Times of COVID-19 (https://timesofcovid19.temporalities.no/)

Home (http://timesofcovid19.temporalities.no)

About (https://timesofcovid19.temporalities.no/times-of-covid19-about/)

(https://timesofcovid19.temporalities.no/2020/04/24/lockdown-labour-and-leisure-gaming-in-quarantine-laura-op-de-beke/)

LOCKDOWN, LABOUR, AND LEISURE: GAMING IN QUARANTINE // LAURA OP DE BEKE

(https://timesofcovid19.temporalities.no/2020/04/24/lockdown-labour-and-leisure-gaming-in-quarantine-laura-op-de-beke/)

timesofcovid19 · April 24, 2020

Lockdown, Labour, and Leisure: Gaming in Quarantine, Laura op de Beke

In Norway lockdown measures were initiated on 12 March. Schools and universities closed, events were cancelled, and those lucky enough to be able to work from home set about adapting living rooms to home offices. In the meantime, as people were hoarding toilet paper and canned goods, other commodities too were flying off the shelves, like the mobile game console the Nintendo Switch. Although it has been available for about three years now, the Switch's sales fluctuate with the publication of new games, for example the long-awaited *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* which came out 20 March, right in the middle of the Corona pandemic. With everybody cooped up at home, craving distraction, sales skyrocketed causing the console to be sold out almost immediately in North America (Gilbert). Board games too are in high demand. In Norway, people rushed to get their hands on the 2008 board game *Pandemic*, which was sold out in most stores (Ørbeck Eliassen).

Although the 2008 economic crisis proved that the game industry is not recession proof, Corona sales show that it is almost certainly recession resilient. The game industry has profited from economic slumps before. In times of economic hardship, people seek diversion, and games, especially those that boast dozens of hours of gameplay, can start to seem like sensible investments. In Asia, online gaming boomed in the late 1990s in South Korea during a recession that laid off thousands of workers who whiled away their time in cybercafés (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 135). Online games also allow people to socialize at a distance, which was grounds enough for the WHO to announce their support of an initiative called #PlayApartTogether, launched by a coalition of game developers to encourage people to game their way through quarantine (Snider). The WHO was not the only serious institution to take a sudden stance in favour of video games. There have been a number of articles in papers like the New York Times and the Washington Post suggesting people pick up gaming as a hobby to help them pass the time. Such mainstream approval marks a notable change in attitude. Previously dismissed as a waste of time, playing video games has now become a way of spending that time usefully, even responsibly, perhaps because, as I suggests below, games allow us to manage our emotional response to the crisis, and to continue to participate in the capitalist rhythms of labour and consumption currently on hold.

Do Something With Your Nothing

'Too many games, too little time' is one of the most commonly lamented adult gamer problems. Many blockbuster games are huge time sinks which is inconvenient for busy adults, even more so if those adults happen to be women, who tend to carry more of the burden of domestic labour (what Arlie Hochschild called 'the second shift'). This is why casual, mobile games, which are often marketed to women, have to be "time positive," meaning they have to be playable in short bursts of time, on the road, or in waiting rooms (Chess 59). "Do something with your nothing" is how the Nintendo DS, predecessor of the Switch, was advertised to a predominantly female audience in 2006. This catchphrase seems not to have aged at all in these quarantine times. Social media is

saturated with productivity porn urging people to pick up new skills and hobbies. Underlying such posturing is a very real fear of unproductivity, of lost time. Part of their appeal is that video games allow us to transform lost time – 'nothing' – into something. They do so by instilling in players a sense of productive bliss. Aubrey Anable has written persuasively on the collapse of work and leisure in her analysis of mobile gaming.

> "[T]he concrete labor of game production is profoundly alienated from its value and our consumption … Yet, labor, like the return of the repressed, shows up in the narratives, interfaces, mechanics, and algorithms. Through game apps we are invited to engage with systems of measurement and evaluation that produce us not as concrete workers, but as subjects of the mobile and shifting interface between labor and leisure. (203-204).

Shira Chess too points out the "slippage between gameworld time and real-world time" established by casual games like time management games, especially those of the invest/express model, of which *Animal Crossing* is an example (79).

Animal Crossing was created by Katsuya Eguchi, who wanted to design a game that allowed families with different schedules to play with each other. *Animal Crossing* unfolds in real-time, which means it is synched to the diurnal, seasonal, and calendrical rhythms of the real world. Kids can play in the afternoon when they get off from school, while parents can play in the evening after bedtime, leaving each other gifts and messages. Currently the game is bridging spatial divides more so than temporal ones, allowing players to visit their friends' without breaking lockdown protocol, but this is not the only reason for its quarantine appeal. As game scholars have argued since the franchise's inception, *Animal Crossing* perpetuates "capitalist rhythms of labour and debt" (Scully-Blaker 91). In *New Horizons*, as in previous instalments, players are immediately indebted to the NPC (non-player character) Tom Nook, who provides you with a starting loan to buy a piece of property. Paying off the loan requires you to engage in repetitive tasks that yield items you can exchange for bells, the in-game currency. Bells can also be exchanged for furniture, clothes, or house upgrades, all of which you can show off to your friends. With many people laid off, stuck at home, and unable to participate in social rituals of labour and consumption, *New Horizons* offers a virtual, networked space in which to continue to indulge in these familiar pleasures, as if nothing ever happened.

But *Animal Crossing* walks a fine line between the rhetoric of acquisition, and elimination; consumerism, and eco-pastoralism (Bogost, 272). It is possible to resists the urge to grind for bells in favour of what Rainforest Scully-Blaker calls "radical slowness" or the "deliberate failure to 'keep up' with the ever-accelerating rhythm of capitalist society" by relying on the bounty of the virtual world, which puts items in your path naturally as long as you are willing to take your time (103).

Premediating Pandemics

Chess concludes in her discussion of the time management game that its emphasis on speed and efficiency is ultimately about controlling a kind of hysteria (87). This points to another way in which video games are used in quarantine, not just as a means to pass the time, but also as a way to manage one's emotional response to the crisis. For example, one popular ludic response to the Corona pandemic seems to be to practice a form of exposure therapy, indulging in fictional representations of pandemics thereby chasing a kind of emotional inoculation. Although there is no scarcity of 'viral' games, two examples in particular come to mind: the previously mentioned *Pandemic* and *Plague Inc.* (2012). By the grace of both their plausibility and their multiplicity – in the sense that they offer different conditions and outcomes each playthrough – games like these participate in the media logic of premediation. Coined by Richard Grusin, premediation, describes an anticipatory media regime that became especially prevalent post 9/11. Premediation works by anticipating, modelling, and exploring disasters to come. In doing so, it yields a false sense of control over the unknowability of the future, at the cost of a pervasive, protracted sense of low-level anxiety, which, in the context of the war on terror, was exploited to support the logic of preemptive war.

For example, *Pandemic* allows 2-4 players to work collaboratively to contain, cure, and eventually develop vaccines for four global pandemics that threaten to infect the world. Using the special abilities ascribed to each player via role cards (researcher, scientist, medic, quarantine specialist etc.), the game forces you to make every move count. Time is against you, as each turn worsens the spread of the virus increasing the chance of outbreaks. Challenging though it is, however, *Pandemic* is ultimately an empowering, team building experience As most players will find, practice makes perfect and the unpredictabilities of the game can be managed with good strategy. And even if you lose, you can always reset the board and try again.

Not so in *Pandemic Legacy* (2015). Legacy board games are played over the course of a number of consecutive session during which the board, the characters, and the rules are all subject to irreversible change: cards are ripped up and the board is stickered over. Legacy games have something valuable to offer according to game scholar Ivan Mosca. He argues they push players to "abandon the classic, progressive model of knowledge in favor of 'an openness to vulnerability'" (qtd. in Chang, 226). There is no resetting the board in legacy games, which instead make you live with the ramifications of your failure(s). Arguably, this is exactly what the world needs right now. Corona has exposed the vulnerabilities in our system, from the hollowing out of our health care services by neoliberal governments, to the fragility of our economies, and social networks. Time will tell whether we recognize the situation as irreversible, and attend to what will be its legacy, or whether we will foolishly try to go back to the way things were by resetting the board.

Pandemic's darker cousin is the mobile/PC game *Plague Inc.* by Ndemic Creations (2012), which experienced a surge in popularity amid the Corona outbreak, just as it did during the 2014 Ebola crisis (Goodfellow). Unlike *Pandemic*, *Plague Inc.* makes you play on the part of the disease, presenting you with a number of dubious choices covering the disease's initial design (viral,

microbial, fungal?), to its transmission (zoonosis, obviously, but do you want rats or bats as carriers?). The goal? To infect every human being on earth. Additionally, *Plague Inc*. allows players to design custom scenarios, a feature that quickly inspired a number of corona simulators which anticipated the spread of the virus. In response, Ndemic issued a statement that "Plague Inc. is a game, not a scientific model." Despite this public disclaimer *Plague Inc.* was banned in China as of 1 March 2020. In what strikes me as an attempt to take responsibility for their game which may strike some as insensitive, Ndemic been a prolific disseminator of Corona-related information on Twitter, and they announced on 23 March that they donated a quarter of a million dollars to Corona relief/research funds. Moreover, in collaboration with the WHO, among others, they announced that they are "accelerating work on a new Plague Inc. game mode which lets players save the world from a deadly disease outbreak […] managing disease progression and boosting healthcare systems as well as controlling real-world actions such as triaging, quarantining, social distancing and closing of public services." However, it remains to be seen whether this heroic game mode will be as popular as the original, whose misanthropy was part of its appeal.

Plague Inc.'s popularity suggests players crave more emotionally complex experiences and are fed up with being told to chin up, carry on, and save the world. What about those days when you don't feel like saving the world with its blundering governments and careless politicians? Indie developer Kara Stone's *The Ritual of the Moon* is another game that seems particularly apropos. Played for five minutes each day over the course of a 28 day cycle, it provides some structure to the seamless flow of quarantine time. Each day, the game presents you with the option to save the world, or to allow it to be destroyed by a comet. *The Ritual of the Moon* thus flirts with both the heroic impulse of *Pandemic*, and the destructivity of dark play that we see in *Plague Inc.*, channelling both the psychological highs of contemplating the pandemic as a moment of change, and the despair of watching it unfold at the cost of people's lives and livelihoods. In doing so, no other game has impressed me more with its sensitivity and its sanity in these trying times.

Works Cited

Anable, Aubrey. "Labor / Leisure" In Time: A Vocabulary of the Present. NYU, 2016. 192-208.

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. MIT press, 2007.

Chang, Alenda Y. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games.* University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Chess, Shira. *Ready Player Two? Women Gamers and Designed Identity*. University of Minessota Press, 2017.

Dyer-Witheford and Greg de Peuter. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games.* University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Gilbert, Ben. "Nintendo Switch is sold out everywhere as demand surges amid coronavirus pandemic" businessinsider, 26 Mach 2020. https://www.businessinsider.com/nintendo-switch-sold-out-nearly-everywhere-amid-coronavirus-demand-surge-2020-3?r=US&IR=T

Goodfellow, Jessica. “Plague Inc game goes viral amid coronavirus outbreak.” Campaignlive.co.uk, 7 February 2020. https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/plague-inc-game-goes-viral-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/1673405

Schiesel, Seth. “For the Uninitiated and Bored, an Introduction to the World of Gaming” *The New York Times*, 1 April 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/arts/gaming-introduction-basics-quarantine-coronavirus.html

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. “Buying Time: Capitalist Temporalities inAnimal Crossing: Pocket Camp” *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, vol. 12, no. 20, 2019,
pp. 90-106

Snider, Mike. “Video games can be a healthy social pastime during coronavirus pandemic.” USAtoday, 29 March 2020. https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/gaming/2020/03/28/video-games-whos-prescription-solace-during-coronavirus-pandemic/2932976001/

Park, Gene. “So you want to be a gamer. Here’s how you can start.” *Washington Post*, 27 March 20202. https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/03/27/so-you-want-be-gamer-heres-how-you-can-start/

Ndemic Creations. “Plague Inc. Gives a Quarter of a Million Dollars to Fight Covid-19” Ndemic Creations, Company > News, 23 March 2020. https://www.ndemiccreations.com/en/news/175-plague-inc-gives-a-quarter-of-a-million-dollars-to-fight-covid-19

Ndemic Creations. “Statement on the Current Coronavrus Outbreak.” Ndemic Creations, Company > News, 31 January 2020. https://www.ndemiccreations.com/en/news/172-statement-on-the-current-coronavirus-outbreak

Ørbeck Eliassen, Heather. “Alle vil spille virusspillet – nå er det tomt på lageret til leverandøren.” NRK Nyheter, 27 March 2020. https://www.nrk.no/kultur/alle-vil-spille-virusspillet-_-na-er-det-tomt-pa-lageret-til-leverandoren-1.14959783

Video Games

Animal Crossing: New Horizons. Nintendo EAD, Nintendo, 2020.

Pandemic. Matt Leacock, Z-Man Games, 2008. https://www.zmangames.com/en/games/pandemic/

Plague Inc. Ndemic Creations, Ndemic Creations, 2012. https://www.ndemiccreations.com/en/22-plague-inc

The Ritual of the Moon. Kara Stone, Kara Stone, 2019. https://ritualofthemoongame.com/