tasks, online battle leagues and hourly raids. For a "casual game", completing even a fraction of this content requires at least as much commitment and gameplay time—both physical and digital—as any JRPG or RTS.

At the same time, *Pokémon GO* was enormously successful at attracting the coveted cohort of "casual players"—particularly during its first months of release. This unique confluence of a massively successful mainstream game that incorporates hardcore elements has produced what I call "extreme play" from some players, further exemplifying the conflation of casual and hardcore in the post-



casual play era. For example, in two separate surveys of Finnish Pokémon GO players conducted 3 years apart—in 2016 and 2019—a small but significant subset of respondents reported going to extreme lengths, such as playing long hours or walking until their legs ached, to catch or hatch Pokémon (see Koskinen et al 2019). In many cases, these were middle-aged players who would not typically engage in or be associated with this sort of behaviour. These middle-aged respondents described playing outdoors until after midnight when they had to start work early the next day (male, 48, 2016), catching Pokémon at a restaurant in the middle of dinner with family (female, 43, 2016) and walking back and forth at the airport to get PokéBalls (female, 55, 2016) (Koskinen et al 2019).

It is not only commercial, mainstream location-based games that encourage players to go to extreme lengths and push beyond their normal limits. *Wayfinder Live* is an augmented-reality location-based game designed by Troy Innocent and played in cities around the world, including Melbourne and Tampere, Finland, where I interviewed players (see Innocent/Leorke 2019, 2020). *Wayfinder Live* involves downloading a smartphone app that provides clues to 16 physical “code” objects hidden around the city, which players must scan with their phone’s camera to score points and unlock story fragments.

Our research found that although players engaged less with the competitive or narrative elements of the game, several were strongly compelled to find all 16 codes before the game ended. Although *Wayfinder Live* is an artistic game designed to be played as part of a festival or conference, some players found their entire day taken up with code hunting (female, 44) while others described a “completionist” desire (male, 32) (quoted in Innocent/Leorke 2019: 32) and feeling “100 per cent motivated” (male, 32) (Innocent/Leorke 2020: 295) to find them all. This produced an ambivalent affective relationship with the game for some of these players that oscillated between frustration and gratification. This is captured by one player’s experience dilemma when she had one final code she couldn’t find:

I really got frustrated because it was already something like 9:00 p.m. and I thought ‘Ok, maybe it’s time to stop now because I really have to go home,’ but I felt like I should have stopped maybe thirty minutes ago [laughing] (female, 36) (quoted in Innocent/Leorke 2020: 291).

In *Pokémon GO* and *Wayfinder Live*, extreme play occurred when casual, location-based game elements combined with a strong affective motivation to achieve the game’s goals to produce addictive, excessive or intense levels of commitment. Of course, non-location-based games can also invoke similar extreme forms of play. But location-based games in particular extend this behaviour into the everyday lives of players outside the lounge room or computer screen more deeply than other games.

I use the term “extreme” here in a deliberately relative, subjective sense. What some players would deem extreme behaviour, like being unable to stop playing

late at night or walking dozens of kilometres for a reward, others might consider typical. Extreme in this sense refers to situations where players go beyond their usual limits to accomplish something in the game. Games that are designed or marketed as casual—whether *Pokémon GO*, *Clash of Clans* or *Wayfinder Live*—are particularly conducive to extreme play for a certain subset of players, since they attract people who would not normally be inclined to invest a large amount of their time or labour in games. More research beyond the small-scale studies I have discussed here is needed to explore how prevalent extreme play is. Research suggests it is only a relatively small percentage of players—less than 5% of *Pokémon GO* players surveyed and less than half of our *Wayfinder Live* interviews. But it reflects the ongoing dissolution of distinctions between casual and hardcore, as ostensibly casual games embrace hardcore elements, and vice versa.

## Conclusion

Discussions around casual and hardcore play are often couched in the language of labour: how much time and effort players “invest” in them; whether they demand a “full-time” or “flexible” commitment from players. As Keogh (2016: 35) points out, this analogy can be extended literally. Casual games, like a casual job, do not necessarily involve less work than a full-time job but are instead flexible and fit around the schedule of the individual. In contrast, playing a hardcore game like *World of Warcraft*, as Juul points out, is a full-time job: reaching level 60 takes the equivalent of working a full-time job for two months (2010: 59). People’s status as casual or hardcore players is rhetorically tied to their labour as well. People play casual games while commuting to work or during “breaks”, while having more responsibilities like work and family means less time for gaming and they become casual or “lapsed” players (Juul, 2010: 9). And of course, as Anable (2018: 73) astutely observes, casual games both involve labour and are often *about* “labor and efficiency”, whether players must flip burgers, cultivate farms or mine resources, and thus “bound up with the blurring distinction between work and play in contemporary culture.”

While scholars have sought to distinguish casual and hardcore play in terms of players’ labour, virtually since the publication of Juul’s book the notion of hardcore and casual play as distinct form of labour has been contested. Fluid, idle and extreme play all reflect the way that these distinctions have become further blurred as games both allow players greater flexibility over the labour they invest, while simultaneously capturing players time and attention in increasingly subtle and pervasive ways. Post-casual play doesn’t signal the end of casual or hardcore gaming, but like the term “postmodernism” it signals a breakdown of these categories, a collapse of the meaning around these terms. It represents a turning point where casual play has escaped any form of a bounded definition and colonised all categories and genres of games and play. This “post-casual turn” can be chrono-

logically placed after the “casual turn” of the mid-2000s, when—as Chess (2020: 91) notes—casual and hardcore served as a “baseline” for a transition in the games industry towards attracting a wider audience of players. But importantly, it is also part of a continuum of practices in game design, from modding—such as Custom Mode’s assimilation of PC mods and idle games’ appropriation of auto-play mods—to platformisation—like *Pokémon GO*’s evolution into a service platform.

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