

Video Games and their Affective Intensities:

Locating and Exploring the Emotional Intensities in Online Communities and *Project Zomboid*

Derek Pasborg

A Thesis

In the Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (Sociology) at

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

September 2025

© Derek Pasborg, 2025

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Derek Pasborg

Entitled: Video Games and their Affective Intensities: Locating and Exploring the
Emotional Intensities in Online Communities and *Project Zomboid*

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Sociology)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to
originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

Dr. Bart Simon Chair

Dr. Kregg Hetherington Examiner

Dr. Fiona MacDonald Examiner

Dr. Bart Simon Supervisor

Approved by _____

Dr. Martin French, Graduate Program Director

_____ 2025 _____
Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science

Abstract

Video Games and their Affective Intensities:

Locating and Exploring the Emotional Intensities in Online Communities and *Project Zomboid*

Derek Pasborg

The purpose of this thesis is to understand better the relationship between the experiences of games and their emotional contexts: that is, how emotions and feelings impact how gamers experience and conceive of their play. *Project Zomboid*, a multiplayer horror zombie-survival game, provides a setting and history charged with emotion and feeling, on top of which the human-survival drama plays out. Using ethnographic methods, including participant-observation in a *Project Zomboid* Discord server, play experiences and five semi-structured interviews, this thesis explores the affective nature of *Project Zomboid* as an expression of the zombie genre: as collections of bodies, containers, and surfaces for emotions, feelings, and ideas. It explores how players of *Project Zomboid* utilize game mechanics and player-made modifications to harness the game's ability to foster affectively intensive experiences, including game settings as well as adding, removing or changing ones already present. The thesis also explores how communities adjacent to video games like the *Project Zomboid* Discord perform the role of sustaining those affective relationships between players/users and the game: how players, users, and developers experience the *Project Zomboid* Discord community as an “emotional ecosystem,” an ecology of feeling and sentiment that informs discourses and interactions surrounding the game and its community. Whether they are deemed good or bad, and whether there are high or low stakes activities involved, these values and opinions reflect encounters, experiences, and emergences of the sociocultural dimensions of emotion in social interaction.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Bart Simon for his mentorship, his patience, and his trust in me; I could not have undertaken this project without his help. I would also like to thank Dr. Kregg Hetherington, and Dr. Fiona MacDonald, for their comments and criticisms during the defence process. Their feedback will be foundational to whatever emerges from this project.

I would like to give special thanks to my interlocutors, NZ, M, A, KK, and IY; without your valuable insights and observations, I would not be able to present any of what will follow in this thesis. For the same reasons, I would also like to thank N and P for letting me join their *Project Zomboid* multiplayer sessions.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
Introduction	1
Literature Review	2
Section 1: Sociology of emotion research	2
Section 2: Anthropology of emotion research	4
Section 3: Defining affect	6
Section 4: Affect and game studies – towards representation	10
Research Questions	12
Methodology	13
Theoretical frameworks	13
Rationale for game selection	15
Procedures	19
Chapter 1: Locating the affect of/in <i>Project Zomboid</i>	23
Section 1: Zombies and the affect of genre	23
Section 2: Ambivalent affect and participant stories	27
Section 3: Playing genre through affect, playing with affect through genre	33
Chapter 2: Modding the Affective Playing Field	47
Section 1: The emotional mechanics of <i>Project Zomboid</i>	47
Section 2: Modding (y)our expectations	52
Section 3: Modding for feeling(s)	56
Section 4: Modding as representation	61
Chapter 3: The Living World of the Dead	69
Section 1: Emotional ecosystems & the hyperintensive nature of the <i>Project Zomboid</i> Discord	69
Section 2: <i>PZ</i> Discord as a space for interactivity and opportunity	71
Section 3: The Indie Stone and developing a community at scale	77
Section 4: The <i>Project Zomboid</i> Discord as example of “emotional ecosystems”	82
Conclusion	93
Future considerations and directions	95
References	98
Appendix 1: Informed Consent Forms	105
Appendix 2: Interview guide for participants	108
Appendix 3: NZ’s “Printable Item Checklist”	110

List of Figures

Figure 1: Image of introduction slide, “This is How You Died”.....	15
Figure 2: Image of the list of traits and professions in <i>Project Zomboid</i> ’s character creation.....	17
Figure 3: Image of <i>Project Zomboid</i> “zombie lore” settings.....	35
Figure 4: Image of the Holy Grace Church in Muldraugh, before our occupation.....	37
Figure 5: Image of the in-game church after fortification.....	40
Figure 6: Image of the researcher’s in-game character and their journal.....	45
Figure 7: Image of “Custom Sandbox” settings in <i>Project Zomboid</i>	50
Figure 8: Image of <i>Project Zomboid</i> ’s moodle system.....	88
Figure 9: Image of a character in the “Real CD DA” game scenario.....	90

Introduction

Gaming is a peculiar activity: it is simultaneously individual and social, personal and public, active and passive. As Street (2017) comments, “games are complex things. They are not stable objects but processes that come to life as network effects”: said another way, video games enable and are enabled by processes that are inherently connected to each other (p. 40). When I choose to play a game, for example, I am not engaging with the game: rather, I am opening up a “form of relation” to the game’s network of affects, or what Anable (2018) calls the “fraught cultural meanings and implications that circulate around video games” (p. xii). Playing games as a means to form relations with its discursive foundations, then, reveals that being “passionate” for and about video games is about being “drawn in [...] by the game “itself”” (Sunden, 2012, p. 177). Emotions like passion are particular to those contexts, but not entirely inseparable: what is inseparable, however, is their nature as socially and culturally manufactured “products” (Geertz, 1973, p. 57). According to Malaby (2009), if play is to be understood as an attitude “characterized by a readiness to improvise,” then anthropologists and ethnographers have a responsibility to, in his words (2012), “confront the relationship between this cultural form and the subjective experience it is contrived to elicit” (p. 206; p. 302).

Video games, as will be discussed throughout this thesis, are deserving of their own analysis and “in their own terms” (Boellstorff, 2015, p. 61). Of particular interest to this project is the relationship between the experiences of games and their emotional contexts: that is, how emotions and feelings impact how gamers experience and conceive of their play. In this chapter, I will give a review of the literature, as sociology and anthropology have unique perspectives on the role of emotions in social and cultural life. Contributing to those understandings are theories of emotion, feeling, and affect, that originate within the disciplines of psychology and philosophy, each having an influence on how scholars conceive of these concepts inside and

outside of their disciplinary boundaries. Finally, I will turn to a discussion of the impact of these works on scholarly discourse within the game studies. Following this, I state two main research questions and their underlying sub-questions, which will be guided by the theoretical framework and methodology employed in this project. To conclude, I will put forth an argument for the ethnographic analysis of the affective dimensions of video games.

Literature Review

Section 1: Sociology of emotion research

Beginning in sociology, an important foray into emotions was undertaken by Hochschild (2012), whose concept of emotional labour has been influential within the social sciences. For Hochschild (2012), “emotion locates the position of the viewer [...] awe, love, anger, and envy tell of a self vis-à-vis a situation”: what this means is emotions are socially constructed, and in turn have numerous consequences for social and private life (pp. 30-31). Applying this notion of the social constructivism of emotions to labour and work, Hochschild (2012) posits that emotional labour is a distinct category of work, as it relies on an individual “to induce and suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (p. 7). Put another way, it is the literal effort of composing oneself when their emotional state is contrary to what is socially expected of them. Jackson (1993) in a similar vein explores how narratives/social constructions of the self are used to inform experiences of “being in love” and love “as longer term affection,” stating that love as an emotion is “just as much cultural as the conventions around it” (p. 202).

What Hochschild’s work signifies alongside other works in the sociology of emotions, according to Shilling (2002), is the importance of emotions in critically engaging “key sociological issues of social order and action [...] [and] moral questions of whether individuals

are able to engage in self-determined action” (p. 11). Shilling (1997, 2002) highlights how classical sociologists, such as Durkheim, were accused of having elided the emotional connotations of social life. They suggest that perhaps it was less of an explicit decision, and that these sociologists conceived of emotions and feelings as impacting “the moral conflict of social orders” and thus were of great concern to the discipline (Shilling, 2002, p. 28). In their work, Katz (1999) argues how the “dialectical” nature of emotions informs its experience as active and reactive, and how the study of emotion in everyday life “reveals the hidden sensual and aesthetic foundations of the self” (p. 8). Turner (2009) expands on this notion further, explaining that theories of emotion have influenced various aspects of sociology, from evolutionary/biological theories to symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical theories (p. 343). What Turner (2009) notes, however, is the persistence of biological explanations for sociological phenomena. This fact, alongside arguments for recognizing emotions as socially constructed, keeps the subdiscipline from expanding its boundaries further (p. 353).

A contributing factor, according to De Courville Nicol (2011), is the “affective turn” of disciplines: “the increase in the widespread existence of fear as a result of global social transformations” has led individuals to either help or hinder people trying to adapt to these changes (p. 2). More importantly, and to De Courville Nicol’s (2011) credit for articulating this, “how and to what effect has fear become a moral problem in late modern societies”, and why are these questions egging us now (p. 2)? There is perhaps a greater understanding, now more than ever, of the fundamental role of emotions “in all social phenomena” (Bericat, 2015, p. 1). For Bericat (2015), this is for two reasons: first, that sociology “seeks to explain social phenomena,” and second, that because emotions are social, they are “necessary to explaining the fundamentals of social behavior” (p. 5).

Section 2: Anthropology of emotion research

Anthropologists are interested in emotions along similar lines to sociologists, namely for their impact and influence on social and cultural life. Rosaldo's (1984) work offers ethnographic examples that demonstrate the processual nature of emotions, and how society, through ordering and constraint, "shapes the self through the medium of cultural terms, which shape the understandings of reflective actors" (p. 150). Lutz and White (1986) highlight anthropology's contributions as twofold: first, the notion that the researcher/anthropologist brings with them preconceived ideas of emotions and the self, influencing the ethnographer's interpretation as a result of their positioning (p. 431). Secondly, Lutz and White (1986) discuss how an inclusion of emotion in ethnography will present "a fuller view of what is at stake for people in everyday life": by bringing "pain and pleasure in all their complex forms" to ethnography, these stories might give a more "[humanistic]" appeal "for the Western audience" (p. 431).

Abu-Lughod (1990) discusses emotion as "discursive practice," or how, drawing from ideas set out by Foucault (1972), emotional discourses/discourses of emotion relate to power dynamics and social hierarchy (p. 27). She continues this argument in her paper "Writing Against Culture" (1991), offering strategies and implications for its effect on portraying difference: the first is focusing on "practice and discourse" as they work against the "assumption of boundedness"; the second is focusing on "connections and interconnections" across history but also connections between "people, cultural forms, media, techniques, and commodities"; third and finally, she suggests writing "ethnographies of the particular," a theoretical position that portray communities and groups as "essential and fixed" but rather "particular" to their circumstances (pp. 472-476). While most anthropologists and psychologists accept the idea of emotions as a "universal phenomenon," how they are conceived and felt are of an entirely different concern (Leavitt, 1996, p. 516). Thus, an understanding of emotion(s) from an

anthropological lens is necessarily kaleidoscopic: as Leavitt (1996) notes, there are peoples and cultures in the world that dichotomize “mind and body, and culture and nature,” which complicates the Western universalistic concept of emotion (p. 516).

Adding to the complexity is what Boellstorff and Lindquist (2004) call the “individual/social binarism” of being, or the notion of difference in the experience of “the relationship between embodied versus transpersonal modes of being” (p. 438). More succinctly, the idea that experiences of the mind and experiences of the body are such that they belong to separate sites of inquiry: what ethnographic analyses contribute to this conversation is that it “brings together domains usually set apart as ‘intimate’ versus ‘public’, or ‘embodied’ versus ‘symbolic’”: in calling attention to the divide between “the body and emotion”, these authors suggest that ethnographers commit to “understandings of emotion as embodied yet foundationally social” (Boellstorff & Lindquist, 2004, p. 440).

Though not explicitly mentioned thus far, what these sociological/anthropological interpretations of emotion suggest by way of analysis is the “complexity” that emotion offers to ethnographic accounts of social phenomena: in focusing on the experience of emotion, Beatty (2014) posits that the narrative approach to ethnography, one that “captures both the particularity and temporal dimensions of emotion,” will offer “greater fidelity” than “semantic, synchronic, and discourse-based approaches” (p. 414). The reasons, as Beatty (2014) purports, are that emotions “are nothing if not particular” as they “refer compellingly to an individual’s or group’s situation,” inviting a more local temporal/spatial account of the ethnographic experience (p. 419). Furthermore, Beatty (2014) notes that there is a “peculiar egocentricity [to] emotion” when they say that in recognizing “that our emotions are always more than cultural formulas and social structuring positions,” ethnographers can capture the “me-focus of emotions” through a narrative

approach to ethnography, which situates the “particularity” of emotions to the way they are constituted, namely that “they tell a story” (p. 419).

As has just been discussed, the contributions of sociology and anthropology to research on emotions are a necessary complication in analyzing social phenomena: what these disciplinary approaches offer are means of capturing the complex nature of emotion, and the various implications this fact has for researching social life. In the following section, I will discuss affect, and the theoretical implications it has for the study of emotion and feeling.

Section 3: Defining affect

Affect is a term that is relatively difficult to pin down, as its foundations are in no way indicative of its trajectory in academic discourses. For example, Tomkins (2008) discusses the notion of affect, and from this Nathanson offers nine definitions of various “unmodulated physiological reactions present from birth,” while “feeling” is defined as “awareness” that an affect has occurred, “emotion” is described as the experience of an affect “as it is co-assembled with our memory of previous experiences of that affect” (p. xiv). The nine affects, “Surprise-Startle,” “Distress-Anguish,” “Anger-Rage,” “Enjoyment-Joy,” “Interest-Excitement,” “Fear-Terror,” “Shame-Humiliation,” “Dissmell” and “Disgust,” form a system of “quite different alerting mechanisms” which inform our experiences of affects (Tomkins, 2008, pp. xiv-xx). Essential to Tomkins (2008) conception of affects is biological essentialism, or the notion that affects express the biological underpinnings of emotion over the sociocultural aspects, which, as will be discussed next, is only one definition of affect.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) definitions of affect/affection are not conceived of as “personal feeling[s],” rather, in Spinoza’s sense of “affectus,” or “an ability to affect and be affected” (p. xvi). Added to this, the “passage from one experiential state of the body to another

and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xvi). In one sense, Tomkins' (2008) notion of affects is such that the experience of affects is an experience of emotional memory or "scripts" (p. xiv). For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), being "affected" involves an "encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting body" (p. xvi). Tomkins' definition is a biological explanation for a system of emotional regulation, where Deleuze and Guattari (1987) are attempting to develop a philosophical explanation of the relationship between bodies and "becoming." In defining affects as "becomings," Deleuze and Guattari (1987) construct a theoretical plane on which bodies have "extensive" and "intensive" power to transform, and the infinite number of possibilities for the body that this idea has (pp. 256-257). Again, for Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the "body" is not only the physical form but the literal and subjective capacity for bodies to change: their "latitude" and "longitude" are "the two elements of a cartography," which while providing "consistency," are not determining of their becoming/possibility (pp. 256-257).

This notion of affect, unlike Tomkins' theorization, is applicable not only to (human) bodies, but to concepts, ideas, and theories as well. Massumi (2002) discusses how these notions of latitude and longitude can be seen as "connectability" and "capacity" (p. 20). For example, when a scientific concept is borrowed or "poached" from another discipline, it does not lose its connection to those concepts, rather, its "rhythm" has been interrupted as it has "systemic connectability" to discursive concepts but no system to fit in to (Massumi, 2002, p. 20). Looking at this scientific concept as a body in the Deleuze and Guattari sense, Massumi (2002) posits that the concept's latitude, or capacity to affect, is informed by its longitude, or its capacity for connectability: these are, in Massumi's words, "relations of motion and rest – affect" (p. 20). In this example, Massumi (2002) argues that affects play out in a "conceptual struggle," speaking to

the effect that the affective turn in scientific inquiry has had on discourse: that is, “reopening the question of what constitutes empiricism” when scientific knowledge is understood as ‘affecting’ and being ‘affected’ by the notion of discourse itself (pp. 20-21).

Missing from Massumi’s conception of affect is emotion: in their book on touch and affect, Sedgwick (2003) moves away from philosophical accounts of the ontology of affect towards a phenomenology of emotion and feeling. Sedgwick (2003) turns to the definitions provided by Tomkins, but seeks to make further distinctions: contrary to the drives that Tomkins speaks of in their work, which posits drives as the motivation for human behavior, Sedgwick argues that affects “can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things” (p. 19). In doing so, Sedgwick (2003) offers an account of affects as generating “unpathologizing” accounts of emotions/feelings, something at odds with a more psychological/biological interpretation (p. 115).

Speaking more to the casual, ephemeral side of affect, Stewart (2007) writes of “ordinary affects,” the capacities of affecting/being affected that give flow or “continual motion” to everyday experiences of life: through an eclectic set of anecdotes, Stewart puts forth an account that speaks to those “public feelings” that “begin and end in broad circulation,” but more importantly, how ordinary affect is about bodies interacting/affecting one another and “generating intensities” (pp. 2, 128). Berlant (2011) expands this discussion to interpreting affect in “historical consciousness” (p. 15). That is, asking questions regarding when affects begin and end, and when are they finished ‘affecting’ and have finally arrived at the stage of ‘becoming’ (pp. 15-16). Berlant (2011) argues for an interpretation of “shared” affective “atmospheres,” or the idea that “bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to

atmospheres in which they find themselves” (p. 15). In effect, Berlant (2011) proposes that the rendering of any affective experience involves a shared notion of the world, a “patterning” which “provides evidence of historical processes” (p. 16). “Affects saturation of form” helps communicate history as a “visceral moment,” bringing with it a reading of those particular moments through “structural historical relations” as well as an “aesthetic or formal rendition” (Berlant, 2011, p. 16).

Down a similar corollary, Ahmed (2014) argues for an understanding of emotions “not [...] as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices” (p. 9). In discussing this, Ahmed (2014) observes the sociality vs. psychological arguments of emotions, but rather than adhering to models of emotion coming from “the individual and the social,” Ahmed posits that emotions “create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated” (p. 10). Through this process, according to Ahmed (2014), “the objects of emotion take shape as effects in circulation,” whether in the form of bodies, scientific concepts, feelings of touch or being “touched” emotionally (p. 10). Where Ahmed (2014) separates herself from these other scholars of affect is her account of the “stickiness” of emotion: the concept of emotional contagion, or object’s affective power, and how emotion “can move through the movement or circulation of objects”, makes certain objects “saturated with affect” (p. 11). Much like what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) discuss in their work as “becomings,” the “circulation of objects of emotion” involves the becomings of the thing performing the *affecting*, and the object being *affected*, simultaneously transformed through the process of emotional contagion (p. 256; Ahmed, 2014, p. 11).

Taken together, these works provide additional comprehensive meanings to understandings of emotions, feelings, and affect: while not always commensurable, what each of

these works does is provides further discursive/theoretical means of conceiving the roles that each of these concepts has on social life, from a conception of the affective contours of emotion in everyday life, as well as determining the impact of emotions and feelings on those understandings. In the following section, I will examine how these concepts of emotion, feeling, and affect have informed scholarly discourse in game studies.

Section 4: Affect and game studies – towards representation

By no means is this section meant to act as a genealogy of affect and emotion research in game studies, instead, what I offer is a discussion of the various scholarly discourses related to emotion and affect within game studies. That is, I will argue that the affective turn in game studies has led to a focus on representation inside and outside of games. In this sense, when I say representation, I mean an emphasis on capturing the reality of the lived experiences of all players, not just those deemed to be the object of interest. Inquiries have been made into how affect informs the history of games scholarship: for example, the concept of an “ideal game studies subject” influences the shape and reach of the narratives that games scholars/academics espouse as normalized and accepted, affecting the work of marginalized scholars through a form of emotional manipulation or “scholarly negging” (Phillips, 2020b, p. 31). Trammell (2022) also highlights how game scholarship has a foundation in “white European canon of game studies scholarship” that limits the scope of play theory through “an etic lens” (p. 239).

For example, Ash (2013) argues that developers are aware of this relationship between “affect, emotion, and vulnerability” through an analysis of Call of Duty 4 map design (p. 46). In particular, through the architecture and map design, Ash (2013) states that “rhetorics of captivation and reflex exhibited affect” the “bodily capacities” of users, which in turn increases a player’s “reliance on and consumption of these games and services” (p. 47). When players

“attune” themselves to new map design, Ash (2013) posits that new relations “between the body-brain-environmental assemblage” are created, informed by the “vulnerability” of the body in this becoming-stage (p. 47). Given that vulnerability can take the form and shape of several possibilities, Cremin (2016) proposes that video games “loosen the ties to our molar [bodily] identities,” and is indeed drawn by lines “that exceed those identities” (p. 442). In a Deleuze and Guattari sense, video games are processes of becoming, and “we do not ‘interact’ with video games such we are a part of a video game assemblage” (pp. 444). More importantly, what this means for the discipline of game studies is that “legacies of structuralism and poststructuralism,” upon which science has relied on, has limited the kinds of analyses that can be done “in wholly accounting for human experience” (Anable, 2018, p. 6). Fortunately, “affect theory’s intervention” allows for investigations of “intensity, becoming, and in-betweenness” that is at the heart of human lived experiences (Anable, 2018, p. 6). Turning to “phenomenological imprecision,” Anable (2018) argues that games are “affective systems” and that when we play video games, “we are opening up a ‘form of relation’ to the games aesthetic and narrative properties” (p. xii). This also refers to the hardware and software of the computer, our bodies and others, as well as the various concepts that enable these ideas of “leisure and play” (Anable, 2018, p. xii).

According to Bohunicky (2021), this application of affect differs from that of Deleuze and Guattari’s, as well as Massumi’s, because they argue that Anable’s interpretation “starts in the middle,” and “is generated in the crossing of discourse and corporality” (p. 6). In the use of this application, Anable (2018) posits that “we are made and remade through our affective attachments to representations,” and that “video games require this” form of analysis, which “read[s] for affect” (p. 9). The implications of these ideas and concepts for scholarly inquiry are

that games are “designed to evoke nuanced reactions of nostalgia, tragedy, guilt, regret, and so on”: they can (and do) impact our emotions/feelings through affective attachment to characters and narratives (Chew & Mitchell, 2020, p. 875).

On a related note, video games can inform whether we care or develop empathy for certain narratives. Ruberg and Scully-Blaker (2021) define care as “[evoking] an action, an affect, a mode of engagement, a politic, and even a tool for social change” where care in video games acts as a form of “cultural politics” (p. 656). Games generate care in “multifaceted, troubled, and by extension, generative” means as video games often espouse narratives of “empathy,” which “manipulate us into caring,” but there are also games which critique this “rhetoric” of empathy, such as queer indie game developers (Ruberg & Scully-Blaker, 2021, p. 656, 664; Ruberg, 2019, p. 58). As games become more prevalent in everyday lives, some scholars argue that attention should be given to the way they shape discourse. For example, Ganzon (2019) highlights how otome games, a genre of story-driven romance games centered around female protagonists, “accommodate the consumption of games within women’s daily lives” through an “appropriation of neoliberal postfeminist discourses” (p. 149). What these discussions suggest is that video games are generative sites for emotion and affect and deserve to be investigated. In the following section, I put forth the research questions which guided this research project.

Research Questions

1. Understanding games as affective systems, how do the affordances of a particular game/platform shape narratives surrounding the affective experience of the game/platform?
 - a. What means does *Project Zomboid* provide for players to engage with this affective language?

- b. In what ways do players perceive and interpret the affective elements within *Project Zomboid*, and how do these perceptions influence their overall emotional engagement with the game?
 - c. How do these forms reflect/contrast the developer's (perceived) intentions?
- 2. Understanding emotions as frames of understanding, how are players' experiences of emotions in *Project Zomboid* affected by/reflected in their communication?
 - a. How do players communicate their emotional experiences in *Project Zomboid*, both within the game (e.g., through in-game chat or character actions) and outside the game (e.g. on Discord)?
 - b. What messages are being communicated to *Project Zomboid* players with regards to the meaningfulness of their play?

Methodology

Theoretical frameworks

The first theoretical framework which serves as the foundation for this thesis is Anable's (2018) theory of games as affective systems. Central to this theorization is the idea that the player is a "feeling and active subject," which brings with it numerous methodological considerations (p. xiv). When players, as feeling/active subjects, enter a game, they open "form[s] of relation[s]" with various material and immaterial properties of the game (and not) (Anable, 2018, p. xii). According to Anable (2018), video games give expression "to ways of being in the world and ways of feeling in the present that can tell us something about contemporary digitally mediated and distributed subjectivity" (p. xii). Related to this is Boellstorff's (2015) notion that video games and the 'virtual' experiences we have in those worlds are "profoundly human" (p. 29). According to Boellstorff (2015), the emergence of concepts of "virtual worlds" does not signify

that we are “post” human, instead, gaming and the experiences within those virtual spaces are simply a reconfiguration of the human: “it is in being virtual that we are human” (p. 29).

This concept, taken into consideration with Anable’s (2018) affective systems, suggests that while games are not new by any means, they “offer ways of experiencing the time and space of contemporary life” that is not only different from other “screen-based media,” but is also inherently social and cultural by its very existence (p. xiii). In other words, their status as cultural exports of ideas of play and leisure bring with it “the whole host of fraught cultural meanings and implications that circulate around video games”: for better or for worse, games are a means of articulating experiences, which according to Carr (2019) invites “the textual analysis of representations of identities and social groups” (Anable, 2018, p. xii; p. 718).

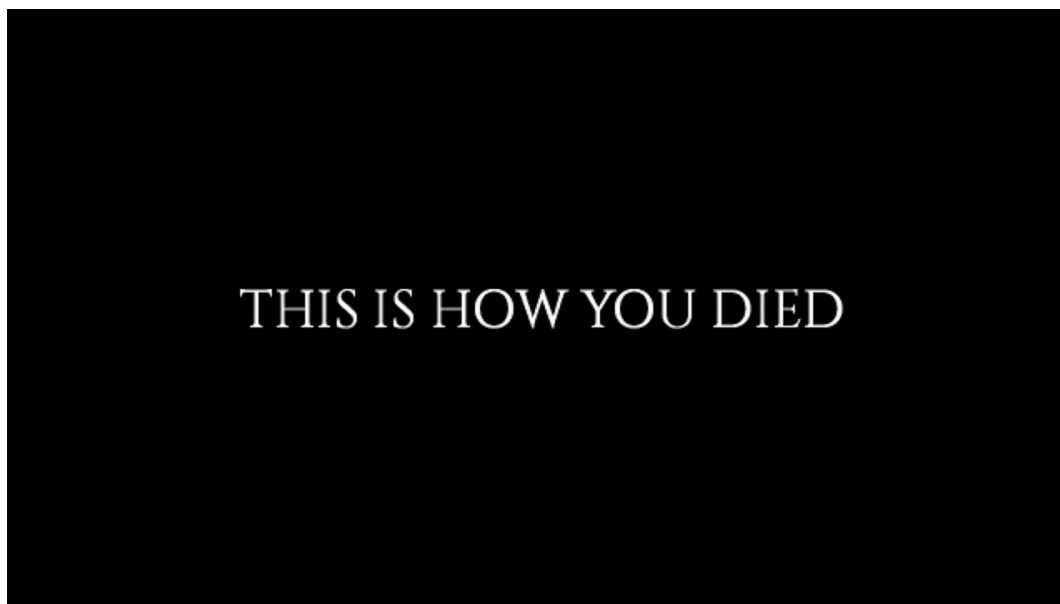
A second, supporting theoretical framework for this project is Beatty’s (2019) notion of emotions as “frames of understanding” a multitude of cultural and social phenomena (pp. 15-16). At the core of this argument is the broader role that emotions play in “sequences of behavior” (Beatty, 2019, p. 17). For Beatty (2019), emotions are emergent, and classifying emotions in the moment gives “direction and meaning” to what is happening (p. 19). As such, emotions and the contexts in which they play out are better understood on a smaller scale, at the level Beatty (2019) calls the “emotional episode” (p. 4). Made up of “feeling, meaning, relationship, circumstance, action, implication, history,” the “disentangling” of emotion from the “personal [...], life history, and point of view” in contemporary ethnography has elided a focus “on the constituents of social life without presuming what they individually are, or even *that* they individually are” (Beatty, 2019, pp. 20-21).

Rationale for game selection

The focus of this thesis is an ethnography of a community adjacent to the video game named *Project Zomboid*, which I will also refer to throughout this thesis as “*Zomboid*” and “*PZ*.” The population selected for this project are gamers who play *Project Zomboid*, and with this population in mind, I selected the official (developer-run) *Project Zomboid* Discord server as my field site. I have chosen this game as the focus of this graduate research project for two reasons. The first is that the game provides an emotional language, or affective system, through which it communicates to the player the intensity of its setting. Upon entry to this world, the player is greeted with “THIS IS HOW YOU DIED” (Figure 1) (Anable, 2018).

Figure 1

Image of introduction slide, “This is How You Died”



Note. The image represents the opening line presented to the player following character creation.

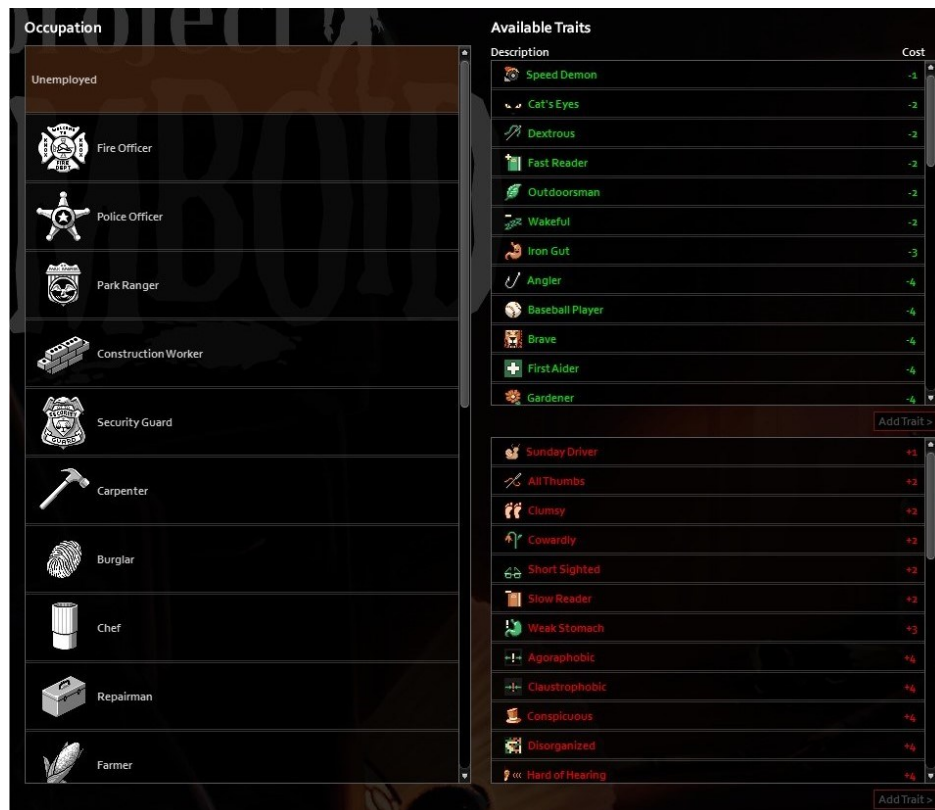
As a player, your story is already written, and your demise is already decided. Therefore, your avatar’s journey, much like a real-life journey, is about the experiences and relationships that you form along the way. As a multiplayer, horror, zombie-survival game, *Project Zomboid*

provides a setting and history charged with emotion and feeling, on top of which the human-survival drama plays out. It follows a similar historical trajectory to our own, with the exception that by the early 1990s, a zombie infection had spread from the epicentre, Louisville, Kentucky, and became a worldwide pandemic. As one of few immune to the airborne strain of this infection, it is up to you how you wish to proceed: will you rebuild or reinvent society? Will you do it alone, or will you recruit others to help you? While the game gives the player the tools, it ultimately leaves it up to them to decide.

Along the way are many personal, emotional episodes. These contexts and situations give meaning to the emotional states of individuals in these situations. For example, your survival and that of your companions is dependent on many factors, including how hungry/tired/thirsty you all are: these concepts are not unique to *Project Zomboid*, but what is more particular to *Zomboid* is how these systems interact with the more ‘roleplaying’ systems featured in the game. At character creation, players are given points to assign themselves ‘traits,’ which can be positive or negative in nature: players can, however, choose to take negative traits which give them extra points to take positive ones (Figure 2). At the same time, there are various occupations that you can pick, each with their own associated positive traits. For example, a Fire Officer gains +1 to Axe, Fitness, Running and Strength with no associated downsides: the Police Officer, however, has +3 to Aiming, +1 to Nimble and +2 to Reloading, and they start with a negative amount of starting points, meaning they need to take a negative trait to offset their how positive their character is. A player is not obliged to take either the occupations or the traits: they are completely optional actions, but fundamental elements of the *Project Zomboid* play experience, as they reflect how hopeless and imperfect our struggles would be in a zombie apocalypse scenario.

Figure 2

Image of the list of traits and professions in Project Zomboid's character creation



Note. The above image represents some character traits and occupations in the game.

Both positive and negative traits provide extra variety in single-player and multiplayer by influencing the affective intensities of a given situation. For example, I can recall from the many times I have played *Project Zomboid* before this project, my character was not a smoker, and such a characteristic would have given me a greater chance of survival. As a smoker, my character needs a cigarette approximately every hour lest they gain stress and sadness. In turn, this management of my own avatar's stress becomes embodied in my play as I seek out ways to mitigate the potential cause of stress. Perhaps the inevitable downfall will be from my character's lack of cigarettes. In multiplayer scenarios, the player is not only experiencing their emotional episodes but also those of other players and friends. They are always becoming, being affected by

the actions of the game, other players, and their own decision making, becoming stronger/weaker, hungrier/more full, thinner/fatter, or more relaxed/stressed out. In turn, they provide a deeper connection to the setting of your character, but also to that of the emotional context(s) of the situation at hand. From my own player experience, *Project Zomboid* provides these opportunities for affective intensity and relationships with other players through constant negotiation of/attuning to player's avatars affective states, and the "vulnerability" this entails (Ash, 2013).

The second reason for selecting *Project Zomboid* is to better understand how *Project Zomboid* acts as an affective system through an ethnography by working with the notion of "emotional episode[s]" (Beatty, 2019, p. 4). The way in which *Project Zomboid* players experience and discuss emotion is emergent and gives meaning to the context/situation at hand. What separates *Project Zomboid* from other zombie-survival sandbox games like *7 Days to Die*, *DayZ* and *Unturned* is the realism and believability of its setting, and the effect of these on gameplay. It is not to say that these games are not affective systems that provoke their own affective intensities. Games like *7 Days* and *DayZ* have health systems that do not capture the embodied feelings/emotions of how injuries might feel to a player's avatar. The way this is communicated/felt in gameplay is emergent: when you injure yourself in *Project Zomboid*, you are given information based how severe that injury was, how much pain your character is in, how much medical knowledge you have and the resulting emotional/feeling state(s). Consequently, your character's state is communicated not only in-game through messages like 'Ouch,' but also through decreased player performance, such as not being able to run/walk as quickly as well as making unnecessary noise through crying out in pain, which attracts nearby zombies. A fractured ankle in this instance can mean the difference between living or dying for you or your group, and how players communicate this information to each other is embodied "yet foundationally social"

(Boellstorff & Lindquist, 2004, p. 440). Therefore, how do you players let other players know they broke their leg, or can they figure it out for themselves based on the way you are limping?

Procedures

The primary means of data collection was through ethnographic methods. Due to the nature of the site of my research, I conducted a digital ethnography. The difference between digital and standard ethnographic methods lies in the fact that the field is “intangible” (Pink et. al., 2016, p. 7). Instead of being a disadvantage, the intangibility of the digital field “invites us to consider the question of the digital intangible,” which itself implies numerous questions for how we conceive of the relationship between the “digital, sensory, atmospheric and material elements of our worlds” (Pink et. al., 2016, p. 7). As discussed by Beatty (2019), the meaning that emotions can have is numerous and cannot be ignored by the ethnographer. Reading these meanings (and others) requires a “grasp of context and intention” that ethnographic research can provide (Beatty, 2019, p. 156). Beatty (2010) had previously argued that to capture the reality of emotional experience, researchers/ethnographers must go beyond the ethnographic vignette and into the realm of narrative. While I attend to this sentiment in this thesis, one question that struck me throughout the entire process was whether the social scientific nature of ethnography was stripped away, and whether the insights I gathered are valuable to scholarly disciplines. Perhaps what this indicates is a level of vulnerability that one has to have when engaging with affective concepts and bodies/objects: this “unsettled uncertainty of the research process” provides the “space” for understanding “the stories of others” and the effects they have on us as researchers, and as vulnerable beings open to being affected (Page, 2017, p. 28).

As a field site, the *Project Zomboid* Discord server is publicly accessible and not age-gated; therefore, all observations and data collected through participant observation are

completely confidential in case community members are under the age of 18. Discord is a communication platform, and Discord servers are the digital spaces within the platform that let its users communicate with others in specific contexts and settings, such as gaming, or ‘friends-only’ groups. Following approval from a moderator, I announced my presence on the server as well as the scope and goals of my research. After an initial participant-observation period on the server, I announced recruitment for interview participants in the form of a post. To participate, they must be at least 18 years old and must have signed the provided informed consent forms (see Appendix 1). During this period, which lasted from January to March 2024, those who were interested were encouraged to contact me, from there I would provide digital informed consent forms and an interview guide (see Appendix 2). The interview guide provided general definitions of the three terms I would be using throughout the interview, including feeling, emotion, and affect as well as the questions I would ask during our semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted between approximately 45 and 75 minutes, with time at the beginning of the interviews being given to brief participants on the project, as well as provide them with time to sign the digital consent forms. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, ongoing, and could be withdrawn at any time. I told the participants that it is my responsibility to destroy all information/documentation related to the participants involvement, and that there would be no negative consequences for doing so.

During the participant-observation period, which lasted from January to July 2024, I primarily gathered data as a lurker in Discord, where I observed users communicate with each other in the form of Discord posts, which included posts to multiple channels on the server. Treating these posts as forms of text, I formed various themes that I subsequently developed the core chapters of this thesis around. Throughout the thesis, I maintain the confidentiality of these

players through the use of pseudonyms. In the case of my interlocutors, I shortened their username to use the first letter, and in the cases where users had the same first letter, the last letters of their usernames (e.g. N and NZ; one pseudonym, IY, was an exceptional case due to “I” also referring to the first-person perspective); in the case of user posts on Discord, their usernames have been removed and replaced with the order of the speaker in each discussion (e.g. User 1 is the first person who spoke in that discussion, User 2 being the second, and so on).

As a preliminary example, some players discuss how the game brings out the pessimism within them. What does this mean exactly? How does this pessimism inform players actions/decisions? Why do these kinds of feelings “stick” (Ahmed, 2014)? How do they relate to my own experiences of the affective intensities offered by the game? Although lurking does entail a few methodological concerns (Strickland & Schlesinger, 1969; Bone et. al., 2016; De Seta, 2020), I accompany this data with field notes and observations made during play sessions with two *Project Zomboid* players, followed by five semi-structured interviews guided by these notes/observations and the project’s research questions. The questions provided to interview participants include, which can be found in Appendix 2.

In Chapter 1, I discuss how games are affective systems that produce and are a product of emotions, attitudes, feelings and sentiments. This chapter demonstrates what makes *Project Zomboid* particularly interesting as a case study is the range of affective intensity offered by the game through its portrayal of the zombie genre. In what will follow, I discuss my play experiences alongside two *Project Zomboid* players as well as interviews with *five Project Zomboid* Discord users, who I interviewed between February and March 2024, sharing stories that point to the ambivalent emotional experiences offered by its gameplay, and as I will note, the potential for players to construct and live out their narratives. The zombies tended to be the last

things on our minds, almost as if their presence was only a primer for the explosive human drama.

In Chapter 2, I explore three examples of how players of *Project Zomboid* utilize game mechanics and player-made mods to harness the game's ability to foster affectively intensive experiences: by experimenting with *Project Zomboid*'s zombie settings and other non-modded features; through smaller mods that lightly change the game world; and through mods that change existing features or add entirely new ones, using a mod called "Neurodiversity Plus" as a case study to explore this notion.

In Chapter 3, I posit that communities adjacent to video games like the *Project Zomboid* Discord perform the role of sustaining those affective relationships between players/users and the game. If video games can be construed as systems operating as networks of affects, then the gaming community can be understood as the ecosystem in which this grander network plays out. I attempted to demonstrate how the *PZ* Discord community is experienced by players, users, and developers as an emotional ecosystem, an ecology of feeling and sentiment that informs discourses and interactions surrounding the game and its community.

Chapter 1: Locating the affect of/in *Project Zomboid*

Section 1: Zombies and the affect of genre

Zombies and zombie games are some of the most prolific examples of ludic and visual horror. Conceptually, they are a representation of the human form gone completely and horribly awry, at odds with the natural cycle of life. Within this statement is another conceptual characteristic: zombies used to be something, in this context, human, and this existential threat, the loss of our humanity, is all that awaits us should we ever fall into their clutches. Being consumed and continuing the cycle of capitalist consumption in our *afterlives*: the perfect subjects, zombies are consumers in the market with one demand, but a stubborn supply chain. Taken together, these few examples tell different stories, each with their moral lesson. No single zombie story can encompass the affective intensities brought about by its experience. Perron (2009) has described survival horror games as an “extended body genre,” which I feel speaks to this notion (p. 125). “A head with a body,” genre draws the affective boundaries of our ludonarrative experiences, or the intersection of ludic/play and narrative experience: sometimes in the shape of eldritch horrors, but in this case, in distinctly familiar, human shapes (Perron, 2009, p. 141). When one plays *Project Zomboid*, they are in fact participating in the (re)drawing of the conceptual boundaries of the zombie and their place in video games and other visual mediums. You are not just playing a game but experiencing and feeling a genre of possibilities.

The developers of the game make their influences clear in their reverence for George A. Romero, the famous director of the “of the Dead” trilogy of zombie movies, including *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead*. According to the developers, “without [Romero] there would be no *Project Zomboid*,” and even state “the entire face of videogaming would have been very different without his vision” (The Indie Stone, July 17, 2017). Indeed, the game’s default play settings attempt to recreate a “Romeroesque” style of play, partly due to the

zombie's nature to shamble around in large numbers. Webley (2020) defines the Romeroesque in video games as the “anxiety inducing, shambling, smothering hordes” and “evok[ing] the impossibility of reason to comprehend the creeping totality of the apocalyptic situation” (Webley, 2020, p. 263). Moreover, according to Webley (2020), the Romeroesque is noted for its subversive narrative elements that question the nature of authority, consumerism, and equality (p. 259). He notes that these more subversive elements are not found in mainstream triple A games, a term used to denote games published by high budget developers and publishers. Instead, they are found in indie game titles, *Project Zomboid* included (Webley, 2020, p. 269). In similar ways, both Romero's films and indie zombie games gain attention and notoriety because of their independent status and their willingness to make something frightening (Webley, 2020, p. 260).

In contrast to this, *Project Zomboid* also gives players the ability to subvert those subversions, even giving them the power to remove the zombie threat entirely. As a simulation-style game, every aspect of it is customizable and modular, leading players to have vastly different and even incommensurable experiences. They are, however, built on the literal and figurative foundation of the Romeroesque. As players, we are tasked with (re)building the world as we see fit. As individuals, and as humans, we are also tasked with imagining what the world will look like and the trajectory that will lead us there. In their chapter on zombies and posthumanism, Wilde (2022) discusses the “dual fascination” with posthuman stances on zombies: first is our captivation with the idea of a complete societal “crash” that a zombie apocalypse can create, and second, that we as audiences of zombie media would welcome such an attack on those “embody” the societal collapse (p. 32). While it might suit certain genre expectations of the zombie, as Wilde (2022) points out, “zombies are also victims of humanistic systems” that perpetuate these attitudes and feelings regarding not only our “contemporary

human practice[s],” but also the fact that death would not save us from the “interminable production chain” of our zombie afterlives (p. 32).

Part of the daily struggle in a *Project Zomboid* playthrough is related to defining your experience – what will we do in this situation? Concerning Wilde’s (2022) arguments regarding the posthuman zombie, *Project Zomboid* raises the question of what a postcapitalist society could look like if a societal collapse or crash were to happen. Though not clear, the game features certain metanarrative clues that suggest what may have caused its particular iteration of the zombie apocalypse. Was it the Spiffo Restaurant’s new secret sauce making everyone sick? Maybe it was those military experiments happening in the secret underground base. Regardless of the arrived-at conclusion, all evidence would suggest that ‘we’ are the reason for our predicament, the royal human we, that is. Alas, as players, we are not concerned with why, inasmuch as what: what do we do now that the world is seemingly over? What is next?

A fitting visual metaphor that may stand in for this feeling of directionless anxiety is that of the survivors from Romero’s 1978 film *Dawn of the Dead*. In the film, after landing their helicopter on the roof of a gigantic indoor shopping mall, four individuals systematically lock down and secure this location all while having a few close calls with zombies. After they accomplish their tasks, they run off to all the stores, grabbing and consuming things off the shelves at their leisure. The film shows a montage of the survivors as they eat decadent meals and wear expensive clothing; after days, perhaps even weeks, the survivors start looking increasingly unthrilled with their predicament. While it does serve as a visual metaphor for rampant consumerism, it also raises the question of what western life would mean if we were not actively coveting these objects. What other meanings can be learned from life outside this capitalist,

extractivist system? The film would suggest that part of the struggle remains in our hands, the human drama that “not even the zombies can save us [from] now” (Wilde, 2022, p. 32).

Project Zomboid both embodies and criticizes this standpoint. On the one hand, this apocalyptic scenario invites people to act in all sorts of self-preserving manners if it means staying alive. On *Project Zomboid* multiplayer servers, one can only imagine the extent to which individuals will group up to benefit themselves, whether for the purpose of roleplaying or sheer brutal pragmatism. In other cases, there are servers where players try to create and imagine new communities sustained through cooperation and synergy. At the center of these experiences is a shared horror for the zombie: as an affective genre that elicits both fear and hope, the game allows players to explore those affective intensities in ways that are deeply meaningful on a personal and social level. One moment you might be working hand in hand with a stranger, and in the next moment a completely different stranger takes what both of you were working on: a potential glimpse of the apocalypse, and such is life in *Project Zomboid*.

It is a game *about* zombie culture, where players either remediate or refashion cultural attitudes and objects related to the zombie genre, including zombies’ pace and reach. According to Perron (2020), zombies in video games remain popular because they are represented and behave “ideally,” only responding to the player character as a way to call for what Perron names “inter(re)activity” (p. 213). To interact within a game demands a level of concern from the player, something which Perron (2016) specifically calls “gameplay emotions,” or emotions “arising from gamer’s concerns and actions in game” (p. 190). While he states that video games involve “surface concerns” as they allow players to take actions “that we would not do in real life,” they do have associated “social concerns” (Perron, 2016, pp. 192, 204). Using examples of social groups and gaming, Perron (2016) discusses how we are never “really play[ing] in isolation,” as

our performances are constantly appraised “in terms of achievements we compare with our reference group – be it explicit or not” (205). The zombie genre adds an additional dimension, as emotional highs and lows come from the contrast and/or consistency of players’ cultural expectations of a zombie game versus their actual experiences.

Games are affective systems that produce and are a product of emotions, attitudes, feelings, and sentiments: what makes *Project Zomboid* particularly interesting as a case study is the range of affective intensity offered by the game through its portrayal of the zombie genre. Framed by the trappings of zombie culture, each playthrough is an emotional episode of your television show, where players discover their proximity to the zombie experience and what it can/could be both as consumers of zombie media and emotions. In what will follow, I discuss my play experiences alongside two *Project Zomboid* players as well as interviews with five *Project Zomboid* Discord users, who I interviewed between February and March 2024, discuss their experiences playing the game, sharing stories that point to the ambivalent emotional experiences offered by its gameplay. As *consumers* of emotions informed by zombie media culture, *Project Zomboid* encourages its players to construct and consume their personal narratives as zombie genre ‘what-if’ scenarios.

Section 2: Ambivalent affect and participant stories

As far as gaming experiences go, “*Project Zomboid* is a game of progression,” according to NZ. They shared with me that “[the game] really makes me feel motivated in a way that I am focusing my attention on something, and depending on what I am doing, it makes me feel that, especially when I feel unmotivated, I can accomplish tasks” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). The way this progress takes shape is in accordance with one’s goals, using whatever control the game gives you. When they are not at work, NZ enjoys playing *Project*

Zomboid because it lets them “immerse [them]self inside of this completely fictional world where [he] can zone out from real life.” They also point out that because they have control over the things they do, it makes them “feel better” whenever they “goes back to the real world” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Player agency and control are some of the defining features of *Project Zomboid*, and having even a semblance of choice goes a long way at making players like NZ feel empowered. Previously mentioned in this chapter is the idea of simulation games, or games that attempt to accurately replicate activities/jobs in digital form: *Project Zomboid* is a simulation, or sim game, but the more important descriptor is that it is a ‘sandbox’ game. The term sandbox is analogous to the affordances it provides players, namely that the world is one big sandbox that they can shape how they see fit. In NZ’s words, “I think the developers, just by the nature of it being a sandbox style of video game, encourages people to think out of the box in terms of their gameplay” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). As they later point out, NZ feels that while player choice and freedom are important aspects of playing the game, in the end, it is just a game. Despite this, they state that “you can really turn your emotions into trying to find the right decision [...] for lack of a better term, the most fun [choice] for you” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Because of its emphasis on survival, *Project Zomboid* can be a grueling experience as you try to endure every major and minor hardship. If you happen to die or “mess up,” as NZ puts it, you can make a new character and start all over again. Every new character, even if they live in the same persistent world, invites players to experience new emotional episodes of the game as they discover newfound feelings and understandings in relation to their play. It feels good to progress, as players enjoy a sense of relief from the stress that *Project Zomboid*’s gameplay elicits, but in a single moment it can all end, eschewing a new affective dynamic.

For all the emotional work it takes to make a solid, well-rounded player character, it comes as no surprise that we would become attached to our avatar. NZ shared that they had worked on/played a character for approximately one month of in-game time, which comes out to about 25-30 hours of real time work (if they use the default time calculation: more on this in Chapter 2). “This was me getting on every day after work, so it was kind of my stress reliever” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Unfortunately for them, all their work would be lost to a singular zombie: “I was frustrated, I was unmotivated, for a little bit, I really did not want to play the game anymore” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). In spite of this frustration and saying to themselves ‘I put all this time into something and it turned bad... so what’s the point,’ players like NZ are taught through trial and error to persevere, and through this perseverance you can potentially be rewarded with a fresh perspective of the game’s affective elements.

For other players, such as M, the challenge of progressing is itself a reward, but one fraught with trouble. This is the grind of *Project Zomboid*. The game is infamous for having players scour the entire playable world for a single item, this can be things like a magazine that allows player characters to gain the ability to connect gas generators to buildings without electrical knowledge. If a player is fortunate enough to find one, in M’s words, “once you actually get to that thing, it is *such* a good feeling... it feels so amazing” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). These feelings are amplified in multiplayer servers, where M points out “even if you are playing [with] 10-plus people, you can all do different things and be focused on something.” Part of this role specialization is related to the game’s concept of community building in the post-apocalypse, but the traits and professions chosen are the result of the preferences and skills players bring to the table as individuals and as gamers. To see everyone

on a server working together, as M puts it, “you feel like you are being supported in a different way than you usually do” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). Even when players are off doing their individual tasks, this group/social play contributes to an overall feeling of eudaimonic flourishing.

How players go about expressing this feeling with other players is through voice and text chat in-game, and through Discord, with M explicitly mentioning in-game voice chat in their story. While there are specific gestures that players can use in-game, for example, giving a thumbs-up using a context-specific menu, voice chat gives players the ability to express feelings through their own characters, as the voice chat in-game is proximity-based. According to M, the tone, tenor, and cadence of a person’s voice “convey[s] emotions via how you would do it in standard conversations,” emphasizing the level of social awareness one needs to interact in some multiplayer servers (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). Playing it straight or putting on a happy or sad voice has as much to do with the social context as it does with roleplaying a particular character or background. During one play session, M and their friends had to deal with a cheater on their server; in this specific instance, because the cheater had been caught in the act, the group decided what this cheater’s punishment would be. While discussion of their emotions is normally bounded to the game itself, metagaming events such as this instance of cheating dispel the illusion of *Project Zomboid* being ‘just a game.’ Adding further, M said “this makes you feel more like you are actually interacting and being part of what is happening, which makes you feel like you are integrated into the community in a much different way” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). *Project Zomboid* “attracts players who seek a community,” not only because they want to, but because the game itself *insists* on this kind of group play and community building (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024).

Players of *Project Zomboid* are encouraged to form communities and play groups on the Discord community server. For A, the desire to play with others is a matter of investment, particularly when it comes to finding one that fits your interests. “You’re not forced to go there [...] but that is a choice you make to emotionally invest in a small group” (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024). Expanding on this further, A feels that a sense of community is more easily fostered amongst smaller groups of people. The *Project Zomboid* Discord server has a space for individuals to post messages about their multiplayer servers, often leaving server details, roleplay guidelines, and invitations to their own Discord servers. The *Project Zomboid* Discord becomes a hub for large groups of people to form common understandings of the game in hopes of creating desirable social play experiences, then splitting off from this larger server in favor of smaller group dynamics that allow players greater space and time to know each other personally. Finding like-minded people online who enjoy the game is not as difficult for A as it is convincing their offline friends. A states that “I am trying to convince them to play with me [...] but they are hard to convince ‘cause they play the same games” (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024). Despite this large community, *Project Zomboid* can also be an isolating experience.

In KK’s recent playthroughs, the overwhelming “feeling of loneliness” is an affective force that blankets their whole play experience. According to them, “there is not really much going on beside you and the zombies [...] that sort of inescapable feeling” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). While KK has tried various challenges to cope with these feelings of loneliness and boredom, they are sentiments that are shared across these players’ stories and even my play sessions. These feelings tend to stick and be associated with the play experience of the game. It creates an overall impression that progressing in the game is

something that cannot be too fast or slow as it creates situations wherein players feel there is a lack of an endgame. “Once you get used to the whole progression-loop, you do not really get scared anymore, because the zombies do not really evolve [...], you become sort of complacent by the end of it” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). Part of this dilemma relates to ‘making your own fun’ and the contradictory nature of the game’s open-endedness. For some, the freedom to approach situations according to your own affinities and goals is satisfying, but this lack of direction can, conversely, frustrate other players. What do you do when you become bored of the game you are invested in? If play is fundamentally a way of being in the world, what happens when the act of play ceases to just ‘be’ and becomes a conscious, almost out-of-spite routine? It becomes boring. For KK, to combat or play ‘against’ the boredom “is mostly just a case of just switching things up, trying out new things, trying out different challenges [...], power through the boredom ‘cause I feel there is gonna be more content waiting for me once I am done with it” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024).

In the case of IY, she may not ever experience or feel some of the sensations offered by the game. In contrast to the other stories shared thus far, IY tries to stay away from the main subject of *Project Zomboid*, namely the zombies. IY has a phobia of zombies, also known as kinemortophobia. Despite having this phobia, IY enjoys playing *Project Zomboid* for its survival aspects, treating the game like “a very dangerous farming sim” (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). IY usually plays the game with her friends but particularly her partner. “I think the main reason I play the game is because it provides for me a sense of community, especially for my long-distance friends, and it provides a sense of pride whenever things go well” (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). Describing her playstyle as being a “homemaker,” she posits that being in tense situations where she can play a supportive role among her friends

creates within her a sense of pride “based off [the group’s] successes” knowing, not just feeling, that her actions are meaningful and contribute to the group’s cohesion. IY feels compelled to occupy this support role while her partner and other friends deal with the things she cannot.

I am proud of these things that I accomplish, because I do feel like it is harder for me to do these things, this is a way for me to interact with the phobia, and a way that I really enjoy, and even when things are going terribly, I know that I am doing well. (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024)

Even knowing this, there is always a chance for her to reexperience “the most overwhelming sense of despair that [she] ever felt playing a video game.” Instead of pulling her away, IY instead plays ‘with’ her phobia and ‘against’ this current of negative affect. Despair, frustration and failure ‘move’ her to get better at playing the game for her friend’s sake, her partner’s, and herself.

The player anecdotes shared thus far illustrate the ambivalent emotional experiences provided by the game. It can be simultaneously thrilling and boring, and it can inspire great wanderlust but also hopelessness and despair. In the following section, I will reflect upon my play experiences which will further demonstrate the range of affective intensity brought about through experiencing *Project Zomboid* as a game, but also as a representation of genre.

Section 3: Playing genre through affect, playing with affect through genre

After finally agreeing on a particular time, N, P, and I finally got down to planning out the server settings. Each of us has played the game for hundreds of hours, with N having the most experience out of this group: I thought to myself, what would or could make this time different? “You can host this time,” said N. Great, I thought to myself, time to put it together. I was in control of our play experience, but each game mechanic was adjusted in consultation with N and

P. “Have either of you played the game vanilla recently?” I asked. After some back and forth, we agreed to a vanilla, unmodified server with the exception of a single quality of life mod called ‘Sleeping with Friends,’ which as the name suggests, allows players on multiplayer servers to sleep at the same time. We also decided on adding one additional mod which I will discuss later in this chapter. In the coming pages, I will recount my play experiences and read it with/against the experiences of my interlocutors. Taken together, they illustrate how *Project Zomboid* is not only an effective horror game, but also an affective representation of the zombie genre as it has been depicted thus far.

The server that N, P, and I played on together was not pushing genre conventions: we elected to play with Romeroesque zombies, whose slow shambling makes them non-threatening when dealt with individually, but panic-inducing when confronted in a group. The player, however, has complete control over how intelligent, tough, and strong the zombies are, and even the size of their population. Whether a player feels like playing with *Left 4 Dead*-style running zombies, playing the game like *7 Days To Die*, or is pretending to be a character from *The Walking Dead*, *Project Zomboid* provides players with an affective foundation upon which they can scaffold their play on particular genre conventions of zombie media, while also leaving space for them to explore different styles of play that are unique to this open-ended, sim-style of gaming.

As previously mentioned, our group elected to play with shambling zombies whose strength, toughness and intelligence were at its default settings (e.g., normal) (Figure 3). Referring to earlier discussions about the genre, Figure 3 also demonstrates the extent to which zombies have proper or culturally expected forms of representation. As a genre toolkit, *Project Zomboid* lets players choose how near or far they want to be to the expected zombie lore.

In response to this, a single but meaningful change we made was to the zombie's ability to transmit infections from bites, scratches, and lacerations. Collectively, we did not want to bear the burden of infecting each other if we were to get infected, the likelihood of which is extremely high given the nature of our playstyles. N is a confident and knowledgeable player, and P is equally knowledgeable but admits to lacking courage in combat scenarios, and I fall somewhere in between both of those scales. In sum, we work well together, however, we tend to rely on N's expertise which led to tense situations in events where N was occupied or not able to help P or I. And so, our project began.

Figure 3

Image of Project Zomboid "zombie lore" settings



Note. The image represents the zombie "lore" or settings that control how zombies play in-game.

Darkness clouds the screen except for your avatar's (in-game) line of sight. To clear this fog of war, I turn my mouse while holding the right-mouse button, which shifts my character's point of view. I find myself on the first floor of a two-story home. I attempted to confirm N and

P's location on my map and quickly realized that in my haste to start playing, I enabled player mini-maps instead of an option that lets us see each other on our own maps. While I let them know that a server restart was in order, N jokes that "[he] should have hosted." After this minor inconvenience, we returned to our world. We were fortunate enough to have spawned close together, but it was still going to take some effort to find each other; in the meantime, we were going to need supplies. N was working on his own while I looked for P, who was in a neighborhood nearby.

Despite the ability to communicate using in-game voice chat, we elected to meet on Discord, which while eliding the proximity function of chat also gave us the ability to speak to each other at will. Over P's open mic I hear frantic clicking from his mouse followed by an audibly annoyed "Aw crap." "Where are you?" I respond. "Forget it, I am done for," P replies. Fortunately for P, I was not far, and I managed to save him: for the moment, we were safe. Amid this excitement, N managed to come across an abandoned church with several vehicles in its parking lot (Figure 4). After verifying on the map, we realized that this church was centrally located in the town we were in, Muldraugh, and this meant stores, homes, and other public services were within walking distance, and therefore, looting distance. Though we did not know it then, this area is the only place we would ever call a home on this server.

Figure 4

Image of the Holy Grace Church in Muldraugh, before our occupation



Note. From *Project Zomboid Map Project*, by B. Schieder, n.d., Project Zomboid Map Project

(<https://map.projectzomboid.com/#10770x10180x4922>). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

“This place is kind of small,” I said to N. “It should work for now,” he replied, “it doesn’t have as many windows.” Of course, I thought to myself, we will need to board up the windows as soon as possible. N immediately went to work furnishing our new home. While P helped him out, I decided to explore our surroundings. The church was a sizeable property with open grounds and a row of trees obscuring the northern section of the lot. To the east, where we spawned, were rows of streets still in need of looting, while to the west there were shopping centers and the main boulevard. Not feeling compelled to explore unfamiliar territory, I revisited the neighborhood to the east.

Part of the struggle in *Project Zomboid’s* early game progression is the search for survival materials and supplies. The challenge is in part due to your character’s carry-weight capacity: we can only carry so much in our hands, pockets and on our backs that eventually we will need some

kind of container. Container is a loose description as it can refer to bottles, bags or even the trunks of vehicles. The search for any kind of container is what one is prepared for at the beginning of any *Project Zomboid* play experience. With this in mind, I began searching through abandoned homes with the hope of finding each of us their own water bottle and backpack. As I clear and secure each house on the block, I open my map and use a handy pencil to cross off each home I visit. I find a few houses with generators, an essential tool once the power inevitably turns off. I had no luck finding everyone a bottle or a backpack but problems such as these have a way of eventually sorting themselves out, namely through continued exploration. Once our sleeping arrangements were made, which involved sharing a communal bed, we each took turns sleeping and guarding our building, the church's priest house. The next few days and nights followed a similar pattern, as we secured more of our so-called home. After each of our play sessions, of which there were four, we would continue chatting about the game and our hopes and goals regarding our next sessions.

It is in these debriefing segments that we were able to see our different individual play styles interact with one another, and what that meant with regards to the kind of group play we were imagining. In the context of these moments, our playful observations of each other's *Zomboid* idiosyncrasies served as a recapitulation of all the events that happened in that session. N would get a lot done with regards to furnishing our base, P would help when N needed him, and I would wander around looking for supplies and other ways to help. These little expeditions usually involved me taking a pristine car, thanks to N's mechanic skills, driving off to look for these materials, and returning with the materials in a nearly useless, destroyed car. "Jesus Derek," N said, "I spent the whole [in-game] day working on that thing!" The loot from my supply runs was *usually* worth the trouble of breaking a car, but not necessarily worth the incessant nagging

and teasing from N. While playful, this teasing helped me realize my own shortcomings when it came to playing the game: even with nearly 300 hours played, I still had a lot to learn about myself and the manner in which I play with others.

By this time in our play sessions, we had grown our base to include the church's chapel, which we fortified with wooden walls and metal sheets (Figure 5). We moved all our supplies and furnishings into the chapel, where we set up everything in the nave. P dismantled the pews, which gave us an abundance of wooden planks, and N dismantled shelving, while I carried our loose supplies into the base using an abundance of bags we collected across the weeks. Within the day, we were more or less settled into this new living arrangement. While we were celebrating our success, we decided that we would need to start fortifying the base. Other deliberations we made included when to get ready for the impending power and water shut-off, and how to deal with our dwindling food supply. Until this point, we were living comfortably, perhaps a little too much so; despite having plenty of food and water less than an in-game week ago, we would have to get back to work, as keeping ourselves well fed meant our food stores were getting to an unacceptably low level. We had collected most of the food in close proximity to us and would now have to travel further to find supplies. While we did not acknowledge it at the time, our feelings were starting to change with regard to our play.

Figure 5

Image of the in-game church after fortification



Note. The image represents the church base in **Figure 4** after our fortification efforts.

The latter half of this playthrough is arguably more interesting in a narrative sense than the former half. Despite things going to plan, or perhaps because of it, we were losing interest in this playthrough. Without any struggle, the survival element of *Project Zomboid* loses its emotional/affective capacity to make players act. Part of this statement is a reflection about progression in video games: should we be *thrilled* that all our character's needs are being met? Should we be *ecstatic* that we have our local zombie horde culled and under control? Instead, N, P, and I were getting *bored*. Our trips away from base became more frequent as we looked for more interesting things to be doing. For example, our previously mentioned food supply was getting dangerously low and we headed off to a town called Rosewood, which is due southwest of Muldraugh. If driving around town was difficult for me, driving to another town would take monumental effort on my part to keep any one of our cars in a workable condition. The roads and

highways of Knox County are swarming with the undead, which makes bobbing and weaving the only viable strategy of getting around them. We drove in two cars, but we would eventually abandon a sedan in favour of a stepvan, which would help us haul back more supplies. Rosewood was overrun with zombies: with this realization, our priorities shifted, and we headed off to the local police and fire stations looking for firearms and other weapons. With too many zombies to handle, our situation grew tense, with me uttering “we have to get out of here” more than a few times. We were fortunate, however, to make it out with only a few scrapes and bruises, and the risk of dying and losing one’s character was almost outweighed by any notion of action or excitement, which would relieve our feelings of boredom. At the end of our session, during our informal debrief, N brought up the idea of adding a mod called “Horde Night”: it would add a server setting whereby the host can make zombies attack your base in waves every ‘X’ number of nights. I told him I would check it out, and we left it at that.

The following day, I found the mod on the Steam Workshop, a repository for player-made modifications for games sold on the Steam distribution platform. Based on N’s recommendation, I decided I would add it to our server’s mod list, just not yet: we were still low on food, and our previous adventure did not help us in that matter. Furthermore, our next escapade would have to be an even longer and more arduous venture as the closest town with a grocery store was in the middle of *Project Zomboid*’s map. While the route was more direct, it was also twice the driving distance from Rosewood, our furthest journey to this point. The drive was uneventful, but the experience in town was far from it.

It all started at the town’s bookstore. P noted that we were missing a few skill books and magazines which could enhance our experience rate, and he decided to break in. Suddenly, the building’s alarm chirps to life: “Aw fuck!” I hear P exclaim. Our time had just gotten a lot shorter,

as we scrambled in and out of the bookstore. We only had a few minutes before every zombie in the area would be upon us. With the horde closing in, we quickly drove to other locations we needed supplies from: a bar for alcohol, which could be used to make disinfectants, the farming/rural store for more tools and weapons, and a few restaurants and a gas station which would hold some of the food we desperately needed. Hungry and stressed out, we pushed further into town. Before long, we started getting overwhelmed by the massive horde that the house alarm had attracted. It is at points like this where the game becomes more socially interesting: in sharing these emotional experiences with others, of being terrified but also excited, it demonstrates the extent to which these gameplay events can be conceived as episodic, each with their own narrative and emotional continuity. In reference to this, I now move on to the final ‘episode’ of my group play with P and N, and the boisterous crescendo representing the sum of our collective feelings around creating a unique play experience.

After our foray in the unnamed town, we returned to our base in Muldraugh with the previously mentioned supplies. It was more than enough to keep us going, as we had enough food, ammo, and other items to keep us at base for the foreseeable future. It is at this point that the Horde Night mod was added to the server; N and I were unsure whether it was working correctly, but we continued with our tasks in-game. I was few kilometres away from our base, filling containers at the gas station. N did not elaborate on what he was doing, and P was at the base fortifying its walls. Before any of us could react, a terrifying cacophony of zombies’ moans and screams could be heard across town, and an eerie red vignette unfurled out from the edges of the screen. Was this just happening to me, I wondered? It was clear that the sun was setting, but something else was happening. “Uh, guys, are you hearing this?” I called out. “Oh my God,” P exclaims, “you guys need to get back NOW! Derek, N, where are you?!” As funny as it is for me

to reflect on now, I had not anticipated being as struck and dumbfounded as I was than experiencing this Horde Night. There was no time to stop and think as we all had to move quickly if we wanted to have any fighting chance of survival.

I slammed hard on the gas pedal and sped home, dreading every second we would have to spend protecting ourselves and the base we had worked so hard on. N managed to make it back before I could and immediately tried to attract the horde away with the sounds of 12-gauge shotgun shots ringing out in the warm, humid Kentucky night. We were not fast enough, however: over our frantic callouts to each other on Discord, I could hear the frenetic mouse clicks and keyboard strokes from P's microphone, eventually culminating in an emotional "OH NO! Argh, they got me guys." "It's okay," I respond, "I am almost back, and N is close-by, he can patch you up." "No, I am done, I am gone," P replied, "they are everywhere, they even broke through a few walls." I would soon learn that it was much worse than that, but at that moment, all I could feel was anger. Death and dying in this game are as natural as breathing in real life, but in these emotional contexts, that natural characteristic carries with it an affective dimension that is only seen, felt, and heard in the presence of others, for lack of a better term, socially. While one can experience the emotional highs and lows that the game offers in single-player, as I will discuss in the following paragraphs, *Project Zomboid's* multiplayer is unique in that its affective intensities increasingly refer to tensions that exist and play out between individuals and groups. Some are more intense than others, reflecting the flow of playing with others, and some evoke feelings that are more ambivalent. Each of these experiences or emotional episodes is representative of a particular affective intensity offered by the zombie genre. In these play sessions, N, P, and I shared an experience of the hopeless and futile efforts of our survival, and its associated emotions and feelings. It was not P's first death in *Project Zomboid*, let alone his first

death on this server, and yet this single Horde Night happened to evoke an emotional response from all of us. In all the excitement, I even managed to get myself surrounded and would eventually meet a similar fate to P, with N being the only survivor.

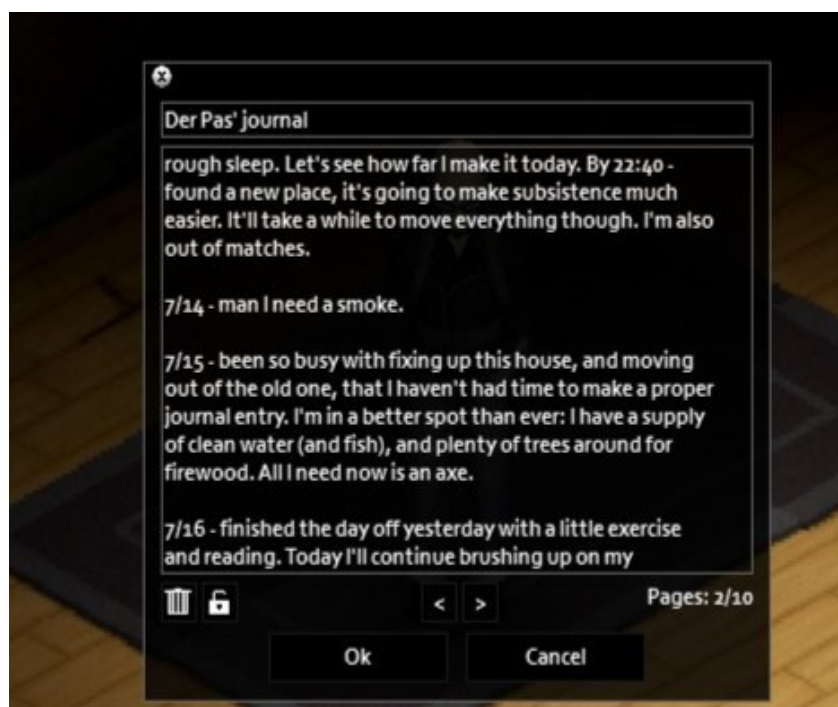
While P and I created new characters to join back up with N, N surveyed the damage inflicted by the 100-plus zombies that attacked our base: he estimated it would take one good session to fix everything up. After we decided to finish our session for the night, and N asked to check out the Horde Night's mod settings in case what happened was a fluke or a bug. As it turns out, everything was working as it should, and it was a misunderstanding on my part for not knowing how the mod functioned. Each night has a particular number of waves spawning a specific number of zombies, and I had no idea how many waves would spawn per Horde Night. Fortunately, I had the foresight to lower the number of zombies down from the default 100 zombies per wave; realizing this fact, we all breathed a collective sigh of relief. Despite the setbacks we faced, we all agreed it was probably the most interesting (and affective) session of *Project Zomboid* we had ever individually played, all thanks to a player-made modification we barely understood. We played one more session after this, a large cleanup and repair job of the base that left us bored with ourselves. After this session, we decided to go our separate ways.

After finishing my group sessions with N and P, I turned my attention to the single-player experience and the kinds of affective intensities that are felt in these contexts. What do we think and feel when we are all alone, amongst a mass of unthinking and unfeeling zombies? Playing alone, I decided I would create a character modelled after myself, trying to be as accurate as possible to my own mental and physical condition. I started with my self-perceived negative traits: smoker, short-sighted, out of shape; it very quickly occurred to me that I would not (or could not) survive the apocalypse in my current health situation. I reminded myself that the game,

and in turn the zombie apocalypse, would treat everyone the same, and that no one would be spared from its deathly touch. As morbid as it was to entertain those thoughts, that realization led me to create a character named Derek and start playing. Did I feel any different playing as myself? Did it invoke any introspection? In response to those questions, I decided to keep a journal in-game, something I had never done in a game or in real life (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Image of the researcher's in-game character and their journal



Note. The image above is of my in-game character's journal notes.

Because I had never journaled, I had to come to terms with the fact that I did not understand why someone would want to write one, and for whom? I would begin by recounting the day's events, keeping track of the date and my character's overall condition and feelings (moodles). It helped serve as a refresher when I, my real-life self, would take a break from gaming, but it also allowed me to slip back into the mindset I was having at that time. Ironically,

it would be the shared characteristics between my avatar and I that enabled me to swiftly rediscover my emotional pulse. Reading “I need a smoke,” or “I’m exhausted,” was more than enough to remind me. I spent approximately 12 hours playing this character when the nagging feeling of boredom reared its ugly head into my experience. Far from the first time, this boredom was different, more existential in nature. If I were the last human being on the planet, what would I survive for? If not for other individuals or groups, or for myself, then for whom or what? Never had I felt so alone in a playthrough that I physically stopped myself from playing, but this would be the first time I would do so: not because I did not want to, but because I wanted to selfishly understand the meaning behind these questions and the reasons for asking or answering them.

As I bring this chapter to a close, how is it that a zombie game can evoke these kinds of questions and their associated sentiments? After all, N, P, and I did not discuss anything remotely philosophical. However, we found ourselves in an emotional context that brought with it its own set of emotional and affectual questions, such as the meaning of sharing these moments with others. The zombies tend to be the last things on our minds, as if their presence was only a primer for the explosive human drama. For my interlocutors and myself, the experiences we share about the game reflect certain feelings we have towards it, and these feelings are productive of mixed emotions. As stated in the introduction of this chapter, the emotional highs and lows come from the dissonance between cultural expectations of the zombie genre versus our actual experiences. Allowing players to test the boundaries of genre also acts as a toolkit for playing *with* genre, as they can focus less on their gameplay emotions and more on the personal/social concerns they may have in creating emotionally ‘authentic’ or personally meaningful zombie narratives. Therein lies the affective nature of *Project Zomboid* as an expression of the zombie genre: bodies, containers, and surfaces for emotions, feelings, and ideas.

Chapter 2: Modding the Affective Playing Field

Section 1: The emotional mechanics of *Project Zomboid*

In the previous chapter, I discussed the play experiences of my interlocutors as well as my own, to portray zombies and zombie media experiences as its own expression of the horror genre's ambivalent affect. Through player interactions and their creation of personal stories/narratives, *Project Zomboid* players are provided with an affective foundation from which their experiences can scaffold on. While the previous chapter concerned itself with identifying a range of emotional/affective experiences, this chapter focuses on the elements common and distinct to each of the participants' gameplay. At the core of each player's game is the game's namesake: the 'project' wherein players are given complete control over *Project Zomboid*'s in-game settings/parameters. Furthermore, as previously mentioned in this thesis, there are thousands of player-made mods that players of the Steam version of the game have access to through the Steam Workshop, allowing them to adjust what I argue is the affective ceiling of their desired experience. When taken together, these *Project Zomboid* experiences take many shapes and forms for different people as well as in different contexts, and even in isolation, these mechanics offer gameplay that is not only played but felt. These intense play moments are, in some cases, the result of hours of fine-tuning settings and curating player-made mods in an attempt to feel with the game's emotional intensity.

As a survival horror game, there are three dimensions to what makes (zombie) ludic horror so affectively intensive when compared to other forms of (zombie) media. According to Perron (2009), these are notions of "presence," or the impression of "being" in the game world. Here, "agency" is where the player is both "witness" and "active participant" in the events they find themselves, and "embodiment," the notion that players perform "actual body movement" in relation to "control interfaces" (pp. 139-140). Together, according to Perron (2009), they

represent how video games “intensi[fy] the emotional experience of the horror genre” through engaging players’ bodies with “monstrous bodies” and the kind of affective imaginaries that it creates (p. 141). In what follows, I present three examples of how players of *Project Zomboid* utilize game mechanics and player-made mods to harness the game’s ability to foster affectively intensive experiences through ‘modding’ their emotions. Players can accomplish this by experimenting with Zomboid’s zombie settings and other non-modded features; through smaller mods that lightly change the game world; and through mods that alter existing features or add entirely new ones, using a mod called “Neurodiversity Plus” as a case study to explore this notion. In effect, players’ *Project Zomboid* experiences are about the *production* of emotions as they become the directors of their own movies and television shows, remediating and reproducing what they find desirable about *their* zombie experience.

Quite literally, zombies come in all shapes and sizes. In most cases, they are used as depictions of what humans used to be. While the verdict is out on whether there is a definitive zombie, culturally speaking in the western world, the influence of George A. Romero’s vision cannot be understated. As mentioned in Chapter 1, *Project Zomboid*’s standard zombie settings were set up with Romeroesque zombie in mind. Despite this, players are given the option of adjusting the parameters of most if not all the game’s settings: should players feel obliged, they can adjust the strength, health, intelligence, speed, decay, and horde size of the zombies present in the game world. An example I made in Chapter 1 was that of shambling or walking zombies versus running zombies: this setting alone has enough gameplay impact that it can shape the dynamics of player-world interactions. While some changes in settings can be felt incrementally, settings such as these inform whether specific actions are worth taking. As an aside, I have played with the sprinting zombie settings on my own and found the experience too difficult to be

personally enjoyable, while in the context of playing with others, the idea of playing with shambling zombies feels lackadaisical and seemingly invites players to experiment with these systems.

One consequence associated with this idea of player freedom and control is that players can elect to remove the zombie component of the game completely, turning *Project Zomboid* into just a ‘project.’ There are a number of content creators that play with the idea of *Zomboid* as a life and building simulator: these individuals contribute to the notion that the *Zomboid* experience is played to be felt, and the act of feeling is a matter of constant negotiation with the game’s settings player’s specific emotional/experiential desires. For players like A, their relationship with the game is such that everything and every system needs to be “calibrated.” “If you have a thing that’s too hard to play, or too easy, it’s not fun” (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024). As a sandbox-style simulation game, this extra degree of control allows players to choose between the kinds of play experiences one desires, and those that they desire to experiment with.

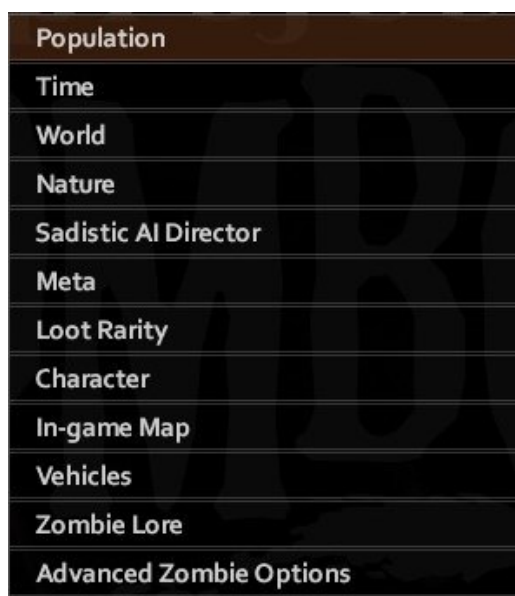
In addition to the zombie settings, players can also adjust the weather and nature systems of the world, including the erosion of roads. They can also adjust the availability of loot and other survival materials, the roleplaying and character development systems, vehicle settings, as well as the AI director system itself, which controls dynamic events in the game world, like a helicopter attracting zombies to your position (Figure 7). I am separating the following discussion from these other game mechanics as it is arguably one of the most impactful – time. As time passes, the corpses of dead zombie’s rot and stink, food molds, and eventually, the power substations providing light and power to modern appliances suddenly run out of fuel. One of the players I interviewed, NZ, recalls playing for their first time, and how time as a game mechanic informed this affective experience of motivation. “My experience with gathering the necessary materials,

such as food, water, generators, electricity, and my preparedness for that initial lack of resources, makes me feel like I’m on a timeline” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024).

These systems, alone and in conjunction with those previously named, let players change the fundamental nature of standard game experience. While *Project Zomboid* offers pre-made difficulty settings, each with their own playstyle in mind, Custom Sandbox enables players to finetune and adjust the above settings (Figure 7). When player-made mods enter the discussion, the potential is almost limitless: as NZ recounted to me, “I’ve personally seen players make the game look like another game they enjoy... I’ve seen players encourage huge multiplayer realms with roleplay [...] and I’ve seen players basically turn it into another version of *DOOM*” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024).

Figure 7

Image of “Custom Sandbox” settings in Project Zomboid



Note. This image is of the setting categories players have access to in Custom Sandbox mode.

Despite this degree of control, one commonality in players’ experiences is characterized by frustration with the game’s unforgiving difficulty and their feelings towards their character’s

untimely demise, reflected by my interlocutors who refer to these experiences as grindy, boring, demoralizing, and even hopeless or despairing. The friction caused by the interaction between players emotional experiences and the affective system of the game, contrary to what one might expect, produces positive effects, or in this case, affects. When I say friction, I mean the experience of an affective boundary or surface formed between affecting body/object and the affected body/object. This is in line with what Ahmed (2014) understands as “boundaries/surfaces,” whereby “emotions are not ‘in’ either the individual or the social” but instead “allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (p. 10).

Friction with game design elements, for lack of a better term, creates boundaries between the player’s expected and desired experience, and the experience offered by the game. As an “umbrella of experience,” using NZ’s words, each player’s virtual *Zomboid* world is shaped by their unique interactions with the games systems (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Effectively, it means that players are constantly negotiating with their own emotions and feelings, assessing what they value about their experience, and modifying it accordingly. For players such as NZ, “it’s as simple as that: if it’s an issue I can’t overcome, I will stop playing the game” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Their own experiences of frustration with the game led NZ to create a printable item checklist, which I will discuss in the proceeding section, to help those in similar contexts (see Appendix 3).

Returning to A’s discussion of calibration, the ability to add all these mods requires a modicum of patience, not only because they can affect the balance of the game’s systems, but also because they could conflict with other mods you may choose to install. For individuals like KK who enjoy playing on multiplayer servers, mods allow for more personally meaningful play. As I will elaborate in the next section, your mod choices reflect your gameplay preferences;

conversely, they have a side effect of dividing what could be conceived as a cohesive community into many disparate servers, each with its own set of mods that can potentially conflict with one another. In KK's words, "I've been having trouble finding good servers recently, because not all of them just have like the same mods, 'cause I like to play with like 400 mods plus" (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). To complicate this further, players like KK often feel that their interpretation of the game is at odds with the intended experience, likening their struggle to "modders versus purists":

From my point of view, it significantly improves the gameplay: of course, you're gonna have the purists that are gonna be like "aw man, nah, this is how the dev's intended it man, you wanna have the original experience, man." (KK, personal communication, 2024)

The *Project Zomboid* community harbors members with common interests and sentiments with regards to both avenues of play. While starting from similar foundations of play, modding can affectively alter the trajectory of one's relationship to the game.

Section 2: Modding (y)our expectations

I have alluded to the fact that modding can change the nature of players' *Project Zomboid* experiences, but sometimes these changes need not be so drastic as to significantly transform them. Sometimes it is a matter of fixing a broken aspect of the game. As an early access product after all, the game is unfinished and will naturally have bugs and quirks that have yet to be addressed. Other times, the world might feel like it is missing real-life charm, something amended through the addition of more realistic sounds and iconography. In this section, I will discuss quality-of-life and other immersion-enhancing mods brought up by my interlocutors, and

what effect these modifications have on curating and producing affectively intensive play experiences.

When it comes to selecting prospective mods, there are a few things to consider, the most important of which is the kind of experience you want to have and feel through. NZ, for example, is a fan of quality-of-life improvements. “I enjoy the aspects that the developers laid out and I don’t want to change that... however, there are some things that simply don’t make sense to me” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). NZ brings up a mod called Common Sense, which gives player’s abilities that they should be able to do already, with their example being the ability to wedge open doors and windows with a crowbar/prybar. Another mod that NZ mentions is called True Music; while the game features CD’s as lootable items, they have no ability to play or emit sound apart from visually displaying that music is being played (e.g., text above a CD player in italics, with musical notes at the beginning and end of the text signifying it is in fact music). “This game is based in [1993] America [...] but there are no CD’s containing music, which was a large part of the culture in [1993]” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Reflecting on their mod choices, NZ highlights how their preferences lean towards fostering a sense of realism and historical authenticity in their game world. Moreover, they reflect what you desire personally. According to NZ, “there are so many mods and so many opportunities to modify to whatever you want that you’ll get a hundred different answers from a hundred different people” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). In comparison, I cannot speak to the accuracy of this claim as among my small sample of interlocutors, the mod preference and selection varied by individual, leading each player to recount different stories of their experience playing with those mods.

Another example of an immersion-enhancing mod or set of mods in this case are vehicles created by mod author KI5, which features improved textures and more detailed 3D models when compared to *Project Zomboid*'s standard list of featured cars. According to M, “you can like, armor almost all of them, you can actually see when the parts get taken off” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). Related to vehicles, M also bring up another mod simply titled Fuel Side Indicator, a small but necessary addition so you “don’t park on the wrong side of the pump” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024).

Despite the limited nature of these changes, players such as M feel that by downloading and using these mods, they are expressing their preferences for what content they want to see in the game, as well as bringing attention to desperately needed adjustments. “Because of the modders,” says M, “the [...] developers might see like ‘oh yeah, this is something we should definitely add, this is something people think is annoying which is why they downloaded this mod, we will add that!’” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). Fortunately, the developers are active participants in their official community pages, monitoring what is being created, as well as what people are saying about these creations, some of which they highlight in blog posts on their website.

NZ had the privilege of having their mod highlighted in ‘Community of the Dead,’ a blog series run by The Indie Stone that showcases community art, mods, and other creations. NZ authored the Printable Item Checklist, a printable form which helps players keep track of items and milestones one may need in their average *Project Zomboid* playthrough. Sharing it on the *Project Zomboid* Discord and Reddit pages, NZ states that “even if it helped five people, and they downloaded it, I feel like it would be worth it just because it not only saved me a lot of time and my playthroughs [efficient], it made their playthroughs more efficient as well” (NZ, personal

communication, February 27, 2024). I feel that there is something to be said about the idea of play within gaming communities as an attracting/pulling force, particularly when the general game experience evokes such similar responses. People/players come to these spaces looking for solutions to their perceived problems, and in this process share their experiences and feelings with what Pearce and Artemisia (2009) call a “play frame,” that which “paves the way for communities to form emotional and social bonds” that are “unique” to play (p. 24).

There are instances where players, interested in a challenge, seek out mods that increase the game’s difficulty or seek to make the world more reactive and dangerous. One such mod brought to my attention is Expanded Helicopter Events. *Project Zomboid*’s AI director, from my limited understanding of the system, controls dynamic game events, things which are out of the player’s direct control but affect the game world. At the time of writing, this feature was limited to sleep events such as nightmares and other events that wake your character during sleep, as well as helicopter events. The standard parameter across all game modes/difficulties is a helicopter flyover sometime in the first two weeks in-game weeks of the playthrough. On its own, this event has major repercussions for player characters, as a helicopter actively searches for them, attracting zombies to your position. Interestingly, because of the game’s isometric perspective, players cannot see the helicopter above them, let alone the sky; Expanded Helicopter Events add to this stress by diversifying the types of helicopters that can appear. According to A, “some may attack you, some may just do a lot of noise, then that’s really scary, ‘cause you hear the helicopter, you don’t know what type it is, until it does its specific thing, and yeah... that’s scary” (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024). As previously mentioned by A, adding a mod such as this takes time and effort to calibrate or tune its settings, as fun remains at the core of their experience.

In other situations, mods can be happy accidental additions to one's overall play experience. KK, who is a self-proclaimed car enthusiast outside the game, spends their playthroughs searching for and collecting cars across their game worlds. Like M, KK also plays with car models from modder KI5, but the manner in which they engage with this mod content differs. KK discussed the cars and how they allow for customization and personalization of your own vehicle, making something your own, while M emphasized the visually-reactive nature of the cars, such as the ability to armor a vehicle and see it visually represented on the car (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024; M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). This is not a judgment of how people mod their *Project Zomboid*, but rather an observation that demonstrates a contrast in how people see similar mods fitting into their gameplay experience. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the idea of making your own fun resonates with many players, and modding can be viewed as an expression of this sentiment. "Like these sort of small things that you can do yourself that, like, are unique to every person and sort of... add to the experience in a way that it kinda stops it from getting stale, you know" (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). Whether through a hundred or just one, mods and modding provide new flavours, sights, sounds, and plenty of opportunities to touch and feel (emotionally, sensorially) the affective intensities evoked by our individual preferences and tastes. Games, and I would argue mods as well, can be "productive of pleasure, but they can also be productive of many other emotional states" (Malaby, 2007, p. 96).

Section 3: Modding for feeling(s)

Thus far, I have not spoken to the social experience of this emotional intensity through modding, but for players like IY and her partner, part of the reason they feel so strongly about their (modded) play experiences is because they curate a selection of mods for playing together. In thinking about how she plays, IY highlights how she chooses mods for herself and her friends:

I do get extremely immersed in the game, the way that we play [...] and the mods that we use are such to promote a deep sense of immersion, both my partner and I and our friends have all been playing TTRPG's [tabletop roleplaying games] for a long time, and so we're really into role play. (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024)

Drawing on these past and current experiences with TTRPG's, IY and her friends play a *Zomboid* that is better suited to their group style of play. While being afraid of zombies, IY uses that fear to strength her resolve to help their group succeed. For IY, the reason she plays is for a more survival-oriented experience, and as such, selects what she defines as immersion-enhancing. Drawing from her and her partner's real-life experiences, we discuss her experience with a mod called Neurodiversity Plus and how it helps curate an "emotional experience" (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024).

As an individual diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and bipolar disorder, IY describes the mod in great detail as well as elaborating on why her and her partner play with it: "the mod definitely impacts our emotional experience because of moodle management [...] there's a lot to make sure that my moodles are managed" (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). The mod adds neurodiversity to the game in the form of new traits, such as autism spectrum disorder, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit hyperactive disorder. These are positive and negative effects that can be added to your character during the map and game setup. Unlike the default traits already in-game, these neurodivergent traits are more dynamic in how they affect gameplay. For IY and her partner these traits inform a different kind of playstyle: a playstyle in which, because of their vulnerability, they must increasingly rely on each other. For example, in her description of the bipolar trait, IY brings up that her character's reliance on her partner's character depends on her character's mental state:

[Bipolar] mania is kind of the inverse [of the bipolar depressive trait]: mania gives you the wakeful trait so you need less sleep, when you do sleep [...] you lose fatigue quickly, and you get a boost to endurance... I think you can't experience sadness at all, so when I'm having a manic day, that's when I go out with him [IY's partner] [...] but on depressive days, I... like, no one can expect me to leave the house. (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024)

Similarly to IY, there are moments when her partner must cope with the dynamic nature of his selected trait:

With his ADHD [...] he does take a stimulant whenever he's having bad days [...] he has hyper focused and he has hypo focused and it [...] can switch, it's similar to the way bipolar mania and bipolar depression work [in the mod]. (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024)

Keep in mind that while these events are happening, a zombie apocalypse continues to unravel around them, ratcheting up the tension. In order to thrive with these traits, IY and her partner must search for medicine to make their situation more tolerable. "A driving factor of our loot is: I need antidepressants, and he needs stimulants. If we don't get those within the first week, we're fucked, like, might as well start over" (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024).

As well as bipolar disorder, IY also plays with the autism spectrum disorder trait, which has its own parameters. As IY explains,

Any loud noise sends you into a panic, so like, gunshots, or anything like that [...] you are likely to be more clumsy [...] it gives you the picky eater trait, and it also chooses safe

foods for you, and [...] there's a chance that you can spawn in with a special interest based off your traits. (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024)

There are also moments when these mod mechanics feel too gamelike and restrictive:

I will like, spawn in multiple times until I have safe foods that match me, so, for example, not that I in real life have too many difficulties, but, like, if I spawn in and I hate ice cream, I'm not gonna play the game that way [...] I can't fucking hate wild garlic bread, that's not ok [laughing]." (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024)

Not only are these scenarios immersive, IY realizes that playing with mods like Neurodiversity Plus with her partner is "a trust-building exercise for us [...] like navigating the world with real-life experiences [...] makes it easy for me to accidentally realize that I'm pacing because I'm basically in the game" (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). In becoming closer to each other, they become closer to the game. Through a relation to the game's affective surfaces, in addition to their own emotional context as a couple, IY and her partner become attuned to, and through, *Project Zomboid*'s emotional and affective intensity. Their mod choice emphasizes the synergistic nature of their relationship inside and outside of the game. While IY takes care what she calls the more "support-oriented" activities and roles such as cooking, tailoring, and medicine, her partner occupies an offensive and defensive role that IY is unable to fulfill. According to IY, "it is... an opportunity, a low stakes opportunity for us to rely on each other, and rely on... like I know that he'll keep me safe, he knows that I will manage the resources in a way that is best for us" (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024).

The mod discussed above is one example of the kind of gameplay-altering mods I pointed to at the beginning of this chapter. Other mods seek to change *Project Zomboid* in different ways,

one example being its shooting mechanics. KK brings up a mod called “Advanced Trajectory”: for KK, “it has totally changed the way I play *Zomboid*” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). They explain that “it used to be that guns are sorta hit or miss, RNG [random number generator] type of thing, and now there is some actual skill involved in shooting and stuff” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). Indeed, the mod adds realistic bullet projectiles and trajectory to all guns, making them feel more accurate as one has to put their crosshair on a body/particular body part in order to make a successful shot.

In our discussion, KK also brings up another type of mod with similar gameplay-altering changes, namely map mods. Before proceeding, it should be noted that while some map mods are treated as separate from the standard *Project Zomboid* map, Knox County, the two mods discussed here are additions to this standard map, expanding something which is already exceptionally large. More places to explore means more loot to acquire, as well as the potential to expose oneself to more risky situations. As KK points out, it also means there is more room for “more styles of play [...] ‘cause different map mods are [...] designed in different ways” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). The first map mod we discuss is Blackwood: “it’s just north of Rosewood, and that whole map is [...] designed for you to come by car, and to sort of park the car outside of the town itself, and then explore the whole thing on foot because there’s like, lots of trash and barricades, and stuff inside the map itself” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). Blackwood distinguishes itself mechanically and visually from the rest of Knox County: from a visual narrative sense, it feels like it was once the last bastion of hope for a group of survivors who are now long gone, especially with the amount of trash and debris blocking the streets. Mechanically, it also means that accessing Blackwood is more difficult, as one needs a sledgehammer to destroy solid objects like walls and other hard surfaces. Together, these visual

and gameplay elements “allow for different experiences” than those provided by the default Knox County map (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024).

The second map mod we discussed, *Over the River*, is similar to *Blackwood* in that it is an addition to default Knox County map. In contrast to this other map, *Over the River* creates an alternate route to one of *Zomboid*’s great challenges, the city of Louisville. The map addition, as KK describes, “which is over the bridge from West Point [...] you have to like go – unless you want to go to Louisville – you have to get like... go up [...] a ladder onto the bridge, and there’s a ton of zombies and loot and stuff” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). Like *Blackwood*, *Over the River* is a test for your character and their endurance, and as such, it is not advisable to visit unless one is ready for a challenge.

Section 4: Modding as representation

Whether one is playing *Project Zomboid* for a challenge or not, mods allow for customization such that one individual’s challenge can be altered to play like another individual’s casual play session, and the same can be applied in reverse. What one person finds touching another can find tasteful, such as KK’s enthusiasm for unique cars and M’s more aesthetic observations of those mods: these feelings represent the way we as players interact with the game. Anable (2018) discusses the notion of affective circuits, or how our bodies and games/machines come together as one through the “collapsing of language to render [them] as operating in the same way” (p. 45). For an individual like KK who expresses great enthusiasm for cars in real life, the ability to embody that appreciation in a virtual space across multiple game worlds is not only personally gratifying, but also a means of reifying that real-life affective circuit between automobile and KK’s body in/through a video game. It is important to note that expressing aesthetic judgments, such as M’s, is also a representation of an affective circuit. M’s

experience with car mods and their discussion around their purpose in their playthroughs suggests, as Anable (2018) argues, that surfaces are “crucial sites of touch and entanglement, where representation still matters and representation is matter” (p. 46). Mods can be a lot of things, but most importantly they are representations of desires for additions, changes, removals, and each of these is representative of someone’s affect or affective experience, whether that be for cars, guns, maps, music, or game mechanics. Players of *Project Zomboid* download and put these representations/surfaces into their own game worlds; despite their seemingly different play contexts, players like M and KK share feelings related to the presence of these car mods in their game worlds. Like Anable (2018), I feel that understanding screens as “zones of contact” better represents how players of video games interact with them, and that regardless of intentionality, if we pay attention to the kinds of surfaces players want to touch or be touched by, “it reveals more than it obscures” (p. 69).

The same can be said for other mods discussed here in this chapter. True Music, a mod that allows players to add their own music files and album/vinyl covers, is an example of how players use mods to portray what they feel is realistic to the setting. NZ’s experience with this mod, and their desire for a setting/historically appropriate soundtrack, is similar to reflections offered by Shaw’s (2014) interviews with marginalized gamers. In those discussions, Shaw (2014) posits that while people have many ways of “thinking about realism” in media representations, wanting representation and critiquing it are two different ideas (pp. 164-165). It should be noted that while its inclusion does little in the way of shaping the argument of how media is or should be portrayed, in the case of NZ and other players, True Music lets them create a more believable portrayal of early 1990s America, something they feel is absent from the game’s current state. These sentiments are indicative of the level of nuance in discussing

representation(s) in media and games. What Shaw (2014) points out is that the demand for representation is often at odds with what people identify “with” and/or identify “as” and risks “being the target of pluralism” (p. 217). What makes mods particularly interesting with regards to this discourse is that contrary to the standard for digital games, they are proliferated outside the traditional market logic that demands compensation and competition for products bought and sold (Shaw, 2014). Of course, the modding community has its form of market logic, in terms of players wanting particular experiences, and modders, while identifying and responding to those needs, look for alternative means of dispensation. Examples include monetization platforms like Patreon and ko-fi, where users of these platforms can pay one-time or monthly subscription fees to support content creators in exchange for special or privileged access to their content. It troubles the idea that representation is “nice when it happens,” and that even with their distinct logic, the question remains whether modding communities of indie games like *Project Zomboid* reproduce issues with representation as seen in the mainstream gaming culture (Shaw, 2014, p. 217). I will return to this question in Chapter 3, but for the moment there are thousands of mods that allow players to add new ways of experimenting with their play, experimentation that comes with the ability to represent yourself and your interests. Sometimes, these processes are straightforward and predictable, and other times they create unexpected but welcome coincidences.

Thinking back on my own play sessions, including those with N and P, the selection of mods was a small but deliberate choice on our part to feel closer to what the game truly represented for us: a fantasy of the post-apocalypse where we could live in the mouth of madness without succumbing to it, being architects and flaneurs of our aesthetic of failure (Anable, 2018). “Video games are not distractions from the frustration and failure of our everyday life,” writes

Anable (2018), “rather, they are intimately link to how we feel failure”: frustrated, unmotivated, sad, and dejected are but a few ways to describe the sensation of this affect, but they are far from the only feelings associated with experiencing failure (p. 119).

Similarly to Anable’s (2018) work with affect and casual games, *Project Zomboid* represents a shift in how players and game developers feel about playing and portraying failure in games. Like the examples Anable (2018) explores in her book, *Project Zomboid* asks us “not to celebrate failure but to flail with it a while and learn its contours” (p. 129). Every time you begin a playthrough or load a save file into one already in progress, the game is keen at reminding the player that “This is How You Died,” suggesting that perhaps the failure is not our own but instead “the failures of a larger ideological formation” that could let such an apocalyptic situation unfold (Anable, 2018, p. 129). Our story has not even begun, and it already seems as though we have failed. With the game’s interface and its aesthetics telling us our deaths are all but confirmed, does this not inform how we move through our game worlds, already doomed to fail? *Project Zomboid* allows players the privilege of deciding for themselves how or whether they want to answer this question. For N, P, and I, exploring the playful possibilities of the Horde Night mod also meant discovering how it would affect our experiences of the game moving forward. Had we made these discoveries earlier in our playthrough, we might have played for longer; as it stands, the mod helped us uncover what we felt was a failing of the game, the (re)activity of the game’s AI director, and led us to the contours of our play experience through this experience of failure (Anable, 2018).

An interesting notion about games is that despite their straightforward purpose, namely, to be played, the experience of which is said to be subjective and individual, the language we use to describe such experiences is lacking. While we may play games for the feeling of fun and

enjoyment, or to represent our interests in virtual, risk-free arenas, those moments are guided and informed by emotional sensations that only make sense in those contexts (Beatty, 2019). To discuss what those moments felt like, or to revisit them like an old save game, requires an emotional investment in the idea of those memories. *Project Zomboid*'s modding community as a space for producing and representing affects, provides players with emotionally contingent experiences such that their game worlds and resulting play within it feels unique to them. Discussing their own feelings related to this, A shares that "I can play this game with a lot of different people and I won't have the same emotions and affections for the same things" (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024). Because of the game's open-ended nature, A expresses that "it's complicated to refer to one point, there's a lot of things to do in *Project Zomboid*, and there's a lot of things I love to do" (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024).

The movement of affect, and at times its "stickiness," refers to the capacity for objects of emotion "to take shape as effects of circulation," as players and their (avatar's) bodies interact and affect other player's bodies, and the world itself (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 10-11). Despite the difficulties players have expressing and rearticulating these past felt sensations of which I share myself, these players recognize that they are engaging with systems that are influenced through the circulation of intimacy and intensity. Though IY has her own reservations regarding discourses within *Zomboid* community spaces, she feels that the emotional experiences provided by the game are the primary reasons people keep coming back update after update:

I think people play for mood [...] Regardless of what they're interested in, you are expected to build as much as you can before it falls: so whether that be build your zombie count, build your base, build your quality of life... I think the overall point is to build as

much as you can before it breaks, and it requires that you get emotionally invested to continue. (I, personal communication, 2024)

Through interactions with the game, its mods, and other players, these *Project Zomboid* players demonstrate the entangled nature of affect in our (digital) lives: that through this entanglement of body and game, one can see “the interface that permits one system to inform and shape the other” (Anable, 2018, p. 56). Using mechanics afforded to the player by the game, they can adjust the affective ceiling of their experience, increasing or decreasing the potential for particular kinds of emotional play experiences.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that *Project Zomboid*’s mechanics and game modifications are examples of how the game is played for its emotional and affective intensities. The game itself, with its modding capabilities stripped away, presents itself as an affective foundation. In Custom Sandbox mode, for example, players can adjust and fine-tune individual game settings according to their preferences: using these settings, players have effectively changed the way the game plays to that of other video games. With this affective foundation already teeming with possibilities for unique play experiences, the modding community contributes emotional charge through allowing players to download and add, alter, or remove certain elements of the game experience. Understanding mods as representations, players can add these mods to their games in ways that are both satisfying from a gaming and personal standpoint. Some examples shown in this chapter include car models and textures, new areas and maps, and a mod that adds neurodiversity through the game’s trait system. I also shared the story of a player who made their own contribution to the community because of their play experiences: a printable checklist that helps others keep track of their items and game milestones. Finally, I revisited my play sessions with N and P, and how our experience with the Horde Night mod was reflective of

the sentiments shared by my other interlocutors. Insofar as we share a foundation, *Project Zomboid*, each of us managed to scaffold experiences off it that led to various ceilings, with some yet to be discovered. Even when we found it, the game provides the tools with which to reconstruct or remold the experiences into similar but emotionally novel ones.

When taken together with what I discussed in Chapter 1, namely the affective nature of the zombie genre, it is perhaps no wonder that an open-ended expression of its aesthetics and themes through interchangeable settings and mods would lead to *Project Zomboid*'s current situation as not only an example of a game in the zombie genre done well, but also an example of what the indie gaming scene means for modding in general. Different parts of the game are modified differently depending on the kind of experience one desires. What parts you change and what elements of those parts change reflect player's desires to modify different emotions, as they are the *directors* not only their screen and stage, but also their emotions. It becomes a site for numerous kinds of production: players' ability to express and represent themselves socially and emotionally through games and play with individualistic and collective practices like mod selection, for themselves or a group, requires time and effort. It also requires an emotional investment in creating a feeling or mood that one or many will explore the boundaries of; for players of *Project Zomboid*, it is because of its ability to be modified in this way that makes it unique for them.

Related to this is the notion that players' decision-making, at least with regards to their affective play experience, is guided by the availability and repertoire of mods, the ideas for which are born out of discussions on the *Project Zomboid* Discord, sub-Reddit, and The Indie Stone forums, as well as other forms of online discourse such as content creation on YouTube. The result is that the community recycles and regenerates ideas about itself and the game, informing

the kinds of sticky feelings present in discourses around the game. Having set the foundation for this discussion through these last two chapters, I will explore what makes *Project Zomboid's* Discord community an emotional ecosystem.

Chapter 3: The Living World of the Dead

Section 1: Emotional ecosystems & the hyperintensive nature of the *Project Zomboid* Discord

Until this point, I have only briefly touched upon the greater community behind the game, an example such as one of my interlocuter's works being highlighted by the game developers in a community creation highlight blog. Little did I know that before meeting NZ, I had already read that blog post thanks to the developers actively sharing blog posts and other news on the *Project Zomboid* Discord server. At more than 165,000 users at the time of writing, the *PZ* Discord serves as a central hub for everything happening in the community, but as I have already mentioned in Chapter 2, it is not the only official online community for the game. The Indie Stone forums and *PZ* sub-Reddit, the former being the developers' forum space on their official website, and the latter being a Reddit discussion space for the game also run by the developers, exist as spaces where the developers share with and respond to players of their game: these spaces, however, were not the focus of this research. It can be argued that these would serve as better or more representative field sites, with the Indie Stone forums being the original discussion board for the game, and the sub-Reddit having a massive 498,000 user base at the time of writing.

What makes the Discord community unique in terms of scholarly inquiry is that it is both reflexive and recursive in its experience and presentation. It presents itself as a space for social interaction and creating opportunities to turn those interactions into play. It is also a space where users can follow the developers every move and word as they engage with the idea of community at scale. Finally, it is also a space that can be understood as an extension of the game itself, as players of the game and users of the Discord regenerate and recycle ideas about playing the game that are personally and socially meaningful. When taken together, they create the impression of the *PZ* Discord community as a kind of group therapy. This is not to say that everything is

positive, as there is negative feedback directed at the developers, and this says nothing about the kinds of interactions that take place between users, which, while I do not go into the finer details here, have left a sour impression of the community on them. What I do offer, however, is an account that suggests the *PZ* Discord is a reservoir of emotional resources for use in the consumption and production of play, and important for a number of players, a space for having an audience of *your* experience of the game.

As I will present throughout this chapter, while the definition for video games as affective systems refers to the experiencing and playing of games as an affective relationship, informed by its nature as a more grounded and interactive form of media, it does not say anything about what those relationships mean in circulation (Anable, 2018). “Games do matter,” writes Anable (2018), and related to this, I posit that communities adjacent to video games like the *PZ* Discord perform the role of sustaining those affective relationships between players/users and the game (p. 131). If video games can be construed as systems operating as networks of affects, then the gaming community can be understood as the ecosystem in which this grander network plays out. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how the *PZ* Discord community is experienced by players, users, and developers as an emotional ecosystem: an ecology of feeling and sentiment that informs discourses and interactions surrounding the game and its community. Users/players participate to get ideas, a common language, and techniques for consuming, producing, and modifying the game. This continually circulating talk about emotional experiences, and their consumption/production of *Project Zomboid*’s gameplay, ties back into cultural expectations players have about zombie media culture. Drawing their attention towards continuous discourses, players have conversations around what is or is not scary, what is boring or exciting, whether

multiplayer is better than single-player, and whether there is an authentic way to play a game about surviving the zombie apocalypse.

Section 2: *PZ* Discord as a space for interactivity and opportunity

As mentioned previously, Discord is a VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) communication platform, and Discord servers are the digital spaces within the platform that let its users communicate with others in specific contexts and settings, such as gaming, or friends-only groups. When one enters the *PZ* Discord, they are greeted by a list of channel sections, each with their own following and purpose. As stated in Section 1 of this chapter, the Discord server is how The Indie Stone performs public outreach and everything involved in that process. The main information section features blog posts, patch/update notes, news discussion, links to the developers' social media, as well as the server's guidelines and frequently asked questions. The heart of the server is the *Project Zomboid* section, with separate channels for the stable and unstable branches of the game, technical support, a channel for *Project Zomboid* Wiki editors, one for translators of the game, and channels for showcasing art, videos, streams, and other works related to *Project Zomboid*. Modders have their own section of channels, which includes modding support, modding development, a developer chat channel as well as modelling and mapping channels. A section I spent much of my research investigating entitled 'looking for groups/games' or LFG, features channels for server recruitment and community recruitment, and the eponymously named LFG channel. Finally, there is a section of the server reserved for off-topic community discussions, where users can share images of their pets (called paws), general artwork unrelated to the game (called creativity), and links to music online (called music). The remaining section of the server is reserved for voice chats, wherein users can create chat rooms for others to join publicly or privately.

For the average user of the *PZ* Discord server, the reason to join is to be in a space saturated with interactivity, or at least opportunities to interact with others. “There’s always a bunch of people, and they always have their own feedback” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Across the various Discord sections and channels within them, as well as the sub-Reddit, NZ recounted their experience in the *Project Zomboid* community:

People have given me advice, people have shared stories with me of similar things happening in their playthrough, people have given me opinions for what mods to download to be able to circumvent [my issues], people have given me advice on their styles of playing, as well as how to overcome an issue I was having when I posted about it, so it’s a huge group of people interacting with other people, to be able to share their experiences and feelings. (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024)

In addition to the social-relational aspect of these interactions, as NZ suggested, it is also a space for players to share metagaming knowledge, as the developers enable opportunities for them to discuss and share this knowledge through topic-specific channels on the Discord (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017). The longer they play for, according to NZ, the more interested they become in the possibilities provided by exposing oneself to various aspects of the *PZ* community. “The more things I’m willing to try and branch out to other members of the community, to other areas of the community who may have a different playstyle than me... and experience that and see what it’s like” (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024).

Because of the limited temporal scope of a player character’s life, and the emergent nature of the game’s features, one might be led to believe that playstyles such as NZ’s are an efficient means of seeing all of what the game has to offer. Of course, for single-player playthroughs this may be the only option; in multiplayer playthroughs, you not only have to worry about yourself

but also about others. In Chapter 2, I discussed that when one feels they have reached an affective boundary within their experience of the game, modding is one avenue that creates possibilities for adjusting that affective ceiling of the game, raising the affective potential for creating or having a relationship with the game, its systems, and other individuals. For some players, such as M, it is this possibility for group or social play that creates affectively meaningful experiences. To form communities or groups with other players, whether on the Discord server or through servers in-game, the idea of surviving together is an attracting force. M relayed that “especially in multiplayer, you’re dependent on each other to survive. You have to get a community around you [...] otherwise you’ll die” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). As they continue relaying their story, M makes an interesting remark: “I don’t think it’s specifically the game that does it, I think it attracts players who seek a community” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). Insofar as players are enjoying a multiplayer game session together, this statement reflects a general feeling or desire for sociality within the Discord and the game space(s) players join.

Throughout my participant-observation, I frequented the channels whose purpose was to let users recruit others to their own servers and communities through advertisement posts. It was in this section that I posted about my own project, and the members of the Discord server that responded to my call are those who I interviewed and feature throughout this thesis. Returning to server and community recruitment, players can also post that they are looking for games or groups to join. In one interaction, a user posted in the General Discussion channel that their ‘looking for group’ messages were being ignored, which led to another user giving feedback on this event:

User 1: Post in looking_for_group and hope the curse of the disappearing internet
randoms doesn't strike again :3

User 2: [Shares image of meme referencing The Ring, where viewers of a tape will die in 7 days] Not a meme. 7 days is basically the average lifespan of ANY multiplayer server for any game. Only the top servers last past a week

These posts, and the event that they refer to, are reflective of some interactions that take place between users that are searching for multiplayer experiences. Despite people's best intentions in looking for personally gratifying multiplayer experiences, and the labour that goes into that search, users including myself only get exposure to the servers with larger player bases, a fact that these servers usually highlight in order to attract even more players. Despite their greater numbers and presence, players like A prefer more servers with more tight-knit, small groups of people compared to the more popular servers. "You're not forced to go there, or leave if you don't like it, but that's a choice you make to emotionally invest in a small group" (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024). These players' preferences afford them greater time and space to know each other personally, through discussions about the game as well as their own personal lives, fostering a sense of community that is different than that found within the broader *PZ* Discord community. A notes that "large groups lean you to small groups where you have the feelings" (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024).

Additionally, the potential for personal and social growth plays a role in these interactions. By playing with others in the smaller group settings, regardless of player's level of experience, there are opportunities for the transference of knowledge that do not presume a hierarchical relationship between mentor and mentee. Perhaps it is not unique to this particular game or community, but what makes social interaction particularly valuable for players in these settings, whether through smaller fragments of the *PZ* Discord community or smaller *PZ* game servers, is the ability to constantly renew one's own experience of the game through other people

and their knowledge and experiences. As KK stated to me, “it’s multilayered. Each new experience builds up on what you’ve had [previously] [...] none of it is premeditated or anything... it just happens on the spot” (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). Play is the contingent structure in which these emergent acts take place, however, the nature of these play experiences as affectively intensive means it does not necessarily feel like playing.

Supporting other players, and feeling supported by them, plays out through the specialization of labour based on playstyle: players select professions/backgrounds for which they have an affinity. To get the chance to see players adopt roles that promote a feeling of synergy, for M, they view it “as a kind of happiness, to see everyone, like, work together and actually see, like... that there is actually unity, and you feel very strong together, you feel like you’re being supported in a different way than you usually do” (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). After all, the game may be designed to promote these styles of play, but the social dynamics that inform these interactions are the result of meaningful engagement between other people “playacting” in this virtual scenario, while also “immersed in [their] own role performance viscerally and cognitively” (Isbister, 2016, pp. 52-53). For several players I interviewed, roleplaying and the possibility of occupying a particular role or niche allowed them to experience a range of emotions and feelings, both positive and negative. Following from real-life interactions, A argues that “you need to be able to understand... emotionally, everybody ‘cause you don’t know what they’re feeling in real life but you’re just guessing, and it’s a hard aspect, but that’s like real life” (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024). The material conditions of the game and the *Project Zomboid* Discord community in which these experiences are situated provide affective and discursive spaces for people to know and get a feeling for each other.

Some players, such as IY, only use the Discord to stay about the game's development. She feels that her unique play experiences do not match the standard experiences of other players, stating that "I have not seen anybody else mention that the way I interact with the game is also their primary interaction" (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). Despite this impression, she posits that "the things I take pride in and the way that I interact with it is a... subset of, like, the experience the developers were hoping that players would interact with" (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). Playing the game as a pure zombie survival simulator, where her phobia of zombies naturally leads her to taking less risks, and acting through supportive rather than offensive means, IY's observations of online *PZ* communities, particularly the sub-Reddit, contribute to her apprehension to participate further. She feels the primary audience of the game, "men between 20 and 45," do not engage with *Project Zomboid* the way she does: "I... very rarely see people say they value the survival aspect of it more than the zombie count" (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). Related to this, IY noted the level of discourse around guns and gun mods in her time on the sub-Reddit:

I think that they're [men aged 20-45] trying to chase that like... hero, warrior feeling, where they can conquer and have a way to express their strength [...] I don't see them engaging with a full emotional set that is not only presented but encouraged to them by Indie Stone. (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024)

For IY, part of this sentiment is related to her feeling of pride towards her playstyle(s). Her affectively intensive experiences are uniquely hers and her partner's, something that is not easily transported to other play sessions and settings. Another element whose role is less explicit but equally important to this sentiment is an envelope of power that keeps her from sharing these thoughts online. Phillips (2020a) writes that power envelopes, or categorizations of identities,

critiques, and constraints, “tends, ontologically, toward isolation and enclosure” (p. 16). With a particular emphasis on gaming envelopes, Phillips (2020a) continues this argument with a statement that in relation to affect and power, “bad feelings expose precisely when and where the disruption of power happens” (p. 16). Related to this, Phillips (2020a) points out that different power structures inform various kinds of disruptions, some having a greater or lesser effect.

Because of the overwhelming presence of certain kinds of discourses in *Project Zomboid* community spaces, and the power these feelings and thoughts have in shaping the impressions of its members, IY feels like she is locked into a “permanent lurker position” (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). Whether or not this is indicative of “gamer trouble” as Phillips (2020a) names it, was not the original reason for this inquiry. I will note, however, that out of the five individuals I interviewed for this project, only one identified as a woman, and this fact aligns with what IY observed in her time on the *PZ* sub-Reddit, namely that more men than women play *Project Zomboid*, which also applies to online discussion spaces (like Discord and Reddit). I will return to this discussion through an exploration of player discourses in the *PZ* Discord in Section 4. As I learned myself, there are several activities one can participate in as a lurker, the least of all being staying current with The Indie Stone’s intentions for their game. In general, when asked what they made of the developer’s intentions with regards to their emotional experiences, my interlocutors had varying opinions.

Section 3: The Indie Stone and developing a community at scale

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that the Discord server was a means of engaging with community at scale. With its high member count, the developers are effectively engaging with a much larger population, including those who have never played the game. The same can be said of the *PZ* sub-Reddit, with its member count twice or even three times as large. Being a

member of the Discord or the sub-Reddit does not assume you are an active player or even play games at all, as the number of active users, those who post on the Discord's channels, is dwarfed by the number of lurkers, myself contributing. Although it is purely anecdotal on my part, as the game has changed quite significantly since my fieldwork, those who do post do so frequently. The feeling of community and the affect that draws people to it is in part a reflection of the developer's closeness to it, which players reiterate in discussions about the game.

For example, in my interview with NZ, we discussed the idea of sticky feelings or impressions left by other players/users of the Discord, and they recalled a number of conversations around the comparison of other developers with The Indie Stone: which was better, more reliable, among other topics. NZ pointed out that these conversations were extremely positive, and "that instantly, right away gave me a positive opinion of the developers and how they handle the community aspect of their game, where they take advice very well, and they also make sure everything is polished and everything works" (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). When I inquired whether there was another game developer they could think of with a similar outlook on community outreach, they replied that "it's very uncommon... especially big developers, large companies, there's kind of a joke, I don't know if you've heard it, where the larger game is, the worse it gets" (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). NZ clarified that they were referring to the fact that The Indie Stone is an indie studio with a small development team, funded by sales through early access programs on various digital distribution platforms. "It's from very small-time game developers, almost indie-style developers that will dedicate more time to working on the game rather than, just my opinion, dedicate time to seeing their bottom-line budget" (NZ, personal communication, February 27, 2024). This impression of the developer's closeness, their willingness to be open and respond to advice and complaints

equally, contributes to a palpable sense of community that is proliferated by the developer's indieness and their propensity towards creating an ecosystem over an economy.

The idea of closeness also applies to the feelings that players have regarding intended game experiences. There is a general impression shared by my interlocutors that their affective experience matches the intended affects offered by The Indie Stone, but also that there is no single experience that can truly encompass everything you can possibly do or think. From M's perspective, a missing element from their then-current experience was a more balanced single-player playthrough, "so you would not be as focused on one skill in the same sense, you would be more spread out between them" (M, personal communication, March 1, 2024). From A's perspective, the emergent nature of the game and its interactivity signifies the developer's open-mindedness: their difficulty in recalling specific stories of their playthroughs expresses their level of "thought about every aspect of the game," and as they stated previously, "it's complicated to refer to just one point" (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024).

On a more negative note, from KK's perspective, the notion of making your own fun from the game's open-endedness can feel exhausting emotionally, especially when you feel you have experienced everything. Because the game is not complete, however, it changes the foundation of that affect. KK's response, that "I feel like the dev's know that, and they're working on that," indicates that on some level, players are willing to forgive the developer's perceived missteps, and that eventually, all will be well (KK, personal communication, March 8, 2024). What began as a criticism ended as comfort, a reassurance in The Indie Stone's ability to not only listen to feedback, but also to understand how sentiments such as these *feed back* into the community in the form of discourses, ideas, and impressions.

In this way, *Project Zomboid*'s Discord server, sub-Reddit, and The Indie Stone forums, allows the developer to provide a layer of commentary to everything they publish online. The affordances provided by the Discord server mean each blog post or update has its own thread/discussion. Unlike Reddit, where upvotes, pins and other metrics sort posts, each blog having its own post in its own blog section makes it easier to follow news/updates from the developers. Discord also makes the member list visible by default, meaning that you can see any user who is online in the server, including developers and Discord moderators, a sense of presentness that is not easily seen on Reddit or The Indie Stone's forums. While each platform has its own community guidelines, rules, and moderation features, Discord provides its server owners with a level of control so as to prevent disruptive or malicious activities from taking place. This is not to say that its application is perfect, but in my time spent in the server, I did not come across any directly malicious content; that being said, users have their own ways of being disruptive and disrespectful. One example I will share is an interaction between several Discord members and a developer/moderator, with the users asking the developer for an update on their release timeline for a new patch:

User 1: sheesh. NO RELEASE DATE

Developer: You will be sad every blog, we don't mention release dates in blogs.

User 2: You probably won't come out with a full answer obv but on a scale of 1 - 10 how close are you guys for an unstable release?

Whether out of frustration or simply the desire to enlighten these individuals about the game development process, the developer shared the following response:

Developer: This doesn't work, sadly. I dunno if you've been in a sort of situation in your life, be it in your personal or professional life, where you feel like you're at a place but a setback puts you back on your bum. Be it because you played a ranked game and you think you're progressing well throughout the ranks, but then suddenly you have one bad streak and it puts you back several ranks just for you to then get hardstuck for months in another. We're not simply filling a loading bar, or ticking off clearcut boxes. New boxes pop up every day. Sometimes bigger boxes, sometimes smaller. You're just sometimes in a situation where for example you think you're approaching an 8 or 9 and then suddenly you fall back to a 7 or 8, and then you are hardstuck for a bit, feeling like you've been at an 8 or 9 for a while now. So yeah, it doesn't really work like that. Giving you an artificial and abstracted number doesn't give you any better information than what you already have.

I can only speculate on the context for the developer's response, but what this moment says about The Indie Stone and their game is despite people's hopes and wishes for constant updates on its progress, it is primarily a consumer product that is subject to the fulfillment of commitments and deadlines that can change on a whim. However, not every developer takes the time to make statements like these, suggesting that the *Project Zomboid* and its Discord server, both as digital gaming worlds and as community space, invites players to experience and identify them as an extension of each other. With regards to The Indie Stone's response, it is one thing to know that the developers are hard at work on these updates, but the added context of why they do not provide release dates informs players/users that there is an unspoken emotional labor happening in the background. On one hand, it is to keep players aloof of any changes, but on the other, it is also to not make any promises they cannot hope to keep, and the potential frustration

that may cause players and themselves. In return for this openness, players like those I interviewed give the developers the benefit of the doubt, trusting that they have their best interests at heart. This openness also applies to the community itself.

Section 4: The *Project Zomboid* Discord as example of “emotional ecosystems”

I posited previously that the term affective system, while implying the existence of affective relationships between video games, their underlying systems, and ourselves, does not identify how or if these relationships are sustained. In Anable’s (2018) words, “video games [...] can tell us quite a bit about collective desires, fears, and rhythms of our everyday lives,” but as affective systems, where do these ideas live except within ourselves (p. 132)? While we can trace out the contours of these networks of things touched by video games, it is clear that some kind of term that grounds these systems in our own human experience is needed.

Missing from this understanding is the notion of sharing: not only of emotions, feelings, and ideas, but also what Beatty (2019) likens as “the possibility of human connection, and the source of so many anthropological insights” (p. 225). Unlike Beatty (2019), who feels that the “affect paradigm excludes the shared life that is the strength of fieldwork,” I argue that affect gives expression to ways of being and feeling that are often unspoken, and more dangerously, taken for granted (p. 225). Affective systems point to these below-the-surface bodily phenomena, while emotional ecosystems, a term I will expound throughout this section, focuses on how community sentiment and discourse regenerates ideas about what is shared and valued, and what sticks as a result of these affective exchanges.

It perhaps comes as no surprise that users of the *Project Zomboid* Discord play the game for varied reasons. Some people play for fun, while some play to be challenged. One may play for immersion in a postapocalyptic setting, while another plays to be social with their friends or

with players online. In all these cases, players of *Project Zomboid* are engaging with elements of the game or its experience that produce feeling(s), and these feelings are generative: productive of changes in playstyle, of emotion, but also of producing ideas and sentiments related to their play. As I have previously quoted my interlocuter NZ, as an “umbrella of experience,” what sticks as an impression of the *PZ* community is the notion that it is the place to share how they feel about the game. Though I do not have the space to share all my observations, what follows are snapshots of emotional episodes of interactions on the Discord server, across numerous channels explicitly related to discussions of the game and its features, as well as server and community recruitment. I will also highlight an anecdote shared by one of my interlocutors, IY, regarding content creation and how they inspire users to regenerate these playstyles in their own game worlds.

My use of the word snapshot refers to two things: first, that these messages reflect a particular social and temporal context, and the context of those messages is understood as an emergent phenomenon that “gives direction” to a particular emotion (Beatty, 2019, pp. 18-19). Secondly, also related to the temporal context, is the nature of the speed of these conversations: for example, because the discussion channel for Build 41, the then-current version of the game, is an open chat, staying with a particular message can be difficult, as potentially 5-10 people (or more depending on the time of day) could be chatting at once. As a result, some discussions can feel disjointed, with users needing to scroll up or down the chat in order to find a particular message they want to reply to.

In the ‘pz_build41_chat,’ and to a lesser extent the ‘general_chat,’ you can find players both asking for, and providing help to players new and old alike. These are also the channels where most discussion of the game (as well as others) occurs. From expressing feelings of joy to

feelings of sadness, and those more ambivalent, users of the *PZ* Discord engage in conversations with others, but sometimes they do so solely for the sake of expression. For example, one user writes:

User 1: im facing a real weird issue in gaming. i dont find video games as fun as i used to but what i am finding fun is jumping into new genres i havent tried blind. and i dont know what im gonna do when I run out of new genres of games to play

Being in a space with like-minded users, this member is not necessarily speaking out into the void, but instead to collections of individuals ready to interact and respond. The above-mentioned user could be found across multiple channels, engaging in all kinds of discussions, suggesting a sense of value comes with visiting the Discord on a regular basis. In another discussion, this same user and two others spoke about the length of their playthroughs, which turned into a conversation about the inevitability of boredom that comes with playing *Project Zomboid*:

User 1: Nobody lives forever in zomboid. its designed in a way to slowly stack the odds against you over time. its just an exercize in how long you can fight that

User 2: 'Only'. Lmao as someone with like 650h, most of my runs never clock past 6 months because I'd just get bored and start a new save. Haven't played the game in a long while though, mostly just waiting for B42

User 3: eeeh... yeah boredom tends to be the end of most vets

User 1: It does

User 3: your character gets more powerful over time really, and peak day is by default like 1 month in

User 1: I'm in b42 waiting room I haven't actually played in months

User 2: I'd get everything I needed inside of a month or two, and I can only go on murdering and exploring for so long until I want to start a new save. My last proper game was probably Sept '23 lmao

Implied through their discussion with other users, it is clear that they are not satisfied with their *Project Zomboid* playthrough, and this boredom is transitioning to other gaming experiences: they state that they have “not played in months.” In the previous conversation (although technically the future), they express distress regarding running out of “new genres of games to play.” What is noteworthy is that this user shared these feelings on the *PZ* Discord instead of Reddit or any number of online communities and platforms. Perhaps it is because *Zomboid* players are in a unique position whereby they have experienced its affective intensity and are therefore more suited to talking about these feelings with other *Zomboid* players, particularly when they strike an emotional chord like boredom. *PZ* Discord users also offer each other advice in these situations, such as the following discussion, where a user shares that they are bored with the game “but still want to play it”:

User 1: I'm bored of this game, but I still want to play it...

User 2: Same, i usually just play this game with small goals then i just take a break and play other games

User 1: Looking through my screenshots. The thing which reminded me of why I stopped playing was this: [images of foggy parking lots with large quantities of zombie corpses]

User 2: almost 100+ mods is helping me through the boredom

User 3: play warframe as a break

User 1: 1) Low Visibility is really annoying, 2) The hordes are huge, but not a challenge to kill, just tedious.

User 3: or go outside

User 1: I'm trying to think of how I would improve the gameplay loop

This user had two others respond to their message, one being more helpful and the other being cheekier. The modding solution suggested by the more helpful member is one means of dealing with the original poster's issue. As I explored in Chapter 2, modding has given players such as my interlocutors the ability to shape old experiences and playstyles into newer unique ones affectively. The cheekier solution offered by the other user suggested either playing another game (in this case, *Warframe*) as a break, or to "go outside." Seemingly at odds with each other with regards to their provided solutions, these users share a common experience in their expressions of boredom. The emotional experience of Project Zomboid is such that, in the following interaction, it is difficult to discern between statements about an in-game character and our own emotional states:

User 1: I mean my record is like 2 years or something, boredom is what killed that character

User 2: How does boredom kill your character? is it really part of the mechanics or nah

User 3: it cant, but in a roundabout way i suppose you may end up dying due to it. it causes sadness, which slows down timed actions

User 1: It's when you start doing stupid shit because you don't have much to do. my boredom, not my characters

User 3: oh yoy mean irl boredom

In this discussion, users were chatting about their personal records for their in-game character's lifespan, the original poster stating that "boredom is what killed that character," to which another user responded, asking if that was possible. As a third user points out, boredom is a moodle that indicates players' level of boredom, the level of which affects sadness, another moodle whose role is to affect the speed at which actions are completed, one example being taking something out of your backpack. The user elaborates further that boredom cannot kill you, but it can make your character more prone to sadness which has its own effects. The original user, however, was referring to their own boredom of the game.

Interestingly, discussions like this are not uncommon, as the game's moodle system (Figure 8) refers to many emotional and feeling states that we express in everyday life, meaning that it is easy to confuse a conversation about roleplaying for one about emotional self-expression. What sticks is the notion that users are sharing feelings about the game in a space designed for the proliferation of these kinds of emotional discourses: moreover, the game's mechanics and affective intensity inform how players communicate with their feelings with each other and how/if they relate to the game. In the discussion above, for example, users have to provide clarity to others about whose boredom they were talking about: their character's, or themselves?

Figure 8

Image of Project Zomboid's moodle system



Note. The image above is of moodles acquired during gameplay, including (from top to bottom) Bleeding, Wet, Has a cold, Pain, and Drunk.

Returning to this idea of stickiness, Ahmed (2014) makes a distinction between “shared feelings” and “feeling the same,” where “emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to that feeling” (p. 10). Related to this, A discusses how good or positive talk of the game has to be coaxed out of some players compared to bad or negative talk. “I heard a lot of players be angry, on the game, on the developers, on everything but... when you’re talking to a group and ask for a good aspect, yeah they can talk about it... it’s just that you have to encourage them to talk about it” (A, personal communication, March 3, 2024). In one sense, these players share the same feelings of frustration, disappointment, and anger, but the object of each individual’s emotional charge is seemingly disparate. For this reason, A and many other players choose to create and join servers where people with similar interests, as well as smaller group dynamics, can play out.

This movement, according to Ahmed (2014), is “instructive” because that which “moves us, what makes us feel [...] holds us in place” (p. 11). Players who join these servers, some of whom post messages in Server/Community Recruitment and ‘looking for group’ channels of the Discord, circulate their “objects of emotion”: a particular experience, playstyle, or desire to play a curated list of mods with others, and the search for meaningful play experiences with other players that involves what Ahmed (2014) calls the “transformation of others into objects of feeling” (p. 11). What this means in practice is that players’ movements across servers, between their character’s bodies and the game’s systems, are about looking for fun or looking to combat boredom; these messages and invitations to play become avenues for these individuals to articulate feelings for and about a game that matters to them, making their own fun, and transforming it into a shared feeling. The *PZ* Discord serves as an audience of *your* experience, the enabling of which lets you experience others as part of *their* audience.

An additional element to the hyperintensive nature of the *Project Zomboid* community is content creation. In my discussion of IY’s experience on the *PZ* Discord and sub-Reddit, IY stated that while she was apprehensive in being more involved in the community apart from her position as lurker, she participates in other ways, such as viewing various media produced by YouTube content creators. In our interview, IY and I discussed videos made by two content creators, each of whom represent qualities she looks for in her own playthroughs with her partner. The first YouTuber, “ambiguousamphibian,” represents the “balanced” approach she adopts in her playstyle: “I think he is a very balanced player. I think he appreciates all the aspects of the game, I think that he appreciates that it is a survival sim” (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024).

His varied playthroughs focus on the game's more challenging aspects, such as "A Real CD DA," a scenario where players start their playthrough in a house on fire, surrounded by zombies, with a drunk character that has multiple deadly wounds (Figure 9). While available to all players, this scenario is viewed as one of the most challenging ways to begin a playthrough, and as such, playing and succeeding in seen as a demonstration of the player's repertoire: their knowledge and skills related to their engagement with the game mechanics, and the ability to apply them in intense scenarios. As part entertainment and part education about the game's mechanics, videos like those by ambiguousamphibian let players realize that there are possibilities for experiencing the game that they may not even know about. This knowledge can then be used for application in your own playthroughs, or as IY points out, for more pragmatic reasons.

Figure 9

Image of a character in the "Real CD DA" game scenario.



Note. The image represents a character in the "Real CD DA" game scenario, where the player starts inebriated and gravely injured in a burning house.

Apart from their implied entertainment value, IY also views these videos as a means of rounding out her experience of *Project Zomboid*, in part due to her phobia of zombies:

The main reason I watch people play the game is to get an understanding of what sorts of routes are available to me, different parts of the game that I can't explore, that I have to like mentally prepare myself for. (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024)

The second YouTuber she highlighted, “The Librarian,” represents the roleplay qualities she strives to include in her playthroughs: “he also is very immersed, and has always showed respect for the people that he kills” (IY, personal communication, 2024). Related to her statement of “engaging [*Project Zomboid*] with a full emotional set,” The Librarian’s videos demonstrate a roleplaying scenario that speaks to her own perspective of zombies in her playthroughs: he “approaches it from a roleplay aspect of ‘these are my neighbors that have been sick,’ and for the most part, he prioritizes burying everyone that he kills” (IY, personal communication, March 20, 2024). Not all videos are made the same, as IY mentions how some content creators prioritize destruction, an attitude that is at odds with what she values about the game, and how this turns her away from watching that kind of media content. The range and variety of *Project Zomboid* related content, from challenge videos to specific roleplaying styles, suggests that there is a wealth of video content surrounding the community, with content creators ready to respond to those desires in ways that speak to emotional discourses about the game.

The hyperintensive nature of this community means that there will always be new perspectives to share, and novel questions to be asked and answered in response. That continued interest is sustained also through the work of The Indie Stone, whose intentions are constantly gleaned and scrutinized by their players, who are hungry for their every word and statement across multiple online discussion spaces. In sum, they point to the notion that the *Project*

Zomboid Discord server is an extension of the game space: it is a reservoir of emotional resources for use in the consumption and production of users play experiences. It also serves as an audience for *your* experience of the game. As an online community, it is an emotional ecosystem that recycles and regenerates ideas about itself as a space for sharing, and in the act of sharing, users shape and are shaped by discourses of emotion that affect in-game and online social interactions. This continual circulation of emotional experience informs players' emotions and feelings, as they refer to other games/media as guidance/inspiration for *consuming* and *producing* desirable play experiences.

Conclusion

As I draw my thesis to a close, I am reminded of my own emotions and feelings, and why I feel attached to investigating the emotional dimension of video games. The reasoning, and the avenue by which I arrived at it, is a result of all the contexts and situations I have experienced in my own life. In the introduction of this thesis, I discussed how emotions are particular to contexts in which they are expressed and felt, but not entirely inseparable: what is inseparable, however, is their nature as socially and culturally manufactured “products” (Geertz, 1973, p. 57). I also discussed that, using Malaby words (2009, 2012), play is “characterized by a readiness to improvise,” and as anthropologists and ethnographers, we have a responsibility to “confront the relationship between this cultural form and the subjective experience it is contrived to elicit” (p. 206; p. 302).

Throughout this thesis, I have looked to answer my original research questions: first, understanding games as affective systems, how do the affordances of a particular game or platform shape narratives that inform the affective/emotional experience of the game/platform? Of related concern was how the game provides players with a means to engage with the language of narrative and genre, how players interpret those elements, and how they reflect and/or contrast the developer’s perceived intentions? Secondly, with the understanding that emotions can be interpreted as frames of understanding, how are player’s experiences of emotions in *Project Zomboid* affected by/reflected in their communication? Adjacent questions included how players communicated their emotional experience in the game and in online communities like Discord, and what messages they were communicating with regards to the meaningfulness of their play.

In Chapter 1, I demonstrated what makes *Project Zomboid* interesting as a case study about the *consumption* of emotions and the range of affective intensity offered by the game

through its portrayal of the zombie genre. In what followed, I discussed the experiences of five *Project Zomboid* players, including my own play sessions with two others, sharing stories that point to the ambivalent emotional experiences offered by its gameplay, and as I noted, the potential for players to construct and live out their narratives. The zombies tended to be the last things on the minds of my interlocutors and I, almost as if their presence was only a primer for the explosive human drama. Therein lies the affective nature of *Project Zomboid* as an expression of the zombie genre: bodies, containers, and surfaces for emotions, feelings, and ideas.

In Chapter 2, I explored three examples of how players of *Project Zomboid* utilize game mechanics and player-made mods to harness the game's ability to foster affectively intensive experiences, or how players become *producers* of emotions: by experimenting with Zomboid's zombie settings and other non-modded features; through smaller mods that lightly change the game world; and through mods that change existing features or add entirely new ones, using a mod called Neurodiversity Plus as a case study to explore this notion.

In Chapter 3, I posited that communities adjacent to video games like the *PZ* Discord perform the role of sustaining those affective relationships between players/users and the game by having an audience for *your* experience of the game. If video games can be construed as systems operating as networks of affects, then the gaming community can be understood as the ecosystem in which this grander network plays out. I attempted to demonstrate how the *PZ* Discord community is experienced by players, users, and developers as an emotional ecosystem: an ecology of feeling and sentiment that informs discourses and interactions surrounding the game and its community.

What does this mean to everyday people who play video games? What I hope to have made clear throughout this thesis is that the way people conceive of their 'play affects' affects the

way they communicate beliefs, ideas, and values to other players in the community. Whether they are deemed good or bad, and whether there are high or low stakes activities involved, these values and opinions reflect encounters, experiences, and emergences of the sociocultural dimensions of emotion in social interaction.

Future considerations and directions

In thinking of the future directions this research might have, the first is that video games are being continually shaped by the kinds of discourses being purported by them. While this research is not unique in the sense that it advocates for continued research on the sociocultural dimensions of games, what I hope is *sui generis* to this contribution is how gaming is a deeply cultural, emotional, and social exercise with numerous implications for life in and outside of games. In the context of this research, emotions and feelings were implicit and taken for granted dimensions of interactions both in-game and online. As games become more prevalent in our everyday lives, attention should be given to the way they shape discourse: for example, Ganzon (2019) highlights how otome games “accommodate the consumption of games within women’s daily lives” through an “appropriation of neoliberal postfeminist discourses” (p. 149). My hope is that through my research, discourses such as these can be traced out and understood as being foundational to the ideas and feelings we have about video games. More importantly, however, is to articulate that we, as individuals, players, and scholars, have the agency to subvert these discourses and trouble their hegemonic power through accounts that unsettle their normative foundations.

A second future direction that my research could have is adding to the scholarly discussion about moving away from the notion of finding (or making) an “ideal game studies subject”: not only is not representative of the kinds of people who study or play video games, but

it is actively harmful to engaging more scholars to play and study video games (Phillips, 2020b: p. 27). One of the more striking elements of my work is listening to the stories of my interlocutors, and when players such as IY mention that they feel unable to participate due to a difference of opinion, or in their case, the way they ideologically approach play, I feel that it not only reinforces narratives such as games being a primarily male hobby, but it also cements that these are spaces where male-dominated narratives influence the flow of emotions and feelings. While I appreciate the experiences that each of these players are able to share with me as well as share in online spaces, my work demonstrates that the image of the “young, able-bodied, cisgender, straight, white [man] with the time and the money to play” as the basis for narrative design and understanding experience of players and games must change (Ruberg & Scully-Blaker, 2021, p. 659). If game developers are willing to create games that make people “care,” to engage with them “[seriously]” requires that researchers put the pressure on developers to “carefully” consider the “radical potential and cultural value of video games” in representing the kinds of narratives that actually mean something to more than one social group (Ruberg & Scully-Blaker, 2021, p. 664).

The third future direction, and one related primarily to the way the game has changed, is to follow the game and its community for a longer period of study. Since my research in 2024, *Project Zomboid* has updated to a latest version, Build 42, adding numerous mechanics and changing ones that are fundamental to the experience of the game. In a sense, the game has been in a constant state of flux, forever changing, and players are witnesses to the various ebbs and flows of the indie video game development process, such as how it is influenced by more dominant practices within the industry. One such example has occurred in this latest Build, including the addition of artwork wherein the artist is suspected to have used generative AI: this

angered players who, airing their grievances towards its use, made the developers remove those assets from the game. Although this is purely anecdotal, the relationship between players and community, and on the other hand, developers and their community, has been tested by these sentiments towards AI: future work could be directed at examining this particular moment as a lightning rod for the production of mixed emotions and affects, and how discussions around game development and AI have led to vocal groups of players and content creators airing their approval and dissent in various online discussion spaces.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1990). Shifting politics in Bedouin love poetry. In C. A. Lutz & L. Abu-Lughod, (Eds.), *Language and the politics of emotion* (pp. 24-45). Cambridge University Press.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (1991). Writing against culture. In R. G. Fox (Ed.), *Recapturing anthropology: Working in the present* (pp. 137–162). School of American Research Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
- Anable, A. (2018). *Playing with feelings: Video games and affect* (1st ed.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Ash, J. (2013). Technologies of Captivation: Videogames and the Attunement of Affect. *Body & Society*, 19(1), 27–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X11411737>
- Beatty, A. (2010). How Did It Feel for You? Emotion, Narrative, and the Limits of Ethnography. *American Anthropologist*, 112(3), 430–443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2010.01250.x>
- Beatty, A. (2014). Current Emotion Research in Anthropology: Reporting the Field. *Emotion Review*, 5(4), 414–422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073913490045>
- Beatty, A. (2019). *Emotional worlds: Beyond an anthropology of emotion*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bericat, E. (2015). The sociology of emotions: Four decades of progress. *Current Sociology*, 64(3), 491–513. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115588355>
- Berlant, L. G. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.

- Boellstorff, T. (2006). A Ludicrous Discipline? Ethnography and Game Studies. *Games and Culture*, 1(1), 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281620>
- Boellstorff, T. (2015). *Coming of age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 2008)
- Boellstorff, T., & Lindquist, J. (2004). Bodies of emotion: Rethinking culture and emotion through Southeast Asia. *Ethnos*, 69(4), 437–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000302290>
- Bohunicky, K. M. (2021). Dear Punchy: Representing and Feeling Writing in Animal Crossing. *Loading*, 13(22), 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075262ar>
- Boluk, S., & LeMieux, P. (2017). *Metagaming: Playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, making, and breaking videogames*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Bone, J., Emele, C. D., Abdul, A., Coghill, G., & Pang, W. (2016). The social sciences and the web: From ‘Lurking’ to interdisciplinary ‘Big Data’ research. *Methodological Innovations*, 9, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799116630665>
- Carr, D. (2019). Methodology, Representation, and Games. *Games and Culture*, 14(7–8), 707–723. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1177/1555412017728641>
- Chew, E. C., & Mitchell, A. (2020). Bringing Art to Life: Examining Poetic Gameplay Devices in Interactive Life Stories. *Games and Culture*, 15(8), 874–901. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019853372>
- Cremin, C. (2016). Molecular Mario: The Becoming-Animal of Video Game Compositions. *Games and Culture*, 11(4), 441–458. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015569247>

De Courville Nicol, V. (2011). *Social economies of fear and desire*. Palgrave Macmillan US.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137010377>

De Seta, G. (2020). Three lies of digital ethnography. *Journal of Digital Social Research*, 2(1),

77–97. <https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v2i1.24>

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B.

Massumi, Trans.). <https://doi.org/10.2307/203963>

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language* (A. M.

Sheridan Smith, Trans.). Pantheon Books.

Ganzon, S. C. (2019). Investing Time for Your In-Game Boyfriends and BFFs: Time as

Commodity and the Simulation of Emotional Labor in *Mystic Messenger*. *Games and*

Culture, 14(2), 139–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018793068>

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Routledge.

(Original work published 1983)

Jackson, S. (1993). Even Sociologists Fall in Love: An Exploration in the Sociology of Emotions.

Sociology, 27(2), 201–220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038593027002002>

Katz, J. (1999). *How emotions work*. University of Chicago Press.

Leavitt, J. (1996). Meaning and feeling in the anthropology of emotions. *American Ethnologist*,

23(3), 514–539. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1996.23.3.02a00040>

Lutz, C., & White, G. M. (1986). The Anthropology of Emotions. *Annual Review of*

Anthropology, 15(1), 405–436. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.15.100186.002201>

Malaby, T. M. (2007). Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games. *Games and Culture*, 2(2), 95–

113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412007299434>

Malaby, T. M. (2009). Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience. *New Literary*

History, 40(1), 205–218. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.0.0079>

Malaby, T. M. (2012). Digital gaming, game design and its precursors. In H. A. Horst & D. Miller

(Eds.), *Digital Anthropology* (pp. 288-305). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085201-19>

Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Duke University

Press.

Page, T. (2017). Vulnerable Writing as a Feminist Methodological Practice. *Feminist Review*,

115, 13–29. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0028-0>

Pearce, C. & Artemesia. (2009). *Communities of play: Emergent cultures in multiplayer games*

and virtual worlds. MIT Press.

Perron, B. (2009). The survival horror: The extended body genre. In B. Perron (Ed.), *Horror*

video games: Essays on the fusion of fear and play (pp. 121–143). McFarland.

Perron, B. (2016). Emotions in video games: Are you concerned? In B. Perron & F. Schrter

(Eds.), *Video games and the mind: Essays on cognition, affect and emotion* (pp. 189–209).

McFarland.

Perron, B. (2020). The pace and reach of video game zombies. In S.J. Webley & P. Zackariasson

(Eds.), *The playful undead and video games: Critical analyses of zombies and gameplay*

(pp. 197-215). Routledge.

- Phillips, A. (2020a). *Gamer trouble: Feminist confrontations in digital culture*. NYU Press.
- Phillips, A. (2020b). Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field. *Feminist Media Histories*, 6(1), 12–36. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2020.6.1.12>
- Pink, S., Horst, H. A., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. SAGE.
- Rosaldo, M. Z. (1984). Toward an anthropology of self and feeling. In *Culture theory: Essays on mind, self, and emotion* (pp. 137–157). Cambridge University Press.
- Ruberg, B. (2019). *Video games have always been queer* (1st ed.). New York University Press.
- Ruberg, B., & Scully-Blaker, R. (2021). Making players care: The ambivalent cultural politics of care and video games. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(4), 655–672. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920950323>
- Schieder, B. (n.d.). *Holy Grace church*. [Photograph]. Project Zomboid Map Project. <https://map.projectzomboid.com/#10770x10180x4922>
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). *Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Duke University Press.
- Shaw, A. (2014). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Shilling, C. (1997). Emotions, Embodiment and the Sensation of Society. *The Sociological Review*, 45(2), 195–219. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.00061>
- Shilling, C. (2002). The Two Traditions in the Sociology of Emotions. *The Sociological Review*, 50(2), 10–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2002.tb03589.x>

- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary affects*. Duke University Press.
- Street, Z. (2017). Queering games history: Complexities, chaos, and community. In *Queer Game Studies* (pp. 35–42). University of Minnesota Press.
- Strickland, D., & Schlesinger, L. (1969). “Lurking” as a Research Method. *Human Organization*, 28(3), 248–250. <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.28.3.t056036u16021201>
- Sunden, J. (2012). Desires at Play: On Closeness and Epistemological Uncertainty. *Games and Culture*, 7(2), 164–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012451124>
- Tomkins, S. S. (2008). *Affect imagery consciousness: The complete edition*. Springer Publishing. (Original work published 1962)
- Trammell, A. (2022). Decolonizing play. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 39(3), 239–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2022.2080844>
- The Indie Stone. (2017, July 17). Thank you George Romero. *The Indie Stone*. <https://projectzomboid.com/blog/news/2017/07/thank-you-george-romero/>
- Turner, J. H. (2009). The Sociology of Emotions: Basic Theoretical Arguments. *Emotion Review*, 1(4), 340–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073909338305>
- Webley, S. J. (2020). “The Romeroesque”—Playing with ethics and ideology in zombie games, from indie to mainstream and around Again. In S.J. Webley & P. Zackariasson (Eds.), *The playful undead and video games: Critical analyses of zombies and gameplay* (pp. 259–273). Routledge.

Wilde. P. (2022). Zombies, deviance, and the right to posthuman life. In S. E. Hamilton & C.

Heffernan (Eds.), *Theorising the contemporary zombie: Contextual pasts, presents, and futures* (pp. 19-36). University of Wales Press.

Appendix 1: Informed Consent Forms

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Video games and their affective intensities: An investigation into the relationship between emotions, feelings, and experience of gaming affects

Researcher: Derek Pasborg

Researcher's Contact Information:

Faculty Supervisor: Bart Simon

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information:

Source of funding for the study: N/A

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to better understand the relationship between the experiences of games and their emotional contexts: how emotions and feelings impact how gamers experience and conceive of their play.

B. PROCEDURES

If you participate, you will be asked to respond to a semi-structured interview with 15 questions given by the researcher. The interview will take place on Zoom and will be recorded.

In total, participating in this study will take 1.5 hours: 30 minutes for the participant's review of the questions prior to the interview, and 1 hour for the interview itself.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Participating in an interview carries foreseeable risks, including the possibility of unintentional disclosure of sensitive information, breaches of confidentiality, or the potential for information to be misused, mishandled, or misconstrued.

There are no foreseeable benefits to participants for taking part in this research study.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research: audio data from the interview.

We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.

The information gathered will be confidential: the researcher will know the participants' real identity, but participants' identities will not be disclosed in disseminated results. We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results.

We will destroy the information five years after the end of the study.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher before March 31st, 2024 at 11:59PM EST.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page I. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Appendix 2: Interview guide for participants

Interview guide for *Video games and their affective intensities* research project

Definition of key terms for participants:

Feeling: Feelings refer to conscious, subjective experiences of sensory or emotional states. They are the immediate, personal sensations and perceptions we have in response to stimuli, events, or thoughts. Feelings can encompass both physical sensations (such as warmth or pain) and emotional states (such as happiness or sadness).

Emotion: Emotions are complex, multi-dimensional psychological responses to events or stimuli. They involve subjective experiences, physiological changes, and behavioral expressions. Emotions are typically categorized into specific states such as joy, fear, anger, and sadness and can vary in intensity and duration.

Affect: Affect is a broader term that encompasses both emotions and moods. It refers to the underlying, basic, and more general quality of feeling, often without specific labels. Affect includes the overall emotional tone or atmosphere of an individual or a situation, and it can be positive (e.g., happiness) or negative (e.g., sadness). Affect is considered a fundamental aspect of human experience and can influence cognition, decision-making, and social interactions.

Theme #1: Understanding games as affective systems:

1. Can you describe your experience with Project Zomboid and how it made you feel emotionally while playing?
2. In your opinion, what specific elements or features in Project Zomboid contribute to the emotional experience it offers to players?
3. How do you think the affordances of Project Zomboid, such as its gameplay mechanics and graphics, influence the emotional narratives you and other players create while playing the game?
4. Do you believe that your perception of the affective elements in Project Zomboid aligns with the developer's intended emotional experience? If not, how do they differ?
5. Can you share an example of a moment in Project Zomboid where you experienced a strong emotional reaction? How did you interpret that emotion, and how did it affect your gameplay?

Theme #2: Understanding emotions as frames of understanding:

6. How do you express your emotions while playing Project Zomboid, both within the game (e.g., through in-game chat or character actions) and in external platforms like Discord or forums?
7. Are there particular strategies or methods you use to convey your emotional experiences to other players or the gaming community?
8. Can you describe any instances where you observed or participated in discussions about emotions and experiences in Project Zomboid outside of the game? How did these discussions shape your understanding of emotions in the game?

9. Do you feel that your communication of emotional experiences in Project Zomboid contributes to a sense of community or shared understanding among players?
10. How do you perceive the messages conveyed to players in Project Zomboid regarding the meaningfulness of their gameplay experiences and emotional engagement?

General Questions:

11. Have you noticed any differences in how players of varying demographics (age, gender, background) express their emotions and experiences in Project Zomboid?
12. Are there any particular player-created content, such as mods or custom scenarios, that have significantly influenced your emotional experiences in Project Zomboid? If so, how?
13. Can you think of an instance where your emotions in Project Zomboid evolved over time as you gained more experience with the game? How did these changes manifest in your communication and narratives about the game?
14. How has the Project Zomboid community shaped your emotional experiences and understanding of the game? Are there any specific interactions or events that stand out in this regard?
15. In your opinion, what role does emotional engagement play in the long-term enjoyment and sustainability of Project Zomboid as a gaming experience?

Appendix 3: NZ's "Printable Item Checklist"

PROJECT ZOMBOLD ITEM TRACKER

PAGE 1: BOOKS, MAGAZINES, & LIFE AND LIVING

CHARACTER:				EMERGENCY RADIO FREQUENCY: ____ . ____ MHz	
------------	--	--	--	--	--

SKILL BOOKS	Vol. 1 (Levels 1-2)	Vol. 2 (Levels 3-4)	Vol. 3 (Levels 5-6)	Vol. 4 (Levels 7-8)	Vol. 5 (Levels 9-10)
Carpentry					
Cooking					
Farming					
First Aid					
Electrical					
Metalworking					
Mechanics					
Tailoring					
Fishing					
Trapping					
Foraging					

MAGAZINES:

COOKING

The Good Cooking Magazine Vol. 1 ☐

The Good Cooking Magazine Vol. 2 ☐

METALWORK

The Metalwork Magazine Vol. 1 ☐

The Metalwork Magazine Vol. 2 ☐

The Metalwork Magazine Vol. 3 ☐

The Metalwork Magazine Vol. 4 ☐

MECHANICS

Lanes Auto Manual - Standard ☐

Lanes Auto Manual - Commercial ☐

Lanes Auto Manual - Performance ☐

MISCELLANEOUS

How to Use Generators ☐

FARMING

The Farming Magazine ☐

FISHING

Angler USA Magazine Vol. 1 ☐

Angler USA Magazine Vol. 2 ☐

ELECTRICIAL

Electronics Magazine Vol. 1 ☐

Electronics Magazine Vol. 2 ☐

Electronics Magazine Vol. 3 ☐

Electronics Magazine Vol. 4 ☐

Engineer Magazine Vol. 1 ☐

Engineer Magazine Vol. 2 ☐

TRAPPING

The Hunter Magazine Vol. 1 ☐

The Hunter Magazine Vol. 2 ☐

The Hunter Magazine Vol. 3 ☐

FORAGING

The Herbalist ☐

RADIO CRAFTING

Guerilla Radio Vol. 1 ☐

Guerilla Radio Vol. 2 ☐

Guerilla Radio Vol. 3 ☐

LIFE AND LIVING:

DAY 1

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING

☐ 12:00 (12PM) CARPENTRY

☐ 18:00 (6PM) FISHING

DAY 5

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING

☐ 12:00 (12PM) CARPENTRY

☐ 18:00 (6PM) FORAGING

DAY 2

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING

☐ 12:00 (12PM) CARPENTRY

☐ 18:00 (6PM) FARMING

DAY 6

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING

☐ 12:00 (12PM) CARPENTRY

☐ 18:00 (6PM) TRAPPING

DAY 3

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING

☐ 12:00 (12PM) CARPENTRY

☐ 18:00 (6PM) FISHING

DAY 7

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING

☐ 12:00 (12PM) CARPENTRY

☐ 18:00 (6PM) FORAGING

DAY 4

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING

☐ 12:00 (12PM) CARPENTRY

☐ 18:00 (6PM) RECIPE (NO XP)

DAY 8

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING

(NOTHING)

☐ 18:00 (6PM) CARPENTRY

DAY 9

☐ 06:00 (6AM) COOKING