

Death by Prox(y)imity: Participation with the Pandemic through the mobile multiplayer game *Among Us* (2018)

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A stranger stands between you and your authority-mandated work task, getting too close to this stranger could mean your death sentence. The question is are you walking to your day job during the Covid-19 pandemic, or are you playing Innersloth's 2018 online video game *Among Us*? The answer? Why not both.

As in-person social interaction became the primary mode of transmission of the Covid-19 virus, alternative modes of social interaction were adopted to maintain interpersonal communication. Games, both analogue and digital, became a safe and engaging mode of communication often enabled by the accelerated developments in video conferencing software such as Zoom.

For the interests of the conference this presentation seeks to analyse *Among Us* and its internal game structures through the lens of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Main Message to assert that new modes of connection are created by the players, whilst simultaneously allowing them to process the pandemics 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2005) within a zero-threat digital environment.

I will do this by creating an assemblage of five key ideas Goffman's 'Definition of the Situation', Anderson's 'Imagined Communities', Agamben's 'State of Exception', Fischer-Licht's 'Autopoietic Feedback Loop', and Murray's 'Procedural Authorship'.

Erving Goffman wrote that 'when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. [...] Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him.' (Goffman, 1990: 15)

In the world of Covid-19, a new definition of the social situation has been developed, masks, keeping distance, and hand sanitiser are all major features of this new definition, and when one breaks these social expectations, discomfort ensues. When everyone around you is wearing a mask, this visual information defines the situation, and what is expected of you.

In the four maps available in *Among Us*, the definition of the situation is equally understood. Up to ten avatars stand in their Personal Protective Equipment (or bright shiny space suits) preparing to complete several mini-games to invoke their victory conditions. But something stands in their way, one or more of them are imposters, they may look like a regular crewmate, but the imposter's victory conditions rely on killing off the crewmembers one by one. How do they do this? By proximity. Hand sanitiser might not be needed in space, but distance certainty is.

This definition of the situation within the game world is constantly being re-examined. As I, in my Avatar form, enter into the electrical room to complete one of my many tasks, I am halted by seeing someone else inside. Are they a crewmate? Are they an imposter? If I approach my task on the other side of the room will they think me an imposter? How do I communicate that without the ability to speak to them?

If playing on a public server I can only communicate with the directional motion of my expressionless avatar, when playing with friends on a private server however it is not uncommon to use zoom, skype, or discord to communicate via voice chat, although most house rules require silence during play, speaking only in meetings held when called by a player or when a body is found.

In the real world, we perform the awkward dance of avoidance in the face of potential collisions and/or Covid transmission. In *Among Us* the same form of dancing is used to transmit information. "look at me moving in circles, I'm here, I'm not killing you, I'm clearly a crewmate" of course the player your signalling may interpret your circular dance as a ruse for them to let their guard down. For such is the mistrust, of both the digital definition of *Among Us* and the physical definition of Covid-19. You can't be sure who has the potential to kill you.

By hosting gatherings online in *Among Us* players can engage with the same fear of proximity they experience outside their homes, but it is only in the online world where death is not permanent. The impermanence of an online death allows one to be reckless, to be the asymptomatic like imposter, remove their mask and murder their friends, allowing a temporary reprieve from the anxiety caused by proximity in a viral pandemic.

Benedict Anderson's notion of the Imagined Community was first posited in reference to nations. Now nations of vastly different political, social, economic, and historical backgrounds have, under the pandemic, gained a globally shared experience. This

shared experience has created a new imagined community of those living in unprecedented times.

Anderson wrote that this community 'is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.' (Anderson, 1991: 6)

We have been brought together in a new imagined community, as citizens of a pandemic, and yet the image of our communion is a deeply unequal one. As the upper and middle-classes who can afford to work from home do so, and our most vulnerable, our minimum waged 'key' and 'front-line' workers, contracted the virus at a higher rate than any other demographic.

But as Anderson continues 'it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, [...] not so much to kill, as willingly die for such limited imaginings.' (Anderson, 1991: 7)

In *Among Us* an imagined community is developed between the crewmates, imaginary as they do not know those who belong to the same affiliation, and a community as they are willing to die, all be it digitally, for their new nation, their team. In the digital experience, the player becomes what Anderson describes as a 'long-distanced nationalist' (Anderson, 1992: 13) who holds no actual attachment to this nation, as in the player's eyes it is a temporary configuration, built purely on the arbitrary digital allocation of the crewmate role. But regardless 'finds it tempting to play identity politics by participating [...] in the conflicts of his imagined Heimat [Home]' (Anderson, 1992: 13)

How does the player connect with the game world and as a result connect with the strangers they are playing with? During the pre-game lobby, players have the opportunity to alter their avatars physical appearance through the selection of their PPE (space suite) colour. By enabling this form of customisation, a player becomes invested in their avatar and as a result the game world. But as colour choices are limited it breeds competition with your fellow players to get your preferred colour first. This competition connects the players through competitive kinship, which is further tested when the crewmate and imposter roles are allocated.

A conscious choice of geo-connection is made when selecting the server location to play from. *Among Us* had a relatively small player base until the pandemic, the rise in

players has resulted in server strain, meaning players often have to choose servers located in Asia or the Americas rather than a European server. By consciously choosing a server location before play, the player is making a direct choice of geo-connection, rather than leaving it up to the algorithm. It enforces their attachment to the imagined community and their avatar.

With so many players engaging on foreign servers a communal language was developed in order to cope with language barriers. Such as a shortening of suspicious, to Vent the process of an Imposter using a vent to move from one room to another (a mechanic only available to the imposter role), or even the elusive Third Imposter, meaning a crewmate who plays so badly they end up causing an Imposter Victory, are all methods of connecting one player to another.

Before I move onto Agamben's State of Exception, I would first like to distance myself entirely from his position on Covid-19, most notably his statements regarding the 'Irrational and entirely unfounded emergency measures adopted against an alleged epidemic' (Agamben, 2020) and his liberal use of the National Research Council's data to imply that the symptoms would be mild/moderate and be akin to 'a sort of influenza'. As a care home manager during the pandemic, I have seen first-hand the necessity of such measures, and although I use his theory to explore Covid-19, I reject in their entirety, his views on the matter.

The state of exception as posited in Agamben's 2005 book of the same name, explores the denegation of the basic rights of a territory's citizens by its sovereign power enacted 'In [a] time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation and the existence of which is officially proclaimed' (Article 4.1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) in order for that power to operate in total authority outside of the pre-existing rule of law. He explains "In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference" (Agamben, 2005: 40).

Within the U.K Government's response to the pandemic, an argument could be made for the beginnings of a State of Exception. Where the ruling power has operated at odds with pre-existing forms of governance, such as the UK Governments repeated disregard of SAGE's advice. This state of exception was 'proclaimed' at the Daily Press

Briefing's held from March 16th 2020. Where a running tally of the infected and the dead kept the need for the state of exception at the forefront of the public mind.

[Slide 14] In *Among Us* a similar game mechanic exists in the form of the Emergency Meeting, called by a player from a singular location on the map, or by reporting a dead body when in its proximity. The Emergency Meeting automatically teleports the players to the same location, where through the games own State of Exception their autonomy and more specifically their mobility is removed, reducing them to voice chat if playing via conferencing software, or if not, a group messaging platform, similar to nations use of Twitter to discuss each briefing.

The first phase of the emergency meeting is the visualisation of the dead. Here the surprise of unknown murders sets the tone, where the group must justify their actions and point out sus behaviour. A time limit is set on this discussion which culminates in the second phase, voting on the player one believes to be the imposter. The player with the most votes is unceremoniously removed from play, via an airlock, volcano or another elaborate form of digital execution. Only when a meeting is called, and the state of exception proclaimed, can the crewmates go against their implicit passive nature and inflict death.

Even elements of the communal language developed around *Among Us* sustains the real-world State of Exception in-game. To Vent, or Vent Kill is the process whereby an imposter uses a vent to escape from the scene of a murder, or to quickly enter a room and to commit one. Death by ventilation then is one of the hardest to avoid as a crewmember, a situation echoed by the ill effects of coronavirus where only 1 in 5 healthy adults will survive being placed on a ventilator. That statistic rapidly drops for elderly patients and those with underlying health conditions. (Leeds NHS).

While playing the game, a connection is developed between players via a series of autopoietic feedback Loops. First imagined by Erika Fischer-Licht, as a self-replicating exchange of focus between performer and audience, where the performance occurs not on the stage but 'between the actors and spectators, and even between the spectators themselves.' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 33). It exists in the middle ground between the presentation of the artistic artefact and its perception by the audience.

But in *Among Us*, a digitized version of this feedback loop exists in the in-between space between the players and their actions on screen as well as between each other. Fischer-Lichte states that 'while presence brings forth the human body in its materiality, as

energetic body and living organism, technical and electronic media create the impression of human presence by dematerializing and disembodimenting it.' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 100). It is this impression of human presence that allows for intimate and human connection through the collaborative autopoiesis of the feedback loop.

In the same way that video images of our faces in this very digital conference give off the impression of materiality via dematerialization and representation, so do the avatars of *Among Us*, giving off that same impression, representing the dematerialized self in a digital form, allowing for a representational but still very real 'bodily co-presence of actors and spectators [that] enables and constitutes performance.' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 32) In the playing of *Among Us*, in the performance of the players as Crewmates and Imposters, very real connections are established.

Janet Murray in *Hamlet on The Holodeck* posits the idea of procedural authorship, a form of feedback loop developed purely for the digitized sphere, built through collaborative story-making by participants within and with a digital environment.

By playing *Among Us* the participants develop a shared story, not as involved as the grand narratives of roleplaying games, and yet by lacking a grand narrative all its own it allows those immersed within it to develop their own meta stories via procedural authorship. Through these meta-narratives and the games internal structures, we can process a small part of the pandemic experience. She explains that 'A good story serves ... [to give] us something safely outside of ourselves (because it is made by someone else) upon which we can project our feelings.' (Murray: 1997: 100)

As our experience of the pandemic was reduced to screens both as work, play, socialisation and information 'Digital narratives [... offer] us the opportunity to enact stories rather than to merely witness them' (Murray, 1997: 170) it is this enacting that allows us to remain engaged in a world that prohibits our participation. She continues by stating that 'Enacted events have a transformative power that exceeds both the narrated and conventionally dramatized events because we assimilate them as personal experience. The emotional impact of enactment within an immersive environment is so strong that virtual reality installations have been found to be effective for psychotherapy.' (Murray, 1997: 170)

As the pandemic has stretched on, and our existence has moved ever more online, the digital culture has taught us that although a mediated presence is not the same as a physical one, it is never-the-less able to create strong and emotional connections between

representations of ourselves online, be it a represented face on a zoom call or an avatar in an online game.

Complex sociological and psychological processes are at work such as procedural authorship of online space, feedback loops between participants, or the creation of imagined communities that allow us to process the startling changes brought on by the pandemic and its state of exception, in a way that feels less like government-mandated isolation and more like sustained socially distanced connection just waiting for a time when we can be together again. In the absence of physical proximity, a dematerialised version of ourselves in a brightly coloured space suite allows us one way of connecting and processing a wildly different world.

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