

**Title** – The First Week of the Zombie Apocalypse: The Influences of Game Temporality

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### **Abstract**

*DayZ* is a zombie-themed survival first-person shooter game with persistence similar to games in the massively multiplayer online game genre. Released on the 16 December 2013 by surprise, *DayZ* adopts an 'alpha' release model; though playable, *DayZ* is unfinished, and will continue to be developed over the coming years. In 24 hours, the game sold over 172,500 copies, and reached over 800,000 sales within three weeks.

In this article, I examine the experience of *DayZ* between 16 December and 23 December, 2013. Through examining the experience of the game over such a short time frame, I highlight how patches, paratexts and changing literacy about the game can rapidly change its experience and culture. I argue that this emphasises the importance of acknowledging a game's temporality when analyzing the relationships between player experiences, cultures and a game's design.

### **Keywords**

DayZ

MMOFPS

game literacy

game design

player experience

game temporality

## Introduction

An introduction to an article like this on a particular game can normally begin with a succinct explanation of what that game is, but in the case of this article (and this game); this is a curiously obfuscating exercise. The succinct version is that *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive 2013) is a zombie-themed survival massively multiplayer first-person shooter (FPS) game with a relatively high level of consequence; but this definition engenders a new question - which *DayZ*?

The first version of *DayZ* was released by its sole developer, Dean Hall, in April 2012 as a 'mod' of the 2009 first-person shooter military simulator *Arma 2* (Bohemia Interactive 2009). 'Military sim' is a moniker given to games in the combat FPS market that are punishingly realistic in comparison to the commercially dominant FPS games, such as in the *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003-2013) and *Battlefield* (DICE 2002-2013) series. Accordingly, *DayZ* places the player in a punishingly realistic depiction of a zombie apocalypse. Beginning with few items, characters quickly grow thirsty and hungry and will pass-out and die when not sustained. Death in *DayZ* is character-death (rather than avatar death); any advancement gained in-game is lost when dying. The player must scavenge zombie-infested towns and cities in the search of weapons and food, sharing the vast persistent virtual world with up to 63 other players at a time. In this version, the player's character awoke, (or simply began), on the shore with a poorly stocked inventory; a weak pistol, basic medical supplies and a little food and water.

As a 'mod', *DayZ* was free (although it required a copy of *Arma 2* and its expansion, *Operation Arrowhead*). Along with its design and economic model, even the installation of *DayZ* was subversive. In those first few months, *DayZ* required a manual installation; copying certain files into the *Arma 2* directory, a process that would need to be repeated each time the game received one of its frequent updates. This is because *DayZ* was released unfinished (as a proof of concept for the groundbreaking genre), under continuing development to remove bugs and introduce new features. As its popularity grew, third-party programs were developed to streamline the installation process and over 1.7 million unique players have since purchased *Arma 2* and downloaded the files to play the mod.

Yet this is just one version of *DayZ*, a version that no longer exists; subsequent updates so significantly transformed the player experience of *DayZ* that it would be incommensurable to compare *DayZ* in July, 2012 to the *DayZ* of today. The start of the game was radically altered when handguns and munitions were removed as a starting item; from then on, the player began the game defenceless against other players and the harsh environment. As a result, the consequence of death was drastically increased, leading to more moral dilemmas and more intense social interactions (see Carter et al. 2013). For a short period of time in 2012, new players started with a can of beans, leading to the 'bean wars'; advanced players 'farming' these newly defenceless spawns for their precious cans of beans.

Intermittently, *DayZ* was given a humanity system which would change a player's appearance based on the 'ethical value' of their in-game acts. Murdering another player lost you points, but administering items like the blood-pack to another player (which restores health) gained points. The corresponding 'hero' and 'bandit' appearances persisted across lives, transforming *DayZ* from a game of 'character-death' to a game of high-consequence 'avatar death'. The result restricted role-play; whereas players could be a bandit one life, and a hero the next, they were boxed into playing the same role each life. Sometimes players could chat with every other player on the server, whereas at other times players could only communicate via

'Direct Chat', proximity-based communication making the game a lonely, isolated social experience (see Carter et al. 2012). These small changes drastically altered the player experience of *DayZ*, and thus what *DayZ* is and any accounts of its experience.

After its explosive popularity, *DayZ* developer Dean Hall announced that a standalone version of the game was in development in conjunction with *Arma 2* developer Bohemia Interactive. At this stage, Hall claimed a January 2013 'alpha-release', and gave up development of the *DayZ* mod to the community. Under community development, the game introduced significantly more features and items, virtual worlds and game-modes and splintered into a variety of different *DayZ* versions. A *DayZ* 'hunger-games' variant (based off the popular teen book/movie) saw players stake real money on their game play, with the cumulative pot going to the last remaining player. A similar 'Survivor Games' became a popular live-stream event, pitting *DayZ* personalities against each other for the amusement of thousands of spectators. The more popular mods, such as *Breaking Point* and *Overwatch* radically transformed *DayZ* from a high-consequence survival experience to a much more typical first-person shooter, spawning new players with high-powered weapons or making loot much more common. In reaction to this, other modders created *DayZ Origins*, a version of the *DayZ* mod that claimed to be more 'true' to the (or at least, a) original *DayZ* experience. However, the *Arma 2* engine's vulnerability to hackers and griefters saw *DayZ* wane in popularity as players waited for the official *DayZ Standalone*.

Eventually, following multiple delays, the *DayZ Standalone* was released on 16 December, 2013 at a price point of \$29.99. With little fanfare or teasing announcements (players following the development closely knew the game's release was impending, but the release of the game on Steam was the first official announcement of its release) *DayZ* rocketed to the top of the sales charts, eventually selling over 172,500 copies in 24 hours, and over 800,000 in three weeks. Mimicking *Minecraft*, Hall and his team of developers had adopted an 'alpha' model for the game's release; players could purchase access while still under-development, and be guaranteed a copy of the game when finally released.

In this article, I discuss this *DayZ*; the *DayZ* that existed in its first week, between 16 December and 23 December. This is a version of *DayZ* which no longer exists; subsequent patches, changing player cultures and game literacy have altered the player experience of the *DayZ* standalone. Yet from this highly focused analysis we gain insight into the importance of game paratexts on game cultures, the affects that minor reconfigurations can have on the experience of the same game, and can more astutely understand the relationships between mechanics and experience, between game histories and game culture, and between literacy and social interactions. By drawing attention to this in the case of *DayZ*, I highlight how game temporality is a relevant factor when analysing the experience of games and virtual worlds.

### **Prior Work**

As a new game, there exists very little academic work on *DayZ*. Whereas these sections of articles can typically draw upon studies of similar games, *DayZ* is genre defining; it is so drastically different from its predecessors that what makes *DayZ* interesting (moral involvement, death consequence, proximity-based social interactions) are very unique, and their inclusion *together* in a game even more so.

With regards to death, *DayZ* has been noted (Heaven 2013) for the extremely high-consequence that 'death' has in the game, where it is configured as 'character-death'. In nearly all games in the FPS genre, and indeed most games that employ the 'death metaphor' (Bartle

2010), death is configured as 'avatar death'<sup>1</sup>; the player's on-screen representation is depicted as dying, but beyond very minor time or effort penalties, there is no consequence. While the avatar is depicted as dying, the character (and attributed advancement and abilities) remains 'alive' and present in the next life. On this typical configuration, Lisbeth Klastrup writes (2008):

The experience of death is thus not one of termination, though it may definitely cause a player grief. In most game worlds, dying is an activity similar to a number of the repeatable activities that occur as part of the everyday life in the world... dying is a risk-free endeavour. (Klastrup 2008:144)

In earlier work (Carter et al. 2013), I have discussed the affects that this reconfiguration has on the experience of *DayZ* (or as it was in October and September 2012). Contrary to the suggestions of others (e.g., David Myers argues that perma-death is 'overly restrictive' and 'an incongruous MMO design feature that disrupts the normal and most enjoyable flow and consequences of play' (2010: 130)), we found that character-death increased the perception of investment, making play more intense and emotionally involved. Social interactions were highly intense as players desired social experiences but were wary of the potential cost. Role-play was also encouraged by this configuration of character-death, as each life was clearly bounded which consequently encouraged different play styles for each separated life.

We further found that this perceived investment invoked moral dilemmas, a unique emotional experience to find in games for many players and one of the most discussed aspects of the game. Unbound by formal team structures, player relationships are ambiguous; any player you encounter in *DayZ* could be friend or foe. Lars Schmeink writes (2013) that in *DayZ* 'the player's humanity is stripped away and instinctual opportunistic or downright sadistic behaviour sets in' (2013: 21). Our earlier observations (in Carter et al. 2013) highlighted how, despite being in the FPS genre players often avoided killing other players even at personal cost. Further, various online accounts and videos depict players experiencing serious emotional distraught at being forced to kill other players. With no linear narrative to justify the morality of an in-game act, players were forced to exercise their own moral judgement; to kill or not to kill. In this way, *DayZ* is similar to *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003) which was noted by Miguel Sicart in *The Ethics of Computer Games* as one 'closest to the goal of ethical soundness' as 'players have to be able to reinforce the values they want to live by in their gameplay' (2009: 218).

Defining the social experience of *DayZ* is its implementation of a proximity-based voice communication system. Most games in the FPS genre implement voice communication between teammates. This commonly follows what Gibbs et al. (2006) refer to as a 'two-way radio' configuration; all players on the same team can hear and communicate with their teammates, irrespective of their avatar's location in the virtual environment (as if they were holding a two-way radio). Instead, players in *DayZ* are restricted to only being able to communicate (via voice and text) with players whose avatars are within 50 (virtual) meters of their own. This implementation drastically transformed the types of social interactions that can occur within *DayZ*, leading to a variety of interesting play scenarios such as kidnapping (see Ruch 2012), trades, grieving, haunting and treachery (see Carter et al. 2012 for more). The key transformation that this configuration has for the game (in the context of other games in the FPS genre) is that by allowing collocated players to communicate via voice (or text), player-interactions were not necessarily player-*versus*-player; an interaction could now become friendly, cooperative or mundane, as players could communicate to disengage the situation.

## Method

In this article, I draw upon my own experiences, catalogued and analyzed through recordings of my own play, as well as the experiences of a small player group that shared their experiences through a *DayZ* facebook group with whom I often played alongside. This auto-ethnographic approach (see Linderoth, Björk and Olsson (2012) for prior use in game studies) is complemented by a digital ethnography (see Murthy 2008) of popular reddit posts (on /r/DayZ and /r/Gaming), *DayZ* forum discussions, videos of play uploaded to YouTube and Tweets under the #dayz hashtag to elucidate other perspectives and play accounts.

## Community Literacy, Mechanics and Experience

In the *DayZ* standalone during its first week, a player's character requires energy and water. Their overall health is determined by their volume of blood. Thirst can be replenished by fluid, and energy by food. Satisfied levels of thirst and energy sees blood regenerate. The rate at which these two values decline depends on how active the character is moving during game play. Based on their current status, a player gets text messages from the perception of the character; 'I am hungry', 'I am starving'; 'My stomach feels full'. These are coloured to indicate the severity of the issue ('I am hungry' comes up white, whereas 'I am starving' is coloured red). If a character's state is giving red messages, their energy or water levels are so low that their blood volume is declining. This is communicated to the player by gradual changes in the appearance of the game, which de-saturates and blurs, until it becomes almost impossible to discern the environment, before passing out. Injuries also reduce a character's blood volume.

Mirroring the harshness of the environment, *DayZ* offers no tutorial or in-game guidance. The player spawns (in a Romero zombie movie-esque fashion) on the coast of the virtual world, having progressed through no tutorial and with no assistance in understanding the affordances of the game. *DayZ* features no highlighting, vision modes or points of interest; common design features for supporting learning identified by Linderoth (2012). The only way to understand the controls is to awkwardly look at the control settings in the configuration menu. If you had downloaded the game of *DayZ* immediately when it was released, there was no way to find out the information about thirst and health explained above.

Exacerbating all this was that new *DayZ* players spawned with very low levels of energy and water. In accordance with the most popular configuration of spawning in the *DayZ* mod, a new player only spawns with a torch and a battery (the two need to be combined to get the torch to work; this took me approximately 20 minutes of very dark play to work out), and their shirt can be crafted into 'rags' that can be used as bandages (that took even longer, and several deaths to realize). On the 16th, and through for the next few days, there was an astonishingly low level of literacy between players when it came to how the mechanics of thirst and energy functioned. This was further clouded by a bug that caused blood regeneration to not work. This low level of literacy about the mechanics of the game drastically changed the tone of social interactions and the experience of players.

I think this is best exemplified in the time that I found myself in the Balota military base, not wearing any trousers.

Player's of *DayZ* spawn on the southern coast of Chernarus, which has two large cities (Elektrozavodsk ('Elektro') and Chernogorsk ('Cherno')). Running parallel to the coast is a railway line and road, and a player can quickly determine their location using a third-party map, landmarks and buildings, and which of the railway or road is closest to the coast. These two large cities are often highly populated, as the high-density of buildings means a high-density of 'loot' (items to scavenge). North of the coast are dozens of smaller towns, but much further apart; it can take 5-10 minutes to traverse the forests between two towns. Consequently, in the earlier versions of the mod these two cities are hotspots of player-interactions, as new players explore them for much needed loot, and well-equipped players use them to stalk and kill their human prey. Indeed, such was the reputation of these areas that the hill outside of Elektro became known as 'sniper hill', due to the density of snipers using it to prey on players looting buildings in Elektro.

To the west of Cherno is a smaller town called Balota, which has a large airstrip and a small number of military buildings. In the *DayZ* standalone (and, to an extent, in the *DayZ* mod), the type of loot that spawns in a building depends on the location of the spawn; cooking pots spawn on stovetops, medical supplies spawn in hospitals, axes in sheds, etcetera. Any new player realizing this would deduce that guns and ammunition (which were exceedingly rare in the cities and towns) could best be found in military buildings, such as the Balota airstrip. Thus, in my second life (in my first I had quickly attracted the attention of a zombie and died from blood loss, not realizing I could tear my shirt into make-shift rags), I immediately travelled to Balota, hopefully to find the equipment I had found necessary for survival in *DayZ*'s harsh environment.

In *DayZ*, inventory (your capacity to carry things) is attached, somewhat, to reality. Items of clothing and bags have the ability to store items; a pair of default trousers has a capacity of 4, a backpack a capacity of 25. Items of clothing like t-shirts or shoes do not increase your storage capacity, so when you first spawn, the only way to store items (i.e., without just holding it in your hands) is in the four pockets of your trousers.

The first item I came across was a gas mask, but I was unable to put it on. I assumed, as an alpha, this item just had not been enabled yet. I moved on, and the next item I found was a pair of 'Autumn Hunter Pants', which have a storage capacity of six rather than four. I immediately removed my default trousers to pick up these new, superior trousers, but found myself again unable to wear the item. My default trousers had disappeared. I learned later that a common server synchronization bug in this initial build of the game sometimes meant there was a delay at the player's end in updating their inventory. Not realizing this, I thought that logging out, and logging back in again was worthwhile.

When I logged back in, I was wearing a gas mask, and no trousers (see Figure 1).

I had little time to reflect on my poor life choices as I further explored the military base without any trousers (and ability to store items), before another player encountered me in my sorry situation. Demonstrating the realism that *DayZ* purports to have, this other player did little else but laugh at me as I requested their assistance. 'I saw a body over here, you might be able to wear their pants', the stranger suggested, who then led me to a player who had already met an end in better state than I - they were, after all, still in possession of their trousers. I travelled with this player for about 15 minutes, finding a backpack, a fire extinguisher (a rudimentary close-combat weapon), before losing track of their location. Due to the limitations of proximity voice, I could not find them. I did not know if he had parted

ways before I clobbered him with my fire extinguisher, if he had logged out, or had met a grizzly end too far from my location for me to hear his calls for help.



Figure 1: The appearance of my second *DayZ* character

The subsequent player I encountered, on the road between two towns, armed with an axe (a better weapon than a fire extinguisher), paused about 10 m from my character. They took the axe out of their hands and waved, indicating no aggressive intent towards me. Via text, they asked if I knew how to open a can of beans; they were starving to death, but could not open the beans that they had found to eat them. At the time neither of us knew we could have used his axe to open the can (spoiling 20 per cent of the beans in the process). Numerous accounts on reddit and the *DayZ* forums during these initial few days saw players frustrated, recounting how their character starved to death with a can of beans in their backpack, desperately looking for a can-opener. A later player with whom I spoke likened their similar experience to the canned fruit sequence in the holocaust movie, *The Pianist*. The rarity of the can-opener item led to many online jokes about the beginnings of the 'can-opener wars'; referencing the 'bean wars' of the *DayZ* mod in mid-2012. We travelled together for a little while longer, before his character fell to the floor. Hunger had gotten the better of my silent companion.

I took his beans and axe, and continued travelling, trying to survive the harshness that was not just *DayZ*'s environment, but learning curve. I later died of blood loss, from a zombie I let get too close. I never did open that can of beans.

The majority of my player-interactions during these first few days echoed these two experiences; with no in-game or external learning resources, collective literacy at the standalone (and its new challenges) was very low. Game guides, tutorials and explanations are commonly referred to as a form of paratext (Genette 1991; 1997; Consalvo 2007). Digital game paratexts are the peripheral industries and media that 'work to shape the gameplay experience in particular ways' (Consalvo 2007: 9) and 'help structure it and give it meaning' (Consalvo 2007: 21). In addition to the game being in an alpha state (and consequently being incomplete and filled with bugs), the lack of available instructions meant that the harshness of *DayZ*'s environment was significantly increased. This is an unusual situation for modern online game play, as has been noted by Steinkeuhler (2008), players ubiquitously create how-to manuals, player guides and even have in-game apprenticeship systems (see also Garleneau 2005; Paul 2011; Papagyris and Poulymenakou 2005; Carter 2014).

The lack of these common game paratexts resulted in an unusual absence of collective literacy; players new to the game were more concerned with overcoming the environment than risking their little advancement in a player-versus-player battle. The result was that *DayZ's* community was, briefly, more collaborative and cooperative than it was before, or has since become. The rarity of long-range weapons and ammunition, and the feeling of the almost inevitability of death in those first few days encouraged players to share knowledge about items in the game, controls, tactics and profitable locations. My companion who died of hunger could have attempted to kill me, hoping I had some food I had not disclosed to him, but our shared hopelessness in the face of the game's difficulty encouraged collaboration.

It was a curious design decision by Dean Hall and his team to start players out almost hungry, and almost thirsty. To new spawns, one of the first messages they will receive is that they are hungry/thirsty. Rather than starting out fully satisfied, with a grace period in which to begin to master the environment, the clock is already ticking down when the player enters the world for the first time. Exploration, even social interactions become relegated in the face of immediate death. In configuring *DayZ* this way, Hall and co. ensured that in these first few days of the standalone, the game (rather than other players) was the primary obstacle that players had to overcome. The result was as described, an increased tendency between *DayZ* players to collaborate, to share knowledge, and to err on the side of friendliness. Each player was in the same boat, so to speak, of apocalyptic nightmare.

As literacy about the game grew as these paratexts were developed, the cooperative and collaborative inclinations of *DayZ's* players was reduced. Various tip-threads were created on the forums and on reddit, and 'lets play' videos on YouTube explained *DayZ's* controls, hunger, thirst and sickness systems and the best places to find good loot. The newly configured zombies, though more aggressive than in the *DayZ* mod, spawned rarely due to limitations on the server. The collective literacy regarding how the game worked changed how players approached interactions, as the biggest challenge players faced shifted from the game environment to other players. This version of *DayZ* ceased to exist, testament to the impact that game paratexts have on the way that games are played and experienced, and the influence of a game's temporal situation on its experience and values.

### **Changing Places, Space, Expertise and Values**

This collaborative and cooperative inclination of the player community in these first few days was, obviously, not absolute. I was murdered multiple times during these first few days; by an axe in the dark from behind, in a melee fight as a new spawn, gunned down in a futile attempt to avenge a murdered companion, but informants in the study made a number of interesting observations about the changing values towards places and items in the game, and how I observed them begin to negotiate the morality of *DayZ* in the context of the game's paratexts (Consalvo 2007).

Firstly, the location of an interaction had an overwhelming influence on the attitude that players brought to it. As previously explained, players spawn on the southern coast of Chernarus, along a coastline with two large cities and a small military base on the west. As collective literacy slowly developed, and online third-party maps were updated to reflect the new environment, the migration patterns of new spawns was typically west along the coast, before moving north from the Balota airfield to hit other military installations in the general direction of the North West Airfield, the largest military base in the virtual world and least plundered due to its geographical isolation.



In one play session, as we travelled north, and the likelihood of encountering another player lessened, the likely aggressiveness of any interaction increased. Any player who had made it this far off the coast had likely, to some extent, mastered the environment. They were probably wearing trousers, and had found sufficient water and food (that they had surmised how to eat), and likely looted several towns since spawning. Killing them, with no other information than their location in the virtual environment presented a higher reward. The chance of them being sufficiently armed to kill us, was also higher. Thus, a player was less inclined to engage in combat in Balota, as they were at the North West Airfield.

In the patch released on 31 December, the player spawning system was changed so that players spawned on the East, rather than South coast. In the patch notes, the change was justified as follows:

What this effectively means is that the distance to the three major military areas (North West Airfield, North East Airfield, and Balota) is pretty much equal. This should serve to spread player traffic over the map a bit more, and reduce the tendency for players to stick to the Balota-Zelenegorsk-NWAF loop. (*DayZ* 0.30.113925 patch notes)

In consequence, the values that players bring to the environment of the game was rapidly transformed. Each of these profitable military bases was now such a significant distance from where a new player spawns, that the likelihood of violence between players was equal at all of them. This changed the meanings that players attribute to the virtual geography of the game, consequently affecting the interactions that take place in them. One of my informants appreciated this change; 'I really feel like the new spawn locations is a massive changer. It's made it so that player movement is far less predictable based on the mod. I really felt like that freshened it up for me because it gave that heir of chance that makes the game a little more scary'. The *DayZ* that existed, from 16 December to 23 December, no longer exists. Meanings attributed to the places and spaces in the game have been transformed, and lost.

As *DayZ* allows looting the bodies of dead players, the density of high value non-consumables (such as guns) increased. While the frequency with which these items spawned remained the same, an item unlikely to be discarded (and very likely to be looted) would remain in circulation for longer, increasing the number in the game. As players became better equipped, and more able of violence and control over other players, player attention changed to explore some of the more unusual items that were new to the game; blood bags, disinfectant and handcuffs.

### **Playing (Im)morally**

I have elsewhere (see Carter et al 2012) described *DayZ* as an example of a ruthless game. This moniker refers to the way in which player relationships are ambiguous, death has consequence, and players can unnecessarily act upon other players in a fashion that disadvantages them. Staffan Björk has also described games like these as 'feel-bad games' (2015). In *DayZ*, murder is ruthless. With no formal teams or points, and the only abstract goal of the game being to survive, choosing to kill another player (rather than letting them pass by un-accosted) is a ruthless act

This has led to criticisms of the game as immoral; of players who engage in ruthless play revealing their own true nature (see Pottenger 2013). However, as discussed earlier in the

article, I argue *DayZ* is a moral game (according to Miguel Sicart's appreciation of game morality). By granting moral choice, *DayZ* opens itself up to moral experiences, as well as immoral experiences, in a safe(r) mediated game-space. The lack of moderation allows for players to explore ruthlessness, role-play evil and question their own morality. The most interesting moral experience of *DayZ* does not belong to the player murdering others, but to the player who set out a hero but slowly turns into a bandit as they have more to lose.

One of the principal ways in which *DayZ* players began to play immorally is through force feeding players disinfectant. Figure 2 is a screenshot, from the perspective of the victim, of two heavily armed players restraining an unequipped player. The text on the lower left reads, 'My mouth tastes weird' (in white) and 'Rawr\_aplasticbag has successfully performed an action on you' (in green). This was posted to the *DayZ* subreddit, with the title 'To the guy that posted about force feeding someone disinfectant spray... You've started something horrible'.

Indeed they had.



Figure 2: A player being force fed disinfectant in the *DayZ* standalone

### Paratexts, Game Histories and Player Cultures

*DayZ* (the standalone, between 16 December and 23 December 2013) exists along a timeline of *DayZs* (pronounced 'daisies'). Despite having had no advertising campaign and being so riddled with bugs, *DayZ* was an enormous success in mid-2012, eventually selling over 1.7 million copies of *Arma 2*. *DayZ* is a peculiar game to 'sell' to a new player; 'oh its great, if you die, you lose everything!', 'there are zombies and you have to eat and drink otherwise you die', 'other players will murder you for a can of beans'.

Instead, *DayZ*'s success came from the viral-like sharing of a number of videos and stories about play that highlighted the emergent social interactions that were uniquely possible. With clunky controls and dated graphics (being based on a 2009 game), stories and videos of

interactions were what fans of the game shared. One of the most popular of these was Adam Ruch's live tweet of (see Plunkett 2012), and later article about (see Ruch 2012), his kidnapping in *DayZ*. In it, he describes his experience being kidnapped by five other players at gunpoint, forced to do their bidding, scouting areas and eventually dying when 'his group' (of kidnapers) is attacked by a third-party. A highly shared YouTube video, depicting a (likely choreographed) fight-club like scenario with new spawns similarly highlighted the possible underbelly of *DayZ*'s unrestricted social interactions. Stories like these, and many others (e.g., forcing players to 'dance' or answer questions at gunpoint) resulted in many players purchasing the game to experience these unique kinds of interactions, seeking them out themselves.

As a result of the popularity of this different kind of paratext, new items and abilities were included in the *DayZ* standalone to facilitate kidnapping and other forms of ruthlessness. This echoes Chris Paul's observations of how paratexts can alter the design of the game (Paul, 2011). The handcuffs item, which would restrain the arms of an avatar (as in Figure 2), stops a player from pulling out a weapon if kidnapped (getting the jump on their kidnapers, so to speak). In one of the early patches, it was configured that a player logging out of the game when kidnapped would die, losing all their advancement. The purpose was to encourage players to play along, rather than use *DayZ*'s multiple servers as a tactic for escaping.

Further expanded was the ability of players to act upon other players. A passed out player could have water or food fed to them, potentially bringing a player that collapses of thirst or hunger back to life. A medical kit contained blood bags, epi-pens and morphine; equipment that a friendly player could administer to another player's character. Blood bags allowed blood to be collected from one player (presumably with lots of blood) and to be given to another player, bringing up their blood volume (the equivalent of health points in *DayZ*).

Whereas in the first few days of *DayZ* players were preoccupied with mastering the game, once the basics were understood players quickly began experimenting with the new affordances of these items and abilities as these unique forms of loot were found. The first most popular of these, reaching the front page of the /r/gaming subreddit, accounted for a player force feeding a player disinfectant. The result, they found out, was that the restrained player began vomiting, losing valuable thirst and energy before passing out and dying. The same affect was possible if over-feeding a character. Reviews of the game on Steam quickly became overwhelmed by succinct, positive reviews such as 'Forced a man to eat a rotten Banana and he died 10/10' (1,691 of 1,910 people found this review helpful), 'a group of males handcuffed me and took my pants off. 10/10' and 'cuffed a guy with handcuffs, force fed him disinfectant spray and a rotten kiwi. He vomited, and fell unconscious. 11/10'. Screenshots of these were shared virally.

Many players began attempting to do the same, using the handcuffs items to create the same kidnapping and machiavellian scenarios that had made the original *DayZ* mod so popular. Blood, it turned out, could also be forcibly taken from a restrained player; kill-on-sight was now relegated in favor of 'farming' new spawns for their precious blood. A burlap sack item was teased by the developers, promising kidnapers more control over their victims. Stories of kidnappings, and videos of kidnapers escaping (or sometimes murdering) their kidnapers were widely shared and this paratext, combined with changing literacy about the game, transformed the player culture. My informants scavenged handcuffs, growing excited about performing their own exercise in virtual immorality. This aspect of the game was referred to by one of these players as 'the whole role playing aspect' of *DayZ*. Kidnapping, as cruel and psychotic as it sounds, is the social alternative to murder in *DayZ*.

The *DayZ* of 16 December no longer existed, developing paratexts meant that player literacy about the game had sufficiently grown and consequently, the tone of interactions had changed. Influenced by the game's paratexts and history, players grew obsessed with kidnapping and (play) acting cruel scenarios on other players. Indeed, many players sought to be victims. Running around without trousers in the Balota airfield would see me drained of my blood before I was helped. Further minor updates in patches and better equipment entering circulation transformed the values of items and spaces in the game. *DayZ* had changed, and will continue to change, as further updates, patches, expansions and changes in player culture change it. Its experience, like all games, is temporally contingent.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the player experience of the *DayZ* standalone between 16 December 2013 and 23 December 2013. This is immediately following its surprise release and prior to Christmas which saw a second influx of new players. I have refined the scope of this discussion so severely as a statement regarding how rapidly and significantly the experience of online games change, the notable impact of paratexts on game experience and game culture, and the significant effect that minor changes to the game can have on meanings brought to and taken from gaming. As most online games receive regular updates and patches, though rarely as frequently or significant as *DayZ*'s patches, I demonstrate with this temporally refined analysis that such consideration is necessary to take into account when analyzing the relationships between games, player experience and player culture.

Consider, for example, *World of Warcraft*. Like all other games in the MMOG genre, *World of Warcraft* received frequent expansions that introduced new races, challenges and game-modes. As a result of these regular updates, refreshings and reconfigurations, it is self-evident to any former or current *World of Warcraft* player that it would be obscuring to compare the experience and player cultures of *World of Warcraft* raiding during its hey-day of 40-player raids (e.g. see Chen 2012) that required significant coordination and cooperation, to the maximum 25-player raids of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion (with pick-up-groups and 'flexible raid' functions). Likewise, games in the multiplayer online battle arena genre (e.g. *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation 2013) or *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009)) have a constantly evolving 'meta' (see Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2012) which affects the strategies and tactics used by players, often irrespective of changes to the coded affordances of the game world. The temporality of these games – their relationship with the time in which they exist – is clearly evident for deconstructing their experience. Single-player games, purchased via a physical copy and played without an internet-connection - consequently remaining static - are also affected by their temporality. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the revived interest in (and corresponding game fandom about) 'retrogaming' (see Suominen 2008).

This demonstrates how, as researchers, it is necessary to be more aware about how online games evolve, and consequently mark our research as having been conducted over a specific period of time (and what that means for our research). This may present itself as an additional perspective of game-time to those previously identified by Drachen and Hitchens (2009). As I have discussed in this article, the experience of *DayZ* players in the first few days of release rapidly transforms, and subtle reconfigurations of minor game mechanics drastically transform the values of players with regards to death, consequence and the game's virtual geography. The temporality of *DayZ* is meaningful for understanding both what *DayZ* is but also the experiences of those who play it, and what factors are involved in affording that experience.

This article has also highlighted how literacy, not just of an individual player, but also of the community of players, should be considered and warrants further research in understanding how games are experienced in the crucial (for sales, at least) early days of its release. While in the case of *DayZ* this created a richer experience that resonated with the harshness of its fictional environment, in other genres this may have significant detrimental effects. The pervasiveness of game guides and other educative paratexts means that they are typically taken for granted when it comes to studying games and game experiences, privileging the experience of those gamers connected to the peripheral industries where these media circulate. This discussion of the first few days of the *DayZ* standalone has shown how the lack of these paratext materials can drastically alter social interactions and the broader experience of a game, warranting further attention and acknowledgement.

This article has also touched on a small number of other topics with regards to *DayZ* of pertinent interest to the game studies community. Understanding *DayZ*'s alpha-release model (and its reception by players) will be of value to game studies, as it appears to be growing in popularity in the footsteps of games like *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2009) and *Kerbal Space Program* (Squad 2011). The ways in which minor alterations to the game affect game experience presents as a rich site for future research. Further, the morality of *DayZ* play (touched on by Pottenger 2012; Carter et al 2013; Schmeink 2013) promises to be an exciting contribution of the game to the academic discipline, as well as a possible platform for studies in psychology and human behaviour. This article also contributes to our earlier work on death and consequence (Carter et al 2013), and how consequence transforms player values and social interactions.

I note that my own experience of *DayZ* during this time period, and that of my informants, was only on Australian, Singaporean and New Zealand servers. As an FPS, which requires as little lag as possible, players are restricted to play with those geographically near. If I were to join a US, or European server, the lag would be so significant that I would be highly disadvantaged in any form of combat, and would have difficulties navigating the environment. Thus, in considering 'which *DayZ*' this article discusses, it is also limited to the Australasian version. This may be considerably distinct from the European, in which language barriers and national allegiances (ala *EVE Online*, see Goodfellow, 2014) are more frequently encountered, or American, which players frequently claim has a more ruthless 'kill-on-sight' culture.

One of the informants revealed to me, only two weeks after release, that they were already uninterested in *DayZ*; 'DayZ needs an update as well to become fresh again... at the moment all you can do is kit yourself out and then gun fools down. Unsure what else you can do with the way that the persistent servers are done'. In the mod, players could find car-parts to repair broken down vehicles; a form of end-game. Without goals to work towards, the difficulty and consequence of *DayZ* had grown tiresome. The role that persistence and accomplishment plays in the experience of consequence is worth further consideration, as is how adding in new features like these attracts and retains players, changing the experience once again.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Institute for a Broadband Enabled Society.

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<sup>1</sup> With regards to these distinctions, I'm drawing upon explications of the concepts that grew out of work on *EVE Online* players (see Carter, Gibbs & Arnold 2012), which have been previously applied to the death mechanics in *DayZ* in Carter et al 2013.