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There Is No Immersion: Critical Intervention through Hypermediacy in Metagames

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In 2020, Draw Me a Pixel released *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*, a game that playfully engages with the concept of the metagame and its varied meanings to examine the relationship between developers, games, and their audiences. *There Is No Game* is representative of a trend in indie games that reflects on the challenges of creating games following the boom in independent game development that began to emerge in 2008 (Juul 2019, p. 91; Parker et al. 2017). These games are often self-reflexive and share similar themes concerning the financial, creative, and public pressures of game development. Many indie developers have expressed frustration with the lack of creative freedom in a risk-averse industry that emphasizes sales and player-centric design over experimentation (Dyer-Withford and de Peuter 2009, p. 43; Martin and Deuze 2009, p. 277). Consequently, a number of developers have explored and reflected on their frustration with the state of the industry through their games. Among such games would be titles like *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden 2011/ Galactic Cafe 2013), *The Magic Circle* (Question 2015), *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015), *Dr. Langeskov*, *The Tiger*, and *the Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist* (Crows Crows Crows 2015), *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games 2016), *Calendula* (Blooming Buds Studio 2016), and *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (Foddy 2017).¹ All of these games offer thoughtful reflections on the challenges of game development through their narratives and gameplay mechanics. This shared self-reflexive perspective on the industry lends these games to be characterized as a subgenre² of metagames, a term which will be addressed in more detail in the following. *There Is No Game* has been chosen as the focus of this article in part because it is timely, but foremost because its distance in time from these earlier works has allowed for more opportunity for reflection on the genre and its predecessors. Likewise, the industry has not remained static and has seen the emergence of movements like Game Workers Unite (GWU), which has made efforts to unionize the industry, giving workers hope for future change (Woodcock 2021).

Examining *There Is No Game's* playful take on the concept of the metagame, this article identifies a shift in this subgenre of metagames from antagonistic and dark play, to an approach to design that inspires a more positive outlook on the future of the industry. Its creator, Pascal Cammisotto, uses play as a way to appropriate the struggles faced in the game's development and to comment on the industry that fuels these obstacles. As Miguel Sicart writes,

[i]n disrupting the normal state of affairs by being playful, we can go beyond fun when we appropriate a context with the intention of playing with and within it. And in that move, we reveal the inner workings of the context that we inhabit. (2014, p. 15)

Cammisotto's playful attitude toward design uses hypermediacy, narrative, and a cooperative approach to gameplay to offer a detailed exploration of the frustrations felt by developers and the recurring themes, antagonistic narratives, and disruptive strategies that are characteristic of many games in this subgenre of metagames. Although it does not propose any overt solutions to the problems it identifies, *There Is No Game* highlights a hopeful future through its construction of the player-developer relationship. Through a comparative analysis of an earlier game jam version of the game and its final form, this article explores the implications of this shift away from the antagonistic style of design frequently used in the genre to a more cooperative approach. *There Is No Game*'s design takes a playful approach to its narrative, mechanics, and subject, creating an experience that subverts players' expectations; while the game references the confrontational narrator present in many well-known titles in the genre, players ultimately find themselves in the midst of a love story.

A Game about Games

There Is No Game is a point-and-click puzzle adventure that is described by Cammisotto as a kind of romantic comedy (La Playade 2020). Its narrative tells of the adventure of two seemingly unlikely friends, the player and game program, as they are sent spiraling across dimensions, and must work together to return home. Each dimension to which they travel highlights a different game genre, beginning with the form from which the game draws its own aesthetic inspiration, the point-and-click adventure, with later dimensions featuring role-playing games, clicker games, pay-to-play games, and mobile games. Within these dimensions, players will also encounter a number of classic games such as *Breakout* (Atari 1976), *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984), tic-tac-toe, sudoku, *Game & Watch* (Nintendo 1980), and *Minesweeper* (Microsoft 1992). Its self-referential and self-reflexive design lends itself to being categorized as 'meta'; however, its use of the concept is layered. The term 'metagame' is often applied in a variety of ways throughout the field of game studies; as Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux write in *Metagaming*, "[a]lthough the term is used to denote a wide variety of activities related to games [...] there is no unified definition of *metagame*" (2017, p. 10). Among more technical uses, the term is frequently used to denote particular kinds of self-reflexive games, approaches to game design, and play practices (Boluk and LeMieux 2017; Carter et al. 2012; Santaella 2007; Sicart 2015b). More broadly, the term 'metagame' is used to describe the act of making games with games, games about games, and games within games. Boluk and LeMieux draw on a variety of applications of the term to propose the following general definition of metagames:

Metagames are where and when games happen, not a magic circle within which unnecessary obstacles and voluntary pursuits play out, but a *messy circle* that both constrains games and makes them possible in the first place. Inside this second circle, the ideological desire to distance leisure from labor, play from production, or games from life breaks down: it's metagames all the way down. (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, p. 15)

For Boluk and LeMieux, metagames have a political potential that emerges through this messy circle and the practice of taking games apart to create something new; in

their words, “what if videogames were not considered games in the first place, but *equipment* for making metagames” (2017, p. 9)? As they further argue,

even though metagames have always existed alongside games, the concept has taken on renewed importance and political urgency in a media landscape in which video games not only colonize and include the very concept of games, play, and leisure but ideologically conflate the creativity, criticality, and craft of play with the act of consumption. (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, p. 3)

While *There Is No Game* is not as radical as the examples discussed throughout Boluk and LeMieux’s *Metagaming* (and indeed it is caught up in the very circuits of the industry that it critiques), it nevertheless delivers analogous questions about labor, production, and life with attention to the very real consequences of industry pressures on the kinds of games that are made and the frustrations felt by those in the industry. The game takes a playful approach to the games that it examines—refashioning them in often unexpected ways—to encourage critical reflection, though as mentioned above, it offers no overt practical solutions to the problems it identifies. This absence, however, is not necessarily a flaw, but is characteristic of more experimental games. Patrick Jagoda, examining *Little Inferno* (Tomorrow Corporation 2012), writes that “[i]n opposition to the California ideology, such [experimental] games do not posit design as a means of problem solving” (Jagoda 2020, p. 249). Instead, their effects “[unfold] largely at the level of affect” (Jagoda 2020, p. 249). As will be examined in more detail in the following, *There Is No Game* reframes the challenges faced in its own development into a story about friendship and a lost love.

There Almost Was No Game: *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*

Prior to its 2020 release, a much shorter version of *There Is No Game* first appeared as a winning entry to Deception Jam (Tom 2015). This version of the game is still available on a number of platforms under the title *There Is No Game: Jam Edition* (Draw Me a Pixel 2015). Although *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* is a much more fully developed version of *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*, a brief consideration of this earlier version is beneficial to provide context for the narrative events and gameplay mechanics presented in *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*. *There Is No Game: Jam Edition* shares many themes and characteristics with other indie metagames released after 2008, including an antagonistic narrator and an emphasis on mechanics designed to subvert player expectations.

On launching *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*, players are greeted by the game’s program and narrator, who announces, “[h]ello user! I... I’ve got some bad news. Actually, there is no game. I hope you’re not too disappointed. [...] This is not a game. It’s nothing like a game. It’s just a massive bundle of boredom.” The narrator then encourages players to close the application, and when players inevitably disobey, the narrator attempts to hinder players from continuing to progress past the title screen. What follows is a series of puzzles that pit players against its antagonistic narrator in their effort to reach the *real* game. This aim, however, is unobtainable; there is no game beyond this interaction between the player and narrator. When players do eventually overcome the game program’s obstacles, they reach the conclusion of the game in which their actions cause (fictional) glitches that

overwhelm and crash the program. The confrontational interaction with the narrator encourages players to develop creative solutions to overcome the program's efforts to hinder them. For example, the player's first action is to break the game's title, causing its letters to fall, which become assets that can be used to solve later puzzles. The play style that the game intentionally encourages mimics the playful attitude of defiant players that reject the intended design experience by pushing boundaries, exploiting glitches, cheating, and trifling. In *Play Matters* (2014), Sicart explores similarly disruptive approaches to games in the context of an examination of the nuances between play and playfulness. He writes that

[p]layers of a game are playful when they consciously manipulate the relative rigidity of the system. Dark play is used as a playful approach to play situations, in which the disruptive nature of play can be used to break the conventions of gentrified play contexts. (Sicart 2014, p. 23)

Much of user-experience design, however, centers on ensuring that players experience the game as intended, and the apparently subversive play of players in *There Is No Game* also remains such a constructed experience. Significant effort is put into playtesting to identify and correct potential issues, thereby creating a consistent player experience. Yet, defiant players may willfully seek to subvert this constructed experience to discover unintended features, out-of-bound areas, or to gain an unfair advantage over other players. Such players may be labeled as cheats or trifiers,³ with the trifier in particular having no interest in a game's explicit objectives (or win conditions) and being most interested in creating their own game out of the game. Hence, trifiers, unlike cheaters, are not typically malevolent, but their efforts do aim to subvert the intended experience. In Espen Aarseth's discussion of the challenges of studying games, he notes that such players fall under Richard Bartle's player category of "explorers" (2007, p. 3), which includes those who seek out both intended hidden secrets and unintentional exploits. In *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*, however, this kind of probing, dark play becomes the sanctioned means of interaction. The narrative stages an antagonistic relationship between the game's program and player that frames and encourages the player's disobedience and, therefore, simultaneous conformity to the game's constructed experience. In a wide-ranging interview, Cammisotto describes how *There Is No Game: Jam Edition* emerged out of his experimentation with the game jam's theme of deception (and its French meaning as to cheat) (La Playade 2020). The result is a game that uses surprise, in the sense of defying convention and expectations, to invite players to engage in this kind of creative dark play with the game's antagonistic narrator. This framing of the game creates an affective experience in which players can hardly help but feel that they are being played with or manipulated by the implied developer.

The player's interaction with the narrator shares much in common with other prominent narrators of this genre, but is especially similar to the narrators in Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden 2011/Galactic Cafe 2013) and *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015).⁴ Both of these works are well-known for their narrators that reflect, often explicitly, on game development and the relationship between players and developers (Backe and Thon 2019; Thorne 2018). Coming from a game design perspective, Chris Solarski (2017a, 2017b) describes Wreden's narrators as unreliable, a term he defines as "a narrator—whether in literature, film, or theatre—whose credibility is questionable" (2017b, n.pag.).⁵ While

the term ‘unreliable narrator’ has been examined elsewhere in more depth (see Ensslin 2015; Hansen 2007; Nünning 2005; Phelan 2005; Roe and Mitchell 2019; Thon 2014), Solarski’s work is of particular interest here as he adapts this literary device to forward his theory of the “unreliable gamemaster” (2017a, p. 114). This term describes the developer’s effort to enhance a game’s narrative by inviting players “to contribute their own imaginings to the narrative” (Solarski 2017a, p. 114), an effect that is achieved by undermining players’ expectations. In “The Unreliable Gamemaster: Player Motivation in Story-Driven Games” (2017b), Solarski argues that by inserting the developer into the game, they are able to have a presence in the game that allows them to exert an influence over the events, or to serve as an aid to direct players. As Solarski explains:

The narrator in *The Stanley Parable* is, of course, the game designer in disguise [...] Only the important difference here is that the game designer’s motives are questionable and players have the option to act against designated objectives. The narrator’s reliability in *The Stanley Parable* is questionable from the outset while Davey Wreden’s next game, *The Beginner’s Guide*, reveals the narrator’s untrustworthiness at the end. In both cases, the role taken by Davey Wreden is that of an *unreliable gamemaster*—an entity perceived within the game world that conducts an *informal dialogue between the game designer and player based on vague or questionable objectives for dramatic effect*. (Solarski 2017b, n.pag.)

The Beginner’s Guide more explicitly inserts its developer into the game than *The Stanley Parable* does (as Wreden and his narrator share the same name in the former, but not the latter); however, it is clear that the conclusion of *The Beginner’s Guide* still cautions players against conflating the narrator with its creator (Thorne 2018, pp. 164–165). *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* also insert Cammisotto into the game; however, his role makes it more clear that his presence is that of an authorial character. Solarski’s unreliable gamemaster, though somewhat underdeveloped in the articulation of its boundaries, implies both a kind of practical design implementation to achieve a particular effect and an understanding that the unreliable gamemaster should be received by players as a fiction. That is, the developer’s presence in the game has quite real effects for shaping the constructed experience, but players should not conflate this implied developer with the actual creator or their actual intentions. Though Cammisotto does appear as a minor character, Wreden’s narrator from *The Stanley Parable*, voiced by Kevan Brighting, is closest to that of the game program in *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*. Both are antagonistic to players as a motivating force to encourage players to act out against their instructions. The declaration of *The Stanley Parable*’s narrator that, “[w]hen Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left,” functions in the same way as the game program’s announcement that “there is no game.” Both statements are an invitation for players to pause and reflect on their next steps.⁶

In *The Stanley Parable*, this effect is used to leverage a critique of player-centric game design (Thorne 2018). The players’ disobedient behavior is often met with the narrator’s insistence on the value of his role in conveying the narrative. This is perhaps most explicit in the “Games Ending,” which is found by consistently acting in opposition to each of the narrator’s instructions, including leaping from a moving platform. The narrator, upset at the player’s disinterest in his narrative, complains that the player his ruining his story:

Was it worth ruining the entire story I had written out specifically for you? Do you not think I put a lot of time into that? Because I did. [...] Help me here, Stanley, help me elucidate these strange and unknowable desires of yours. What would have made this game better? What did you want to see? Vehicles? Skill trees?

The examples listed are features that are characteristic of a player-centric approach to design. A similar moment also occurs in *There Is No Game: Jam Edition* when the player's contrarian behavior causes glitches to appear on the screen. Rather than resolving to repair the glitches, he asks:

How will I ever become a smash hit with all these glitches?! [...] What would a developer add to help sell a creation that's full of bugs? I can think of three things. Gorgeous armed hero girls... Or tons of zombies... and blood, of course. Or... a... ..goat.

The player is then tasked with locating one of these three things; however, their success results not in a reward, but in the appearance of additional glitches (represented as visual artifacts) that quickly lead to the destruction of the 'game.' Through its unreliable gamemaster (who doubles as the developer in disguise), this conclusion to the game conveys a similar commentary about the perils of player-centrism, inviting players to question whether these trends, which allegedly emerge from attempts to cater to paying audiences, would make the game better.

Following the game's win at Deception Jam, Cammisotto launched a Kickstarter campaign to crowdfund the development of a full-length version. Yet, despite the popularity, press, and features on popular YouTube channels, the Kickstarter campaign did rather poorly and was ultimately unsuccessful (KaMiZoTo 2020). In an interview with Ryan Lambie, Cammisotto explains:

[A]fter the unexpected success of the jam game, creating a commercial version of this concept was an opportunity for me to keep my creative independence while perhaps finally being able to make a living from it. But before that, I needed some seed money. So I did this Kickstarter campaign, which unfortunately failed. Despite the hundreds of emails we sent to all the international press and influencers who had tested the jam version, nothing. No news. No one was informed. So I had to finance the project with my own funds without paying myself for several years. That's why I decided to integrate the crowdfunding campaign failure in the game story. Let's be 100% meta! (Cammisotto quoted in Lambie 2020, n.pag.)

This insight into the development of the game provides important context for the narrative setting of the full-length version, which made substantial changes to *There Is No Game: Jam Edition* over its five-year development period.

A New Dimension

The full-version of *There Is No Game* extends *Jam Edition*'s 20-minute gameplay to several hours by introducing all-new chapters (or dimensions) and a narrative that features a villain and love-interest. In this version, the game's program and intradiegetic narrator,⁷ voiced by Cammisotto, is now given the name Game. These

additions, as will be examined, demonstrate significant growth in the game's thinking both about metagames and the mechanics and themes explored in other popular metagames of that era. In contrast to *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*, which featured a game program that did not want to be played, in *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*, there is no game because the project had been abandoned as a result of a failed crowdfunding campaign—a plot line that echoes the game's own financial struggle. The player's primary antagonist in this new version is no longer the narrator, though he remains somewhat confrontational; instead, the game introduces a new character that represents the obstacles faced in indie game development.

There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension begins very much like *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*: on launching the game, players discover that the game does not wish to be played. Its menus attempt to misdirect players away from the game and careless players may inadvertently close the application by choosing the misleading highlighted option indicating "This Way!" (see Figure 1), which exits to the desktop. While navigating title screens is typically a thoughtless interaction, here the experience is defamiliarized⁸ (Bennett 2003; Shklovsky 1965) by the game's purposefully misleading design.⁹ This introduction not only serves to set the tone of the game (immediately causing players to distrust the program), but also creates a moment of hypermediacy that draws players' attention to the medium and asks players to examine its details more closely. This interruption of play jars players out of immersion and draws attention to the game experience as highly mediated. As Bolter and Grusin argue in *Remediation*,

new digital media oscillate between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity. [...] Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium. Thus, immediacy leads to hypermediacy. (2003, p. 17)

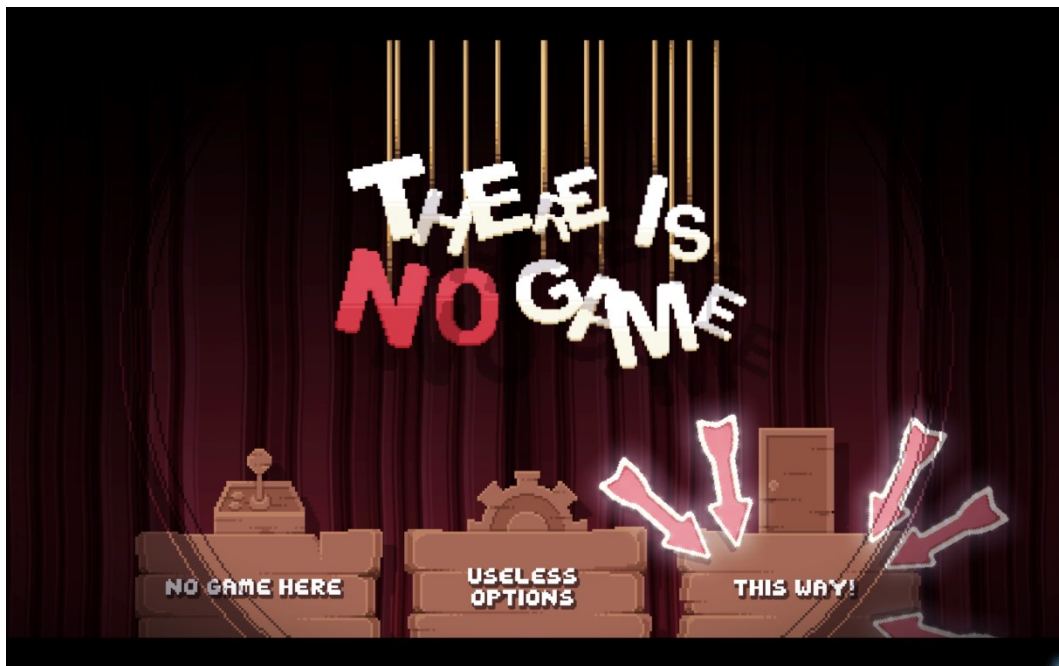


Figure 1: The title screen of *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*.

As Bolter and Grusin further explain, new media often aspire to create more immersive experiences,¹⁰ and games are certainly exemplary in their efforts to immerse players in virtual worlds, particularly with the reemerging popularity of virtual reality. However, this immediacy depends upon hypermediacy; virtual reality, for example, necessitates a more mediated experience (a headset, tracking system, and motion controllers are required to participate). One's first experience in virtual reality, or simply playing a new game, is often an unbalanced combination of immediacy and hypermediacy. The weight of the headset, unfamiliar controls, or reliance on a heads-up display (HUD) often draws attention to the experience as highly mediated. The result is a somewhat contradictory logic: "Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (Bolter and Grusin 2003, p. 5). This effect, however, can also be intentionally leveraged to elicit critical reflection in players by working against player expectations. Addressing trends in major AAA titles, Rilla Khaled notes that,

[i]n mainstream entertainment games, theoretically free to focus solely on entertainment, qualities such as *immersion* and the design traditions of *designing for the everyplayer* and *quantifying motivation* [...] run counter to a reflective agenda. (2018, p. 4)

For Khaled, immersion is an obstacle to critical reflection. Nae and Bacalu similarly critique immersion in video games, writing that

[i]mmersion is such a strong and pervasive cultural value that we tend to regard technologies of immersion as politically neutral artefacts. Even more so, the assumption of political neutrality leads to a naturalization of the ideology implicit in these cultural products. (2019, p. 131)

Nowhere is this apparently naturalizing view of ideology more visible than when particularly vocal players demand that developers keep politics out of their games, as though games were not always already political (Hernandez 2012; Kidwell 2018).

Yet, as Janet Murray notes in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, "[d]espite their seductive hold on us, immersive experiences are paradoxically fragile and easily disrupted" (2017, p. 120). Immediacy and hypermediacy are always in oscillation. It is in this sense that the article's title, "There Is No Immersion," intends its meaning. Much like the game's own paradoxical title, which suggests that there is no game in the expected sense, there is only the metagame, to say that there is no immersion does not intend to imply that immersion is entirely absent, but rather it highlights that immersion becomes the object of play, resulting in fleeting experiences of immersion.¹¹ Certainly, the game's players are still "caught up in the world of the game's story" (McMahan, p. 68)—but, as the game progresses, it is hard not to experience a sense of nostalgia and fondness for games as one travels through the periods of game history that serve as the setting for its narrative. By design, however, any excitement that these nostalgic moments might evoke in players is frequently interrupted. Rather than allowing players to revel in the past, the game's mechanics and narrative interject with obstacles and commentary that disrupt and, at times, defamiliarize players' experiences. Cammisotto describes the game as "based on the element of surprise" (La Playade 2020, n.pag.), which aims to encourage players to think creatively about their approach to the game (to think outside the box), which extends not only to solving its puzzles but also to the game itself.

Metagames playfully rewrite gameplay to bring players out of immersion to draw attention to the medium in an effort to encourage reflection. While certainly the oscillation between immediacy and hypermediacy is at play; total immersion is not its aim. The game's design embraces disruption and intentionally breaks immersion to take players out of the experience. At times this effect is employed to support Cammisotto's use of surprise to encourage creative solutions, but it is also central to the game's narrative. The interruption of play creates an experience of hypermediacy that draws focus to the medium. Although hypermediacy is often an aesthetic characteristic of indie games (through their frequent use of 8-bit and retro styles) (Juul 2019; Thon 2020), in *There Is No Game*, hypermediacy, as Daniel Schlarb writes of *The Matrix*, "becomes part of the story" (2019, p. 196). In *There Is No Game*, hypermediacy is inseparable from the game's narrative and is critical to the game's reflection on the industry. *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension's* first use of this effect in its misleading menu sets players expectations about what is to follow.

When players inevitably persist and move past the game's menu screen, they arrive at its first chapter, "Mise en abyme," and are greeted by the game's program and narrator, Game, who announces:

Hello, user! This is the program speaking. I've got some bad news. Actually, there is no game. The financial crisis, the indiepocalypse, blah blah blah... all of this. I hope you're not too disappointed.

Game then adds that the player should "avoid asking for a refund," and tells the player that they can now quit the application, as there is nothing more to do. Unlike in *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*, Game explains that the reason that there is no game is because of complex financial troubles. The "indiepocalypse" referenced here is a term used to describe the boom and bust cycle of the indie game market, which was driven by the sudden influx of independent games that resulted from both increased access to user-friendly game making software and AAA developers who left major game companies to start out on their own as indies in search of greater creative freedom (Martin and Deuze 2009, p. 287; Reid 2018). The result was a significant surge in the number of indie games released each year, which led to increased competition and difficulty in securing funding and meeting sales targets. With so many new games on the market, sales will generally trend lower, as players can only purchase and play a limited number of games each year. Such financial obstacles, therefore, often motivate developers to take less risks. As Solarski writes,

developing multi-million dollar games is very risky business considering the work involved to produce such high quality gameplay and graphics. Which is why it makes for a safer financial bet to stick to tried and tested formulas to meet the target audience's expectations of big boss fights, action set pieces and explicit rewards. (2017b, n.pag.)

Consequently, some developers may find themselves implementing the very restrictions on their creativity that had led them to leave their relatively secure jobs at AAA companies. Such struggles are referenced throughout *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*, including the explicit suggestion that there is no game because its creator's crowdfunding campaign failed to be funded (which echoes actual events that had hindered the game's development, as mentioned before).

The integration of this real-life event into the game's narrative refigures its meaning, as well as the role of its narrator. While Game still functions as a kind of unreliable gamemaster, he is not the sole antagonist of the player anymore—though their relationship remains strained. Instead, *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* introduces a new villain, Mr. Glitch. Although the players of *There Is No Game: Jam Edition* may initially associate him with the glitches that emerge as a result of their disruptive behavior, Mr. Glitch, as players learn, is a fully developed secondary character that acts as a foil to Game. Mr. Glitch is a product of the creator's abandonment of the game, as he is forced to move on to a more lucrative project. As such, this particular glitch represents a systemic anomaly or contradiction that sees a creative industry pressuring workers to choose between their livelihood and creative expression. The game's playful attitude toward design creates layers of metagames that run deep to highlight the challenges of making games in such a competitive industry.

"Playfulness," Sicart argues, "can be used for disruption, revealing the seams of behaviors, technologies, or situations that we take for granted" (2014, p. 29). Against this background, the glitch appears as a liminal figure that renders the obstacles to indie development visible. Much like Sicart's description of players engaged in dark play, Cammisotto consciously manipulates the often rigid conventions of video game design for gameplay. While many earlier metagames of this genre (including *Jam Edition*) pit players against antagonistic narrators (as implied developers), Cammisotto reframes this narrative, instead aligning both players and developers against an oppressive industry that privileges sales above all else.

In *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*, the fictional Cammisotto is pressured to concede to industry trends as a result of his lack of financial security. In shifting focus from his passion project (Game) to a more lucrative project, Cammisotto inadvertently creates a glitch. The inclusion of Mr. Glitch, therefore, reframes the relationship between the player and Game, and the two must work together against a common enemy. Accordingly, *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* is no longer so much about encouraging players to engage in dark play, but rather positions the player as the subject of the developer's playful attitude toward gameplay. Instead of players driving the action of the narrative forward, the player is at the whim of Mr. Glitch, who takes control of the narrative's progression by transporting himself, the player, and Game to new dimensions as he attempts to carry out his evil plan.

Mr. Glitch first appears at the conclusion of the opening chapter as the player attempts to load the game, which closely mirrors the events of *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*. Rather than Mr. Glitch crashing the game (as the glitches had in the original), however, his interference sends the player and Game to a new dimension that is styled after a classic point-and-click adventure (featuring Sherlock and Watson). Yet, players are not situated in the game as they ought to be; instead, the player occupies a liminal space in front of a CRT monitor on which the game is played. In other words, players are viewing their own very real monitor or other digital display, on which they view and can move around another CRT monitor, on which they view and play the in-game game (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Players can also rotate the monitor to access the input panel, as well as view notes and clues that have been taped to both sides of the monitor.



Figure 2: The front of the CRT monitor with the point-and-click adventure game.



Figure 3: One of the sides of the CRT monitor.

The moment in which the player and Game are transported to this new dimension, the tone shifts and it becomes clear that the player is no longer working against Game (as they had in *Jam Edition*). Although the two begin with a rather confrontational relationship, this narrative thread does not retain the same prominence that it had in *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*. This is reinforced by both Game's helpful comments, as well as the game's HUD, which now includes a prominent "help" button, providing players with a number of clues and hints to solve

each dimension's puzzles and suggesting that players are not meant to be hindered by its obstacles or narrator (as they were in *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*). Instead, this version places more emphasis on its narrative and clearly does not wish to risk frustrating or alienating its players, which might undermine its narrative goals.

Game also provides verbal clues that help players manipulate the CRT monitor and its game in order to uncover the exit. The meta nature of this dimension makes its puzzles particularly challenging, as players must engage with the game itself while working around the monitor and within the in-game game, which in turn contains many varied perspectives onto its two-dimensional game that plays out across a few primary scenes. While the layered complexity of this chapter of *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* defamiliarizes assumptions about the two-dimensional limits of traditional point-and-click adventures, the presence of the CRT monitor creates the effect of a *mise en abyme* as the player views this game within a game on a monitor on their own screen. The hypermediated effect, however, is enhanced through the player's interaction with the monitor which first requires that players not only connect the monitor to the video input, but also, somewhat inexplicably, break the opaque glass on the monitor to view the game. This action no doubt serves as a very literal metaphor for 'breaking the fourth wall,' but also gives players their first item, a glass shard, that must be used to solve one of this dimension's early puzzles. Later puzzles require a similar adept navigation of the game and monitor. For example, one puzzle requires that players disconnect the video input, causing the screen to display tv static, which the player collects as 'snow' to solve a puzzle leading to the dimension's exit. This chapter of *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* thus not only highlights the game's commitment to exploring the depth of its metagame but also demonstrates how hypermediacy is both part of its narrative and integral to its gameplay. Drawing attention to the medium reinforces not only its meta theme, but also its goal to encourage out of the box thinking in its players.

A Love Story

The latter third of *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* introduces its love story, which thus far had been concealed from its players. In the abovementioned interview, Cammisotto states that he wanted to create a romantic comedy, but decided to keep this aspect of the game hidden (La Playade 2020). At what appears to be the end of the game, with the credits rolling, players once more find themselves in conflict with Mr. Glitch, who suddenly traps Game. Players must complete a series of mini-games (a maze, brick-drop game, and *Game & Watch*-styled game) in order to free Game, and doing so results in the sudden appearance of GiGi (Global Gameplay), Game's love-interest. It is through the introduction of this character that players learn that Mr. Glitch emerged not as a result of a failure of the developer or playtesting (as one might expect), but is a consequence of the developer's abandonment of the game. The developer chooses to salvage a part of the game's code to use for a new project, which results in the emergence of the glitch in the game. The code that had been extracted to be repurposed was GiGi. Given the game's framing of the relationship between Game and Gigi, it becomes clear that what has been taken from the game was its heart. Without GiGi, there is no game.

The game's creator was forced to make the difficult decision to abandon the development of his passion project because its crowdfunding campaign had failed. This leads him to make the difficult decision to abandon the game to work on a project that will be financially beneficial. Designing games purely for profit, however, takes the heart out of games, as developers shift their focus to current trends and features that are likely to generate sales. This direction comes at the detriment of the medium's ability to mature and critically engage with more difficult subjects (Bogost 2015, p. 88). The love story introduced in *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*, therefore, is used to deliver the game's critique of valuing sales and player-centrism over creativity and experimentation. As noted above, the features of AAA titles tend to emphasize greater immersion (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, p. 450) and, for example, Khaled argues that "immersion has been embraced to the detriment of reflection, serving almost as its antithesis" (2018, p. 21). This perspective makes all the more clear why *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* must fully embrace immersion's opposite, hypermediacy, in order to successfully tell its story.

In its use of hypermediacy, *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* has much in common with the metagames that also address the pursuit of creative freedom. However, many of these critiques tend to situate the discussion via an opposition between creative freedom and players' demands for features that create more 'fun' and exciting experiences. *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013) addresses this subject by opposing its narrator and his story with an obstinate player. *The Magic Circle* (Question 2015) also explores this same subject by clashing an auteur developer with participatory fan culture (Thorne 2018). And *There Is No Game: Jam Edition*, as discussed, also references this same concern in more ambiguous circumstances. While perhaps reflecting on these earlier games, *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* pushes this idea further to go beyond the criticism that is based on the notion of player demands driving the industry. Although player-centric design may be framed as a beneficial response to incorporating player feedback (a practice that is quite common now with digital platforms releasing early-access games, such as Steam), this approach is not always to the benefit of players, as its true aim is to leverage feedback to increase sales margins. Adding additional character customizations, aesthetic alterations, and multiplayer options is often used to sell players additional downloadable content or in-app purchases. This financial model serves to enhance and extend the life of the base game through the addition of micro-transactions, which also often include loot crates, gambling mechanics, and pay-to-win models that have been heavily criticized by players (see for example the controversy surrounding *Star Wars Battlefront II* [DICE 2017]).

There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension directly confronts this shift in the financial model of games in an earlier chapter titled "Free2Pay," which is a glitched version of the preceding dimension which featured a traditional RPG. In this new version, players are greeted with a lengthy terms of service agreement and must consent to "invasions of privacy" before beginning the in-game RPG titled *The Legend of the Secret Ultimate Clicker, VIP Edition, Deluxe 4.2*. The revised game now relies on clicker game mechanics, where mouse clicks generate coins that are used to buy or improve basic features (e.g., walk faster). This dimension also makes reference to excessive DLC, season passes, premium content, pay-to-win, gambling mechanics, loot boxes, and in-game advertisements. It becomes clear through this chapter that the challenges faced by developers are not caused by demanding players. Certainly,

neither player nor developer enjoy playing or creating such heartless games. The resolution of this conflict is staged in the epilogue of the game.

In the final chapter, players must stop Mr. Glitch from carrying out his evil plan. The player and Game travel to GiGi's dimension and appear on a mobile phone, where they discover that her code had been implemented in a mobile app. It is telling that Game's creator had abandoned his game to pursue a project developed for mobile devices, as industry reports have seen significant revenue growth in mobile games over past six years. As of 2021, smartphone games made up 45% of the global games market (Newzoo 2021), whereas smartphone games had only held 23% of the market in 2015 (Newzoo 2015). Occupying the mobile phone presents unique gameplay opportunities, as Game and the player have access to the mobile device's camera and phone. The camera perspective adds another meta layer to the game, as Cammisotto can now be seen sitting at his desk while working at his computer (see Figure 4). Through the mobile phone, players are also able to manipulate Cammisotto's smart devices (including thermostat, lights, and coffee maker) and can even make a phone call to the creator. Game, however, is uncooperative and does not wish to speak to the creator who had abandoned him. Yet, GiGi advocates for the creator, explaining that "[h]e didn't have a choice. [...] He didn't have the money to keep developing us. [...] He was so proud of us." Though Game is reluctant, reaching Cammisotto becomes urgent as Mr. Glitch accesses the device in order to connect to the internet. Once online, Mr. Glitch begins his evil plan, which involves causing world-wide disruption and turning smart appliances against their users—Cammisotto is later seen being chased by his smart vacuum. In order to defeat Mr. Glitch, the player, Game, and Cammisotto must work together. Unlike other metagames that situate players in opposition to the developer (either directly or as an unreliable gamemaster), *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* resolves this conflict by having the player and developer work together against Mr. Glitch, stop his plan, and reunite Game and GiGi (thereby restoring the game).

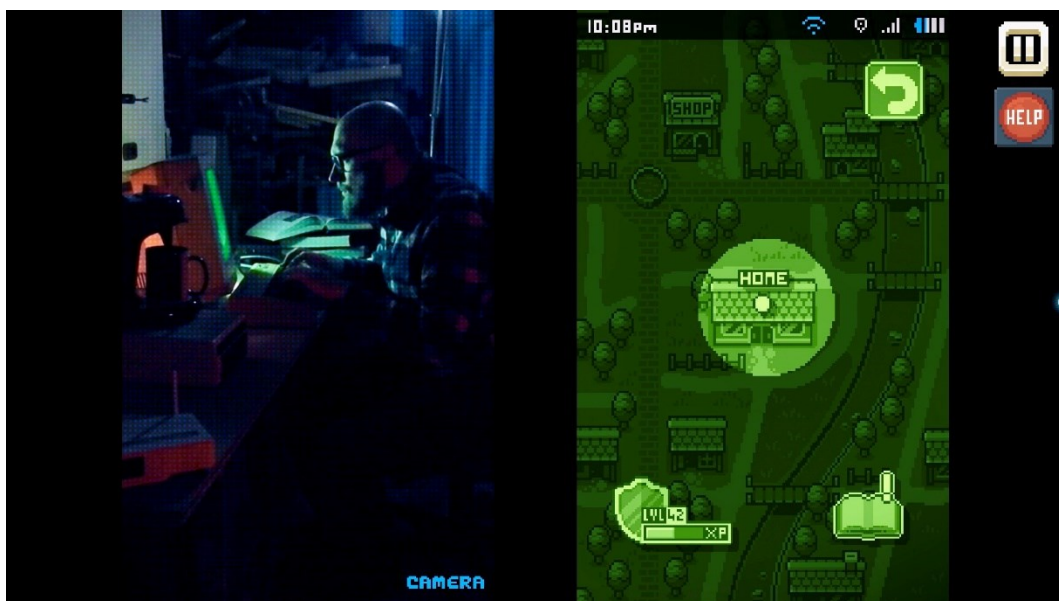


Figure 4: Pascal Cammisotto is shown from the perspective of the mobile phone's camera, which shares a split screen with the current application.

Conclusion

The metagame genre is by its very nature both playful and self-reflexive. As Boluk and LeMieux argue, metagames are uniquely positioned to forward a critical agenda (2017, p. 3). Creative, experimental, and critical design practices are necessary to the growth and maturity of the medium. In their critique of critical game studies, including work by theorists such as Galloway (2006), Wark (2007), Flanagan (2009), and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009), Boluk and LeMieux write that

each of these thinkers argue for a distinction between video games as a platform for critical making and video games as mere commodity. Yet a striking and shared feature of these theories is that each relegates the radical potential of games to a speculative horizon rather than a historical practice. Where are the gamer theorists making counter games? [...] Rather than look toward some future [...] we think the answer is already in, on, around, through, before, during, and after video games. The answer is the metagame. (2017, p. 4)

As Boluk and LeMieux explain, the metagame offers precisely this opportunity to leverage critique through creative practice. The subgenre of metagames to which *There Is No Game* belongs thus offers highly relevant and interesting body of work that demonstrates the success of merging both entertainment and critique. Backe and Thon's analysis of Wreden's games, for instance,

not only illustrates the peculiarities of authorship in videogames, but also underscores that their creators can reflect upon the former in an explicit fashion, by appropriating one of the most fundamental tropes of self-referential narrative: the productive friction between author, narrator, protagonist, and recipient. (2019, p. 19).

There Is No Game has much in common with Wreden's games, especially its earlier *Jam Edition*, which also featured antagonistic gameplay. However, its revised version, *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*—perhaps drawing on the more positive outlook on the industry, inspired by movements like Game Workers Unite (Woodcock 2021)—argues that developers and players should work together to push back against the limits and trends imposed by the industry to challenge conventions and explore new possibilities for games and game design. *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* makes it clear that pursuing exploitative monetization strategies and taking a risk-averse stance toward design will hinder the maturity of the medium. As shown in more detail throughout this article, Cammisotto builds on earlier metagames to create a more cooperative form of gameplay that shifts the narrative away from antagonistic styles of play (e.g., narrator versus player narratives, or abusive gameplay [Sicart 2015a]). Both developers and players love games, and *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* makes this common ground central to its narrative. Though players may have strong opinions about what makes a 'good' game, or what counts as a game at all (Consalvo and Paul 2020; Moulthrop 2020), developers and players will often agree on which trends are particularly detrimental to the medium, with both an undue focus on exploitative monetization strategies and a risk-averse approach to game design certainly ranking highly among these.

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Notes

- ¹ While there are much earlier examples of self-referential and self-reflexive video games (Gualeni 2016; Jagoda 2020; Rapp 2007), this article focuses on those that emerged during the boom in indie game development and resulting “Indiepocalypse” (Lipkin 2019).
- ² Classifying video game genres is complex due to their various intersecting dimensions, which include their platform and social, aesthetic, representational, interactive elements (Apperley 2006; Arsenault 2009; King and Krzywinska 2002). The term metagame itself is too unwieldy and diverse to establish any kind of a coherent genre; however, this article describes the games listed as a subgenre of metagames due to their shared characteristics. The intention is to capture the similarities that put these games into dialogue (e.g., indie games, themes concerning games about games, games within games). Describing these works as a subgenre (rather than metagames) also avoids conflating these works with the concept of metagames more broadly (Boluk and LeMieux 2017).
- ³ Drawing on Suits (2014), Wark explains that, “[i]f a cheat is someone who ignores the space of a game to cut straight to its objective, then the trifle is someone who ignores the objective to linger within its space” (2007, § 040). Consalvo (2009) provides an in-depth study of cheaters, examining reasons for cheating and identifying a spectrum of views on the subject—ranging from purists who believe that it is possible to cheat in single-player games to those who believe cheating is only possible in multiplayer games, where one attempts to gain an advantage over other players (2009, p. 87). Its most serious and agreed upon form (cheating in multiplayer games) risks disrupting or ruining the game (Consalvo 2009, p. 170). While this is a form of dark play (Carter 2015), the kind of play that *There Is No Game* embodies is closer to that of the trifle.
- ⁴ For more in-depth analyses of *The Stanley Parable* and metagames, self-referentiality, and meta-referentiality, see Backe and Thon 2019; Fest 2016; Mukherjee 2015; Schubert 2021; Thon 2015; Thorne 2018.

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- 5 While Solarski (2017a, 2017b) does not critically engage with the criticisms and debates surrounding Booth's concept of the unreliable narrator (1961), his thinking appears to align with Phelan (2005) and the later writings of Nünning (2005), insofar as the narrator's behavior can at least partially be attributed to an implied (Kindt and Müller 2008) or real author (Nünning 2005, p. 100) that invites the player to rebel against the game's design. Given that the examples discussed explicitly reference and reflect on video game production, this conceptualization of the term is well-suited for these metagames (but see also, e.g., Hansen 2007 for a critique of dominant views of the 'unreliable narrator').
 - 6 In a sense, players are always engaged in the process of self-reflecting on their experience as players engaged in play (see the discussion of metacommunication in Fassone 2015, or Neitzel's 2007 critique of its use in games). Much in the same way that Neitzel states of *Zork* (Infocom 1977), in *There Is No Game* "the player is both inside and outside the game" (2007, p. 246). This effect is leveraged to encourage a kind of critical reflection that may go beyond the act of play to reflect on a particular issue (Khaled 2018).
 - 7 Game, as the game's program, is not visually represented, but is understood to be present through his verbal narration as he is directly affected by and participates in the game's events. Thon (2014) examines the complexities of game narration beyond its conventional literary understanding and forwards a transmedial approach to the narrator (see also Thabet 2015; Thon 2015).
 - 8 A particularly relevant explication of the term defamiliarization for the study of video games comes from Morson's introduction to *Russian Formalist Criticism* (1965), in which he describes the concept as follows: "The idea comes from learning theory. In ordinary life, as we learn to do something it becomes a habit. [...] The problem is that habit itself may block our perception" (Morson 1965, p. xi). By disrupting these habitual actions, they become defamiliarized and one begins to see them as though for the first time. Art serves to, as Shklovsky writes, "make the stone *stony*" (1965, p. 12). The game's manipulation of the title screen creates an analogous effect.
 - 9 Mitchell (2016) has applied defamiliarization to support his concept of poetic gameplay. Mitchell and colleagues (2020) also provide a detailed overview of techniques for defamiliarizing interaction, gameplay, agency, time, and boundaries for a poetic effect that generates reflection.
 - 10 The belief that games can or should aspire to create fully immersive experiences is also known as the "immersive fallacy" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, p. 451). See also Calleja 2011; Murray 2017; Ryan 2006, 2015.
 - 11 Although players' experiences of immersion may vary, immersion in *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* tends to oscillate between immersion in its gameplay ('flow' or 'ludic immersion'; Csikzentmihalyi 1997; Isbister 2016; Thon 2008) and its narrative and representational space (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p. 452). At times, players may be fully engaged in solving the game's puzzles, but its shifting dimensions and its use of nostalgia also draw players into its world.