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Married, with children and an XBox: Compromise in Video Game Play

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In a home with two children under six, managing to find the time and the games that allow for play with a partner who has completely different tastes and capabilities produces compromises both inside and outside the game, as well as a hybrid form that spans the two. This last point highlights the fact that compromise remains a popularly studied topic in considerations of games, but only within very discrete boundaries that do not necessarily have anything to do with play or with players. Said another way, compromise appears in studies that foreground games as promoting aggression and competition over agreement and cooperation, with the result productive pair tend to appear in specifically oriented educational games. Likewise, compromise offers a boundary layer in economics, since it usually occurs at asymptotic locations or at points of inflection in simulations of market trends, logistics, and "war games." However, in attempting to play in our household, we have noticed that while the compromises do revolve around an economics of scarcity produced by "resource allocation" problems and "chrono-economic stress," they also involve a series of negotiations and concessions that determine not only the kind of game, but also what happens in that game. Further, each of these three kinds of compromises occurs in the game, outside the game, and in a "transludic" form and that this happens regardless of the game or its genre. This is important because the continuous and continual compromises reveal the ways in which such decisions become an integral part of the gaming process. Thus, our paper will document each of the three principal motives for compromise and the levels on which these register, along with the variety of games—racing, arcade, FPS, action, puzzle-solving, social, etc.—for which this happens. In fact, the variety of games is widespread and varying that we have the corollary of showing that compromise really is inseparable from play.

Constant Compromise in Context

As much as having children demands the constant compromises we make, the process started as early as the release of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, roughly three years before our first child came. Eventually, this progressed to the point that mission selection became dependent upon the relative strengths and wants of each player. For example, one of us enjoys racing games, while the other would much rather do the low-rider competition that resembles *UmJammer Lammy*

than *Forza*. In fact, the compromises begin to resemble the hallmarks of Interest Based Negotiation (IBN). This is hardly surprising given the fact that both of us have been involved in negotiating numerous collective agreements and their aspects, including province-wide bargaining. Thus, the compromises separate the people from the problem, focus on interests and mutual gain, reflect an awareness of the best alternatives, and implement the objective criteria.

However, these negotiations are not necessarily exclusively the domain of those with children, but can be extended to other gamers and game scenarios. Even so, the addition of a partner automatically invokes negotiation, if not compromise. The sort of unstated IBN produces a team approach to *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, to cite a potentially unlikely instance. What we ended up doing was developing our own local compromise solutions. Simply put, with the kids asleep and a short opportunity to both spend time together and unwind by playing a game, it is worth the time to forego succeeding as quickly to make sure everyone has a good time playing, and will do it again tomorrow night. Similarly, *Split/Second* becomes almost a new game as we play with its rules and rewards so that we have stopped playing it to win, and now play it to blow up as much of the world as possible. Instead of driving well, the key is to drive well enough to build up the energy bar and then try to explode all the items to enjoy the visual effects and to exploit hidden pathways. Much to our surprise, our children enjoy the scenery and its changes. We will even play the same level over and over, talking to each other about whose turn it is to blow which part up so that we can see all the different combinations of outcomes.

 Finally, *Rock Band* most explicitly reveals the multiple and simultaneous compromises and their sites. When our first child was very young, we suddenly could not play console games, either alone or together, anymore. Thanks to a traumatic birth, she cried all the time, and would not sleep. She needed to be held and rocked to calm her, and to get her to sleep she had to be held constantly. *Rock Band* affords us a new kind of compromise, the kind of game that can be played while holding, walking, and rocking a child. With a baby in her sling carrier, we were able to play *Rock Band* together for long stretches of time. The person carrying or sitting with her would sing and the other person played guitar. With the volume at a suitable level, the music would drown out her crying and eventually put her to sleep. The standing, dancing, and rocking motion of the person singing would keep her asleep, and we would enjoy long stretches of playing *Rock Band* together while she enjoyed some of the longer and more restful naps she ever had. It does not matter who is actually better at singing or at playing guitar. Whoever carries the child becomes the singer, although there were times when either the game's breaks, or a particular song would necessitate switching roles both within the game and as parents. It was not our favourite game in the world, but it was the only game in the world that could be played via the compromise of content for an opportunity to play together, to have time together and to feel connected to our games. Juggling the various needs, including those of a nursing child, reveals not only that compromise is a part of any kind of game, but also the ways that concerns outside the game map onto concerns in the game, *and vice versa*. Our situation merely highlights the ways any player makes compromises and that these always involve the limits of the game and manipulating those limits.

In this regard, one of the prime attractions of *MW3*, *Split/Second*, *GTA*, and *Rock Band*—to name our best solutions—is the handling of time. William Millard explains that "chrono-economic stress," entails the "psycho-linguistic effects of [one's] awareness of the limits to the time,

bandwith, money, attention, and any other resources that he or she can devote to any given piece of discourse" (159). Given the stressful birth of our first child and her consequently challenging first year, chrono-economic stress looms over everything we did and now do—after a second child whose arrival was easy but whose second and third years have proven more challenging than his sister's first. So, we play *Rock Band*. Its vast song selection allow us to choose, short, medium, and "Green Grass and High Tides" length songs. *Rock Band* now includes our daughter in an active role. She recognizes some of the songs, bangs aimlessly on the drums, and "helps" the person singing. Moreover, it can be played in three-minute-long bursts without any need to "get into it." Forgetfulness, skill, and interference do not matter in "no fail" mode. Stars are secondary to solving the problem of time being so scarce. Similarly, *MW3*'s mini-games, *Split/Second*'s sprints, *San Andreas*'s stories, *Portal*'s puzzles, *Trials*'s tracks, and *Splosion Man*'s screens—to name only a few—offer discrete chunks of play time that negotiate the players' capabilities, the need to mind the kids or rock them to sleep, while still providing an alternative that is better than not playing at all. In fact, the example of *Rock Band* best illustrates the ways in which compromises and the interests, particularly those of a sleeping baby, can be met in and through playing the game.

This is not to say that playing *any* game is the preferred way to put a baby to sleep, but rather to illustrate the fact that even an aggressive, militaristic game like *MW3* involves more, and more levels of compromise than otherwise presumed in the critical commonplaces about such games. As far back as Provenzo's (1991) oft-repeated assertion that games "promote total war and aggression" even when real-life options like compromise might be preferable and that games offer only "one path" with no options for manipulation, this view has dominated every succeeding discipline that attempts to study games (133, 137).[1] Here, though, Game Studies can move beyond debates of narratology, ludology, as well as the apolitical populism of James Gee's (2006, 2007) "good games" and "bad games"—which sound an awful lot like Matthew Arnold's "touchstones" or F.R. Leavis's "great tradition"—and recognizes the interpretive work involved in playing a game.

What makes this most intriguing for us was actually finding out that compromise and games are most widely studied in simulations of bankruptcy proceedings and similar economic scenarios. These are forms of "resource allocation games" (cf Grundel, et al, 2011). That is, the model for reading the best solution to a problem involving a situation for which debts outnumber assets involves a game-based algorithm. In listing our figurative and literal creditors, we cannot help but feel that the needs of our children, for recreation, for entertainment, and for shared enjoyment are all produced and conditioned by chrono-economic stress. Certainly it is difficult to argue that our assets exceed our debts. For us, no game better exemplifies this relationship than a survival mini-game in *MW3*. Debts always outnumber assets by mere virtue of the fact that you cannot actually win and that hordes of enemies will always appear and there are only two of you actually playing. As mentioned earlier, completing a level involves a host of compromises, not just in terms of procurement, but also in terms of who does what. In this regard, the principles of IBN provide the solution to the resource allocation game in a way that a predictive algorithm cannot. The deployment of resources occurs quite similarly in the other games we play in terms of skills, preferences, and what each of us wants at that moment. Moreover, the investment in the outcome—the proverbial "happy spouse, happy house"—offers its own predictive rhetoric, on

that is based on mutual interest inside and outside the game. Indeed, the very contingency imbricates and implicates both simultaneously. Further, the compromises that occur when playing the survival mini-game *and* the other games discussed indicate that studying compromise need not be confined to the economics of bankruptcy or to the tedium of didactic rote learning. In some ways, every game is a resource allocation game, no matter who is playing it!

Two Adults, One Controller: Conclusions

As much as our experience of playing video games and the compromises involved in doing so can be understood through economic game theories, we feel–perhaps predictably–that social exchange on a communal level trumps all else. While altruism can be a part of communal exchange, this should not be understood as existing without benefits for the individual. The difference lies in distinguishing between the rhetoric of "what's in it for me" and the reality that what benefits others might also benefit the individual. Video games present a fantastic opportunity to play out this distinction, to practice it, to rehearse it, and to enact it. Playing a game is a social act. Even though games are highly structured and rules-based, there remains room for improvisation and manipulation.

Finally, recognizing that we are making multiple and simultaneous compromises underscores the ways in which these kinds of solutions occur in and through gaming sessions for myriad types of games and myriad styles of players. Rather than assert our own uniqueness, we would suggest that compromise constitutes a central cognitive and affective response to most kinds of games. However, we find it troubling that many of the games we play occasion compromise based on problematic pragmatics, and in particular, consumerist outcomes. As well, we feel that scholars might be better served to study the kinds of compromise and how they occur instead of insisting that compromise can (and should) occur only in the formalized case of didactic drudgery. If *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* can be played with an emphasis on the communal over the competitive–while still succeeding at the game's internal goals–then video games clearly go beyond categories like good or bad, or the empiricism of algorithms. While each night's set of solutions involve the manipulation of resources in an economics of scarcity, these are always already conditioned and determined in and through the social as it happens in the game, outside the game, and in the space that spans the two.

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[1]Here, we would cite approaches grounded in gender studies, psychology, literature, political science, cultural studies, and film studies being especially wont to repeat almost uncritically the charge that mainstream games negate compromise in favour of competition.