Get Out Of My Way!
Exploring Obstruction in Popular Video Games

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Abstract

Video games are full of obstructions. From aliens with laser-guns to the architecture of a game world, obstruction is an acknowledged element of all games, but is rarely considered in isolation or in detail. It is critical to understand obstruction in video games not only abstractly, but in terms of player experience. We present qualitative data from players of five popular games to examine the role of obstruction in shaping gameplay. The resulting experience-driven understanding is relevant to both analysis and design.

1 Introduction

When we play a game we are constantly being obstructed. In *Monopoly* we "go directly to jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect $200", in *Snakes and Ladders* we come tantalisingly close to winning before sliding down a snake all the way to the beginning of the board again. Video games are no different: From opposing gang-members in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* [Rockstar Games 2004], to a terrible starting position we are dealt in *Civilization III* [Firaxis Games 2001], we rarely have it easy. Something is always getting in the way.

Being *obstructed* is fundamental to games of all kinds: Imagine *Half-Life 2* [Valve Corporation 2004] without the multitudes of Combine soldiers standing in the way of forward progress. Imagine *The Sims 2* [Electronic Arts 2004] without the conflict between needing to eat breakfast in the morning and needing to catch the bus to school on time. Despite being a defining element of gameplay, obstruction is rarely explored in depth in the game studies literature, and is most often addressed from a theoretical standpoint with convenient examples. Most importantly, the *player experience and interpretation* of obstructions is generally absent from current research.

In order to address this perceived weakness in the literature we performed case studies of five popular and contemporary video games from different genres to explore the concept of obstruction in gameplay. We focused especially on players' experiences and interpretations of obstruction, conducting both observation and interview sessions with typical players of the games as well as drawing on substantial experience with the games ourselves.

A set of categories and themes emerged from this data which help to characterise the experience of obstruction in video games. In this paper we present these results as an initial attempt to characterise obstruction in video games from the player's perspective. The results generally confirm intuitions about obstruction in gameplay, but include several interesting surprises also. We believe that such an approach is relevant to both the analysis and design of video games.

2 Background

Game studies has become an established discipline, with academics and practitioners beginning to agree on various elements of "what makes a game." One consistent area of agreement has been that games must be challenging. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, for example, emphasise the place of "artificial conflict" in all games [Salen and Zimmerman 2003]. More general is the idea that a game must not be trivial, as in Jesper Juul's suggestion that "the player invests effort in order to influence the outcome" [Juul 2003]. This already suggests something more general that the standard dramatic conflict, and points more toward a concept of *obstruction*, of being prevented from performing certain desired actions. Part of this is reflected in Bernard Suits' observation that the rules of a game "prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means" [Suits 1978]. Games are not supposed to be easy, they involve a struggle to perform actions in unfavourable conditions: games are *obstructive*.

When we think about obstruction in video games we are most likely to think of "enemies" or "opponents." For example, the bandits in *Fable* [Microsoft Game Studios 2004] threaten to kill our avatar and thus to end gameplay temporarily. The Combine soldiers in *Half-Life 2* similarly chase our avatar, Gordon Freeman, shooting at him. Obstruction,

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however, is a more general term than "opponent" and can mean more than just the other agents in the game world who are out to get us. When the car we are driving in *Grand Theft Auto* has a tire shot out, for example, the increased difficulty of driving is another kind of obstruction. Similarly, a locked chest in *Fable* obstructs in a different way from the sword-swinging bandits.

Most research into concepts of obstruction in the literature revolve around elements such as designing better opponents through artificial intelligence research [Spronck et al. 2006]. Although there is a certain amount of investigation into obstruction or opposition as a concept in play, it is generally not a focal point of the work [Smith 2005]. An important exception to this is Sara Iversen's Master's thesis on "challenge" [Iversen 2003]. Iversen claims, uncontroversially, that challenge is a critical element of all gameplay, studying six video games to analyse the concept. She identifies six kinds of challenge: understanding the rules of the game, orienting oneself within the game, acting well within the game, resource management, constructing aesthetically pleasing gameplay, and solving puzzles. A shortcoming of this work is its lack of consideration of the player experience beyond a hypothesised player or, more specifically, simply Iversen herself. While the analysis of video games as "texts" is important, we also believe firmly that players themselves must be consulted.

Toward the end of her work, Iversen mentions the importance of challenge in terms of *meaning*. In fact, opposition is central to theories of meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structuralism, regarded meaning as occurring in the *differences* between signs [de Saussure 1966]. In other words, "winning" is meaningless without the opposed concept of "losing." In video games, the player's actions (the gameplay) become meaningless unless they are obstructed in some way: Without something stopping you, progressing through the game has little significance. This is especially well discussed by David Myers, who has written extensively on the place of oppositions in defining gameplay from a semiotic perspective [Myers 2003].

3 Method

As we have suggested, an important missing element of current research into obstruction in video games is not only investigation of the concept itself, but the player experience. As part of our larger research project we have studied five popular and contemporary video games using the experiences of typical players as a central data source. The games studied are *Half-Life 2* (HL2), a typical first-person shooter, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (GTA:SA), the latest instalment of the famous action-adventure game, *Fable*, a combination action and role-playing game, *Civilization III* (Civ III), a classic strategy game, and *The Sims 2* (Sims 2), a simulation of domestic life. These games contrast in important respects, from their emphases on violence, to the use of avatars, to the narratives of play, enabling us to draw on quite different perspectives on obstruction in gameplay.

We believe it is central to any study of video games that the researchers play the games themselves. As such, we played and observed each of the case study games and their interfaces extensively ourselves, playing each game for a minimum of twenty hours and often much longer. This included a focus on both the experience of play, such as moments of frustration or elation, as well as more formal examinations of the games' structures and interfaces. We particularly made use of an approach we call *oppositional play* which involves playing games "wrong" on purpose, and which was pertinent to the current study [Barr et al. 2005]. The data yielded from these approaches was in the form of large amounts of written notes as well as direct quotes and audits of the video games themselves.

Our second major source of data more directly concerned the *experience* of play. We recruited five experienced and typical players for each game, totalling twenty-five. Each player played their chosen game for an hour while "thinking aloud" continuously about what they were doing. After the observation sessions we interviewed each player for a further forty minutes according to an interview schedule which specifically included questions concerning the nature of opposition in the game. The two approaches are complementary, with the observations allowing a view of obstruction during actual gameplay and the interviews presenting a more reflective account of the experience. The audio from the think-aloud process and the interviews was transcribed for analysis.

Following a typical qualitative data analysis procedure, we assigned codes to chunks of text, associating a descriptive concept or phrase [Denzin and Lincoln 2003]. In the analysis relevant to the present work, we focused on concepts related to obstruction, such as "opponent" and "frustration." These initial codes were examined for patterns and distinctions and organised into larger scale thematic areas through another pass through the data. The themes and categories developed in this way allow us to discuss obstruction as it appears in the gameplay of the case study games using the rich descriptions of players themselves. Additionally, we are able to refer to the structure of each game in order to present a more complete picture. In the follow section, we introduce the broad thematic areas uncovered and discuss them in depth, providing supporting evidence from the data at all times.

4 Exploring obstruction

Through our analysis of the data we identified four broad themes concerning the experience of obstruction in the video

games studied: characteristics of opponents, other types of obstruction, responses to obstruction, and the centrality of obstruction in gameplay. We discuss each theme separately, identifying subcategories and providing evidence from the case studies to illustrate. Extensive quotations are used, with attributions made to both the game referred to (e.g. "Civ III"), and the participant (e.g. "P4").

4.1 What's An Opponent? Characteristics of Opponents

The most typically noted obstruction or opposition in video games is an *opponent* of some kind. In *Civilization III*, for instance, it is "the other civilizations. They act independently and have different traits" (Civ III, P3). Opponents are agents in the world of the game which actively seek to prevent us from succeeding, most typically by attempting to kill us. In our studies, certain recurrent characteristics of these opponents were of particular interest.

One place to begin is with the *narrative* of opponents. Many games include some form of story which casts particular agents in the gameplay as being "enemies" in some way, such as the Combine in *Half-Life 2*: "You'll have different types of enemies with different goals and agendas, but the underlying enemy is the Combine" (HL2, P1). Similarly, in *Fable*, the ultimate "bad-guy" is Jack of Blades, who is "built up during the game [narrative] to be menacing... he kills people in cold blood and so on" (Fable, P4). In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, opponents are represented as being criminals or law enforcement agents, with the objective of the game being to "crawl your way up, in a cartel sort of crime-world, and become the big boss" (GTA:SA, P2). Neither *Civilization III* or *The Sims 2* have explicit narratives to shape expectations in this way, and so opponents must be recognised in other ways.

Connected with the idea of narratives is the importance of *representation* of opponents. In our sessions with players, this representation was seen to take both *connotative* and *denotative* forms. In *Half-Life 2*, for instance, we are not only told that the Combine is the enemy through the narrative, but it is implied in their appearance, the soldiers "look less human. You're always facing aliens or people in masks and uniforms" (HL2, P2). Again, in *Fable*, the main enemy, Jack of Blades, is not only positioned as evil in the narrative, but he "looks menacing" (Fable, P4). This is in contrast with *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, for example, where most agents in the game world look very similar, but the game often provides explicit denotations of who the opponents are: "[Why kill these guys?] Just because the big arrow comes down on them... a big red one, red meaning bad" (GTA:SA, P1). Similarly, in *Civilization III*, the opposing civilizations are denoted by different colours: "it would make more sense if I could see some of my opponents as well, a comparison between them. In terms of how much is yellow, which is my colour, and how much is red or green or whatever other colour the mysterious fourth opponent is" (Civ III, P4). In *Fable*, "There's that nice distinction between bandits with Red around them and traders with Blue around them" (Fable, P5).

Opponents are probably best defined through their *actions* in the game world. Thus, in *Half-Life 2*, opponents are, most basically, "people who do try to hurt you and kill you" (HL2, P1). Likewise, in *Fable*, it is "some kind of creature wandering around the world that will glow red when I look at it and will somehow attack me" (Fable, P4). In *Civilization III* your opponents are defined because they "do exactly what you need to do, in terms of having enough cities so that you own a certain proportion of the map" (Civ III, P4). In terms of opponents' actions, the question of whether an opponent is *active* or *passive* was seen as an important distinction for players. Active opponents are most generally "people who do try to hurt you and kill you" (HL2, P1), presenting a direct threat to the player's continued play. Sometimes, however, opponents are more passive and "there's a lot of provocation involved ... they're not necessarily going to do anything unless you provoke them" (GTA:SA, P3). In a similarly passive vein, the opposing civilizations in *Civilization III* can be your opponents "because they don't want to trade something you need, like oil" (Civ III, P5). Opponents do not always actively attack the player, but may sometimes obstruct through *inaction*.

Related to this active/passive distinction is a question of whether the opponents in a game are the player's *equal*. Only in *Civilization III* did this seem to be partly the case, because the other civilizations "have the same goals and motivations" (Civ III, P3), as well as the same resources and potential activities. In fact, for some players, it was *only* the possibility of an equal that represented a true opponent: "An opponent is someone who you'd be kind of in direct competition with ... Whereas [in GTA] you're a dude who's going around and trying to take over a city from all of these people who control it" (GTA:SA, P5). Other players agreed that an equal opponent would improve things: "If they threw in someone else doing the same thing, like a background story, where you had to keep beating him to missions and stuff like that" (GTA:SA, P1).

Far more common was to see opponents as trivial, even in *Civilization III*, "they're absolutely not smart. I wonder how they do things" (Civ III, P5). Thus, opponents were often seen as mere *inconveniences*. One participant, taking this to an extreme, said of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, "I wouldn't really say this game has opponents ... It's not directly in competition with anyone. The police aren't your opponents, because, if you're skilled, they're dead, or you just never annoyed them in the first place" (GTA:SA, P5). This is similar to discussions of *Fable*, where opponents "can be divided into utterly useless, and bosses, which might

not be useless, but generally are" (Fable, P4). Likewise, in *Half-Life 2*, the enemies "move around and they make funny noises and they shoot back, but essentially they're obstacles, they're in the way" (HL2, P3).

Connected with the issue of opponents being seen as trivial is that they are often *predictable*. When players learn how their opponents behave, the opponent ceases to be a threat: "there are definite patterns about the way other units move. ... once you know that you don't need to worry so much ... because you probably know what they're going to do" (Civ III, P2). In *Fable*, the ways an opponent moves are also often highly repetitive, and therefore less significant: "He wasn't important, he wasn't interesting, he was just a one pattern guy, basically. Whack, whack, roll" (Fable, P4). This leads to formulaic gameplay for the player: "Just got to spot the patterns in the way they behave and wait for the right opportunity to get out of the way and then get back in and start beating them up" (Fable, P1).

Opponents are the most immediately recognised form of obstruction in video games. We have discussed players' identification of opponents through narrative and representation as well as the actions they take. We have also presented data which shows players think about opponents in complex ways, such as whether they are active or passive, equals or trivial, and the degree to which their actions are patterned. Most apparent was the players' general disdain for their opponents in the video games, with almost all all opposition being regarded as straightforward. Note, however, that the data here does not necessarily suggest that players *want* to be severely tested by opponents, only that they are often not. Note also that the players in question were all "expert" players of the games, and can thus be reasonably expected to have a high degree of proficiency in dealing with opponents in play.

4.2 What's Stopping You? Other Types of Obstruction

Beyond the straightforward picture of an opponent, players also brought up other characterisations of obstruction. In this section we present less immediately obvious ways in which players are obstructed during gameplay, relying on actual players' descriptions of their play and their reflections on the nature of opposition. Importantly, it is in this section that we are able to properly discuss the presence of obstruction in *The Sims 2*, a game which effectively features no *opponents*, but nonetheless obstructs players' actions.

One key obstruction comes in limiting the possibilities for action in the game. In *Half-Life 2* "you can take as long as you want to on a level, but once you've cleared it there's nothing else. You can run around, you can jump a bit, but there's not much more you can do" (HL2, P1). The obstruction is the game design itself, which prevents interesting gameplay in an area in order to force the player to move forward. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, "the game imposes its will upon you, just by removing everything you can do. It says: Yes, this is here, but you can't interact with it. ... Do this for us and we'll give it to you." (GTA:SA, P5). Progression and achievement are core player motivations [Barr et al. 2006], and so this kind of limitation is extremely effective. Similarly, in *Fable*, the player is prevented from using certain weapons, for instance, until they have progressed further in the game: "as a consequence of getting stronger he can wield heavier weapons. And that one is currently too heavy for my guy to wield at the moment" (Fable, P1). Finally, we see that, in *The Sims 2*, a central kind of obstruction is the management of the Sims' *budget* which can severely restrict possible actions: "I don't think ahead, and I try to build the biggest house possible, and I end up not having enough money to buy stuff" (Sims 2, P3). Given that the Sims' possible actions are tied chiefly to the things they own, they can literally only do as much as they can afford.

In a related, and opposite, direction, we see that an *excess* of possibilities or demands for action can also be obstructive. In *The Sims 2*, for instance, one player felt prevented from doing what he wanted because "there's a lot happening at the same time, and there's different things that you could be doing, a lot of different choices. And that can be quite stressful" (Sims 2, P1). This obstruction is tied chiefly to issues of *control*, a word that occurred frequently in players' discussions of *The Sims 2*: "[How is it stressful?] Because I need to control everyone. Sometimes I lose control and I have to pause it" (Sims 2, P4). Even in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, a game we might imagine is diametrically opposed to *The Sims 2*, players sometimes felt obstructed or oppressed by the degree of freedom available and wanted more direction: "[You want to be told what to do?] Yeah. You saw when I was playing. I was changing my mind all the time" (GTA:SA, P1).

Another form of obstruction which is part of a game's design is the nature of its space or environment. A common refrain in discourse on video games concerns "linearity," the issue of games which present only one path to take. Despite its promotion as an open world to explore, at least one participant felt obstructed by the space of *Fable*: "Everything is just a small pathway. ... you run along a path to get to this quest, just killing things along the way, rather than being able to make your own way there" (Fable, P1). This kind of linearity of space is especially evident in *Half-Life 2*, a game in which there are absolutely no decisions to be made concerning navigation: "It's almost like being in a corridor with a light at the end. And you can only go forwards" (HL2, P2).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the wide-open spaces in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* also caused a feeling of obstruction: "The sheer size of the game is your opponent. The game is massive, it stands in your way" (GTA:SA, P5). While the size of the game was largely cited as a positive

feature of the game, there was also a suggestion it could be *too* big: "they've put in ... kind of like time sinks, they make way-points incredibly far... like across the other side of the map" (GTA:SA, P1). Another interesting form of space-related obstruction occurred in the comparatively small spatial environment of *The Sims 2*, where a player simply could not find an important item in the space: "Where's the bills? [Searching for the bills in the house] There they are... no. I can't find them" (Sims 2, P4).

The key obstruction involved above is the amount of time taken to traverse space, domestic or countryside. This applies equally to the time taken to achieve particular results, the amount of time that actions take to perform: "That's the only thing they stuffed up in this game. it takes to long to go and change your clothes and stuff." (GTA:SA, P4). Likewise, in *The Sims 2* one player "can never be bothered making it all the way through university, I think I did it once ... It takes too long" (Sims 2, P1). This obstruction arises from the classic balancing act between the pleasures of play and the time investment necessary to achieve them.

A final interesting element of obstruction in the games stemmed from issues of players' personal values, such as the desire to be a "good person." Thus, in *Fable*, one participant "wouldn't feel comfortable just slaughtering people in town ... It wouldn't really be that natural for me" (Fable, P3). In *Half-Life 2* the screams of zombies set on fire prevented one player from killing them this way because "it's pretty disturbing... I don't like causing pain to people, even in video games" (HL2, P4). Many players of *The Sims 2* felt a kind of moral responsibility to the Sims in the game: "when I lose control they can die. It's like... you take care of the Sims so much, and they die... you feel like you've failed." (Sims 2, P4). Even in *Civilization III*, one player expressed his desire to be a "good dictator," making work for himself: "I go out of my way to cut away jungle so I don't lose citizens from disease" (Civ III, P3).

Beyond the traditional view of obstruction as the opponents designated by the game as "enemies," we see that players recognise a variety of other obstructions. Most interesting, perhaps, is an awareness that the design of the game itself, from limits on actions to wide open spaces, intentionally obstruct the player. The fact that players are sometimes limited by their own values is an especially interesting outcome, and requires further investigation.

4.3 What Are You Going To Do About It? Reacting to Obstruction

Having discussed the general forms of obstruction according to player experience, we now turn to the obvious corollary: how do players respond to obstruction the game world. Much of gameplay revolves around encountering and defeating obstructions, in one way or another. The relationship of a player's actions to the obstructions in a game are critical to understanding the experience of play.

An important first point to be made is that obstructions can only oppose *actions*, and so the available actions in a game help to define what kinds of obstructions there can be. In *Half-Life 2*, for example, "the controls are very weapon oriented. They're that way because the game is weapon orientated" (HL2, P1). In other words, the fact that the major actions in the game centre on moving, shooting, and hitting indicates there will be things in the way that must be shot, hit, or moved past: The Combine soldiers, stacks of crates, the terrain, and so on. Similarly, in *Civilization III*, the central actions are to "build up an empire through any means necessary... to accomplish that you just move units around a particular map which has resources on it and take advantage of those" (Civ III, P1). This corresponds to the key form of obstruction in the game: controlling *space*. The opponents obstruct this because they "take the land you could have had" or "want to take the land you have already" (Civ III, P5), and the space itself obstructs by requiring resource management as we discuss below. As we have seen, the core obstruction in *The Sims 2* relates to the available actions in another way, because the actions are used to maintain *control* over the Sims and this control can be lost due to the complexity of the game. In fact, one player went to far as to note that the opponent in the game was "the Sims themselves. They are the opponent. It's their desire to not ... they're constantly wanting to have fun, constantly wanting to take the easy way out in a lot of ways" (Sims 2, P1). In other words, the direct objects of the players' actions, the Sims, can be thought of as the key obstruction.

Not only does considering the available actions in a game help us to determine what the obstructions are, but the obstructions, in turn, determine the kinds of *activity* that take place in the gameplay. Most typically, the active opponents of games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, *Fable*, and *Half-Life 2*, leads to a kill-or-be-killed mentality in play: "there's missions where you've got to kill people, and they'll kill you before you kill them" (GTA:SA, P2). Similarly, in *Fable*, "if there are enough of them, they will kill you, and thus you must kill them to get past" (Fable, P5). The active opponents leave the player little choice but to fight back, leading to a specific form of gameplay.

More passive obstructions in gameplay can lead to a management-driven mentality. This is most apparent in *Civilization III*, where "there's only a certain amount of resources on the map ... So whoever takes best advantage of it will probably win" (Civ III, P4). This requirement for actions involving management occurs in other games too, such as character management in *Fable* where "you get the various skill points and you end up having to apply them to certain things or you just get slaughtered when you attempt certain quests" (Fable, P3). The careful management of available resources, whether that means the available space or the ammunition

in a weapon, is a central part of responding to obstructions, and this management is entertaining in its own right. Finally, as discussed above in connection with budgeting, *The Sims 2* demands a management-oriented perspective much of the time in order to keep control of the game. Players must choose which household items to buy based on "whatever they can afford, since there's such a limited amount of money. Because you still have to buy beds and everything else, so you just kind of put them in something they can afford" (The Sims 2, P5).

An alternate way to respond to obstructions in gameplay is through *cheating*. In fact, most cheats are focused very specifically on removing obstructions, allowing us to see them from another perspective. In *Half-Life 2* there are cheats to give infinite ammunition and weaponry (removing a resource management obstruction), to disable damage taken by the player (removing the effectiveness of opponents), and even to disable the challenge of traversing space itself, by making the player a ghost who can walk through walls. The obstructions "become completely meaningless. They're not an obstacle anymore because they can't hurt you, they can't do anything" (HL2, P3). This pattern of cheating holds true for other games, such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* where the player can obtain special vehicles and weapons with a sequence of button presses, or traverse space easily by summoning a jet-pack. Finally, in *Civilization III*, "training" cheats are available which transform the game by removing limits of time and money management: "every scientific research I did took one round, and every bit of construction I did took one round, and they only took one gold each" (Civ III, P4). Finally, in *The Sims 2*, the most common cheat used is simply to obtain more money, removing the need for budgeting, for instance. An issue commonly identified with cheating was apparent in our data too, however, that "it doesn't really feel like anything once you play with cheats" (Sims 2, P3). Being obstructed is fundamental to gameplay, and removing those obstructions all but removes the game itself.

A final perspective on reacting to obstruction worth noting is the idea of *self*-limitation. In instances where players feel a game is too easy, they will often seek to increase challenge by setting themselves rules for play. In fact, in *Fable*, there is a system of "boasts" available which make quests more difficult if the players want them to be: "Saying "bet I can do this without getting hit" or "just with my bare hands" or that type of thing" (Fable, P2). Although the idea of self-limitation did not occur with much frequency in our data, the existence of a multitude of specialist walk-throughs for playing without upgrading the character (Fable), challenges to play through multiple generations of a family (Sims 2), and high-speed play-throughs (Half-Life 2), all attest to players' interest in adding their own obstructions to play.

As discussed briefly in the introduction, obstruction only exists if there are actions to be obstructed. Examining the possibilities for *action* in a video game is a central means to understand the potential and actual obstructions. We saw, in this case, that the basic possibilities for action, as well as more general behaviours such as "kill or be killed," and even cheating, are all part of a player's repertoire for dealing with obstruction. Each kind of approach provides a particular lens through which to view obstructions.

4.4 What's The Point? Learning, Achievement, and Meaning

A final question concerning obstructions in video games is a simple one: Why have them there? Definitions of "game" do tend to state them as central, but what is the player experience of obstructions that makes it valuable?

Players sometimes use the opposition presented in a game to learn how to play. In *Civilization III* one participant spoke of learning how defend their territory by studying their opponents: "you're also testing yourself by finding other civilizations and attacking their cities ... you see how they're [defending] it" (Civ III, P2). Similarly, in *Half-Life 2*, the first time you play "you're probably using the wrong tactics, the wrong weapons ... [the next time] I'll be trying to find some alternate ways of dealing with the problems" (HL2, P1). In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the opposition presented by the police forced quite specific learning about the nature of play: "if you're driving a car, say, it's easier to get away from a cop. But on a bike they just elbow you off and then you're busted. So it's risky driving a bike if you've got the cops on you" (GTA:SA, P4). Likewise, in *The Sims 2*, one of the few real *opponents* prompted learning: "I learnt early in Sims 1 and Sims 2 that if you don't have [a burglar alarm] your house gets burgled, and they usually take the most expensive items" (Sims 2, P3). Opponents and obstructions, in other words, provide critical prompts to players in terms of learning how to play.

A very important element of obstructions in a game is that they often present a measuring stick or gauge of progress. In *Fable*, a player can tell how well they are doing because "if you get beaten back constantly, you're obviously not strong enough, or you're not doing well enough" (Fable, P1), or, in other words, "if I'm doing well and I've been building my character up well, the game should be easier" (Fable, P2). Likewise in *Civilization III*, "If you're spending too much on social programs and the like ... you'll notice that you get invaded pretty quickly" (Civ III, P1). In *The Sims 2*, "doing well" was generally equated with overcoming the various character management-oriented obstructions: "your character would be happy, and you'd be in the job you want to be in, you'd have got promotions, have a nice house, be able to buy things, that sort of thing" (Sims 2, P5). In other games, however, such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, it appears that opponents are forever so trivial as to be uninteresting al-

together. The opponents in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* ("they're more of an annoyance" (GTA:SA, P1)) and *Half-Life 2* ("it's easier for you to kill them to stop them from shooting you" (HL2, P3)), were not regarded as a measure of ability at all.

The core reason for the presence of obstructions in video games is that they provide a meaning for the actions taken. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, one participant summarised this well: "the missions are the opponents in the game. But they're the point of the game as well. The missions stand in your way of being able to do stuff, but, at the same time, enable you to do stuff" (GTA:SA, P5). This is easily understood if we imagine a game *without* the obstructions we face: "it would not be fun... because you've got to have a challenge. ... You've got to have it there or it's boring as hell" (Civ III, P1). Even when the obstructions forced a player to repeat a quest multiple times in *Fable*, this added to the significance of ultimately triumphing: "I do quite like it when you get a bit further each time, that can be quite fun, rather than just charging through the quest. It means it's a challenge, that can be quite fun" (Fable, P4). In many games, obstructions *are* the gameplay, or at least the meaningful aspect of it: "you go through constantly looking for the next puzzle, the next challenge, the next bunch of enemies that you have to be quite fast, quite strategic to beat. That's quite nice" (HL2, P2). Of course, obstructions are not the be-all and end-all of all games. A final interesting point raised concerning the Sims was that the key obstruction of maintaining control was *not* obligatory for enjoying gameplay: "there's nothing you have to do to reach "here". Just as long as you make the Sims happy... or you could make them bad, make them die... it's still fun" (Sims 2, P4).

The data clearly supports the claim that obstructions are a basic driving force in gameplay. Players learn how to play based on their opposition, always seeking to do better the next time. Obstructions are regarded as a central measuring stick for whether progress is being made. Finally, we have confirmed, through data, the theoretical position that obstructions are a key part of what gives meaning to play and makes it enjoyable although *The Sims 2* provides a partial exception in that players can *enjoy* the obstructions and ensuing "bad" play.

5 Conclusion

In this paper we have shown how our analysis of the qualitative data drawn from players' experiences of gameplay allows us to characterise the role of obstruction in five different video games. We have shown how the data yielded four basic themes in player experience: the nature of *opponents*, *other* kinds of obstruction, the role of *action* and the *value* of obstruction. Within each theme we discussed several different categories that help to create an overall picture of the experience of obstruction in gameplay.

It is in the nature of case study research that attempts to generalise must be treated with care. As such, the discussion in this paper is limited to the five video games investigated. To the extent that similarities were seen across the five genres represented, however, we may suggest that some central elements of obstruction have been identified. Further, because games within genres are often similar with respect to underlying gameplay, it may well be that the results here apply to a broader range of games.

The categories and themes generated from the data reveal distinctions and ways of thinking about obstruction in the video games discussed. We saw, for example, the difference between obstructions as limitations of action versus limitations of space, or between opponents regarded as equals versus those which are seen as mere inconveniences. Understanding these elements allows us to begin to understand details beyond the simple *fact* of obstruction. Most importantly, the discussion above reflects the actual *player experience* of obstruction, rather than other approaches which often theorise based solely on the game text itself.

In future work we intend to use this exploration to generate a more detailed description of obstruction in video games. Further, analyses of the role of obstruction in different video games allows us to compare games directly. While defeating opponents in *Fable* is seen as a useful tool for measuring skill and progress, no such claims were made about defeating the waves of soldiers and aliens in *Half-Life 2* or the criminals in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. Likewise, while obstruction was generally seen as something to be overcome in most of the games, it was also viewed as something to be potentially *embraced* in *The Sims 2*. Clearly, there is much further work to be pursued in understanding the subtleties of obstruction and opposition in gameplay.

This paper presents a starting point for the detailed examination of obstruction in video games from the perspective of their players. We have shown that obstruction can be categorised and organised into themes to develop a experience-driven understanding of its role in gameplay. Exploring and understanding the experience of obstruction is a critical element in the analysis and design of gameplay.

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