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Trash or Treasure: A proposed typology of bad videogames

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Abstract

Although critically maligned and popularly derided videogames are a persistent part of gaming culture, scholarly work has scarcely acknowledged the different ways in which games are understood as bad. This article disambiguates bad videogames by providing a critical overview of the various manifestations of badness in games. Through examining a series of case studies, we propose a framework for understanding how a videogame can be perceived as bad, focusing on presumed developer intentions and reception by players and game journalists. We chart four distinct yet interconnected categories of bad videogames: So-Bad-It's-Bad, So-Bad-It's-Good, Bad-in-Context, and Intentionally Bad. Rather than identifying specific sources of badness, these categories aim to clarify how badness impacts audience understanding and appreciation of videogames. At the same time, by focusing on the bad, uninspiring, and ugly side of videogames we take a political stance against the typical game studies canon by expanding the archive of what games and play experiences are conceived as legitimate and worthy of scholarly attention.

Keywords

bad videogames, paragaming, bad media, popular discourse, videogame reviews, player reception, developer intention

Introduction

In Alamogordo, New Mexico, underneath a layer of cement and debris lay piles of unsold, unplayed cartridges of the 1982 *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial* (hereafter *E.T.*) (Atari, Inc.) videogame adaptation for the Atari 2600. Why? Atari failed to meet estimated sales and reviews for the game were overwhelmingly negative. As a result, Atari attempted to bury *E.T.* from the public. Since then, *E.T.* has been hailed as one of the 'worst videogames of all-time', with some scholars and game historians

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even attributing the 1984 videogame crash to *E.T.'s* remarkable failure (Guins, 2009: 346). Generally speaking, *E.T.* is considered a 'bad' game, to the point at which its badness has enshrined its legacy in popular culture (Penn, 2014). In comedian Conan O'Brian's Clueless Gamer (2013), an online poll saw *E.T.* as the game viewers most wanted the host to play. After making fun of the Atari's bulky and old-fashioned design, Conan loaded up *E.T.* and began to navigate the green and blue landscapes on screen. When stuck endlessly falling into a hole, Conan laughed and quipped: 'this just simulates the cycles of depression'. The studio audience laughed in unison. If the game is so bad,[1] why was Conan and his audience laughing and appearing to have a good time?

The rhetoric 'So-Bad-It's-Good' comes into mind here. We find pleasure, amusement, and fun in something so awful that it is somehow 'good' – or at the very least, entertaining (Sconce, 1995). On initial inspection, *E.T.* should be everything players despise about videogames – bad graphics, frustrating gameplay, a weak narrative. Yet, it succeeded as a source of pleasure and fun for Conan's audience. But this is not the case for all 'bad' videogames. Consider *The Day Before* (Fntastic, 2023), a multiplayer survival action game so awful that its online servers only ran for 45 days before shutting down and becoming permanently unplayable (Yin-Poole, 2024). Or look at the highly anticipated *Duke Nukem Forever* (Gearbox Software, 2011), which failed to live-up to a 14 year wait between titles. Whereas a So-Bad-It's-Good game produces a pleasurable experience, *The Day Before* and *Duke Nukem Forever* generally evoke sentiments that correspond with their bad reputations.

The juxtaposition between playing a game like *E.T.* and *The Day Before* reveals complexity surrounding the experience of badness in gaming contexts. Badness manifests in many, often contradictory, ways and it is the purpose of this article to outline and explore these manifestations in more detail. In doing so, we create a typology of four categories: 1. So-Bad-It's-Bad, 2. So-Bad-It's-Good, 3. Bad-in-Context, and 4. Intentionally Bad. We outline each category in turn yet acknowledge the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of videogames and player experiences, with some games relating to multiple categories. Indeed, as we explain in proceeding sections, these categories are better understood as a spectrum with specific anchoring points as opposed to a strict and formal system (see Figure 1).

To date, there has been no concrete exploration of the diverse and multiple experiences of badness within the context of videogames. Most previous scholarship focuses on So-Bad-that-It's-Good experiences, omitting other accounts from their analysis (Flynn-Jones, 2015; Juul, 2009). As a result, this paper offers a foundational as opposed to exhaustive review of bad games, developing an initial understanding of the complicated and multifaceted connections between badness and audience reception in videogames. It is not driven by empirical research but speaks to an epistemological unpacking of how audiences *know* a game is bad and the multiple ways this knowing can be understood. To explain each category, we draw on a range of paradigmatic case studies that epitomize the category. Here, we utilize videogame reviews amongst other online sources to understand how badness is often experiential and subjective while operating in a broader cultural context. These sources were selected because they illustrated extensive (although not necessarily universal) audience opinions and outlooks.

Before moving onto analysis, we explore what we mean by 'badness' within the context of this paper, drawing on existing work in literature, art, and media studies as well as game studies. Here, we attempt to situate (rather than define) what it means for a title to be considered bad within game culture. This addresses both industry standards and broader thinking around audience reception. In many ways, the typologies we develop could potentially move beyond the realm of videogames towards other media. However, to maintain the scope of our research and focus within our analysis, we only discuss gaming-related case studies.

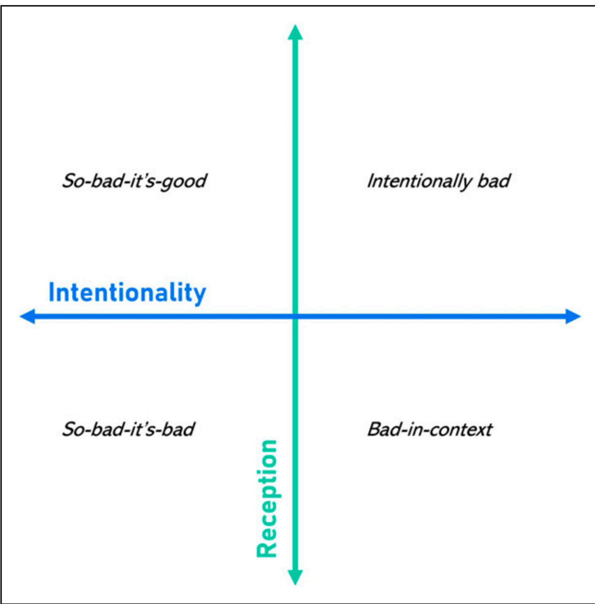

Figure 1. Bad videogame typology graph.

What Is a 'Bad' Videogame?

Despite what the subheading above suggests, this section is not concerned with strictly defining what makes a videogame bad. For one, the authors do not believe that any artistic media piece can be objectively bad. Taste differs from person to person across a multiplicity of diverse social, cultural, moral, and political contexts (see: Bad-in-Context). This work does not aim to govern the standards of badness. Rather, our intentions are to examine the debates, conditions, and contexts that surround supposedly bad media and videogames more specifically. In doing so, we attempt to situate our own account of badness to contextualize and elevate our taxonomies in the proceeding sections. We unpick and utilize previous scholarly accounts of badness alongside ongoing game studies literature to outline how 'bad' videogames are perceived, experienced, and responded to.

For the most part, badness in media has been studied in relation to film, music, art, and literature (Dyck and Johnson, 2017; Firth, 2013; MacDowell and McCulloch, 2019; MacDowell and Zborowski, 2014; Sconce, 1995). Here, badness is linked to flaws and failures. A presumably bad book is full of typographical errors, plot holes, and sloppy dialogue. Likewise, a bad song is off beat, out of tune, unnecessarily repetitive, or lyrically juvenile. These flaws are characterized by audiences and, at times, critics as 'failed intentions', where the work does not meet the standard set by the industry or satisfy the perceived objectives of the creator(s) (Dyck and Johnson, 2017: 282). Readers, listeners, or viewers understand what constitutes good, or at least not bad, media, which becomes subverted when a work is perceived as awful.

Likewise, people recognize flaws when they play videogames. In many ways, bad games are labelled as such through their failure to meet player or reviewer standards. Such failures may manifest as ugly graphics, janky controls, incoherent narratives, technological inconsistencies (such as glitches), or even a 'toxic' player community. Videogame development is multidisciplinary and videogames themselves are multimedia experiences. As such, critics commonly evaluate

videogames using rubrics to distinguish criteria such as graphics, audio, and gameplay. Critically, while other media formats include the narrative, aural, and visual elements of videogames, the interactive nature of videogames distinguishes them. Game designer Stephen Swink (2008: 35), for instance, understands how gameplay is formed on a 'feedback loop of interactivity'. In this way, games, as interactive systems, are not solely evaluated based on the values of linear media but are also considered from perspectives of interaction design (such as usability). Most of the time, videogames are designed with 'player narcissism' in mind, whereby developers 'satisfy player desires by crafting systems tailored to those desires' (Wilson and Sicart, 2010: 41). Games that fail to meet players' desires can become labelled as bad as they often do not provoke an enjoyable or entertaining interactive experience.

It is also worth noting that these flaws are not merely experiential. Indeed, they all act within a large 'evaluative context' (Firth, 2013: 19). Badness is tied to broader cultural receptions alongside playful experiences during gameplay. As such, notions of badness are intimately intertwined with wider structures of taste, value, and capital (Bourdieu, 2013). Put simply, badness is inherently political which, in turn, legitimizes what is considered 'good' and demonizes the 'bad'. Certain tastes reflect and reinstate a high level of economic and cultural capital (Stewart, 2017: 39).

Drawing on Bourdieu's work, Mia Consalvo (2009) develops the notion of 'game capital' speaking to the tastes and knowledge of the gaming community. Like other forms of capital, gaming capital is given to those (both individual and collective) with knowledge, skill, and expertise. Game journalists and games critics can be considered to hold game capital as it is them who outline 'what to play, how, and why' (Nieborg and Sihvonen, 2009: 3). Through game reviews, game journalists outline what is considered good, bad, and mediocre. Often, these reviews quantify a game's standard through a numeric score out of 5 or 10. This tradition has roots back to early game review magazines such as *Nintendo Power* in the 1980s that used rubrics similar to those used today (Rating System Explanation, 1989). In this way, games journalists act as 'cultural intermediaries': professional experts, or 'tastemakers', in a position to generate, appropriate, and negotiate cultural value as they mediate between institutions and consumers (Nieborg and Foxman, 2023: 63).[2] That is, they can govern the standards of taste in the game industry. As we outline in the next section, looking at these reviews can help us unpack why certain videogames are deemed bad in different ways.

However, the voices and opinions of players must be acknowledged, too. Santos et al. (2019: 19), for instance, acknowledges the difficulty in 'bridging subjective views from experts (the few) vs. amateurs (the crowd)' as these views may not always align. For instance, when *Assassin's Creed 2* (Ubisoft Montréal) was released in 2009, James Sterling's review in the popular gaming website Destructoid gave the game a score of 4.5 out of 10, describing the gameplay as 'mind-numbingly repetitive' with 'piss-poor' animation (Sterling, 2009; Ubisoft Montréal, 2009). However, this review contrasted with the opinions of many gamers, resulting in online backlash and disagreement (Chapman, 2009). This example displays how legitimacy and capital are very contentious when it comes to videogames, as subjective playful experiences impact the evaluation of quality.

Standards of good and bad are also deeply tied to the game industry. Triple-A studios, defined by high production and marketing budgets, reflect mainstream videogame production and distribution and have historically policed the "boundaries of how games 'should' look, perform, and play" (Wistow, 2024). Keogh (2023a: 16) suggests that Triple-A produces a 'narrowed, top-tier, hegemonic mode of resource-intensive and technologically impressive modus operandi of commercial videogame production normalized as videogame production'. Big publishers with large budgets and development teams, such as Electronic Arts and Blizzard, articulate certain norms and values that videogames are conventionally expected to perform, including technological prowess, realism, high resolution graphics and sound, cohesive storytelling, ergonomic gameplay, and so on. Thus, a bad or

failed game is often defined as such because it does not meet these standards. Additionally, console manufacturers and digital platform owners play a role in enshrining and enforcing standards by imposing certification requirements that must be met before a game can be published on their platforms (Anthropy, 2012: 32). These standards originated to curtail the waves of 'bad' videogames (such as *E.T.*) that contributed to the videogame industry downturn of the 1980s (Cunningham, 2021).

At the same time, Triple-A studios and big publishers no longer hold a monopoly on cultural legitimacy over the game industry (Anthropy, 2012; Keogh, 2023a). In fact, recent years have shown a growing distrust with Triple-A game companies, as players see them as risk-averse and thus reliant on bland standardized experiences and continuous sequels of popular titles at the expense of creative innovation (Whitson, 2019: 790). Further, increasingly common monetization practices like micro-transactions, battle-pass subscriptions, and loot boxes have been described as 'predatory' resulting in players feeling overcharged and manipulated (Petrovskaya and Zendle, 2022: 1076). Games created by smaller, more amateur creators known as independent or indie developers have come to be regarded as a core source of innovation and counterbalance that strays away from Triple-A tastes and values (Lipkin, 2019). Take, for example, *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013), a popular indie title made initially by a single person. The game situates the player as a dystopian border checkpoint agent, forcing them to make decisions steeped with political and philosophical underpinnings. *Papers, Please* demonstrates a willingness to critically and playfully engage in territory seldomly treaded by more conservative Triple-A titles. Recent statistics show that it has sold over five million copies since its release with an average of half a million sales per year (Alder, 2024). However, both Triple-A and indie studios can develop bad games. The trend of Triple-A studios setting the benchmark for what a good game should be has begun to falter with growing scepticism from players. However, just because indie games are often more innovative and experimental does not necessarily mean that players regard them as good games.

A Proposed Typology of Bad Videogames

As discussed in the preceding section, bad has myriad contexts and understandings when applied to videogames. However, despite any inherent subjectivity and the uncertainty of a single metric or definition of a bad videogame (or perhaps as a result of these factors), we can distinguish types of bad videogames. For example, an audience sharing a laugh at Conan O'Brien playing *E.T.* stands apart from frustrated players applying for refunds en masse after the notoriously bug-ridden *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020) launch. As mentioned above, badness in the context of videogames has yet to be studied at length within academic circles, with the exception of Flynn-Jones's (2015) investigation of bad games that herself and other players find enjoyable or at least funny. However, outside of academia, bad games continue to be of interest as evidenced by the popular press (Greenhut, 2023), games journalism (Rogers, 2018; Stuart et al., 2015), and online video essays (McMuscles, 2022; videogamedunkey, 2023) that explore a host of bad games. Arguably, these examples underscore the importance and interest in the subject and thus the need for a more formal foundation for understanding badness in games.

Thus, we propose the following typology of bad videogames: So-Bad-It's-Bad, So-Bad-It's-Good, Bad-in-Context, and Intentionally Bad. Again, this typology does not seek to describe the specific elements or sources of a game's badness. For example, it does not distinguish games with bad graphics from games with bad storylines. Instead, it categorizes the functions and results of badness. This includes games that have been badly reviewed or have a bad reputation (which can change over time). In other words, this typology describes how badness impacts audience

understanding and appreciation of videogames. We acknowledge that a degree of fluidity exists among these types as some games may be imperfect fits, overlap with multiple types, or potentially shift types over time. This is natural, as our understanding of bad involves subjectivity. We can expect fluctuation as tastes and contexts evolve. Nonetheless, we believe the proposed typology contributes a useful basis for disambiguating types of bad videogames and we welcome future work that expands on this initial foundation. It also expands on 'the kinds of games and players that end up counting as real' by drawing attention to tastes and experiences that, for the most part, have gone unnoticed in game studies scholarship (Consalvo and Paul, 2019: 120).

Our typology charts the relationship between presumed developer intentions and broader audience receptions while noting the processes and dynamics that exist in between. Using a number of case studies, we tease out each category along axes of reception and intention (see Figure 1). On the vertical axis 'reception' speaks to how a videogame is reacted to and understood by players and audiences. We address this by looking at reviews from games critics and broader player receptions such as online user scores and community discussions. We use these accounts to illustrate how a game was received by players and critics.

On the horizontal axis is 'intentionality'. This addresses the standards set by the game industry and game culture more broadly as well as the presumed ambitions and intentions developers had when crafting the work (Dyck and Johnson, 2017; MacDowell and McCulloch, 2019: 465). While we cannot claim to definitively know the developer or publisher's intent of the text, we address what it *presumably* was supposed to achieve and potentially did not. We find these presumptions in the traces that developers and publishers leave behind by looking at store pages or marketing. From looking at a game's cover, screenshots, gameplay clips, as well as public developer commentary, budget, and previous work, audiences can speculate when a game is supposed to be taken seriously or present itself as polished.

It is also worth noting that developers and publishers may have divergent intentions. Developers may aspire for critical success and 'creative fulfilment' (Keogh, 2023b: 1), whereas publishers tend to 'follow the money' (Nieborg, 2021: 180). Therefore, these intentions can range from commercial success to artistic accomplishment. Of course, this is understood on a case-by-case basis as different games have different intentions related to their genre and context. For instance, an educational game made for children may not be created for the same purpose as a narrative heavy title by a Triple-A developer.

The temporal contexts of reception and intention are also important as time plays a significant role in the case studies that we provide. This is particularly vital for So-Bad-It's-Good and Bad-in-Context as the reception of certain titles seems to shift from the period of their initial release. Indeed, what is considered 'bad' upon release may garner a cult following over time as its flaws become ironic or Camp when taken into a new context. Notably, when we plot a title using our framework, it is situated at the time of writing. Of course, reception changes. It is not definitive.

Our typology is composed from the quadrants of the graph in Figure 1. Each quadrant reflects a different combination of reception and perceived intentions.

So-Bad-It's-Bad

The *Alone in the Dark* series of games, with its debut in 1992, pioneered the survival horror videogame genre that remains popular today. Despite the success of its early entries, the series has experienced a precipitous decline in popularity and critical reception, culminating with the 2015 title *Alone in the Dark: Illumination* (Pure FPS, 2015). Upon release, players and critics lambasted the game for its generic art direction, stale mission design, unclear user experience, and rampant

technical problems. *Illumination* plunged the series to its lowest depths with a 19% critic score and a 1.3% user score on the review aggregate site Metacritic, amounting to what the site labels 'Overwhelming Dislike' (Alone in the Dark: Illumination Reviews, nd). On the popular digital game storefront Steam, several user reviews specifically mention refunding or attempting to refund the purchase of the game. One Steam user, Goro Meowjima, left a review summarizing that they would 'rather shove a burning hot metal rod up my urethra than play another 5 minutes of this game'. They had 24 minutes of total playtime recorded by Steam (Goro Meowjima, 2024).

Here we have a game that is So-Bad-It's-Bad. Games of this type are just plain bad, as indicated by negative audience reception and failed developer intentions. No notable faction argues in favour of appreciating the game. Note that this type of badness does not relate to discoverability. A game that has not been experienced by a significant audience is not necessarily bad, just unknown. So-Bad-It's-Bad describes an unenjoyable experience that cannot be salvaged without modifying the game itself. Players find these games terrible yet lacking the excessive signifiers of badness that can produce comedy or other sources of positive reception (see: So-Bad-It's-Good).

One might expect *Alone in the Dark: Illumination*, a game ranked among the 10 worst of all time on Metacritic, to land in So-Bad-It's-Good territory, yet user reviews on Steam and Metacritic reveal a near total lack of appreciation. Recorded playthroughs and screenshots of the game help reveal why. While the game earned terrible marks, watching the game in action is unremarkable. The art is bland but does not stand out as atrocious. Common technical issues involve interface issues that frustrate players but are difficult for spectators to notice. The YouTube video 'Let's Play – *Alone In the Dark Illumination*' by the popular channel LetsPlay (2015) demonstrates this. The narrators describe their experience while playing and quickly encounter issues with synchronizing a network game (the game is intended as an online multiplayer experience). One of the players complains that some of the controls do not work correctly on their gamepad. They have to reload the game multiple times before they can play for a stretch uninhibited by technical issues that are debilitating to the players but largely transparent to spectators (and thus not the source of much entertainment). When one player dies, they have to watch and can no longer participate or influence the game. At points, the HUD interface that indicates key info like ammo and health disappears for one of the players. None of this makes for an engaging spectator experience compared to the vividly apparent transgressions that more popular bad games demonstrate, such as the infamous *Big Rigs: Over the Road Racing* (hereafter *Big Rigs*) with trucks that defy physics as they clip through buildings and drive straight up hillsides, punctuated by the grammatically incorrect victory message 'You're Winner !' that provided fertile material for gaming memes (Stellar Stone, 2003). On the contrary, So-Bad-It's-Bad games exude a quiet but thorough badness with low entertainment value for players and spectators.

So-Bad-It's-Good

When it was initially released, the survival horror game *Deadly Premonition* (Access Games, Gevo Entertainment, 2010) received polarizing reviews. On the one hand, it was claimed to be so awful that it will convince you to sell your console, scoring a mere 2/10 by Erik Brudvig (2012) from IGN. On the other hand, some reviewers hailed it as a masterpiece, with one critic from Destructoid suggesting that '*Deadly Premonition* is beautiful. No, not graphically. Graphically, it's atrocious. It's a beautiful trainwreck' (Sterling, 2010). In the same article, the reviewer goes on to remark that 'there is absolutely nothing in this industry that can compare to how weird and wonderful the whole experience is' (Sterling, 2010). Many players agree, and *Deadly Premonition* has become a 'cult classic' within certain spheres of the gaming community. One of the most famous cutscenes in the

game features the protagonist, FBI special Agent Francis York Morgan, eating what he calls a ‘sinners’ sandwich’ consisting of turkey, strawberry jam, and cereal. The bizarreness of the scene and sandwich has become a well-established joke with some fans claiming to have ‘tried it several times’ (Larkson9999, 2019). Indeed, it is this bizarre storyline alongside its uninspiring gameplay (unresponsive controls, constantly recycled animations, and repetitive combat sequences) that players find enjoyable. A user on Metacritic suggests that *Deadly Premonition* is ‘the best good bad game of all time’ (Bipolarnemesis, 2023). It is awful yet amazing, bad yet good, completely flawed but also adored. Here, we have So-Bad-It’s-Good: there have been failed intentions but positive audience receptions.

Games popular press has generated many articles categorizing titles which are So-Bad-It’s-Good, such as ‘15 Games That Are So Laughably Bad They’re Good’ on The Gamer (Valente, 2017) and ‘8 Games That Are The Definition Of So Bad, They’re Good’ on Game Rant (Jurjovich, 2022). Players, too, create their own lists with the subreddit R/gamingsuggestions featuring multiple posts of users putting forth their So-Bad-It’s-Good recommendations (SoapSabaozinha, 2022; Veilstrom, 2023). The titles included tend to be characterized as ridiculous and laughable. They have an absurd quality to them where they transcend So-Bad-It’s-Bad through excess and transgression against industry standards. Swordfish Studios’ third person shooting game *50 Cent: Blood on Sand* (2009) features across journalist and player So-Bad-It’s-Good lists alike, citing its ridiculous plot line where American rapper 50 Cent takes on a terrorist organization while an assortment of the artist’s top tracks loops comically in the background. Gaining a similar cult following as *Deadly Premonition*, fans of *50 Cent: Blood on Sand* note that the title has ‘a certain charm’ despite its mediocre review scores (Breslin, 2023). This charm lies in its silliness and stupidity. So-Bad-It’s-Good games are often silly and stupid; they are distinguished by ‘failure, extravagance, alternativeness, and ridiculousness’ (Wistow, 2024: 6).

This category has the most previous academic scholarship surrounding it. For years, film, music, and art scholars have been researching the ‘brilliant in the bad’ (MacDowell and McCulloch, 2019; Sconce, 1995; Zborowski and MacDowell, 2013). In his canonical text, ‘Trashing’ the Academy’ Jeffery Sconce (1995) coined the term ‘paracinema’ to describe a counter and subcultural group of film viewers who take pleasure in watching bad films. Here, the enjoyment hinges on the text’s badness where viewers revel in its failures (MacDowell and Zborowski, 2014). Looking at the immensely popular (and notably awful) The Room (2003); MacDowell and Zborowski (2014: 15) suggest that the film ‘fails to achieve basic levels of coherence – in this case, logically, temporally, and affectively – that thousands of examples of popular narrative filmmaking have taught us to take for granted’. In its subversion of typical conventions, *The Room* becomes enjoyable to watch as it produces a sensation of bizarreness which makes it interesting and engaging (Dyck and Johnson, 2017: 283). Viewers are left wondering ‘*How could someone think this is a good idea?*’ (Dyck and Johnson, 2017: 283 emphasis theirs).

The same argument can be made for So-Bad-It’s-Good videogames like *Deadly Premonition and 50 Cent: Blood on Sand.* While games are interacted with in a very different way than films, there are still certain artistic, aesthetic, and affective expectations on behalf of the player. For example, good games are regarded to be responsive, smooth, and ergonomic to play (Swink, 2008). So-Bad-It’s-Good games, like paracinema, subvert and fail these standards to a point of excess that makes them fun (or at least unique or interesting). Also considering So-Bad-It’s-Good games, Juul (2009) uses the term ‘paragaming’ to describe a similar love of the bad. He proclaims in his blog post, ‘flaws make it interesting, open to discussion, it makes you want to find yet another incredibly bad game design decision, to show the game to new people who haven’t seen it. I much prefer this flawed clone to the perfect original’ (Juul, 2009).

Drawing on and departing from Juul (2009), Flynn-Jones (2015) does not see the pleasure of So-Bad-It's-Good games as resting wholly on counter-cultural transgression. Rather, she draws on Susan Sontag's (1964) notion of 'Camp' to suggest bad games are loved through an 'affectionate celebration of failures' that is 'more loving than aggressively oppositional'. In line with Camp sentiments, this affection is based on excess, whereby, the failures of games can become so extreme that players see this as its own form of success that 'gets better as it gets worse' (Flynn-Jones, 2015: 258). She cites *Big Rigs* as an example as players are enamoured by its numerous glitches. However, despite being spectacularly broken in fundamental ways the vivid spectacle of its badness pulls audiences towards it. That is, there is something captivating about the ability to accelerate a vehicle infinitely while reversing (one of the game's most famous bugs) that makes *Big Rigs* a completely different experience to a typical racing game, or any other game for that matter.

At the same time, Flynn-Jones (2015: 262) also looks at the process of 'riffing' where players mock bad videogames as both a distancing and consumption strategy that produces humour and contributes to meme culture. This speaks to the sociability of badness; that indulgence in the bad is often shared and developed in broader social groups and even communities. For instance, there have been a number of community based events concerned with celebrating or slandering bad games such as the 'Bad Games Showcase' hosted by Night City (2025) in Chicago or the 'Big Bad Game-a-thon', an annual exposition that takes place online 'presenting speedruns, superplays, and showcases of kusoge, bakage, and strange, weird, and underappreciated games' (Big Bad Game-a-thon, 2025). Notably, events like these highlight a key temporal dimension of So-Bad-It's-Good as they are crucial sites of reinterpretation and spectacle that lend themselves to the potential canonization of a certain title as a cult classic or Camp. It is through years, sometimes decades, of memes, events, and YouTube compilations (where many players do not even have to play the game in question) that the most famous awful titles ascend to a certain infamous status within the gaming community.

Building on these previous understandings of So-Bad-It's-Good both in and outside the context of videogames, we similarly echo the claim that failure, excess, and transgression lie at the root of understanding So-Bad-It's-Good. In the case of *Deadly Premonition*, *50 Cent Blood in Sand*, and *Big Rigs*, the failures are extreme, continuous, and excessive. Appreciation of these games 'hinges on an aesthetic of excess' which overall produces a good, if not ironic, experience (Sconce, 1995: 380). They break the mould of good game design and offer players alternative experiences. In this way, lovers of bad games do not enjoy a game despite its flaws, but because of them. These players seek out the worst, most bizarre qualities of the game as it further invigorates the experience. In turn, there is a possibility to question the hegemonic logic of seriousness and success, where games that do not function or behave as they 'should' allow players to enact new relationships to play.

Bad-in-Context

When a game realizes its developer's intentions but a given audience nonetheless considers the game bad, we are likely dealing with Bad-in-Context. Context in audience reception of videogames is not robustly explored in existing research. Future work here is merited given the unique contexts in which games exist. However, other disciplines including literary criticism, art criticism, and film studies provide a foundation to reasonably draw from. Considering the multitude of contexts that can influence audience reception of videogames, examining them all is beyond the scope of this article. We will describe some broad contexts and examples to illustrate Bad-in-Context as a type of videogame badness. These include socio-historical, environmental, audience/market, and author contexts.

In 'Introduction to Reception Aesthetics', Hohendahl and Silberman explain how the tastes, values, and competencies of audiences are shaped by their specific cultural and historical conditions, and how these socio-historical contexts evolve (1977). Such fluctuations influence how literary works are received and interpreted across different eras. Similar trends can be seen in videogames.

For example, when the first Sony PlayStation (PS1) was released in North America in 1995, its 3D graphics capability was cutting edge, and popular titles such as *Gran Turismo* (Polys Entertainment, 1997), *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996), and *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 1998) helped shape the Triple-A aesthetics of the early 3D gaming era. However, these games' presentation values, featuring low polygon count models and low-resolution textures coupled with rendering flaws from PS1 hardware limitations, quickly became outdated with the release of subsequent game consoles (Modern Vintage Gamer, 2020). By the mid 2000s, describing a game's graphics as reminiscent of the PS1 implied a severe flaw (Butler, 2024; Staff, 2000).

But, by at least 2015, independent game developers such as Puppet Combo revitalized interest in the 3D art style of the PS1. The store page for Puppet Combo's *Power Drill Massacre* describes leveraging the PS1 presentation style as a selling point, contributing to a specific retro aesthetic of camp and horror (Puppet Combo, 2015). This design choice calls back to notorious PS1 era horror games such as *Silent Hill* (Team Silent, 1999) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996). In the context of their release, these games began as serious, state-of-the-art, Triple-A titles. But over time, their aesthetic as early voice acted (and translated), early 3D titles became outdated and they evolved into So-Bad-It's-Good status in the context of contemporary audiences. This connection established the presentation styles and gameplay of these foundational PS1 horror games as signifiers of camp and the indie horror game genre, much like how the aesthetic and visual artefacts of CRT televisions and VHS tapes have become signifiers of 1980s camp and horror cinema. Notably, in the context of the 2020s, the PS1 presentation style is not exclusively used by modern developers to invoke camp or badness as audience understanding of this aesthetic has continued to evolve (Walker-Emig, 2021). As explained by the musician Brian Eno (1996), 'Whatever you now find weird, ugly, uncomfortable and nasty about a new medium will surely become its signature. CD distortion, the jitteriness of digital video, the crap sound of 8-bit - all of these will be cherished and emulated as soon as they can be avoided'.

While the previous example illustrates socio-historical context through a lens of evolving technology, *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), released 13 years after the debut of *Resident Evil*, poignantly demonstrates how cultural aspects of socio-historical context can impact audience reception. The game, set in Africa, features a White protagonist fighting against mainly Black zombies. This juxtaposition led to controversy among Western audiences where the cultural context of race and colonialism differs from the context where the game was developed in Japan (Martin, 2018). In interviews, the developers explain their surprise at the controversial reception of the title by some audiences. The developers have also stated that the game was specifically designed with Western audiences in mind (Martin, 2018; Totilo, 2008). This raises the question of whether the game fulfilled its developer's intention, as we have presented Bad-in-Context as a type of badness where reception is negative, but presumed developer intentions are met. However, strong sales and a 'generally favourable' aggregate critic score on the website Metacritic indicate *Resident Evil 5* was commercially successful (Fischer, 2018). Thus, it is reasonable to infer that its developer intent was largely realized despite the negative reception among some audiences. Crucially, Bad-in-Context acknowledges pluralism in reception and that audiences in different contexts can receive the same games differently.

As commercial products, most videogames are designed for specific target audiences or markets. Examining how videogames designed for a specific target audience or market can be received differently outside of that audience or market reveals another dimension of Bad-in-Context. Escarpit established this concept in application to literature, but videogame scholars have touched on it as well, particularly in relation to representations of gender and racial identity (Escarpit, 1971; Naessens and Jacobs, 2009; Sherry, 2013). However, the concept applies to an even wider range of categories. One of the authors of this article worked as a developer on *Dora Saves the Snow Princess* (High Voltage Software, 2008) and *Go, Diego Go!* (High Voltage Software, Black Lantern Studios, 2009). The target audience was three- to five-year-old children. These games succeeded at entertaining this demographic (its intended purpose), as evidenced by playtesting and game critic reviews with quotes like 'The game is right on target for preschoolers' (Hollingshead, 2008) and 'All in all, Dora Saves the Snow Princess is a great game for kids' (Juskiewicz, 2009). However, the developers themselves, and their similarly aged peers and family members, had little interest in playing or watching the game beyond laughing at it in a So-Bad-It's-Good way. Likewise, despite reviewer quotes explaining the game works well for its intended audience, the aggregate critic score for the game on Metacritic is 'Generally Unfavourable' (Metacritic, nd). This may reflect how the game reviewing press does not fit into the target audience of the game.

In addition to these dimensions of context impacting reception, research in visual arts has demonstrated how the environmental context in which an audience experiences art impacts reception (Szubielska and Imbir, 2021). Szubielska and Imbir demonstrated the enhancing effect of experiencing art in an art gallery versus in a lab. As they summarize, 'the art gallery context increased both the experience of aesthetic emotions–in terms of valence, arousal, subjective significance, and dominance and aesthetic judgements–in terms of liking'. While further research specifically related to videogames is warranted, this phenomenon of environment impacting audience reception can reasonably be extended to videogames. For example, one can imagine the reception of *E.T.* varying a great deal between the environments of the studio audience of Conan's *Clueless Gamer* (Bleyaert, 2013), on the couch at one's home, and at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian where the game has been on display (Videogame Cartridge, E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, nd).

Hardware platforms shape part of this environmental context of videogames. For example, a console version of a game played in one's home is experienced differently than an arcade version of the same game played in public (Antognoli, 2021). Mobile platforms facilitate yet another environmental context. Players can have different expectations for games depending on the platform. For example, the Nintendo Wii, released in 2006, lacked state-of-the-art, high-definition graphics and online community capabilities boasted by contemporary console platforms of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 (Thurrott, 2010). This resulted in a common evaluation of games being good within the specific context of the Wii, but perhaps falling short when considered in the broader home console context (Casamassina, 2009). Further, the unique motion controls of the Wii distinguished an additional context for evaluating its games.

In addition, the case of 'shovelware' can be understood from a Bad-in-Context perspective. Shovelware is a label applied to games where the developers and publishers rapidly produce a high volume of low-quality titles with the intention of financially capitalizing on market trends and under informed consumers who fail to ascertain the low quality of a shovelware title before purchasing it (Definition of Shovelware, nd). Such a shovelware title could experience market success (the presumed developer intention) but be considered bad by players and critics and thus be Bad-in-Context.

Price is another context upon which audience reception of videogames can hinge. Gamers commonly understand videogames as products, and thus price becomes a major factor in their evaluation. Online user reviews demonstrate this, where players will frequently list price as a key context for their scores. For example, the game *Iron Lung* (2022) by David Szymanski has numerous Steam community reviews citing price as a key context for how they appreciate the game. One player explains, ‘It’s a novel and reasonably well-constructed horror experience, but frankly, [$]7.99 for a 45-min game with zero replay value is egregious’ (Cinci, 2024) Another succinctly states, ‘Too short for the money’ (Bottom Fucker, 2023).

This pressure from consumers on developers to offer longer game experiences for lower prices has contributed to the rise of free-to-play (F2P) games. For these games, monetization strategies shape player expectations and reception as much as narrative or gameplay. The design goals of F2P games tend to emphasize maximizing engagement, retention, and revenue (Luban, 2011). Many F2P games succeed at these intentions while still being regarded as ‘bad’ by some audiences because of the perceived intrusiveness, unfairness, or manipulative logic of their monetization systems (Bigggg BRIM77, 2014). In this way, monetization practices become a contextual layer that reframes player judgements of badness.

Similarly, author/developer context can also impact audience reception of videogames. For example, a Triple-A title creates different audience expectations than an indie title, or a title developed by an amateur. A title by a well-known developer with a particular track record can create different reception dynamics versus a relatively unknown creator.

Intentionally Bad

Badness, as theorized throughout this article, is often characterized through unintentional failure. This shows how bad games, no matter how they are received, inadvertently subvert the categories of success. However, not all bad games are unintentional. Indeed, some incorporate ugly graphics, technical faults, poor controls, and tedious gameplay as a core feature of their design. Put simply, in some cases the typical signifiers of ‘bad’ are calculatedly employed as a stylistic choice. It is here we have the fourth and final type of badness: games that are Intentionally Bad. The faults within Intentionally Bad games are understood by audiences as a conscious developer choice and so players know about (and willingly submit themselves to) the badness as a deliberate component of a particular game.

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy Intentionally Bad games is *Goat Simulator,* a game deliberately full of technological inconsistencies (Coffee Stain Studios, 2014). During any given moment of gameplay, players may encounter a host of different glitches from their goat avatar clipping through the ground to collision mechanics that fling any objects or people the goat touches into the air as if they are weightless. In doing so, it disrupts the conventional and expected polished experience of play, allowing players to engage with flaws and failures. Coffee Stain Studios, the developer behind *Goat Simulator*, outwardly embraces the game’s imperfections. For instance, their Steam store page claims that *Goat Simulator* features ‘MILLIONS OF BUGS!’ and ‘In-game physics that bug out all the time’. This, as Ruberg (2025: 121) suggests, makes *Goat Simulator* ‘unlike so many other videogames, which seek to root out the kinds of technical imperfections’. That is, Coffee Stain Studios did not align with typical game design standards that see developers update and fix their flaws, but intentionally incorporated them as a core facet of the game’s design.

Both games journalists and players acknowledge the Intentionally Bad nature of *Goat Simulator* while citing its stupidity and silliness as a core source of amusement. Dan Stapletonm (2014) from IGN opens his review claiming that ‘*Goat Simulator* is a joke of a game. It’s small, deliberately

unpolished and buggy, and its design is simple'. He later goes on to note, 'it's a hell of a good time'. Where many games would receive criticism for a lack of polish or for being broken, *Goat Simulator* is hailed for it. Similarly, players reviewing the game on Metacritic find the fun in *Goat Simulator* by engaging with what would otherwise be a 'bad' quality in a video game. For instance, GoldenGamer30 (2022) sees how *Goat Simulato*r is 'buggy as **** and has the graphics of a Nintendo 64 game, but the bugs add to the charm. I mean, watching a man fly 600 m into the air because you poked him with your horn is ******* hilarious'. Here, we can see how intentional badness is rooted in the deliberate breaking of the 'rules about the boundaries of good taste' (Strohl, 2022: 10).

Other examples include games like *Desert Bus*, a minigame in *Penn & Teller's Smoke & Mirrors* that sees players take a first-person viewpoint of a bus driver that must travel on an uninterrupted, eight-hour road trip from Tucson, Arizona, to Las Vegas in real time (Absolute Entertainment, 1995). After constant controversy surrounding videogames and their valorization of violence, Penn and Teller aimed to push back against these rhetorics by making a peaceful simulation game that was, in their words, 'stupefyingly like reality' (1995: 22). In doing so, they intended to illustrate what games would look like if they mirrored the banality of everyday life. On the game case, the developers taunt players, saying 'We *dare* you to stay awake for an actual eight-hour bus drive from Tucson to Las Vegas!' (emphasis theirs) (Penn and Teller, 1995). That is, they intentionally created a game that was excessively and excruciatingly boring (Condis, 2023).

In an article for the New Yorker, journalist Simon Parkin describes *Desert Bus* as requiring 'considerable stamina and concentration in the face of arch boredom' (2013). Others have understood how the game is a force of 'abusive game design' which does not pander to the whims of player desires nor corresponds with pre-established pleasurable playing experiences (Condis, 2023; Sicart, 2014; Wilson and Sicart, 2010). It is akin to the notion of 'ludic dysphoria', where designers create an experience that is 'deliberately uncomfortable and jarring' (Mortensen and Jørgensen, 2020: 212). However, that is not to say all games which are designed to be 'abusive' correspond with intentional badness. For instance, *Dark Souls III* (FromSoftware, Inc, 2016) is extremely punishing to the point where it can feel like 'near-continuous agony' for many players (Van Nuenen, 2016: 511). However, *Dark Souls III* still corresponds to the normative standards of good taste, which, as noted above, is seen through engaging gameplay, rewarding objectives, polish, high resolution graphics, and so on.

By contrast, Intentionally Bad games consciously defy these standards. They flaunt badness through technological and aesthetic flaws but also design experiences beyond what is expected. Experimental game designer Pippin Barr (2023: 82), whose work often eschews the objective of fun in pursuit of alternative game experiences, suggests that his works operate 'in direct contradiction to many game design principles'. And this is precisely the sentiment that intentional badness communicates: failure and disruption. When talking about the surreal comedy film Freddy Got Fingered (2001), Strohl (2022: 5) notes that the director did not 'fail at making a good movie [but] succeeded at making a bad one'. In a similar way, *Goat Simulator* was never designed to be polished and bug free, nor was *Desert Bus* intended to be explicitly entertaining. Put another way, intentionally bad games break the implied norms and rules of what a 'good' game is supposed to be. Ultimately, then, what is important about intentional badness is its disruption and inversion of conventional design standards which forge new ways for players to engage with videogames beyond established expectations.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to clarify and disambiguate badness in videogames. We offer four types: So-Bad-It's-Bad, So-Bad-It's-Good, Bad-in-Context, and Intentionally Bad, which describe different

understandings of how audiences appreciate (and at times do not appreciate) games that they perceive as bad. Each type introduces a unique relationship between presumed developer intention and audience reception that reveals the way that badness relates to broader contexts of play. Given that videogames are an experiential medium, we are cautious to offer this typology as stable and formal. Rather, we have taken initial steps to disambiguate the various types of bad games. These types speak to the ways that players and critics engage with and understand bad games. As mentioned earlier in this paper, this work offers a typology that we anticipate future work will refine and develop. Bad games are a relatively untapped area of investigation, full of opportunities and potential for further scholarly understanding of videogame play and game culture.

Not only does this paper offer an initial typology, but it also takes a political stance. It is a critical call to expand the archive of games and experiences that are understood as worthy of attention. As Ruberg (2015: 122) understands, 'turning our attention to the seemingly unpleasant allows us to uncover underexplored modes of experience'. Indeed, by placing emphasis on the various manifestations of bad we explore many titles that invigorate players in unconventional ways. These games let us see games, players, and play differently. They make us cringe, laugh, be bored, frustrated, and annoyed. In doing so, they contradict the limited and exclusionary approach that has surrounded game studies since its inception (Consalvo and Paul, 2019: xxvi; Ruberg, 2019: 8). Canonization, as film scholar Janet Staiger (1985) argues, is a highly politicized process, often reinforcing normative disciplinary assumptions and reflecting broader power relations. Similarly, game studies have some titles that are considered 'historical touchstones' (such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004)) which have provided the theoretical and methodological foundations of the field (Frome and Martin, 2019: 17). Other games which are ascribed 'artistic' and prestigious status 'become important sites for the broader cultural and aesthetic legitimation of digital games' (Parker, 2017: 741).

By focusing on the ugly, the broken and the downright awful, this article breaks away from game studies' previously limited canonization and embraces what Halberstam (2011: 19) understands as 'low theory'. We engage in a 'counterhegemonic form of theorizing' game development failures, mistakes, and badness to uncover a variety of playful experiences and responses to games (Halberstam, 2011: 18). Through our typology, we hope to have created a framework for understanding bad games while supporting a reinterpretation of which games and player experiences are rendered legitimate, authentic, and valuable.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Notes

1. In this paper we are not considering morality/ethics in our scope of 'bad' nor are we detailing whether or not videogames are 'bad' for someone in terms of their mental or physical wellbeing. These topics have been covered in other literature (Bean et al., 2017; De Simone, 2013; Schulzke, 2020). Rather, we anchor badness within the relationship between perceived intentions and audience reception to understand how the text itself is understood and engaged with.
2. Arguably, the game capital that games critics hold has diminished with the rise of user reviews and streaming/influencers holding authenticity. We welcome future work to consider the shifting status of goodness, truth, and value in games culture.

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