Walking, Talking and Playing with Masculinities in *Firewatch*

The final scene of Campo Santo's *Firewatch* (2016) leaves a lot of players frustrated [1]. The

Wyoming wilderness that Henry was tasked with protecting is on fire. The mysterious

circumstances that have obsessed him (and you) with suspicions of murder and secret

government cover-ups have been revealed for what they truly were: a tragic accident and a wild

story spun by Henry's overactive imagination. By the time you reach this point, you've been

playing as Henry for 3–4 hours. You've now hiked out to your boss's tower, where a helicopter

waits to take you both safely away from the fire. Except she isn't there. Delilah, your flirtatious

boss, has spent the summer directing you over the radio from a nearby lookout station. When you

reach her tower at last, she's already gone.

Firewatch is almost too good at evoking the disappointments of everyday life. As Campo Santo's

ombudsman stated, "*Firewatch* is a story about real people who take the easy way out and end up

making a mess" (Fyfe, 2016). There's a reason it's called *Firewatch* and not *Firefight*. Henry's

job consists primarily of waiting for a fire to happen, preventing one if he can, and reporting

anything suspicious to his superior, Delilah. The problem is, that's a rather boring remit. So,

Henry imagines mysteries everywhere, discusses them in detail over the radio with Delilah, and

invents a huge government conspiracy out of what is eventually revealed to be an intimate story

about relationships and guilt. The denouement, in which the player learns that Henry was wrong

(and doesn't even get the consolation prize of winning Delilah, the game's princess stand-in), can

feel disappointing.

Or, to frame it the way this article will, it feels emasculating within the context of traditional videogame constructions of masculinity. Here we have a hero living a modern version of cowboy life: a rugged loner in the Wyoming woods, an unacknowledged alcoholic trying to escape a tragic past, essentially a videogame John Wayne. But Henry's hypermasculine presentation is continuously undermined by the game's mechanics, story and genre. The character exists in an interesting relationship with his masculinity—he performs the motions but is thwarted by a game that disrupts hypermasculine performance at every turn.

This article explores how *Firewatch* problematizes toxic masculinity. I survey the scholarship on videogame masculinities, then analyze how masculinity is portrayed in several scenes and mechanics of the game. Henry is characterized as a traditional, hypermasculine player character, but the game actively refuses to let the player perform that masculinity, enabling instead the performance of a subtle, complex, and well-developed male character. This destabilization is ludologically intentional and portrays a sensitivity towards non-hegemonic masculinities. Despite the pronounced privilege of his identity—Henry is straight, white, and male—the complexity of his inner struggle portrays an othered masculinity within the context of traditional gaming and game protagonists. In the third section, I examine walking simulators more broadly, considering developer comments and player reactions to flesh out the way that the community's construction of masculinity pertains to Henry. The kind of labour the character performs underscores the complexity of his identity; though Henry works hard, his hard work is mostly confined to the realm of emotional labour and therapeutic self-care. This feminized labour is reflected in the gameplay as well, highlighting the divide between "hardcore" games (typically characterized as masculine) and the "hard" work associated with femininity. By playing with

genre and subverting player expectations, *Firewatch* enables players to practice and perform masculinities beyond the hyper.

Hypermasculinities and Beyond

In order to discuss this effectively, we need to survey the work connecting gamer culture, videogame design, and the ongoing discussion of toxic masculinity, a topic of significant scholarly interest throughout the videogame era (Consalvo, 2012) and especially since #Gamergate exploded onto the internet in 2014 (Salter & Blodgett, 2017; Braithwaite, 2016; Massanari, 2017). Many studies of gaming and gender focus primarily on the harassment and exclusion of female and/or queer gamers—crucial issues which are indeed central to the future of games and gaming communities (Consalvo, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). However, as Salter & Blodgett have commented, the scholarship focusing on marginalized players "allows the assumptions of white male identity as telegraphed in games to become invisible. The default becomes normal, unmarked, and thus difficult to challenge or contest" (2017, p.75). While toxic gamer masculinity significantly impacts and harms marginalized groups, the focus of this article will be to consider how the stereotypical "toxic male gamer" identity intersects with non-toxic masculinities.

In Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*, she argues that gender "produces that which it names," such that 'acting like a man' defines what men act like (1993, p. 13). If we follow Butler in understanding gender as performative, we see "masculinity as an emergent performance shaped by social and technological factors, rather than a static construct" (Bell et al., 2015). In doing so,

we can trace how hypermasculinity developed as a cultural norm. *Hegemonic masculinity*, a term originally coined in the 1980's, describes a kind of idealized masculinity defined by a set of normative traits and behaviors which serve to legitimize patriarchy and guarantee the subordination of women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831). These behaviors include homophobia, toughness, autonomy, domination, the rejection of femininity, and the stoic suppression of emotions (Levant, 2013). *Hypermasculinity*, a concept defined by Parrott and Zeichner, describes a masculinity in which these hegemonic traits are overexaggerated, usually exhibited by a trope character like "the bad boy" (2008). Finally, *toxic masculinity* describes the ways in which hypermasculinity causes harm to society.

One aspect of the way hypermasculinity is performed in videogames has to do with the imbrication of work, play, productivity, and gender. Videogames are mass cultural objects and, as such, subject to the Frankfurt school's critique of mass culture as "a tool of domination, a way for capitalism to offer ephemeral gratification to people condemned to lives of work" (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004, p. 1233). As Julian Stallabrass (1993) argues, "computer games are a capitalist, deeply conservative form of culture, and their political content is prescribed by the options open to democracy under modern capitalism" (1993, p. 104). The modern world segregates ostensibly productive and unproductive time, but, Stallabrass contends, we become so accustomed to habitually working that we (consciously or unconsciously) reproduce working behaviour in our leisure time. Instead of providing an escape from capitalism, games tend to reify capitalism. Work and play, two sides of the same coin, ensure that the player/worker is indoctrinated with the idea that their worth *is* their productivity and accomplishment, whether that means completing a mission in a game or completing a task given to you by your office supervisor. As

Chang et al. have argued, the performance of masculinity is inextricably connected with conceptions of work, productivity, and capitalism, noting "the long culture-historical association of self-fashioning with manliness" (2017, p. 112). Bosson & Vandello similarly highlight hegemonic masculinity as an identity reliant on the ability to work and be active (2011). To summarize the way in which this performance of hegemonic masculinity operates: a man works, then said man goes home to play videogames, and both activities reaffirm and reproduce his subjectivity.

Geek masculinity originated ostensibly as a rebellion against hypermasculine norms and was characterized by "a strong interest in technology and playing computer games . . . performances of expertise, skill, and knowledge [which] are not only sources of social connection and pleasure, but also work as important markers for inclusion and exclusion" (Taylor, 2012, p. 111). The origin story of the gamer geek is one of outsiders triumphing over the oppression of 80's-era hegemonic masculinity—the gradual creation of a more inclusive masculine ideal that prized intelligence and technological mastery over physical strength [2]. In the process of carving out that space, however, as Salter & Blodgett argue in *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, "dueling visions of geek-as-victim and geek-as-hero give rise to the hypermasculine geek, an identity forged by rejecting both feminine-marked culture and constructions as well as the traditional athletic male aesthetic" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. vi. See also DiSalvo, 2017 and Dutton et al., 2011). Where some scholarship of gamer masculinity divides gamers into either 'athletes/jocks' or 'nerds/geeks' (Taylor, 2012), other scholars illustrate how the categories do not function as a binary but as mutually enforcing identities. As Salter & Blodgett argue,

Geek masculinity, with its absence of hypermasculine qualities and apparent association with "un-masculine" traits, is often cast in popular culture as a marginalized masculinity…However, the dichotomy is false: geek masculinity is not marginalized. It is instead an inevitable evolution of hegemonic masculinity in a culture where dominance and technical mastery are increasingly interwoven. (2017, p. 47)

This imbrication of geek masculinity and hegemonic masculinity can be seen in the way that videogame design valorizes the very traits and behaviors associated with hypermasculinity. Burrill calls it "digital boyhood"—a fantastical hypermasculinity that subsumes the complexity of masculine experience under a hail of bullets and a thrust of swords (2008). These hypermasculine qualities can correlate with a players' ideal of masculinity as well. A recent study by Blackburn & Scharrer found that "both men and women players with violent favorite games are likely to endorse a view of masculinity that includes aggression, dominance, toughness, and the suppression of emotions" (2018, p. 1). Geek masculinity may present itself culturally as a persecuted identity, but it effectively reifies and promotes normative hypermasculinity.

This omits a lot of other masculinities, and plenty of male-identifying gamers don't see themselves represented or designed for within the spread of hypermasculine game design (Taylor, 2012). Representation of queer, trans, and gay masculinities in videogames is limited and problematic, and representation of straight masculinity is often limited to a violent, hypermasculine ideal that bears little resemblance to most male experience. Condis points out that videogames feature a limited range of masculinities (2018), and Blackburn & Scharrer end their article by supporting "the mission of cultural critics and non-profit organizations actively

involved in a push to reform and re-imagine games" after arguing that violent games are known to "predict narrow views of masculinity" (2018).

One such group of cultural critics analyzes Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012), which shares two developers with *Firewatch*, to "consider how conventional masculinities may be 're-tooled' through subversive or non-normative play practices" (Bell et al., 2015). Their study explores how *The Walking Dead*'s narrative and gameplay mechanics provide players with an opportunity to perform "masculine subjectivities rooted in care, responsibility, and negotiation rather than aggression and domination" (ibid). The player character of Telltale's game is Lee Everett, a man who adopts and cares for a young girl during a zombie apocalypse. Though Lee kills plenty of zombies in the game, it is in his role as Clementine's social father—and the choices the player makes to protect her and teach her how to survive—which "provide opportunities for players to engage non-hegemonic, slightly less 'hyper' constructions of masculinity" (ibid). This performance of careful masculinity is encouraged by the way *The Walking Dead*'s mechanics disrupt normative associations between masculinity, technological mastery, and violence. As Bell et al. explain, "The player doesn't need to be good at 'headshots' or button-mashing to excel at the game; rather, they need to be reflective, empathetic, and protective" (ibid). By rewarding social fathering, the game enables the performance of a masculinity beyond the hyper and provides an example for the kind of game design that can encourage such performances.

Firewatch is a walking simulator, a genre which subverts hypermasculine play in its very form. The term "walking simulator" was originally derogatory, given to works that hardcore gamers

dismissed for their lack of affective interactivity. Walking sims offer an experience of spatial storytelling and exploration, in which players wander around a narratively-rich environment without earning points or necessarily accomplishing tasks. Even within a dynamic narrative structure, the player of a walking sim is often unable to exert agency, change the story, or perform mastery. The genesis of the genre can be traced as far back as *Myst* and includes recent classics like *Journey*, *The Stanley Parable*, and *Gone Home*. Contemporary walking simulators have been coded as feminine within the discourse because of their content, reception, historical valence and mechanics (Kagen, 2017; Ruberg, 2017). If traditional games enable players to live out a fantasy life of performing hypermasculine acts, then walking simulators reestablish an anxious homogeneity of passive non-performance. Their mechanics force a player into relative passivity, a state at odds with the interactive agency prized in videogame design and in the performance of hypermasculinity—two central traits of which are domination and self-reliance (Levant, 2013). The player in a traditional videogame enjoys explicit, participatory interactivity that allows them to have an effect on the system; if hypermasculinity demands activity and accomplishment, then walking simulators are born as a non-hypermasculine game genre.

This is why it's so interesting that *Firewatch* offers a hypermasculine protagonist at the centre of a walking simulator. Henry does not seem like the type of character who belongs in a walking sim. But his macho presentation is belied not only by the genre of the game he inhabits, but by multiple feminizing factors in the text, including the prologue, the talking mechanic, and the way the game constructs the character's (and the player's) paranoid sense of mystery and adventure. As the denouement reveals, the danger that loomed was centered in real world challenges like environmental protection and familial guilt, better solved through conversation and patience than

violent heroics. The next section looks more closely at these game mechanics and the way they invite the performance of a care-oriented masculinity.

The Mechanics of Walking and Talking

In the text-adventure prologue of *Firewatch*, the dialogue tree contains a series of increasingly fraught masculinity tests that Henry fails, setting him up as a hypermasculine character who cannot perform hypermasculinity correctly. The game begins in the late 1970s. Henry meets Julia at a bar and hits on her by asking if she's a student, to which she laughingly responds that she's a professor. Soon, the text tells you, "You *are* Julia's boyfriend," without giving the player (or Henry) the opportunity to make a choice or assert control in any way. The combination of the forced-choice mechanics and the playfully emasculating storyline convey the sense that Henry is attempting to perform hypermasculinity, but prevented from performing it successfully.

This continues throughout the prologue. Henry and Julia are mugged and he feels either immense shame at having failed to protect her, or horror at his violent reaction towards the muggers. Julia eventually becomes sick, and Henry cannot take care of her or their home. After institutionalizing her, the game reads, "You go out to the bar with your old friends. It's not the same. You get the feeling that every wife tells her husband 'If you ever put me in a home like Henry did, I will cut your balls off.' " The only possible response is, "You slowly decide not to see your old friends that much." Underneath the love story, the threat of castration looms, and often manifests in game logic through Henry's lack of options.

The narrative railroading often makes Henry *literally* unable to break away from the hegemonic norm. For example, when Julia receives a dream job offer across the country, Henry has only two choices: "convince her not to take it" or "agree if she commutes back and forth." There is no choice to support her, offer to move with her, express his feelings, or have anything resembling a healthy discussion. His reactions, constrained by the options offered by the text, provide a ludological metaphor for the kind of masculinity expected of him: silent, limited, and anxious.

Yet, early on, when Julia playfully takes pictures of Henry, he's given the choice to "pose and flex like He-Man" or to "frolic like a Victoria's Secret model." You could read this several ways: on one hand, it's another hypermasculinity test, but one Henry can pass by choosing He-Man. The player can breathe a sigh of relief and chooses the first option. But, given the option to perform cartoonish masculinity or mockingly enact femininity, it's important that Henry (and the player) *can* decide to playfully subvert it if they choose. *Firewatch* doesn't offer Henry much choice in the prologue, but it's very interested in the way he acts within the narrow, rigid band of acceptable behaviour offered him. It's a subtle depiction of straight masculinity in the 1980s: constrained to an emotionally unhealthy degree, but flexible within those constraints.

Affirming Henry's masculinity through action becomes increasingly fraught as he's faced with the misery of Julia's early-onset dementia, forced into a (traditionally feminine) caretaker role, and eventually offered the opportunity to escape to nature. He can't do anything about the tragedy of Julia's illness. He can only run away in a manner reminiscent of Sharma's concept of "sexit," a male-coded escape from responsibility and community (2017). Henry hikes to a cabin

in the woods to watch for fires, accompanied only by his pickup truck and his six-pack of beer. This is how the prologue ends.

Firewatch's developers have jokingly referred to the game as a "talking simulator" (Hudson, 2016) and explained that their primary intention was to create a more organic dialogue mechanic. As reviewer Laura Hudson notes, "the dialogue in *Firewatch* isn't just there to just adorn or enrich the game. It *is* the game" (2016). The game's writer, Sean Vanaman, said in an interview that the team created a "new conversation system" that more accurately simulates the experience of an actual conversation: "The conversation is putting itself together dynamically, and that means it can be hyper-specific… There are 10,000 events in the game—speech and everything else—that can happen" (Hudson, 2016). The choices you make in your conversations do, indeed, feel organic and affect your relationship with Delilah.

The way the dialogue trees are designed prevents Henry from having much control over his conversations—an utterly quotidian experience in the real world, but a strangely radical one in a videogame. When he first arrives in his lookout tower, for example, he's exhausted and wants to go to sleep, but Delilah continues to talk. Even if he abruptly tries to cut off the conversation, she won't let him and replies insultingly, "I say you got fired from your job and have finally decided to write your novel. That's the sort of bullshit reason you'll find a man out in the woods." The *Firewatch* dialogue mechanic offers dynamic complexity and deep characterization, partly because Henry cannot control the conversation.

The situation clearly frustrates Henry, as evidenced by another conversation mechanic that returns again and again: the fact that, even when he has conversational choices, what comes out of his mouth is not necessarily what you chose for him to say. For example, you're given the following choice of three phrases with which to approach two skinny-dipping girls during the second game day:

H: I know you're lighting fireworks!/

Quit the fireworks shit or else!/

Please cool it with the fireworks, OK?

If you pick the second answer, you hear a different phrase spoken aloud: "Don't pull any more shit or you're fucked, alright?" The difference might be subtle—you chose the angrier response, so he responded angrily—but his spoken threat is much more aggressive than the one you chose. This contributes to your sense that the lack of control Henry experiences makes him less able to control his own emotions. The mechanic nicely mirrors the experience of anger—what you thought to say in your head is sometimes not what comes out of your mouth—and it supports Henry's structural lack of control over his environment. When having conversations, you cannot control even the words that come out of Henry's mouth, much less anyone else's words, Henry's mission, or what's happening in his world.

The game plays with the tension it creates between the player's desire to control the world (a common videogame expectation and a central tenet of hypermasculinity) and Henry's lack of control and much more nuanced masculinity. In the same scene with the skinny-dippers at the

lake, one of the only interactable objects is a boombox. The paucity of other affectable objects—

and the point-and-click game convention to interact with everything you possibly can because

you don't know what will be important later—means that the player will likely click on the

boombox. But if you touch the girls' boombox, the girls respond with explicitly emasculating

insults.

Lily: Ugh, this guy's creepy, Chelsea!

Chelsea: Ha! You probably have a tiny dick!

L: Chelsea!

C: It's my boombox!

L: Can we go? Let's just swim to the other side of the lake or something.

C: Eww, totally.

L: You're GROSS!

C: You're just some sad man out in the woods!

After the girls say this, Henry has limited options. The game does not let him walk out to them in

the water, nor can he even see them. He can throw their boombox into the water, but that's the

most active response the game allows. The game encourages Henry into an uncomfortable

situation in which his masculinity is insulted and then gives him no ability to retaliate. Forcing

Henry and the player to sit with that unfairness, without recourse to retaliation, is a mechanic that

pushes the player away from a hypermasculine response and into a more contemplative, careful

mode. Afterwards, he walks back to his watchtower to call Delilah on the radio, and she asks:

D: Hey did it go ok?

to which he can respond:

H: It went fine./

It's done./

I hope they drown./

(silence)

While Henry has the option here to respond bitterly ("I hope they drown"), that choice is the only one he is afforded, the only way the game allows him to express himself. This makes his dialogue choices incredibly meaningful, placing the emphasis solidly on Henry's (and the player's) ability to process what is happening emotionally. Part of what makes *Firewatch* so fascinating is that Campo Santo intentionally made it so that Henry couldn't perform his masculinity through action. He can't act—he has to talk. The summer is like one long, therapeutic talking cure after the hell of Julia's diagnosis and deterioration. Rather than complete the work he'd most like to accomplish, like play spy or hunt down a murderer, Henry is stuck on the figurative therapist's couch, working through his feelings. Whereas a player of *The Walking Dead* must practice social fathering to succeed, a player of *Firewatch* must manage the emotional upheavals of two disappointing heterosexual relationships. Henry's inability to say what he wants, to start fights, or to escape his designated path demand the performance of a complex, care-oriented masculinity in order to feel like one has won the game.

The game's visuals situate it in an imaginary "talking simulator" genre as well. The player sees the world first person, from Henry's perspective. First person games tend to show you your

characters' hands and, often, his gun, which serves as a phallic referent. But in *Firewatch*, you don't have a gun—you have a walkie-talkie. You don't get to shoot—you just get to talk. The traditional hypermasculine symbol is replaced by another, one with more complex affordances. As animator James Benson quips, "*Firewatch* is basically *Doom* except the monsters are things to talk to Delilah about" (Fyfe, 2015). In other words, *Firewatch* explicitly repurposes the visual language of a First Person Shooter in order to produce a "talking simulator."

The game further unsettles expectations by suggesting danger everywhere, then subverting that expectation. Salter & Blodgett point out that straight, white male avatars "are often presented as marginalized…literally, game worlds where white men are a persecuted 'minority' " (2017, p. 75). *Firewatch* plays with this concept by offering the player a typical game world filled with clues and suspicious situations, and Henry appears to be the threatened hero who must figure out what is wrong. Henry finds surveillance equipment and a transcript suggesting someone is listening to his conversations with Delilah. He finds a fenced area with government insignia and imagines that government agents are watching him. Mysterious campers and camp sites appear during his hikes, but they seem to have been abandoned. Deep in a cave, his radio connection with Delilah cuts out and he finds a child-sized skeleton. In the background, the threat of a wildfire grows, ratcheting up the narrative tension.

But the game then subverts all its tropes by delivering a realistic rather than a satisfying-by-game-logic denouement. The child-sized skeleton that Henry found in the cave belonged to a child named Brian, and it wasn't a murder; it was a rock-climbing accident. Brian was a nerdy kid who loved fantasy novels and RPGs but followed his father, Ned, to camp out in the wilds of

Wyoming. You find some of Brian's books in an abandoned camp. Delilah remembers him as a weak, unathletic teenager who shouldn't have been out in the woods, and she implies that Ned, a previous lookout with sharp cheekbones and handsome, chiseled features, pushed his son to athletic feats beyond his abilities. After Brian's death, Ned disappeared into the woods. It turns out that the many suspicious events Henry has observed were caused by Ned, whose grief and loneliness had driven him near insanity. Ned eventually confesses this to Henry via cassette tape and retreats further into the woods, leaving behind a sad, empty campsite and a frustrated protagonist.

Ned and Brian function as mirrors of Henry both narratively and ludologically. Narratively, they portray a parable of unhappy hypermasculinity. Brian, the son, represents Henry's physical ineptitude; both Brian and Henry spend months in the woods, trying and failing to perform hypermasculinity like a traditional videogame protagonist, as their identities are more complicated than that constraint allows. And Ned is now, like Henry, fleeing a family tragedy and doing poorly with it, without the ability to process his emotions in a healthy way. Ludologically, both Ned and Brian are portrayed as having a lot more interactive agency than Henry. The kind of interactivity they seem to have would be possible in another game, but not this one. Ned belongs in a conspiratorial spy-themed puzzle game, with all the traps and eavesdropping missions he manages. Alternately, Brian would fit into a platformer involving running, jumping, and finding caves (maybe as save points). His death is the cave is a chilling analogue of the million unimportant deaths that protagonists of those games experience, here made tragic by context. Ned and Brian's ephemera make it clear how much they were able to alter and control, while the game only allows Henry to observe what they left behind.

Hard Work, Hardcore Play and Genre Bending

According to the developers, forced inaction is exactly the point. A month after *Firewatch* was released, Campo Santo ombudsman Duncan Fyfe defended the game's ending and general mission against players who expressed disappointment. Fyfe acknowledged that Henry's job is not the most exciting. That said, Fyfe explained:

[i]t's hard to say if Henry is… unsuited to his job, because he barely does it. His job is literally to sit in a chair and tell someone if he sees a fire, but, enabled by Delilah, he spends his office hours trying to scare teens and break into government facilities… there's always something more desirable than just sitting in a chair; there's always something more desirable than providing full-time care for your wife who has Alzheimer's. Henry might be a chronic procrastinator—leaves wife for job, leaves job for adventure—but everyone in *Firewatch* has something to do that they aren't doing. Everyone's avoiding what's hard. (2016)

Particularly interesting is Fyfe's use of the word "hard," and the way in which the cultural valence of "hard" relates to the games we consider "hardcore." To rehearse the earlier argument, games re-inscribe capitalist paradigms, training the worker to connect personal satisfaction with assigned tasks (Stallabrass, 1993). Games thus serve to reinforce hierarchies, offer an opportunity to perform identity, and make the player a better worker by priming him to respond positively to prizes and feel pressured to complete tasks. This re-inscription grows more complex in light of the association between masculine performance and labor, as traditional masculinity

defines itself in relation to work. Games that do not demand traditional ludological work from the player can therefore feel emasculating.

In gamer culture, this concept is reflected by the juxtaposition between hardcore and casual gaming. Hardcore games typically are characterized by the threat of sudden (and sometimes perma-) death, and they demand a lot of skill. *Firewatch*, which features limited agency, no need for skill, and no player death at all, is the opposite of a hardcore game. Chang, Constantino and Soderman invoke Kubik (2012), Vanderhoef (2013) and Chess (2014) to argue that "the hardcore-versus-casual divide is highly gendered, where hardcore gamers feminize casual games in order to masculinize hardcore forms of play" (Chang et al., 2017, p. 113). This gendering, they suggest, draws its charge from the connection between masculinity and hard work:

If, as Juul (2013, p. 81) claims, many games draw upon a Protestant work ethic in how they negotiate personal success and failure with respect to hard work and a commitment to self-fashioning, then permadeath games have a particularly pronounced understanding of the relationship between labour and 'salvation' that draws on the long culture-historical association of self-fashioning with manliness that further raises the material stakes of success and failure… the machismo often associated with permadeath games offers a compensatory fantasy wherein masculine skill, physical coordination, talent and hard-nosed stick-to-itiveness create a space wherein a Protestant work ethic still obtains, despite unpredictable working conditions that suggest otherwise. (Chang et al., 2017, p. 112)

If mechanics like permadeath make a game a hardcore hypermasculinity test, the mechanics of a walking simulator do the opposite. In a walking simulator like *Firewatch*, you cannot die. As Bonnie Ruberg has suggested, games in which a player *cannot* die provide the opposite experience to games in which a permanent death beckons from around every corner; playing a game with permadeath re-inscribes hardcore straight male identity, and playing a game with "permalife" bespeaks a queer kind of gaming (2017).

So, when Fyfe called *Firewatch* "hard," the word is charged with opposing valences: one from gaming, one from reality. Fyfe used "hard" primarily in the sense of emotional labour—a stereotypically feminine and uncompensated type of work (Guy & Newman, 2004). He was pointing out that it's hard to face the boring but vital challenge of caring for a sick loved one. It's hard to endure a summer of uneventfulness in order to care for a natural resource. It's hard to do nothing. The labour Henry actually performs—developing a relationship with Delilah, thinking through his past and returning home to face his problems—is quite difficult emotional work, but, in gaming terms, it's the opposite of hardcore play. In inviting the player to engage with Henry's hard-but-not-hardcore work, the game incentivizes the player to perform a masculinity oriented towards caring, waiting, healing and listening.

As Jack Halberstam (2011) and Jesper Juul (2013) argue, failure experienced in a videogame speaks more towards a reevaluation of failure than a mistake in the conventional sense. As Halberstam suggests, "someone might actually want to fail, because they're so dissatisfied with a particular social context" (Halberstam et al., 2017, p. 202). A game which allowed Henry to uncover a mysterious plot, save the princess, and shoot some enemies might have felt more

satisfying, but it wouldn't encourage a reevaluation of masculinity and labour. By forcing Henry to fail at his ostensible work—catching bad guys—*Firewatch* invites the player into a contemplative space about what kinds of work matter, or should matter more.

The question of what kind of work matters depends on the genre of videogame, as different genres reward different values and skillsets. We have been considering *Firewatch* as a walking simulator, a genre associated with boredom, femininity, and casual gaming (Kagen, 2017), but the game also draws from other genres, particularly survival horror. On its marketing website, Campo Santo simply calls it a "mystery" ("Firewatch," 2016) and "a single-player first-person video game" ("Tell me about Firewatch," 2016). By avoiding easy categorization, *Firewatch* manipulates player assumptions about the kind of experience and storyline they might expect.

The misdirection that *Firewatch* manages echoes the elision between the walking simulator and survival horror genres which made *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) so powerful. *Gone Home* presents itself, in tone and mechanics, like survival horror—a genre characterized by "[l]earning to run, or unlearning to always fight" (Taylor, 2009, p. 46). In survival horror games, your character is typically underpowered in relation to their surroundings. Some monsters are un-killable, so success relies on running and hiding. The performance of masculinity in survival horror is therefore more complex than in other genres, and "the men of [survival horror] frequently contrast with the assured, unquestioning, militarized hypermasculinity regarded as standard across the industry; instead, they are ordinary, flawed, even neurotic to the point of psychosis" (Kirkland, 2009, p. 178).

When you have no way to defend yourself and don't know what kind of monster might be lurking, a survival horror game provides a very similar experience to a walking simulator. Compare the first half hour of *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* (Capcom, 2017) with the entirety of *Gone Home*. Before you acquire weaponry in *RE7*, both games feature the player character wandering around a creepy, unknown, old house, clicking on objects to examine them and feeling threatened by sinister tonal clues. In *RE7*, of course, the unknown threat eventually reveals itself to be demons, cannibals, monstrous insects, your possessed wife and a host of other horrors.

This suggests that one main distinction between walking sims and survival horror is the justification of the player's trepidation. Feeling terror while playing a survival horror game can be retroactively justified for the hypermasculine player by the arrival of a monster. It's ok to be scared if what you fear is so utterly gruesome; it's not ok to have been scared if it turns out you were just learning to know your sister better. The other distinction is the differing mechropolitics (Phillips, 2015) of the two genres—a character can die in survival horror. But this, too, functions as a justification of fear, such that the player has a defensibly unpleasant outcome to avoid.

Firewatch shares a similar play with genre (and dependence on its subversion) with *Gone Home*. As *Gone Home* developer Steve Gaynor writes, "*Gone Home* is like *Firewatch* in a house" (Fyfe, 2015). Like its predecessor, *Firewatch* uses the conventions of survival horror to create a sense of creeping dread, only to upend them with a conclusion that denies the retroactive hypermasculine justification of a serious violent threat. By repurposing the tone and mechanics of a survival horror game, both games offer a commentary on the dangers, physical and

emotional, of the performance of gender in non-videogame life. But if a player assumed that the games would veer towards horror, as their tonal cues suggested they might, they could feel misled.

While this article is not attempting an ethnography or a survey of player reactions, I want to end by glossing and contextualizing an example of some gamers' negative reaction to the ending of *Firewatch*. PewDiePie, an extremely controversial and popular YouTuber who has made anti-Semitic and racist Let's Play comments in multiple videos, can be seen here as a good example of the way *Firewatch* has been received by hypermasculine gaming culture. After he concluded his playthrough, PewDiePie said he liked the game overall but expressed his dissatisfaction with the ending:

Lame! Is there a different ending where she's actually staying? Cuz that was pretty disappointing. What the fuck was that ending? That was so bad. How is that a fucking ending? 'Oh, by the way, nothing changed. And a kid died.' What? I'm really upset right now… What, I didn't flirt with her enough? Like, what was the fucking problem?… **I feel like we accomplished nothing here today**. If he's just going to go back to Julia, like, what, that doesn't make any sense. And, like, the story was that a kid died, that at least is sad, but… **it didn't lead up to anything**." (PewDiePie FIREWATCH [Reupload], my emphasis) [3].

As a reflection of the norms of traditional gaming culture, PewDiePie's reaction illustrates the connection between affective interactivity, hypermasculine notions of labour as solely accomplishment, and Delilah as the game's (disappointing) princess. Since accomplishment

maps to hypermasculine identity, it forces the player to reevaluate the kind of masculinity they have been performing.

Conclusion

In subverting the expectations of a traditional videogame, *Firewatch* delivers an experience that the majority of players do find enjoyable. Reviews overall are good, particularly from critics— on Metacritic in December 2017, *Firewatch* stood at 81/100 from critics, 6.9/10 from users (Firewatch for PC reviews, 2016). It does so by offering a complex portrayal of masculine experience instead of a hypermasculine hero's journey, appropriating the language of toxic geek masculinity and repurposing it towards a performance of how to behave healthily in a disappointing heterosexual relationship.

The ending subverts generic expectations by denying the player their princess. Delilah gets on the helicopter before the player arrives, whether they ask her to wait or not. Henry can call her from the radio in her lookout tower, and, in a conversation that feels like an epilogue, Henry and Delilah square their story.

Delilah: So taking stock, we found out an old lookout killed his only son and decided to become a lonely hermit.
Henry: And we prevented…one fire?
D: Basically started another.
H: Okay so that's a wash.

The sum total of their work—their efforts to protect the forest, their attempts to solve an intricate mystery, even their relationship with each other—has resulted in nothing. A total failure of productivity and hypermasculinity. If we see Henry as a man and not a videogame man, however, Henry has done quite a lot, and the player has experienced and embodied that growth alongside him. He has not succeeded by the standards of hypermasculinity, but, the game argues, that is not the only masculinity that has to matter.

Endnotes

[1] Fyfe (2016) mentions screenwriter Max Landis and (problematic) YouTuber PewDiePie, but the user reviews on Metacritic provide many other examples.

[2] It should be noted that, though geek masculinity in the 80's might have represented itself as a marginalized identity fighting back against the predominant, jock-valorizing masculine norm, works like *Revenge of the Nerds* (Kanew, 1984) illustrate the extent to which misogyny has always been a central part of the identity.

[3] This is a re-upload of the original PewDiePie stream, as the latter no longer exists online. A year after PewDiePie reviewed *Firewatch*, he used a racial slur during his livestreamed playthrough of a different game. In response, Sean Vanaman demanded that the YouTuber remove his *Firewatch* stream (which had been viewed 5.7 million times at that point) and issued a DMCA claim to make sure he did so (Hernandez, 2017). In the months after the incident,

Firewatch was review-bombed by players who mostly had not played the game (Hood, 2017; Chalk, 2017). The negative reviews sometimes refer specifically to the DMCA controversy and are sometimes characterized by complaints about the game's walking sim characteristics.

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