



Well Played

For the Love of Games

Edited By: Drew Davidson

WELL PLAYED

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FOR THE LOVE OF GAMES

DREW DAVIDSON



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INTRODUCTION

DREW DAVIDSON

A lot of us have a special game that inspired us to get more deeply involved in making, studying and playing games as part of our professional and personal lives. It may be *the* game for you or just *a* game that means a lot, and you find yourself replaying it regularly. It could even be a couple of games, or a games series, or a game that disappointed you enough that you were inspired to try and make one even better. Whatever the case may be, the contributors to this book have focused on, and analyzed, that game(s), exploring why they think it had such an impact on them, and how it helped define their love of games in general.

Well Played: For the Love of Games, is a curated book of authors and their submissions, and it's a companion to the forthcoming special issue of the Well Played Journal, which has an open call for participation, and will be out in the new year.

With this book, and forthcoming journal issue, we've also updated the subtitle of Well Played. Historically, it has been, "on video games, value and meaning." Moving forward it will be, "on games, value and meaning." While it's not a major change, we think it better represents the range of games and experiences we've always been open and excited to explore, analyze and cover through Well Played.

GRAN TURISMO'S MEANING

ON A LOVE OF RACING GAMES, SPEED AND
PROGRESS

LINDSAY GRACE

INTRODUCTION: ON RACING

My first ludic love has and always will be racing games. The first digital video game I ever played was a worse for wear arcade version of Head On (Sega, 1999). It was an awkward combination of maze and racing that for many was but a punctuation mark in the ever-evolving history of digital games. Like many late bloomers, I was often late to the game but propelled by the drive that comes from being both late to the races and an underdog. I didn't learn to ride a bike until I was eight or 9, but by 13 I was racing in my first United States Cycling (UCF) federation event.

As an adult, I took that same love of racing to unsanctioned street races in my modified Honda Civic. When I finally really grew up, I brought that energy to the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) sanctioned auto-cross track. I started by racing with an underdog, a \$2500 rusty Mazda MX-5 with more miles behind it than ahead of it. I later matriculated to a much faster and far less fun-on-the-track contemporary Corvette. As rapper Drake's eponymous anthem cheers, there's something alluring in being able to sing, "started from the bottom now I'm here."

It is true, I love going fast. I love the controlled chaos of hundreds of little machined parts focused on one task - going where the driver directs it. I love the complexity of individual parts and the simplicity of the task. I love the apex of design and function, turning chemistry into combustion, physics into performance, and materials science into visual and functional beauty. But a racing

game, any racing game, is often more than just perfecting turns, managing torque, or understanding the benefits and drawbacks of rear wheel drive. Racing games are also about aspiration, imagination, and long-term goals in the cacophony of short-term needs. They are about moving forward as best you can with what you have.

It is also true that in Bartle's Taxonomy of players, I'm often an explorer. Hence, I've spent years playing every adventure game I could, from popular series like *Tomb Raider* (Eidos Interactive, 1996) to esoteric oddballs like *Ecstasica* (Psygnosis, 1994). Their puzzles are often wonderful, their stories engaging, and their replay more akin to the pleasure of a familiar song than the inspiring curiosity of exploring them for the first time. Adventure games provide the pleasure of discovery, but the discovery is often structured for the player. The application of their lessons learned are often less clearly applicable to the outside world, than, for example, noting the base horsepower for a car you might actually buy one day.

Before adventure games, I started playing chess at age 4. My father taught me, because, as a then 22-year-old father, he needed someone with whom to play. This was well before online chess games were available. It was when games were played in person and networks were personal and computer play was an affordable option. No one else in our subsidized housing played, and so I learned to play as a way of bonding.

Chess introduced me to calculated play, to strategy that balances the heat of the moment with long-term gain and goal. Chess is not about unlocking worlds; it's about getting to the goal by besting the other players' choices. While my brief time on the chess team as its youngest member did involve clocks and timers, my little brain needed to move faster, more deftly, and with more real-time feedback than a typical chess game allowed. Admittedly, I was never a great chess player either.

I did not love chess, but I was fond of its perpetual calculations toward a single goal. I did not love adventure, but I was engrossed by the feeling of discovering new designer-authored spaces. I have always loved racing, and the reasons are only clear to me when I think through my experience with these other types of games. Racing, especially when bicycles, cars, or other machines are involved, is real-time chess. It's a perpetual balance of moves, limited not by the prescribed movements of rooks and pawns, but by physics, movement, velocity, and the rules that bind it.

Racing is chess, at high speeds. Racing is also an adventure game, where instead of unlocking worlds, you unlock new cars, new tracks, and new competitors. Good racing games are so well balanced that they make fighting

game designers blush. You never start a good car racing game with a field of grandmaster drivers, but instead with drivers that are often just about where you are or should be. You never know how rich a driving game world is until you commit to racing in it. These design standards leave a wonderful kind of figurative carrot, leading the player toward their next aspiration by teasing a sense of what is to come with a little more effort and mastery.

This is also perhaps why racing metaphors are so pervasive in Western culture. Beyond an affinity for notions like “onward and upward”, we use racing metaphors in daily life so often they are almost invisible. We long for the homestretch, we compare sprints and marathons, offer a head start, or make a pit stop. We also forget that winning *hands down* is a horse racing term, that *from scratch*'s antonym is a *head start*, or that we must be careful to avoid a *false start* by *jumping the gun*.

Racing metaphors and analogies are often kinder, safer metaphors than those we often use from war. That is in part because racing is not war; it's not a battle, it's even more primal. It's getting to the point first, whether that's toward prey, safety, or something more. Racing is essential to such basic play as tag (aka chase, kho,-kho, *jeu du loup*, *juego de persecución*, and so on), one of the most commonly shared games among varied cultures. It's difficult to find a sport that doesn't involve some term of racing.

To be even more emphatic, racing is life itself. It's about going as far as possible before that inevitable clock ticks a final time; getting there, before it beats you there, whatever the “it” you're trying to beat is. It's about laps, where sometimes you lead, and sometimes you follow, but there's always the effort to do better. As the saying goes, time and tide wait for no one. Hence the need to learn to go faster, farther, and ultimately onward and upward.

THE DIGITAL RACING GAME

It is then no wonder that when asked, as game academics often are, what your favorite game is, my answer is often the same. For years it was the Forza Horizon series (Playground Games, 2012) because it not only supported my Fast and Furious (2001) styled aspirations and memories, but its simulation was also useful in practicing autocross when it was too cold, too wet, or too snowy to do so in real life. Yet like the Fast and Furious film series, the Forza Horizon series persists with a formula that plays to its strengths, without taking itself too seriously.

Among the most important racing games in my history were titles like Project Gotham Racing (Bizarre Creations, 2001), Pole Position (Namco 1982),

Sprint (Atari Inc, 1976), Driver (Reflections Interactive, 1999) and even Grand Theft Auto III (Rockstar, 2001). Grand Theft Auto (GTA), for all its crassness, unbranded vehicles, and awkward mechanics, often surprised people for the hours of simple driving available with real world interaction. In the end, GTA is a kind of adventure game, with some chess moves needed to unlock enough levels (or avoid enough stars) that you can drive any vehicle you want around town and rarely pay the consequences for pushing it to the limits. When I was snowed in on a cold Chicago night, I'd drive hours in Vice City to be reminded of the pleasure of making a machine move deftly through a much warmer climate. The missions didn't matter, only the driving: onward.

However, when the podium leaders are announced, there's really only one winner: Gran Turismo (Polyphony Digital, 1997). Gran Turismo did what the second through sixth place driving simulators couldn't. It didn't gatekeep the player, requiring a literal driving test in a dark garage before the fun could happen, as Driver did. Gran Turismo didn't layer some fiction that leaves the player dissociating themselves from a character they might not want to identify with or embrace. It contrasted to what titles like GTA and Driver did so well for GameStop boys hoping to grow up to be a character only portrayable by actors Steve McQueen or Jason Statham.

Gran Turismo is only what it claims to be - a racing simulation. A game that immediately distinguishes between its arcade mode and its simulation mode, as it presents from the start screen. A game that appreciates the many dimensions of car racing, rolling the opening full motion video with not only an appreciation for the cars, but for the asphalt, for the officials, and for every other dimension of racing shown.

The US version of the PlayStation title begins with a seething remix by the Chemical Brothers of Everything Must Go (1996), the title of the song itself only emphasizing the pervasive reality of life's race. Indeed, everything must go. And so, the song's musical tensions build like the crescendo one first feels waiting nervously for their first race, for the dropped flag, a green light or permission to push the limit. The animation, likewise, does not begin with the lust of flashy cars and reflective paint, but instead focuses on the road below and the way nature pushes a leaf along its path. A love of racing is not singularly about the machine, but about the nature of it in balance with the physics that bind everything in the physical world.

This opening experience is tantalizing and singular. A full forty seconds proceed, setting an early morning scene, the shadowy starting line light set, empty spectator seating, the rising sun preceding the rising gate of a paddock and racer preparing to enter the track. This is not the scene-setting of glory, but

of rigor. It is the start of a story. The story not of a professional racer, but of one just starting. The resolution to this story is racing, close calls, masterful handling and of course, more racing. Notably, the introductory FMV ends not with a car, but with full daylight and a camera that points to the sky. The filmic treatment for such a full motion video is the trailer to an epic sports film with cars, tracks and the choices their drivers make unfolding into a compelling, multilinear story. The day is ahead, and the road is clear.

PLAYING GRAN TURISMO

Gran Turismo did what masters of any genre do well. It borrowed from past successes but set new standards in an endeavoring toward greatness. The start screen offered a no-nonsense bifurcating choice - play arcade mode or simulation mode. Arcade mode was the quick start, with options to practice driving with a balanced selection of cars, some time trial practice and a 2-player couch cooperative. Simulation mode, however, emphasized the virtual showroom and provided the same kind of leveling and matriculation that adventure game and role playing audiences understood.

Both simulation mode and arcade mode appealed to the two audiences of game simulation fans. Arcade offered the head-to-head combat and practice on cars not immediately available to simulation players. It was like many car racing simulations an opportunity to play with cars you haven't yet earned. It was also the base for head-to-head competition with friends. It was where people tagged into competition while getting ready to go out to the club, killing time in someone's basement, or bonding in the way some bond – staring at a screen while talking about your emotions, your plans, your hopes and dreams. For those of us who had awkward years, waiting to race among 4 or 5 friends was the time you bonded with them before aiming to beat them to the finish line.

Arcade mode was a place to meet, much like online spaces would become. It was designed for playing quickly, without the nuances of simulation mode, and with the expected din of other people in the room. Arcade mode is an experience to be talked over, talked through and much like a road trip, as much about the journey as the destination. It often didn't matter if you won or lost, because there would be another chance to play with little expense beyond time. It was an arcade, but without the quarters. It was an arcade, but without the audience of people you didn't know. It was such a safe space, if you knew you'd beat someone too easily, you'd balance the experience by picking a car you know is inferior to the one they were driving. You might even give them

pointers on managing their choice for next run. Arcade mode was exactly what it was supposed to be - a space where reality and play met.

But for single play, it is the simulation mode that gobbled countless hours of time from players. Simulation mode begins with an offer to choose from the used car makers of leading, predominately Japanese manufactures. Players start with a 10,000-credit budget buying from the used market in much the same way I bought my first entry-level car for racing. Players face the initial trajectory-determining question: to buy the fastest year and model they can afford or buy something they can modify with the leftover money. It's choices like buying a used Mazda Eunos roadster (aka the Mazda Miata MX-5), a 93 Honda Civic hatchback, or a Nissan Silvia (aka 200 and 240 SX) that set the tone for the game. Players are not given Ferraris to mash into guardrails. They can't choose from mythical 1,000 LB cars that magically run truck engines that protrude from the hood. Instead, as the opening sequence hints, this simulation starts at the bottom and makes you work to get there.

Many of the most tantalizing cars aren't available, even to race against until the player is ready for them. That means a surprisingly charming experience gate, a license. The player earns the ability to race in more elite classes by passing the most rudimentary but surprising driver challenges. These include tasks completed with the most mundane and at times least noteworthy cars in history. Yet, to afford cars that are only available on the new market, one must perform well. To earn my Chevrolet Corvette, I'd need to earn 45,000 credits, which is much easier when you matriculate through the racing license ranks.

Once all those hurdles were surpassed, once a player masters the straight-aways of the high-speed ring or wins more than a few special events, another layer of the game becomes even more important. Players discover the allure of modified vehicles. They learn that even their grandparents' daily driver has levels of power and handling they never imagined. They also learn that the wrong decision, to perhaps over-modify a Honda Civic, robbing it of much needed torque, complicates a race. Gran Turismo offers just enough simulation. There are no oil changes or blown engines, even if you take complicated Mitsubishi GTO (aka Mitsubishi 3000 GT) all the way to its 1000-horsepower potential.

In game, the experience is balance for new and professional drivers alike. Defaults are set for arcade enthusiasts, automatic transmissions and no-drift physics. The switch to these unlocks a level of reality that leaves any driver appreciative of the nuances of driving well. The feel of an antique car's quirks comes through in the experience just as noticeably as the stability and weight offered in modern implementations of stability control. Once that same,

distinct three tone signal starts the race, the thoroughness of balancing details with playfulness emerge. The experience is neither overly technical, with idiosyncrasies like fuel volume and weight to determine before racing, nor so simplified it feels like the physics agnostic Super Mario Kart (Nintendo, 1992).

Of course, true to the US's state of balanced liability and litigation, the games startup is tarnished by a startup warning that most players ignored. It was something about the game respecting the intellectual property rights of the car manufactures and their brands. However, that warning also hinted at something more and more car simulations would come to appreciate. The game was not only an opportunity to experience remarkable cars, but it was also an opportunity for companies to market their cars. Yes, brands like Porsche, Ford and Jeep have already done so, but Gran Turismo did so in a way that turned the game into a virtual car show. Instead of walking into a showroom, players had the opportunity to experience a wider variety of cars from a wide variety of eras. But importantly, unlike a car show, these cars were ready to go instead of sitting still while people appreciated their bodywork.

There's an important story that really drives this home. It's the story of Gran Turismo shifting the sale of two specific cars in the US. The game exposed two versions of vehicles not available in the US, the Subaru WRX STI and the Mitsubishi Lancer Evo. These cars, so the story goes, were so engaging in the game that US domestic buyers petitioned dealers and manufactures to bring them to US markets. In contrast with the Porsche Challenge (SCEE Studio Soho, 1997) or the many Ford Racing (Empire Interactive, 2000) games, this helped shift the market. Manufacturers saw games like Gran Turismo as an opportunity to sell.

This was my first experience with the persuasive power of games. Before I read seminal work by well cited academics like Ian Bogost, I learned from experience that games were a medium to sell or dissuade buyers. I tested my theories on which cars to race by testing their performance and mods in games. It didn't hurt that the game offered a unique toy, a machine test (aka a kind of dyno test in racing communities) for all the cars I added to my virtual garage. It was a near perfect foundation for developing aspirational buyers. Did I later own the Hondas, Mazdas, and Corvette because I had played them in the game? Or did my love of racing align with the cars chosen for their driver focus and their appropriateness to the many iterations of Gran Turismo games?

Either way, I learned more about cars from Gran Turismo than any book, enthusiast magazine, movie, or other media I had consumed. As I wrote in a long-since-forgotten abstract for the International Digital Media and Arts Association conference nearly two decades ago, Gran Turismo was a tireless teacher.

It would let me fail repeatedly against my understanding of rear-wheeled vehicle physics. It would let me foolishly spend all my hard-earned racing money on a heavily modified Honda Civic until the car was so light and so modified it had no off-the-line torque but could beat a stock car 3 times its price in a long, turbo-friendly straight line. I learned about brands never marketed to me, European and Japanese cars that were sold under different names in the US, and the incredible opportunities of modifying cars beyond spec.

ON RACING GAMERS, MEDIA INTERSECTIONS AND GENERATIONS

The game also helped me understand something else. It helped me understand that the gamer identity was far wider than popular media had me believe. The nice thing about a race is that it is far easier for someone to pick up than the lore of a dungeon crawler or the fictions of a first person shooters. It also avoids the violence or adult themes that make for awkward play between someone outside your age range. Men, women, boys, girls, old, young, and every intersection within and without those terms can understand the core elements of a racing game. Pick a car, keep it on the road, get to the finish line before everyone else. You are the car, a generally genderless machine, with a single purpose competing against similarly purposed machines.

The most enduring and compelling games are often just that. They are a few atomic units that when used and remixed remain compelling. They are tetrominoes to Tetris, specific moves to chess pieces, checkers on a board. These are games that remain appealing not because they complicate things, but because their set of variables allow a playful experience built from the concert of their arrangement and the rules that guide their interaction. The allure is in the permutations, not in the single instance.

Gran Turismo didn't simply offer every car - it offered the right cars. The algorithms do a wonderful job balancing competition. It provides the right cars for the right level of competition. Novel-for-the-time innovations like catch-up artificial intelligence helped balance non-player driving to meet the player at their performance level. Its structure, like a good teacher, lets the player learn, encouraging them to stretch themselves toward a higher goal while it avoids punishing the player irrevocably when they fail.

Gran Turismo is not only a visual experience, but also an auditory one. The audio tracks, supported by CD-Media on the PlayStation 1, afforded for real music by real artists known outside of the game world. It was not merely MIDI inspired by real music. The non-Japanese version of the game offered tracks

from then rock stars like the Chemical Brothers, David Bowie, Garbage, and The Dandy Warhols. While such names may not resonate now, they were well-recognized among its Western audiences.

The music of *Gran Turismo* was not only about commercialization, but about setting a tone. It was music a few friends playing arcade mode could appreciate. It was fun party music, instead of the tolerable afterthought that melodically droned in the background of other games. It was contemporary, appropriate to the tone of the game, and part of a holistic experience. It's no surprise that musical performers now, like car manufactures, want to be included in well-respected games to advertise and popularize their products.

That this was often electronic music only fit the rising popularity of raves and clubs and of the emerging, ultimately world-changing technologies, the pace of expanding Internet, a future virtual reality, and emergent digital cultures. All of this is placed neatly in a time where club goers were celebrating the ethos of P.L.U.R. – peace, love, unity and respect. The era of the original *Gran Turismo* remained a relatively optimistic one, floating toward an idealized future inflated by the emerging technology bubble. The thing that propelled it forward was a culture of appreciation for the ways in which technology – from personal computers to cars, from personal communication to mass communication, from music production to media sharing – was a positive and perhaps even democratizing force.

That culture would beget popular media franchises like the once street racing-themed *Fast and Furious* films. It also introduced unique moments in media like Mitsubishi's use of an electronic music song by Dirty Vegas (2001) to promote their latest street racing friendly car, the 2003 Mitsubishi Eclipse. This was of course, the same model featured in the second film from the *Fast and Furious* series, *2 Fast 2 Furious*. By the time Mitsubishi helped make a Grammy Award-winning album with their ad, the tech bubble had fully burst and with it an optimism about technology. Not only had tech optimism declined, but also the trend of customized modified cars. The headwinds include the drag of an early 2000s economic recession, changes in car manufacturing. Mitsubishi would eventually retire their racer-friendly Eclipse and Lancer Evo models, moving as the market did: toward the practicality of sport utility vehicles. Dirty Vegas's hit song now feels like a white flag for the era, signaling the final lap for the generation's real world modified car community. The song was seemingly appropriately named "Days Go By". As in racing, all things go.

In retrospect, *Gran Turismo*'s 1997 release was at the cusp of several significant turns. Humanity was only 3 percent shy of a new century. *Gran Turismo* fits neatly among other media of its decade that championed the inevitable race

toward a finish line that is part of life. Like the game, some films popular with the same demographics playing Gran Turismo emphasized the harried pace of life. Like the pace of club and rave life, movies like *Go* (1999) and *Run Lola Run* (1998), emphasized the sense of racing toward a future demarcated by the end of the century.

Much like a rush, the mood of the music, movies, and games like Gran Turismo hint at the straightaway around the bend. They were popular at a time when the finish line of a new century was suddenly within view. Ironically this was while all the angst and anxiety of the time emphasized the complexity of its contemporary. But with distance, such stress might look unnecessary in retrospect. If each day that goes by, each year, decade, or century is really just a lap, the road behind often looks easier than the road ahead.

That new century would usher complexities that make the 90s look like a charming decade worthy of the romance of simpler times. In 1997, the US led the world in share of population using the Internet by nearly 10 times, with a now seemingly meager 21% (<https://ourworldindata.org/internet>). Gran Turismo was released at that edge, where friends played together on the couch looking out toward an imperceptible future where they could play with anyone anywhere in the world. In as much time as it took to go from Pole Position to Gran Turismo, the world has also eschewed the modifiable complexity of internal combustion engines for the quiet simplicity of electric cars. Waiting for turns and spectating from a couch in the same room became 97% population Internet usage globally and online competitive play at the scale of eSports.

As each generation rotates through its eras, the sense of velocity quickens. Yet there's always the call to look in the rear-view mirror, reminiscing about the simple charm of what's behind. It's perhaps a reminder that there's always another lap, an opportunity to go a little faster, and a new finish line to pursue. It's also perhaps a reminder that racing games, their metaphors, their analogies, and their experience, are useful not only in play, but in life.

We progress, onward and upward, further and faster, forward as we go. Racing games remind us how to do that.

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