

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

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Abstract

Video games are an enveloping and captivating adventure away from the routine and blandness of reality. Although Jesper Juul argues that rules are the key component supplying the enjoyment of games, I disagree. I will argue that the immersion and beauty provided by the game's universe and storyline, and how that setting and story work together, add fundamentally to the overall gaming experience, and it can make a game exceptional. I will do so through choosing to focus on one notable game, *Slime Rancher*.

Though seemingly cutesy and simple on the surface, the decisions made by *Slime Rancher's* game developer, Monomi Park, in terms of story and universe create a wonderful, surprising experience of exploration and discovery. As opposed to the Juul perspective, my own perspective, as I will show too, aligns more with the gaming romanticism employed by writers such as Miguel Sicart.

The structure of the paper will approach each part of the game map as they are discovered sequentially, paragraph-by-paragraph. I will elaborate that with each new section of the game, more dimension is added to the game play. I will also incorporate various references from literary sources to accompany the characterization of the universe and story, in order to provide context for how each setting contributes differently to overall experience. This structural decision

will explore the psychological contribution that setting and story provide the player. I think either direction would lend itself to my purpose and goal through this paper.

Although extremely endearing, there is a real depth to *Slime Rancher*'s universe that I'd like to look into further. I think there's a great deal of content hidden among the rocks and around the outermost corners of the game, waiting to be unveiled.

In games, you are a pioneer. You have power to create your own frontier. The games you play are adventures all their own. Your experience is raw and real. So, what moves you the most?

A good video game, in particular, is one comprising many parts that work together seamlessly to wrap their users up in a fictional universe. However, the most enticing part of video games is heavily contested among scholars and theorists and has been a constant a source of debate. One noted game theorist, Jesper Juul, argues, “From a rules perspective, the most crucial role of fiction is to cue the player into understanding the rules.” (Juul 189). His claim is that the rules are the most important part of any game, and the fiction of a game (including fictional worlds and storyline) is to function as a proponent of the rules. However, I and other theorists including Miguel Sicart believe the *space* in which the game takes place and the *story* tied to it are the most impactful components on players, and these can stand alone as their own entities instead of acting as a menial pedestal to the rules. I will show how this is the case by examining what has been a popular game in 2017, *Slime Rancher*, and I will explore, from a theorist’s perspective, how a game world makes such a dramatic mark on players.

Let’s first take a dive into *Slime Rancher*. What on earth is a “slime,” and what compels a player to ranch for them? *Slime Rancher* was released by the developer Monomi Park initially in January of 2016 as an early access title. Then, on August 1, 2017, came the game’s official release. Platforms for this game include Windows, macOS, Linux, and Xbox One.

Slime Rancher takes place in an open world, and is viewed through the perspective (first person) of the rancher who goes by the name of Beatrix LeBeau, which the player embodies. LeBeau works on an unknown, seemingly strange ocean-based planet with breathable air, known simply as the Far, Far Range. It is located one thousand lightyears away from earth, and it's home to thousands of creatures called "slimes," beloved for their iconic brand of cuteness by fans of the game. It appears LeBeau is curiously the only humanoid-type character inhabiting the Far, Far Range, working in isolation, with the slimes as her only company.

The aim of this game is to explore the Far, Far Range, finding and rounding up slimes, and feeding them. Feeding the slimes results in the slimes giving you "plorts" in exchange, which can be sold for money (Newbucks). The Newbucks can be used to purchase upgrades and items to expand your ranch and your equipment. These upgrades make the process of collecting plorts, ranching/caring for slimes, and exploring the game sphere much more manageable. There are wide variety of different types of slimes, each with their own characteristics and deriving from various regions in the game. Some of these slime varieties include Pink, Honey, Rock, Phosphor, Rad, Fire, Tangle, Mosaic, Crystal, Gold, Puddle, Lucky, Tabby, and more. There are also Gordo slimes (oversized versions of individual slime varieties spread throughout the game sphere.) These slimes are appreciated for their extremely endearing design and personalities. An additional unique feature is the ability to splice the slimes and make a hybrid of any two varieties of slime. These hybrids are known as Largos. Largos can provide plorts of both the types of slime it is a hybrid of. Although some varieties of these slimes can create complications on the ranch, none are directly harmful. The only villainous variety of slimes are called Tarrs. Tarrs are

formed when a Largo eats a plort unlike the types of slimes its made up of, it becomes a Tarr. Tarrs eat and destroy all other slimes it can get a hold of. The gameplay is at times cyclical in nature, as it involves a constant upkeep of the ranch. This includes the cycle of managing all the slimes, feeding them, collecting their plorts, and returning those plots for money and upgrades. Despite the critiques of such repetition, the atmosphere and vibe of *Slime Rancher* is viewed by fans of the game as extremely calming and often cathartic.

Slime Rancher is not a game that focuses its gameplay on strict rules and intensity. The gameplay is highly exploratory. *Slime Rancher* emphasizes the rancher's (player's) curiosity, independence, and eagerness to work hard on their ranch as they dually venture across the Far, Far Range.

Discovery of new biomes on the Far, Far, Range cannot be obtained without grinding for money on the ranch, and reversely, more impressive monetary gains and a diverse slime portfolio can't be obtained without a keen willingness to explore the game universe in it's entirety. After all, this concept alludes to the famous proverb, "nothing ventured, nothing gained." Additionally, the further LeBeau ventures, the more clues she finds about the previous rancher, known as Hobson Twilgers or simply 'H,' to inhabit the Far, Far Range through notes he left behind. These notes are often very thoughtful and spark intrigue about what his life may have looked like during the time he worked on the range. With each new note comes a new insight from Hobson.

Meanwhile, "Bea" is also receiving Starmail (like email) from her friend/love interest Casey who is whose gender is deliberately ambiguous and who lives back on earth. *Slime Rancher* ties the game world to the storyline in this way. The more you discover, the more you learn, the more

you earn. This exploration becomes clever, engrossing, and immersive due to the detailed, elaborate world and the first person perspective.

The various biomes in *Slime Rancher* are equally gorgeous and distinct. The game graphics are objectively extremely vivid in their use of color, detail, and variety. These biomes includes areas on the Ranch, and areas in the Wilderness. The Ranch areas include LeBeau's ranch itself, the Grotto, the Overgrowth, the Lab, the Docks, and a retreat expansion. The regions of the Wilderness include The Slime Sea, the Moss Blanket, the Dry Reef, the Indigo Quarry, the Wilds, the Glass Desert, and the Ancient Ruins. And there are new sections yet to be added by the developers. Access to these new biomes isn't acquired easily or simply. New sections of the Far, Far Range are locked to the player. Unlocking them involves finding food for them and overfeeding the Gordo slimes—there is usually one Gordo slime per biome, usually representing which slime is indigenous to that region—until he explodes. When the Gordo explodes, the rancher is rewarded with various items, including regular sized slimes of the same type, food for the slimes, a static transporter (making it easier and quicker to traverse between areas of the Far, Far, Range), and a Slime Key. The Slime Key is what you need to unlock a new biome. Once in that new location, the player can venture through it and discover what surprises it has to offer.

As we can see, The Far, Far Range clearly has no shortage of diversity and intricacy in its design. But what does that prove? How can the game universe and the story it tells in *Slime Rancher* possibly impact players so dramatically? What makes it so exciting? To think about gameplay, we must first think about the concept of play itself. To do so, I looked deeper into the ideas of

two theorists of play, with two distinct points of view, at times in opposition to one another. The first of these game theorists, Jesper Juul, argues against my point: he believes that video games make bad storytellers. Whereas, a movie makes a better storyteller than a game does. In his view, the game universe and storyline of a game pale in comparison to the rules, which are paramount. More specifically, he believes that the rules and goals have the greatest impact on the player him/herself. I disagree. Although rules are *important* in some games, importance and influence are two different beasts. When it comes to impact and enjoyment, I believe the universe and story is the most powerful to the user and their perspective.

There are several arguments to be made for why game spaces have greater influence on players than rules. The first involves what the spaces *do* and *don't do*. For example, Miguel Sicart, another theorist refers to the spaces for play (in games, video games, etc.) as 'playgrounds.' Sicart explains how real playgrounds were invented to facilitate play without dictating it exactly. The same can be said about video game universes. These fictional universes function like playgrounds. On a playground, there is balance between appropriation and resistance. A playground is a structure for play, which creates its own structural limitations, so that the game isn't an aimless free-for-all. However, it also leaves room for appropriation, such as the creativity, playfulness, and independence that comes from combining a playground's (game space's) functions with the complexities of your imagination. This idea is the first argument as to what makes gaming worlds so powerful to players. As Sicart writes, "If play spaces are defined by something...[it] is the openness to appropriation, the ways in which they let us play, giving us a place to be" (Sicart). Such freedom for play is exciting. While rules are important, there is less

room for freedom and creativity when the rules of a game are the primary focus. In effective game spaces, there is the ability to make the space your own and interact with your surroundings. This is precisely what users find in the case of *Slime Rancher*'s game space. The universe it creates is expansive across many biomes, each with their own intricate details. Half the fun is finding each space and all the things it has to offer: in other words, the enjoyment is in the ability to *explore*. This concept is paramount in games like *Slime Rancher*. Exploration is appropriation, and it does involve creativity, too. For example, the player has the limits of staying on land—whereas falling into the ocean results in a player blackout and forces you to start a new day and lose that day's progress—but also has the freedom to move about and make actions in the world on their own and in their own time. One may see an island in the distance and decide whether to reach the island via jetpack or to try to find a bridge or other means of reaching it. The limits may include the energy capabilities of the jetpack (is the available energy enough to get you to the island before plummeting into the water) or if availability of a bridge is even an option. The appropriation is finding your way there somehow. This is how we make a game space or play space our own—all our personality traits, thoughts, and decisions are impacted dramatically by the world we find ourselves in.

The second argument for the influence and enjoyment of game spaces centers around their props. Any game space worth its salt has great props that the user can interact with. Props can include tools, weapons, or collectible items, or a combination of these, depending on the game. It's important to note here that I associate props more with the game universe than with the rules because props aren't vital to a game like rules are. They are a byproduct of the universe created

for a the game, to give the user some sort of advantage or sense of achievement. So why are props so meaningful to a player more so than a game's rules? Well, as Sicart writes, "Good playgrounds open themselves up to play, and their props serve as instruments for playful occupation" (Sicart). Moreover, these props or items we find throughout the field of play promote the abilities and advantages we may have in the game. Every player wants to feel that sense of achievement from unlocking a rare weapon that no one has, for example. In the case of *Slime Rancher*, the ability to find or gain 'props' (such as having the most developed portfolio of Slime Keys or explored areas), access to rare plorts, and high-tech Slime Science gadgets is more important to them than *Slime Rancher's* rules. In this sense, props can create feelings of pride or joy in achievement, opportunity, or security for the player and help them in their efforts at play.

Another argument for why game spaces are more dominant and exciting than rules for a player involves the power of linking the game world and storytelling. As we know, Juul is not particularly a fan of storytelling in games. He likes his games clean-cut, with a focus on rules, strategy, and statistics. On the other hand, Sicart is a bigger proponent of the romanticism and beauty behind games and play. In Sicart's view, true play is brought on by people and their complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life, rather than just pure rules. In other words, play is a product of how we as humans relate to things, situations, and each other. Let's now apply this concept to how *Slime Rancher* ties their game world with storytelling. As aforementioned, while Beatrix ventures across the Far, Far Range, she continually finds notes from H, a former rancher on that planet. Meanwhile, also with the discovery of new biomes and progression of time, Bea receives new Starmail from Casey and we learn about their relationship

before Bea went away to the Far, Far Range. This storyline centers around the struggle of the isolation that sometimes comes with chasing your dreams and being apart from the people you love. For example, one of the final notes from H reads:

Two doors, Beatrix. Life's filled with moments when there's two doors and you can only choose one. I came to the Far, Far Range because a search for the unknown is in my bones...it was the ultimate adventure. But then there's that other door: I met Thora and fell in love...She had a piece of my heart, and the universe had the other. Two doors, Beatrix. -H. (Slime Rancher)

With the discovery of a new biome comes the reveal of a new captivating insights as these from H and Casey, which add to the storyline and the intrigue of the game's lore. But the reveal of each new biome (location) and coinciding note from H or email from Casey (information) is what sticks out in the minds of players. These new areas and details are not given; its *earned*. You have to search and work for it, Players are more excited and influenced by what they earn, because we relate hard work and patience to earning deserved rewards. While rules are important, they are set from the beginning and never change. You never have to earn rules, they must be given from the start. Therefore, after some time the rules lose their power of influence in a game, and that power shifts to location and how it creates new information. Again: The more you discover, the more you learn, the more you earn.

The final argument relates to appreciation of beauty. It should be said first: Everyone has a different idea of what is beautiful to them, and an individual can also find many types of things beautiful. In a game, a player can different aspects of a game beautiful, be it the art style,

graphics' capabilities, storyline, or overall concept for the game, and how aesthetics tie back into gameplay. On beauty, Sicart says, "The beauty of play might take its origins in the form of play. The formal elegance of the rules of Go or the size of a soccer field lead to a rational understanding of how interesting it is to perform actions within those boundaries" (Sicart). He further asserts:

When thinking about play, we might risk forgetting the importance of the playthings, the time, the culture, and all the other elements of the ecological environment of the play activity. When I refer to play as an aesthetic practice, I don't want to limit the perspective to the performance; rather, I look at the extended activity. (Sicart)

Sicart he illustrates that they is more to appreciate in play, specifically in this case in games, than just actions of any kind made by the player. Aesthetically, a game can have components that are beautiful and impactful on a player without that same player acting upon them at all. In *Slime Rancher*, the lush, vivid environments created by Monomi Park can be captivating and exciting to look at on their own, even without exploring them and interacting with them. In this way, games like *Slime Rancher* can embody the same qualities as an Italian Renaissance fresco. Although it's admittedly more fun to interact with a fictional world, the aesthetics of a game can undoubtedly be powerful, delightful, alluring, fascinating, or twisted—above all, beautiful. That is something that game rules cannot do on their own.

To illustrate this stance, I am going to take these arguments and apply them to a specific region of *Slime Rancher*, the Ancient Ruins, and justify how this section of the universe in which this game takes place can be more impactful and captivating to players than the game's rules. The

Ancient Ruins are located behind a mountain range, and contain some of the very seldom unnatural structures found on the Far, Far Range. According to Slime Rancher lore, no one knows who built them or when they were erected. However, also perplexing is this point made in the game itself upon arrival at the Ruins: “All that is lost is eventually found, and lost once more.” In order to enter the Ancient Ruins, a player must arrive at the Courtyard at the end of a section called the Moss Blanket. The Courtyard is a charming area featuring the Slime Gate you need to engage with in order to enter the Ancient Ruins. The Slime Gate is towering in height and shaped like a hollowed, futuristic circular gateway, much like a portal in sci-fi movies. The Courtyard itself, in contrast, is lush, natural, and serene. Yet, the juxtaposition of organic nature and “man”-made structural elements flow seamlessly together throughout the Ruins. Entering through the warp-like Slime Gate involves going back to either your Corral or previously explored areas to gather plorts from six different slimes, including Tabby, Rock, Phosphor, Honey, Boom and Rad. Once you have these plorts in your possession, you can return to the gate. Surrounding the gate are carved rock statues of each of these slimes, each with a plort-shaped pocket-like area for the corresponding plort to be placed. The insertion of each plort causes a different toned musical note to ring out, too, and the statue of the slime glows with the color of that particular slime. Once all the plorts are put into these units, the corresponding colors of each slime/plort light up one-by-one on the Slime Gate, and each music note is sung again, this time strung together like a song. The center orb in the Gate also glows cosmically before revealing a smiling slime face, and confetti-like glimmers of light shoot out from the gate. The circular stone tablet blocking the entrance of the gate descends and the entirety of the Ancient Ruins is revealed. The Ancient Ruins encompass vast stone passageways and secrets within the

deepest chambers. There are also flowing waterfalls, hanging vines, and a new variety of bright yellow slime known as Quantum slimes, or slimes with the ability to transcend their current reality and explore other realities simultaneously. Also perplexingly, there are glass doors throughout the area, which also descend into the floor upon the player's interaction with it, like with the Ruins' Slime Gate.

It wasn't until I reached the Courtyard and the Ancient Ruins that I developed a real appreciation for the game and all the thought that went into the design of its sphere. The interaction between the player and the Slime Gate, and the process of revisiting each area already explored and collecting plorts of pre-discovered slimes to use in the gate itself, felt like an intentional and clever process designed by Monomi Park to act as a sort of reverential reflection on how far you'd come and how much of the Range you've discovered to make it to that point in the game. Along with the process of revisiting the expanse of the Range is the interactivity of the Ruins and the Gate itself. The way that the gate is responsive to each plort provided to it, as well as how the art of the game universe is brought to life by the player's action and interaction with the environment—through the addition of supporting color, light, sound, movement—feels painstakingly sensitive to detail and creates an encompassing gaming experience through the game universe as a primary focal point rather than through *Slime Rancher's* rules.

The details of the Ancient Ruins on the whole, like the strange glass doors (as well as their native Quantum slimes), also act as symbols for the region and for the game: the idea of choosing one path over another and going where that road takes you. In one of H's notes found in the Ruins, in

fact, it reads, “Sometimes you’ve gotta choose one path or another and there’s no way around it...Either path you choose is gonna make you hurt some for want of walking the other. Life is filled with doors like these.” Throughout every region of *Slime Rancher*, there are ways for the player to interact constantly and actively with their surroundings to forge their path ahead on the Far, Far, Range and gain further and further ground in the game in terms of both methodical, structural gameplay and personal understanding.

Moreover, *Slime Rancher* does not just design a pretty universe for players to become distracted by while they bide time farming plorts and making money. Rather, time and time again in this game they weave together the design of the game’s universe and the storyline with the rules and technical structure of the game in a way that is powerful, beautiful, and thought-provoking. *Slime Rancher* proves that the most impactful component of a game does not have to lie in its rules. At times, the most noteworthy part of the game is found somewhere on the road you take.

Works Cited

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