

Playing for the Legend in the *Age of Empires II* Online Community

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Abstract

Players in competitive games do not always pursue efficient victory. This essay is concerned with alternative goals in competitive videogaming. Here I examine practices of play, spectation, and casting in the *Age of Empires II* (Ensemble Studios, 1999) community, where playing “for the legend” is a form of heroic play that differs from playing for the win. Building on Celia Pearce’s (2009) ethnographic study of play communities, Will Wright’s (2004) notion of “possibility space,” Roger Caillois’s (1958/2001) theory of forms of play, and Roland Barthes’s (1957/1972) semiology of myth, I argue in favour of a design philosophy supporting play for the legend as distinct—if potentially complementary—to both (1) the meritocratic agonism of esports and (2) attempts at capturing social life within game mechanics. *Age of Empires II* derives value from its function as a technology supporting a friendly community beyond what is encoded in software. The game’s success is not determined only by developer design but rather depends upon the work of a community defining its own ideals about what makes a good game and a heroic player.

Keywords

Age of Empires II; T90Official; playing for the legend; paidia; possibility space; irrational strategy.



Introduction

Whatever its mistakes, mythology is certain to participate in the making of the world. (Barthes, 1957/1972, p. 157)

YouTube critic Noah Caldwell-Gervais (2020) ascribes *Wolfenstein: Youngblood* (MachineGames, 2019) a design philosophy in which a game is “a space to socially inhabit, perform activities, and, sometimes, spend money in, like a hyper-violent, thematically focussed Dave and Busters” (2:28). Gervais sees a financially motivated corporate trend in the notion of game as whole arcade, echoing the famous line from Phil Alden Robinson’s *Field of Dreams* (1989) that “if you build it, [they] will come”—and they will spend. But videogames do not emerge as social spaces just because developers have furnished them as playgrounds. In this essay I describe the community congregating around the decades-old real time strategy (RTS) game *Age of Empires II* (hereafter *AoE2*; Ensemble Studios, 1999), and the online activities of esports caster T90Official (T90), who cultivates a network where spectation and gameplay feed into each other. In the online community of *AoE2*, competitive tactics serve to express players’ creativity, boldness, and humour.

In practice, community lexicon follows T90 in using the term “legend” for a player who distinguishes themselves with a risky and funny strategy that pays off through one of the following: victory despite apparent odds, other players’ chagrin, or the revelation of an alternative perspective on the game. For example, one instalment in T90’s “Low Elo Legends” YouTube series features a player building their base as a beautifully-organized city instead of focussing on defeating their opponent (T90Official, 2020a). A legend involves a convergence of player, performance, and audience. The characteristics of legendary play are constructed occasionally as player creativity, humour, emergent narrative, and commentator framing intervene between victory conditions, game mechanics, and efficient strategy. Using an ostentatious strategy likely to achieve legend status is described by players as playing “for the legend.” Casting and spectation help to define the value of legendary play by connecting players with audiences.

Casting Community Games

The Movement of the *AoE2* Community

AoE2 and its player community have developed together over several decades. Ensemble Studios released *AoE2* in 1999 as a sequel to 1997’s *Age of Empires*, which included among its design specifications 8-player “epic battles” over the Internet (Bettner & Terrano, 2001, p. 1). Updates since *AoE2*’s initial release have included a 2001 PlayStation port, a 2013 “HD Edition” and a 2019 “Definitive Edition,” with various expansions, patches and third-party mods in between. Discourse about *AoE2* strategy originally appeared in printed manuals (e.g., Radcliffe &

Schuytema, 2000) now obsoleted by successive game updates, new strategies, and new information sources (forums, YouTube, etc.). Primary source gameplay information is also widely available: *AoE2* has supported game recordings in a structured data format since its earliest version, and the “Siege Engineers” player collective now maintains an open database of game recordings. As *AoE2* developers Paul Bettner and Mark Terrano (2001) note:

The game recording feature was one of those things that you just happen to stumble upon as an “I could really use this for debugging” task that ends up as a full-blown game feature. Recorded games are incredibly popular with the fan sites as it allows gamers to trade and analyze strategies, view famous battles, and review the games they played in. (p. 2)

AoE2’s longevity as a multiplayer platform has seen its players move from one online venue to another, from the servers at MSN Gaming Zone, to Gamespy, Gameranger, and International Gaming Zone—the latter subsequently renamed Voobly—and finally to Steam.

***AoE2* in Esporting and Videogaming**

AoE2, as a digital artefact central to a human community, now serves multiple roles. To begin with, it is both an esport and a videogame. That distinction, between esports and videogames, may be drawn along a variety of lines. Some commentators distinguish the two based on magnitude of skill, focussing on the ways esports players take their gaming more seriously than regular players (Kauweloā & Winter, 2019, p. 39). Such definition may help esports practitioners seek funds and attention by appealing to professional sports’ rhetoric of meritocracy, advertising some participants as athletes superior to others.¹ However, the discussion of esporting as super-skilled gaming masks a greater conceptual difference between videogames and esports. Where a videogame is a piece of software that may afford various uses, an esport deploys a videogame toward a particular style of play. The difference between esports and videogames is not just a difference of degree or quality, but of level of analysis; it is less like the difference in ability separating a professional athlete from an amateur one than the difference in type between the practice of soccer and the technology comprising a field with nets and a ball. For example, the term “*CS:GO*” (*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*; Valve, 2012) has a double meaning, referring both to the videogame software developed by Valve and available for purchase on Steam; and to the practices of players engaged in *CS:GO* tournaments and other sporting events. These events use the videogame, but in addition feature cultural apparatuses including arenas, spectators, casters, and prizes. While every esport

¹ Indeed, the culture of videogaming in the manner of a sport has received political critique for its “toxic meritocracy” (Paul, 2018).

involves some videogame, not every videogame is played as an esports; and, for videogames that are used in esports, not every match played is part of the esports. Further still, while some videogames, often through a combination of community and developer support, orient strongly toward the competitive attitude of a sport, others afford multifarious play styles of which the sporting is just one. Such is the case for the videogame *AoE2*, which supports many play practices, including those of esports professionals, streamers, and amateur players.

In *AoE2* esportsing usually occurs in a streaming context (although not all streamers play the game as an esports). Few of the world's best *AoE2* players earn a living wage from prizes (ESports Earnings, 2021b). Streaming, however, provides an alternative revenue source, with highly skilled players like TheViper and Hera producing content emphasizing their fast-paced gameplay (e.g., Hera, 2021; TheViperAOC, 2020). Additionally, casting—normally linked primarily with esportsing—has become important for *AoE2* amateur play through T90Official's casts of games drawn from the community archive.

Streamers, Casters, and the Media-Game

The term "caster," referring to the esports analogue of a sportscaster, derives from the software SHOUTcast, used to add voiceover to gameplay video, in a mediatised extension of live commentary (theScore eSports, 2018; Nullsoft, 1998). A match captured together with caster commentary is a "cast." Within a cast, a "call" is an individual utterance by a caster. As with live sports, some caster calls are as famous as the plays upon which they comment (theScore esports, 2020). Esports casters have thus risen to public prominence alongside esports spectatorship itself, as part of videogaming's turn into what T.L. Taylor (2018) calls "media entertainment," echoing major-league sports' development into "media-sports" (pp. 136–137). At large tournaments, casters perform two main tasks: colour commentary, "fill[ing] in the gaps of live play with informative analysis," and play-by-play, "improvis[ing] a rich narrative of hype on top of live games" (Kempe-Cook et al., 2019, p. 1). Play-by-play also makes the game more accessible by aurally describing visual events and providing exegesis of complicated gameplay.

While casting has achieved greatest prominence at large tournaments, streaming has simultaneously emerged as a medium for videogame players to generate live television from their private spaces. For some, streaming has turned into full-time work (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019a). Like many small-scale media producers, streamers intersperse roles that larger production environments would differentiate, whether working to engage viewers in (Glas, 2015), and provide "paratext" for (Burwell & Miller, 2016, p. 110) their own gameplay, or interleaving the dual caster tasks of colour-commentary and play-by-play. As with streamers, players need not necessarily approach the skill levels associated with professional esports. Rather, streaming affords a plethora of alternative

practices and videogame-affiliated identities. As Mark Johnson and Jamie Woodcock note (2019b), streamers on Twitch have exercised a pervasive influence upon the videogame industry by advertising, reviewing, and purveying knowledge about how to play digital games (p. 684). In the case of *AoE2*, the streamer T90Official has taken on an especially large number of roles, combining those of caster, independent tournament host, and community organizer.

T90Official and Guided Spectation

T90Official (“T90”) is an *AoE2* player working as an indie caster, active during the Voobly and Steam eras as part of a constellation of *AoE2*-focussed video providers. T90 distributes his casts as live Twitch streams and fixed YouTube videos, sometimes “cocasting” with other community members or “recasting” other players’ prerecorded matches and matches he played in himself (e.g., T90Official, 2019d). In addition to casting, T90 organizes tournaments, solicits and publicizes various custom *AoE2* mods, and monitors players’ forum posts (T90Official, 2020c). Since T90’s understanding of the game extends beyond theorycrafting to focus on the styles of individual players, his colour commentary has become an oral history of the player community (see Champlin, 2019, pp. 26–27 on oral histories in Twitch streaming). On Twitch, T90’s casts appear as gameplay video and caster voiceover together with a chat feed in which livestream spectators carry on their own running paratext, including miniature custom images that facilitate a discourse of visual memes. The spectator paratext in turn provides fodder for T90’s commentary, which is further regularly interrupted by text-to-audio messages sent by crowdfunding donors. The whole apparatus delivers a clamorous audiovisual experience, albeit one without the continuous texture of crowd sounds characteristic of an arena event. T90 then uploads some of his recorded casts to YouTube, preserving audience commentary alongside gameplay and caster calls.

A display mod called CaptureAge (Dico et al., 2019) affords T90 the option to observe and share with spectators any player’s point of view, together with additional data including the number of in-game entities under each player’s control and the upgrades in effect for those entities. Spectators, despite sharing T90’s privileged vantage point, do not share the privilege of steering the viewport—the caster chooses what the spectators can look at for each point in time. In seeing what players cannot, T90 and his audience avail themselves of a dramatic irony more pronounced than is customary in live sporting contexts, where players cannot usually hide from each other’s view for more than a moment. *AoE2* players, in contrast, can see the full extent of opponents’ strategies only by spectating, after the fact, upon matches they have already played in.

The influence of spectation permeates the entire world of online multiplayer *AoE2*, as Siege Engineers, CaptureAge, and T90’s video channels combine to transgress boundaries between the public and

private. While an honour system discourages spectators from leaking information to players during a live-cast match, it seems accepted practice for T90 to broadcast any archived match, at will, without its players' knowledge or specific consent (see T90Official, 2020b, 13:26). Any recorded match has the potential to be uploaded to the archive, and any match can be recorded by any of its participating players as long as the hosting player has enabled match recording. Thus, the community's archival practices extend beyond the media sport model, as any match has the potential to become a public showmatch. With the potential for publicity infecting even mundane leisure, online multiplayer *AoE2* has taken on a mediatized flavour independent of esports' explicit professional trappings. We might call it a media-game.

Metas and Playing for the Legend

To understand how playing for the legend emerges from *AoE2* as media-game, the below sections make a close reading of *AoE2*'s mechanics and the ways in which its community uses them. *AoE2* affords a relatively wide selection of play styles and mechanical variations. Depending on the software settings, the number of players competing in a match can range from two to eight. Players may or may not be able to make alliances with each other (the "diplomacy" mechanic). They may or may not be able to win in teams (the "allied victory" mechanic); if not—the usual case—even the most battle-tested alliances must eventually break for the sake of determining a single winner. Players can text chat, either by sending messages to specific other players or to the entire group. As in most multiplayer videogames, players can concede, and it is community custom to send the message "gg" for "good game" before doing so. The community also has a specific lexicon for discussing strategy. T90 refers to commonly recognized strategies as "strats." Especially efficient strats adapted for a specific context are "metas," short for "metagame."²

In a type of match T90 calls a "community game," players of varied skill levels congregate to watch and participate. T90 selects entrants to community games by lottery from spectators on his Twitch channel at a certain time (T90Official, 2018a). Community games typically feature a full complement of eight participants, with diplomacy, but not allied victory, enabled. In player vernacular, terms like "2v2," "1v1," or "2v1," refer to different emergent configurations of multiplayer confrontation, as players attempt to recruit allies to gang up on each other. More than anything else, a player's alliances determine their strategic success in community games. Thus, their chat rhetoric, often idiosyncratic, becomes pivotal to their strategy. Metas that would help a player achieve strategic dominance in a strict 1v1 context often meet with

² What T90 calls metas are specifically what Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux qualify as "strategic metagames," in distinction to many adjacent uses of the term metagame (2017, p. 216).

defeat amid the vicissitudes of diplomacy, or as Michael Debus (2017) calls it, the “social metagame” (p. 2). The case study below, “The Legend of Noob Nothing,” shows how the presence of the social metagame creates a particularly salient arena to produce legendary play. In the logic of the *AoE2* community, to become a hero of legend is not only an agentic, but also interpersonal, event.

Canvases for Memes

Humour is central to the discourse and competitive play of the *AoE2* community. To some degree the role of humour, here, can be inferred given the prevalence of parody in online communities. However, it is worth attending, starting here, to the way the clamour of a community game configures itself around an evolving collection of in-jokes, and the way those jokes influence the structure of the game on seemingly every level of analysis, whether focussed on spectacle and media presentation, competitive tactics, or player discourse.

For example, community games often use maps submitted to T90 by other players. Players take mapmaking as an opportunity for meme humour. Here, some of the many resources in the game are fish, and one of the possible types of fish is salmon. After T90 uploaded a picture to social media of himself holding his baby nephew, a fan found the image and edited it to replace the baby with a salmon. Since then, other players have produced maps for T90’s casts where the only type of fish is salmon (T90Official, 2019g). Salmon has thus become part of *AoE2* community lore. T90’s repertoire of custom maps also includes absurd challenges which stage the map in an antagonistic role toward players. For example, “Forest Nothing” is a map covered almost entirely with trees that must be chopped down to make space for any other strategy (T90Official, 2016, 2019b). T90 and many other high-level players have a public love-hate relationship with Forest Nothing, to the extent that “Next Game Forest Nothing” has become one of T90’s catchphrases (T90Official, 2018b). Player-mapmakers may lay out the topographies of their maps to resemble shapes, like, say, a pair of pants; or to put most of the resources in strategically awkward places, like small islands. Some mods add additional bizarreries: units that explode like bombs upon death, for example (T90Official, 2019c), or an ability to upgrade units excessively, eventually producing, say, villagers that move so fast as to teleport across the map. The popularity of bizarre mods in casts demonstrates a community willing to forego the balanced mechanics of overt meritocracy in pursuit of novel playing and spectating experiences (see T90Official, 2019a for a particularly extreme example). Goofiness and a willingness to experiment characterize even the players most proficient with traditional game modes, whose practice as efficient competitors informs, but does not circumscribe, their participation in community games.

The Legend of Noob Nothing

One of T90's most popular YouTube uploads is "The Legend of Noob Nothing" (T90Official, 2019e), a cast of a community game in which the eponymously self-deprecating player succeeds despite poor technique. This section uses "The Legend of Noob Nothing" as a case study in T90 and the *AoE2* community's method of legend production.

T90's casts comprise four phases: early-, mid-, end-, and post-game. In the early game, as players begin gathering resources, T90 describes the match's rules, including relevant mods, along with the map and how it may advantage certain players' positions. T90 comments occasionally on early signs of unusual strategy or instances of good or bad luck, such as units killed by AI entities, or preponderances of resources. The game type for "The Legend of Noob Nothing" is 8-player nomad diplomacy relic regicide: an eight-player match where players can make and break alliances and are free to choose their base's initial location. A glowing Relic sits in the bottom right corner of the map, protected by a forest covering about half the map's surface area. The first player to seize the relic and hold it in their Monastery for 350 in-game years, or roughly 20 minutes, wins (T90Official, 2019e, 55:26). To reach the relic, they will need to chop their way through the forest, either by harvesting the wood using villagers or knocking trees down using siege engines. A thin beach and an ocean with small islands occupy the remaining map space, forcing players to build near each other. Meanwhile, each player has a single fast-moving "King". If a player's king is killed, they lose the game, and their units revert to AI control for the remainder of the match. T90 offers a token reward of 20USD for each regicide regardless whether the kingslayer ultimately wins.

Through the mid-game, each player, unless prematurely defeated, progresses through a series of four upgrade levels ("ages"), which introduce different units to create and upgrades to acquire. The available units and upgrades vary per faction, so the balance of advantage shifts between factions depending on their respective age attained; the Turks can access especially powerful gunpowder-equipped units late in the game, while the Vikings may gain an early advantage on water using longboats. In contrast to the late game's attrition, players eliminated in the middle of a diplomacy match usually fall to risky or tricky tactics. By the "The Legend of Noob Nothing"'s mid-game, player [NRQ]Krounch is allied with player kanizzatata, but surrounds kanizzatata's base anyway with walls, castles and military units (T90Official, 2019e, 33:14). Kanizzatata loads their King onto a transport ship and flees. [NRQ]Krounch lets kanizzatata's King go, maintaining "allied" diplomacy status until the transport ship has reached open waters, where, out of sight of the other players, an explosive Demolition Ship from [NRQ]Krounch intercepts kanizzatata's transport and sinks it (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Kanizzata's transport ship sinks beneath the waves (yellow, centre) while three demolition ships belonging to erstwhile ally [NRQ]Krouch (red) linger in the area. Trading vessels belonging to tobinho_27 (turquoise) go about their business in the background (T90Official, 2019e, 33:48).

As the late game emerges, Noob Nothing chops a path through the forest using villagers, builds a Monastery, produces a Monk, gathers the Relic, and houses it in the Monastery, starting the victory countdown timer. Noob then demonstrates inept micromanagement by destroying several of their own units and buildings with cannon shots presumably intended to create clearings in the forest. As the timer ticks down, the other more mechanically proficient players struggle to reach and destroy the monastery. One player, tobinho_27, suddenly becomes disconnected from the game just before completing their own path through the trees. An underdog story emerges; the livestream audience roots for Noob. Seconds before the other players would have intervened, Noob wins, and becomes the "legendary" subject of T90Official's eponymous video. (The post-game consists entirely of colour commentary as T90 analyzes match statistics, such as who produced the most units or buildings, who mined the most gold, et cetera.)

Agôn and Paidia: Making Space for the Legend

What Count as Possibility Spaces?

Game studies has addressed legendary play through a conceptually related but textually scattered set of terms. Roger Caillois's (1958/2001) sociology of play includes six categories: four forms of play, agôn, alea, ilinx, and mimicry; and two aspects of play, ludus and paidia. Caillois situates ludus and paidia as the extrema of a spectrum, with ludus emphasizing reliable rules, like T90's offer of 20 dollars per regicide, and

paidia emphasizing freedom and creativity, as exemplified in the practice of creating a new game map.

Caillois's typology has sometimes been reduced by assigning its categories to political camps. For example, Josh Jarrett (2016) relates ludus with competition and commodification, implying that paidia offers an avenue of freedom from capitalist corporate interpellation. Although such a direct association between ludus and capitalism might be tempting, capitalist society includes obvious examples of commodified paidia, as with social media services that leverage users' myriad content-creation activities to gain attention and revenue. Although such neoliberal developments did not prevail much in Caillois's time, today's capitalism instrumentalizes paidiac freedom as effectively as it does ludic regulation. Thus, neither ludus nor paidia on its own offers much by way of political rallying point.

In a less reductive reading of ludus and paidia, Graham Jensen (2013) argues that each leads to the other, for example producing opportunities for each other, as when competitive athletes perform paidiac celebratory gestures following moments of ludic success (Turner, 2012). Jensen cites player-created metagames as his main example. Both in the case of meta as known rational strategy, and metagame as new game defined by house rules using the same software, we find players operating within extant rulesets (ludus) but experimenting with new practices (paidia), thus arriving at new prescriptions (ludus) which players sometimes deviate from (paidia), thus constituting a creative cycle. In terms of Margaret Boden's (2004) concepts of exploratory and transformational creativity, ludus defines a space to explore, which players eventually transcend through acts of transformation. Per Jensen, "inevitably, paidic games transform into ludic games as implicit rules and goals become explicit" (2013, p. 71). Yet further, I do not think we always need to textualize or explicate ludus to practice and think it. Ludus arises from convention.

Jensen (2013) relates the interproductive tension between ludus and paidia to the notion of "possibility space" posited by Will Wright, creator of *SimCity* (1989). According to Wright, a possibility space—not to be confused with a mathematical "probability space"—is the space of meaningful creativity that a game's mechanics afford its players (Wright, 2004, 6:15). Jensen quotes Ian Bogost's specification that the "possibility space of play includes all of the gestures made possible by a set of rules" (Bogost, 2008, p. 120, as cited in Jensen, 2013, p. 76). While not necessarily wrong, Jensen's reading of Bogost treads near a subtle hazard. While ludus constrains paidia, it is not the only thing that so does. Ludus is no more gameplay mechanics or software procedure than it is the physical properties of mouse, keyboard, controller, or human body. Like paidia, ludus arises from sentient agency, rather than the mere presence of material conditions. While another avenue of study might examine Caillois's typology through an object-oriented framework

that privileges sentience to a lesser degree, I think it wisest for now to avoid reducing ludus to simply “that which limits and affords.” Ludus and paidia together give affective shape to a possibility space. They cause possibility spaces to have edges, while simultaneously enabling those edges to move and mutate.

Wright (2004) specifically builds upon the idea of possibility space to articulate an interdisciplinary account of simulation videogames. According to Wright, possibility spaces appear in fixed-media narratives as fictional environs through which the characters of a narrative proceed. In fixed media like film and television, the narrative path is typically singular, in contrast to the pluripotential “procedural narrative” that a player’s choices can generate within a gameworld (4:40). Per Wright, the possibility space of a game is written in “player language” (8:40) or intuitive meaning. It is the real “raw material” with which a developer works, above the layer of data structure that comprises programming languages and digital assets. Player language consists in “topologies” (14:03), or “meaningful nouns” (9:45) like “villager” or “tree”; “dynamics” (14:06), “meaningful verbs” like “create” or “chop”; and “paradigms” (14:06), the “grammar” of interaction between dynamics and topologies, that provide meaningful results to actions like creating a villager and sending it to chop down a tree. So Wright claims that players’ in-game choices become meaningful through multiple simultaneous channels of suggestion and feedback from a game’s possibility space. Hence, for example, the Low Elo Legend who built a beautifully-organized “Sim City Base” (T90Official, 2020a), made all the more epic by its impending doom at the hands of its opponent’s less aesthetically-motivated army.

Wright’s (2004) account suggests that possibility spaces can emerge within possibility spaces. For example, in community lexicon the term “vil-rush” (short for “villager rush”) refers to the strategy of attacking opponents early in the game using teams of resource-gatherers (“villagers”). Even as the *AoE2* community began to recognize the vil-rush as a paradigm within the possibility space of strategies, the “vil-rush” took on an affective valence as a means of pranking, as a meaningful noun within the spaces of player personalities and interpersonal narratives. In the multiplayer competitive simulation context of *AoE2*, it is among players’ choices that we find ludic and paidiac gestures responding to each other. These choices become meanings when captured and amplified for spectators by casters and streamers, who add additional layers of meaningful words through their exegesis of the gameplay. The caster’s mediating analysis feeds positively into the process whereby players give meaning to the sight of an advancing mob of villagers by learning to view it as annoying and bold.

The type of heroic play that produces legends operates at a juncture of ludus and paidia, where a player paidiacally deviates from the space of

recognized strategies in a way that introduces a new strat into community lexicon, and thus a new meaningful noun to become voiced by a caster. The emergent strategy, however, cannot be so generally efficient as to become a new meta. Rather, in its contingency upon the idiosyncrasies of its introducing player, this meaningful noun binds to that player's name, producing a legend.

Competitive Acts as Rhetorical Devices

The term "modality" emerges from semiotics, where Roland Barthes used it to refer to any one of multiple simultaneous language-like sources of information present in a given practice or artefact (e.g., Barthes, 1986, p. 33), such as a movie's moving image or subtitles. Modalities are not synonymous with media or with modes of perceptual sense—both the modality of text chat and the modality of gameplay footage reach an *AoE2* player through vision, while the modality of text may emerge from audio and visual inscriptions together, as when reading text while hearing a computerized text-to-voice reader. I use the cumbersome suffix "ality" here to avoid accidental confluences between modality and sensory mode.

In game studies, multimodal discourse analysis offers a way of addressing the multiple distinct streams of meaningful information running through a medium known for converging many. Jason Hawreliak (2013) distinguishes several modalities present in many videogames: text, images, music, and, most characteristically, procedurality, i.e., "the rules, systems and parameters of a game" (p. 81). Hawreliak's analysis, together with Wright's, accounts for the intuitive distinction between the literary narrative unfolding in, say, an opening cutscene exposing the history of the gameworld, and Wright's (year) "procedural narrative," which unfolds as the gameworld responds to the player's choices within it. But Hawreliak oversimplifies procedurality by reading it as a single modality and ascribing it more to the game than to the socially constructive activities of players and spectators.

This oversimplified notion of procedurality as message from developer has guided various discussions of what has come to be called procedural rhetoric. In semiotics, a "rhetoric" is a way of meaning-making using a specific modality. It figures in Barthes's (1957/1972) account of mythology as "a set of fixed, regulated, insistent figures, according to which the varied forms of the mythical signifier arrange themselves" (p. 151). Rhetoric is immanent to both communication and persuasion; per Hawreliak (2018), "meaning is always rhetorical" (p. 8)—every act of communication is in some way an act of persuasion, appealing to and reinforcing an underlying system. A "procedural rhetoric" is a rhetoric in the modality of gameplay mechanics (Bogost, 2007, p. 1). For example, Hawreliak describes how *Mafia III* (Hangar 13, 2016) manifests an "interactive expression of structural racism" by having the Black player-character occasionally assailed by non-player-character police for no deserved reason (2018, pp. 80–81). Readings of procedural rhetoric

typically proceed from the idea—reminiscent of cinema’s “auteur” theory (see Truffaut, 1954)—that “behind any videogame there is a specific view of the world, a perspective on what certain actions are for, and a point of view about what “victory” and “defeat” mean and how they are attained” (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2017). In choosing procedures, a developer conveys a worldview.

Running alongside what has come to be known as “procedurality” (Sicart, 2011), a different, ethnographically-informed approach to game studies has long accorded players more agency than they would seem to possess as receptors for the rhetorical gestures of developers. In *Communities of Play* (2009/2011), Celia Pearce tells the story of what she referred to as “the Uru Diaspora”—the movement of an online community to several different virtual worlds and games in the wake of the destruction of their own” (Boellstorff, 2011, p. viii). To summarize Pearce’s results: after Ubisoft cancelled the online multiplayer puzzle-solving adventure game *Uru Live* (Cyan Worlds, 2003) in February 2004, some of its beta testers recreated parts of the virtual world of Uru in other games, especially the simulation game *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003). Some of Uru’s players advocated for and built various versions of the world of Uru over the following decade, showing how a player community could shape a multiplayer game.

Given Pearce’s (2009/2011) results, caution must be taken not to apply the concept of procedural rhetoric oversimply as a description of the communicative power of the developer. In multiplayer contexts, even those framed as apparently straightforward competitions, procedural rhetorics appear not only as developed by game designers, but as developed and enacted by players for each other’s benefit (or chagrin). Antagonizing another player with a vil-rush, secretly blowing up another player’s king with a demolition ship, and sending resources to another player, are three different strategic gestures all afforded by *AoE2*’s procedures yet done in community games for purposes defined by players rather than developers. The first is to some extent a prank. The second seeks 20 dollars and glory in the eyes of spectators, while trying to mitigate the cost of that achievement within the social metagame. The third sometimes occurs for diplomatic reasons, and sometimes simply performs largesse. While Wright’s design philosophy for *SimCity* was to avoid overly influential procedural rhetoric so that players could develop their own purposes within a very large possibility space, the *AoE2* community shows through its binding of strategies with meanings that videogames need not be explicitly open-ended for players to treat them as expressive media. Rather, if so inspired, players may build discourses out of whatever they have at hand. We can see in *AoE2* strategic combat becoming expressive combat, in which the game becomes worth playing, and the fight becomes worth having, as tactics become messages.

Design for Play for the Legend

Playing for the legend offers at least two benefits. First, where Chris Paul's (2011) work on theorycraft showed how player discourse can reduce the diversity of competitive strategies by promoting optimal approaches and discouraging alternatives. Consequentially, playing for the legend can prevent a community's repertoire of strategies from over-optimizing and thus stagnating. Second, playing for the legend helps to create a player culture with places for both highly and lowly skilled participants. Although even the most virtuosic *AoE2* players value legendary gameplay, it is unnecessary to win to become a legend. Legendary play is an outcome orthogonal to victory; it involves behaviour deviating from the accepted norms of efficient strategy. As a counterpoint to the zero-sum ludic meritocracy of winning, playing for the legend promotes the development of a sporting etiquette, because even a losing player may become noteworthy as a participant or protagonist of legend.

Barthes (1957/1972) used the term "legend" less formally than "myth." A legend may be a story, a version of history, or sometimes that for which T90 uses the term: a story embodied in, and bound up with, a person (p. 69). Myth, on the other hand, is a form, not an object: a semiotic structure shaping perception and substituting for reality, appropriating some objects as stand-ins for others (Barthes, 1972, p. 132). Legends are special figures within myth. For the *AoE2* community, legends serve as symbols within several intersecting mythologies. There is the mythos of historically dramatized "great men," wherein great deeds signify the quality and magnitude of great players. This mythos is both hyperstitious and hyperbolic, the product of participants trying to make as much of their play as they can; and it receives support from game mechanics that represent historical events as fast-moving and affected by the actions of individual units. Along the way, this mythos intersects with symbols of societal histories, as reflected in the languages different factions' villagers speak or the tactics within which each unit performs efficiently. The intersection of these two mythologies is dissonant, as in the spectacle of catapults knocking down trees or villagers running faster than the speed of sound. The legends that emerge in such a syncretic space are then both mythological and counter-mythological, figures of laughter as much as triumph, both moderating the toxicity potentiated by a focus on raw dominating victory and resisting easy mappings between in-game actions and representations of real events or geopolitical dynamics. *AoE2* affords autonomy through silliness.

The humour involved in legend-making is typically the kind of goofiness Olga Goriunova called "new media idiocy" (2013). Players may "troll" each other by deploying armies of an unusual type of unit, or enacting short-term high-risk strategies that disrupt opponents' preferred strats by deviating from established metas. Troll plays thus perform a kind of

kitsch, a poor yet aesthetically distinct taste in combat style. One such prank is the vil-rush, which rarely succeeds in overwhelming the opponent, but it often provokes a desperate and thus undignified response that interrupts more intricate strategies that would have taken until later in the game to develop (T90Official, 2019f, 32:31). All parties to the vil-rush are impelled to abandon self-seriousness.

The *AoE2* community may rejoice in its syncretic imagery, in new media idiocy, and in tautological humour—you should do it for the legend because the legend is worth doing it for—as a buffer against the earnest technomascularity that would celebrate gamers as agents of genuine innovation and triumph (see Kocurek, 2015, p. xxi). There are two benefits to such a buffer. First, the many defeated players in a community game can respect legendary play without feeling beaten down by it, inspired less by the “cruel optimism” (see Berlant, 2011) of aspiration to superiority than by the prospect of playing their own role in a game ridiculous enough to gain some autonomy from the power structures of the rest of the world. Second, the goofiness of legendary play indicates an irony inherent in playful victory: that great play does not signify dominance or technological genius as applicable to the wider world. Great *AoE2* players cannot necessarily expect to be greeted with respect, deference, submission, or attraction outside of *AoE2*; and for emotionally invested players, the humour inherent in playing for the legend may mitigate the potential trauma of moving back and forth between a welcoming gaming community which to some extent reveres their skills, and potentially less welcoming offline environs where success in *AoE2* is not widely valued. Tautology, irony, and unhidden cognitive dissonance, as discursive strategies, limit the importance of each match’s outcome, implying a *memento mori* with each gaming triumph.

Note, however, that the strategies used by *AoE2* players to define a comfortable space for themselves do not necessarily make the community welcoming for everyone. The culture surrounding *AoE2* is—or at least appears—mostly populated by men, and the lingua franca of the online community, along with the language of spectation and casting, is primarily English. The genealogies of patriarchy and imperialism evident in the game’s imagery and ludic systems continue through the demographic composition of the game’s community - a community that this essay’s author, an English-speaking 29-year-old male - fits into relatively generically. While, as this paper has described, there are positive lessons to be learned from the culture surrounding *AoE2*, there are also negative lessons in the game’s disproportionate focus on warfare, men, and open spectacle, and perhaps especially open spectacle at the expense of consent to spectacle. *AoE2* is a relic of a prior, more masculinist, era of game design. Its good aspects, if incorporated into future developments, should be understood as the proverbial baby retrieved from an environment of toxic bathwater.

AoE2's current community receives support from several features, some provided by developers in the initial design of the game, and some made afterwards by community members. I have identified the following:

1. Discrete matches, each with a ludic, agônîc outcome. Each *AoE2* match is a simulation to which ludus and agôn give narrative shape.
2. A large possibility space of strategies that, while maintaining consistent rules throughout each match, drastically change the pace, rhythm and focus of other players' experiences.
3. A large possibility space of modification and further development. In this case, a mapmaking mechanic that lets players create their own modules without professional software programming expertise.
4. The presence of choices like that between salmon and other fish—strategically frivolous, i.e. inconsequential to the outcome of victory or defeat, and thus inviting inscription with meanings beyond the agonîc.
5. A casting service affording both real-time engagement and what we might call *after-time* archiving. In the case of *AoE2*, the casting service emerges largely through indie labour, and particularly through that of one caster who functions akin to Barthes' (1972) "mythologist" (1972): sometimes participating as a high-level player, but usually not one competing for prizes; living the action "vicariously" (p. 157), "decipher[ing] the myth" (p. 127), but "us[ing] a terminology adapted to it" (p. 119).
6. Diplomacy, and with it, a chat mechanic, enabling the social metagame.
7. A virtual world that balances a deep repertoire of researchable, dramatic backstory—in this case, the history of the Middle Ages as symbolized in depictions of cultures from around the globe—against an overtly unrealistic style of symbolic representation; for example, a population of 200 units standing in for an entire civilization.

Conclusion

An open question in game studies concerns the evaluation of strategic depth (Lantz et al., 2017). The case of *AoE2* suggests that researchers should not focus too narrowly on depth as a matter of competitive playability, whether for highly or lowly skilled players. Rather, there is the matter of what we might call "inter-Elo depth," the compatibility of high and low skill levels within the same match; and further still, strategic depth sometimes corresponds to a game's support not only for diversity of strategies but also of deviance among goals, some of which provide satisfaction to players for reasons combining competitive play with the wider concerns of social life.

Yet *AoE2*'s utility as a lesson for developers is complicated by the role of the community. Developers did not plan out all the ways that players would commune around their product. Rather than attempt to prescribe (and monetize) individual gestures, identities or interactions, they designed a framework in which each type of interaction affected others, in an ecology of interrelated mechanics. Developers' hands-off attitude toward the emergent possibility space of player strategy has likely contributed to *AoE2*'s long life as a platform for creative, competitive and communal play, in which metas and their meanings are the purview of the players. With respect to this design philosophy—we might call it a "sandbox ethic" of competitive strategy, for the way that it emphasizes emergent configurations over preconceived structures—*AoE2* is the pinnacle of the series. Its sequels, *Age of Mythology* (Ensemble Studios, 2002) and *Age of Empires III* (Ensemble Studios, 2005), each paired back the strategic possibility space.³

In contrast to script-driven forms of digital heroism wherein a player takes on the mantle of a pre-designed hero and chooses among preconceived quests, this essay has described a form of heroism emerging from the relationship between player traits and evolving community norms. While possessed of some autonomy from other forms of ostentation and virtue at large, and promoted by a particular trend-setting caster, "playing for the legend" in *AoE2* is informed by broader currents of internet humour and aesthetic value. In playing for the legend, a player expresses through competitive acts a persona whose charisma persists whether or not victory is attained.

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³ For example restricting the locations and numbers of Town Centres, respectively.

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