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Intro to Game Design
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Game Analysis
March 19th 2015

I was first introduced to *Team Fortress Classic* in the early 2000s. In addition to the novelty of being one of the first team-based games that I had played, the game's team play element was particularly appealing to me as my young age and inexperience with First Person Shooters (FPS) meant that I could play a passive, backfield defensive role as I learned how to control my character and explore the game world. As such, I realized and appreciated that the existence of multiple class roles facilitated a play experience that progressed largely at a pace with which I was comfortable. What I did not realize, however, was that those class roles were far deeper and nuanced than I first imagined, and that the game experience facilitated by those roles would be unlike any I had encountered before or since. The seemingly simple act of playing *Team Fortress Classic* came to be an experience that provided mental relief from the real world and a route to self-discovery.

In the nascent stages of my involvement with *Team Fortress Classic*, I chose to represent myself in-game through whichever character was most visually appealing to me. I usually ended up playing as the Heavy Weapons class, as his "muscular and heroic" (Bertozzi 476), heavily sexualized appearance was a gratifying contrast to the small, prepubescent body that I inhabited in the real world. Playing as the "HW Guy," as players refer to it, made my play experience more compelling because the large amounts of damage that the character could both endure and deliver gave me a feeling of strength and masculinity that I did not experience in my everyday life. After I purchased the game for myself around the time I was sixteen, my individual gaming

skill had increased from years of playing other FPS games, such as *Quake III* and *Day of Defeat*, to a level where I was competent enough to take on a more active role within a team. From that point on, my choice in characters shifted from cosmetic to practical as I began to choose classes whose weaponry drew on my preexisting skills from other FPS games, while the onset of puberty and a newfound sense of masculinity in real life reduced the need I felt to represent myself as strong and imposing within the game world.

Team Fortress Classic quickly became the only videogame that I played consistently. I was enthralled by the game's raw speed, freedom of movement, and the seemingly endless number of skills to be learned and employed. The variety of play styles that were possible with the different classes was also a major point of attraction for me. I was thrilled by the altered FPS paradigm that a team based game with a heavy emphasis on personal skill represented. The Scout class, for example, stood in stark contrast to the run-and-gun experience that I had previously experienced in other FPS games, and served as an attractive break from the genre's norm. I was intrigued by the fact that the Scout's combat ability was virtually nonexistent, and that success with the class would hinge upon my ability to utilize raw speed, fluidity of movement, timing, and creative footwork to outmaneuver slower, stronger, opponents. Equally appealing was the Spy, who played a rather strategic role which emphasized deception and stealth in order to sow confusion within the enemy team, and relied more on patience and judicious decision-making than upon the brute force that most FPS characters employed. The game's emphasis on specialized roles in which the player had considerable latitude to develop their own style of play immediately attracted me because videogames were one of my only means of self-expression outside of school at that time. However, being a FPS fan at heart, I was happy to see that more

straight-forward classes such as Soldier and Sniper existed as a reprieve from the more nuanced roles that the Scout and Spy played within the game.

The incredible speed and depth of skill development possible within the game quickly came to be a major selling point for me. The fast pace of gameplay fit well with my energetic personality. In my experience, success in *Team Fortress Classic* was reliant upon fast, relentless, and aggressive attacks in which I had to constantly change my strategy in order to stay ahead of my opponents, a task that I always found thrilling. In this way, the game tested my ability to think creatively and clearly in high speed, high pressure situations. It was because of the thrill that I experienced at crucial moments in which I outperformed my opposition that I came to realize that I relished having an outlet through which I could demonstrate my personal abilities in a competitive setting. After this realization, I began to seek out activities external to the game that could provide me with even greater levels of thrill, speed, and fierceness of competition. I did not realize it at the time, but what I was really searching for was an outlet through which I could exude greater levels of thymos. Thymos encompasses "...both bravery and urge for glory" (Edmundson 2014), but *Team Fortress Classic* could not provide me with an environment in which to fully attain the levels of personal achievement and fierce competition that I truly sought, as the internet's impersonal nature removed much of the intensity present in face-to-face competition. My search for an outlet with greater potential for exhibition of thymos culminated in my decision to join the swim team in my junior year of high school. Much like *Team Fortress Classic*, success in swimming required mastery of nuanced movements, speed, and aggressive action in high pressure situations, but with the additional benefit of real-world interaction with my opponents. I ended up enjoying the sport of swimming even more than I did the videogame that led me to it, and it was the first sport that I truly relished being a competitor in. I made it all

the way to the State Qualifying level in my second season, beating out numerous competitors with considerably more experience in a number of hotly contested races. Without the self-discovery that *Team Fortress Classic* provided me with, I may well have missed out on what has become one of the fondest memories and formative moments of my young adult life.

There were certain aspects of my game experience in *Team Fortress Classic* that swimming could not provide me with, however. Swimming helped to satiate my hunger for competition, but it was a pursuit in which expression of my imagination was limited, at best. In the pool, I had options for moving from one end to the other, but those options were constrained by the realities of gravity and buoyancy. In *Team Fortress Classic*, however, even the simple task of moving from point A to point B was a freeing departure from the norms of everyday reality. Huizinga writes that, “Play... creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (1950 pg. 10). In the real world, I was limited by my physical body and the laws of gravity. These limits, however, were considerably loosened in the game. Within the game, I was free to move about in ways that were unthinkable in the real world, and the manner in which I chose to conduct that movement was no longer bounded by my real-world physical limitations. In my experience, the game’s departure from the rules of reality was highly liberating, as it nullified many of the real world limitations of an imperfect body, and instead allowed me, as a player, to fly, swim underwater indefinitely, and even endure fatal damage without pain. This aspect of the game served as an important outlet for the creative side of my personality, a side which swimming and other real life pursuits did not have the ability to address. However, it was also crucial for my mental wellbeing at a time in my life when I felt confused and frustrated about my present reality. In the real world, I had grades, work, and family expectations to worry about, and I felt as if my range of options for dealing

with these issues was rather limited. I felt hamstrung. In the game world, however, these issues were nonexistent, and the freedom to move about unencumbered by either the physical limitations of the real world or the burden of long term considerations served as a much needed mental relief. *Team Fortress Classic*, by allowing me freedom of movement and testing my ability to come up with creative ways of moving about the game world, provided me with mental wellbeing because it allowed me to experience a “limited perfection” in which the most pressing vicissitudes of my real life existence were suspended.

This mental wellbeing that *Team Fortress Classic* conferred to me would have been impossible if it was not a FPS. Realistic third person games, such as Madden or MLB, would not have appealed to me because they simply imitate real life. If I wanted to experience these games, I could have signed up with a real world sports team, as I did with swimming. In digital form, however, these games were not appealing to me because I didn’t feel as if I had a major effect on the skill of the players under my control. I controlled the players, but their exact actions and the minutiae of their catches and passes did not seem to be truly determined by me. “A first-person game invites players to immerse themselves in the game, to play as though they themselves are in the game experiencing the events firsthand. On the other hand, the third-person game makes a distinction between the player and the on-screen character; they are separate entities. In a third-person game, the player is controlling a character rather than becoming the character” (Gard 2000). My experience in *Team Fortress Classic* was possible, and stands in sharp contrast to these games, because the First Person nature of the game provided me with a feeling of strong, direct, and entirely personal control at a time when it was crucial to my sense of mental wellbeing in the real world. My game experience was compelling and beneficial because “the main character (the Avatar)” did “not interfere with the player’s illusion of immersion” (Gard

2000). It was important for me to feel that *I* was the character, and that my character's actions and freedom of expression was entirely of *my* making, not someone else's.

Ultimately, *Team Fortress Classic* mattered, and still matters, to me because it served as a route to both self-discovery and mental wellbeing. The game played a strong role in helping me to determine what is important to me outside the confines of the game. My involvement with the game played a fundamental role in my life in that it allowed me to recognize just how high a value I place on thymos and genuine competition in the real world. Without *Team Fortress Classic*, it is unlikely that I would have become involved in competitive swimming, the sport where I first experienced the full measure of spirited competition. This sort of competition has come to be a crucial part of my everyday life, so it is not a stretch to say that the game is still, in some ways, affecting my life and informing my self-knowledge. *Team Fortress Classic* also provided me with a space in which I could relax mentally. The game world made available to me a place where the questions, considerations, and stressors of the real world were not present. The suspension and simplification of real world rules and limitations in the game served to create a temporarily perfect reality which was a respite from the complex questions that arose in my everyday life. As a result, I was able to reap the rewards of mental and emotional recuperation within the game, which in turn allowed me to function more optimally outside of the game. *Team Fortress Classic* has undoubtedly helped to shape me into the person that I am. Knowing now the benefits that the game has provided me with, it no longer seems like my game experience was 'just for fun,' or simply play. It seems now that the game was more a means to an end than simply an aimless pursuit. However, I think that is the inherent value of, and the beauty of my game experience in, *Team Fortress Classic*. My experience transcended simple enjoyment and provided me with tangible benefits, just as I think all truly good games should. My game world

existence directly benefitted my real world existence. If that experience isn't the mark of a truly good game experience, then I am hard pressed to say what is.

Works Cited

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