Platforming Inclusivity: *Blaseball* and an inclusive vision of browser games

On March 10th, Celebrities Deaths tweeted out an obituary[1] for the recently-deceased Raúl Leal. "The loss of Raul [sic] Leal is a devastating blow for @MiamiBlaseball [sic]," the linked obituary tells us. "Raul was a beautiful boy who feared no Umpire, feared no incineration and protected his team with his life."[2] While it is not clear who this teammate was, why they might fear an umpire, or what horrifying incident led them to being incinerated, a savvy reader would quickly notice references to *Blaseball*.

In the summer of 2020, amidst the pandemic we still find ourselves in the grip of, Los Angeles-based studio The Game Band released *Blaseball*, a browser-based baseball simulator that combined the quintessential American sport with the darkly comical eldritch horror seen in recent years in works such as the podcast *Welcome to Nightvale*. The game is notable for its impassioned fanbase, who have latched onto the game and engage with it on a variety of online platforms. In the case of Raúl Leal's obituary, game developer and critic Cat Manning notes that "[e]nough people tweeted about Raúl's death that an algorithmically-driven obituary generating site reported on it as though a real person had died."[3] While Celebrities Deaths is not the first exploitative Twitter bot to be foiled by an enthusiastic audience (a much more prominent example would be the design-stealing bots that were trolled in later 2019 by canny artists[4]), the fact that the chatter around Raúl Leal's death was intense enough to meet an algorithmic definition of a celebrity death speaks to the passionate and public engagement that fans have with *Blaseball*.

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[1] @DEATHSNEWS

[2] *Raúl Leal*.

[3] @catacalypto

[4] Ramos

A curious aspect about *Blaseball* is that despite the shared passion fans[5] have for the game, the experience that gamers have when engaging with the game is surprisingly heterogenous. While some gamers will engage deeply with the stats that the site throws out while teams compete, others are primarily interested in the personas that the community develops for each player. Still more gamers may find themselves interested less in the game itself and more in some of the epitexts.

Blaseball also stands alone in the developers' support for a breadth of interpretations not just of the meaning of the work but also of fine-grained details right down to the descriptions of the players on the teams. The developers want fast to be "empowered by the creative potential [of *Blaseball*] while also ensuring no one gets shut out by others' personal interpretations."[6] The Game Band help achieve this by employing a minimalist, text-forward interface, providing fans with API access to read the statistics, and establishing a community policy of not revealing information found through the API without flagging it as such. The community has adopted the spirit of collaboration fostered by The Game Band, most notably by developing new technologies for the game's fan wiki that build multiple interpretations into the fabric of the site. By leveraging these aspects of the technological underpinnings of the game, both The Game Band and the fans themselves have developed an inclusive environment where fans are welcome to enjoy the game on their own terms and have tools at their disposal to help facilitate that enjoyment without stepping on another fan's toes.

When trying to understand the complicated interactions between gamers with different interests and different expectations of play, it's helpful to find some kind of framework or a point of comparison. As I considered this problem, my mind kept turning to Mia Consalvo's work on cheating. In her analysis of cheating, Consalvo notes that players can be divided into different groups based on how they understand the concept of cheating, ranging from players who see it as something entirely beyond the pale to players who see cheating as nothing more than part of the ecosystem of gaming.[7]

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[5] A note on terms: normally the people who play a game would be referred to as "players," but *Blaseball* can make this somewhat confusing because the in-game characters are themselves players. With this potential for confusion in mind, I am calling the in-game characters "players," "teammates," or "characters," depending on context, and am calling the real-world people who participate in the cultural event of Blaseball "fans" or "gamers," also depending on context.

[6] Greszes

[7] Consalvo

It can be easy to see cheating as a zero-sum game, where cheaters and non-cheaters are put into strict opposition with no middle ground, but Consalvo's study reveals greater nuance than that. Even within the strictest conception of cheating, there is a great deal of room for play, and for the same activities that might be considered cheating in one context would be deemed acceptable (if frowned upon) in another—for example, while players may frown upon someone who asks for help from a friend, they might accept it if the player "had already tried to figure out the situation on [their] own first,"[8] and tell the player that they're only cheating themselves. Cheating is a relational activity, and so any analysis of it must speak to a broader network of players.

I must note some caution at this point: I don't think that members of the Blaseball community are cheating when they engage with the game in different ways, but rather that this model of community behaviour transfers well and can reveal important patterns of behaviour. Consalvo demonstrates that the concept of cheating is built on both technological and social interactions that go against the grain of what a player is expected to do in a way that confers an advantage, and that "[p]layers actively [make] ethical judgments about gameplay that extended beyond the coded rules of the game."[9]

With Consalvo's work in mind, I want to look at the technical and social components that create the space for multiple styles of play to coexist harmoniously, without the animosity or sense of zero-sum play that characterise gaming communities plagued by cheating. *Blaseball*'s platform is ultimately fundamental to the inclusive model of gaming that The Game Band developed and gamers extended. The centrality of browsers to inclusiveness is visible in many elements of the game, from the ability of stats-oriented gamers to explore Forbidden Knowledge without spoiling the fun of others to the colourful personas fans have developed for the players, and the ability for contradictory personas to coexist peacefully in the community.

Much of *Blaseball*'s inclusiveness is tied to the way the game is presented through the fan's web browser. Unlike many games, *Blaseball* features only a handful of graphical assets, and much of what appears at first glance to be graphical elements, such as the teams' logos, are actually emoji, and therefore textual in nature. Most importantly, the players themselves are entirely textual: fans can only see the player's name, and a handful of statistics. There are no markers of gender, age, or ethnicity in the game, aside from what fans might infer from a player's name, and even in that case clear indicators of these attributes are notably lacking. While a name like Isaac Johnson may imply gender and a vague sense of ethnicity, one look at Johnson's
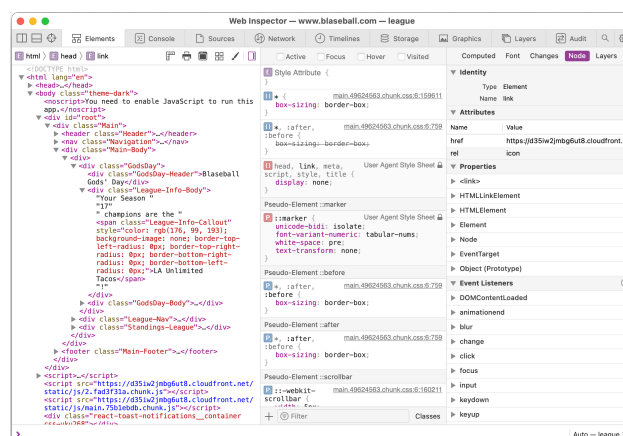
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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

teammates should sow doubt: how confident can we feel in our assumptions about Johnson when the Chicago Firefighters lineup also includes Justice Spoon, Socks Maybe, Swamuel Mora, and Baby Triumphant?

The use of text and the evocative names encourages fans to imagine a diverse universe of players, with few limits on what a player might be. Fans have responded enthusiastically, and have crafted a variety of personas to match the names that include players of a variety of ages, genders, sexual orientations, and even species. The public data on each player leaves room for these interpretations without contradiction; when dealing with web content, however, it is important to remember that a site's code is only ever hiding just beneath the surface.

Because *Blaseball* is a browser-based game, any fan can simply view the game's source to see what is happening behind the scenes. There is a wealth of information available to fans interested in exploring this data, and The Game Band have facilitated these explorations by making an API available to the fans. The information itself breaks down into information that is publicly available, such as player names, team names, the current score, and other such statistics, as well as information that is not publicly available. This latter category includes a variety of statistics, some with known effects on the game and some without, including attributes such as moxie, totalFingers, shakespearianism, buoyancy, anticapitalism, and evolution.[10]

Fans can use their web browser's source viewer to investigate the technological underpinnings of the game and to discover

The *Blaseball* API reveals a wealth of information about the teams and players. Above, the statistics for Core Mechanics player PolkaDot Patterson reveals cryptic statistics such as "anticapitalism" and "laserlikeness."

The information fans can discover through using the API causes a problem for an inclusive game: while analysing this

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[10] It is worth noting that attributes that would contradict fan interpretations of players are absent entirely: gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and other such attributes simply do not exist canonically.

information is a great deal of fun for those of us who enjoy peeking behind the curtain to see how everything runs, for other fans knowing this information can dispel some of the magic from the game. The zero-sum nature of this knowledge means that, in order to preserve the ability for both styles of play—spoiled and unspoiled—to coexist inclusively, there must be some kind of system to allow players who enjoy being spoiled to view this data without introducing it to players who prefer to enjoy the game unspoiled.

The platform itself provides some measure of protection. Accessing the API requires concerted, non-trivial effort, and even if a fan were to access it accidentally—say, by clicking an API link posted to a forum—they would find an impenetrable wall of text that, for the most part, would reveal no secrets without additional processing. Teams, players, and other components of the game are represented by Universally Unique Identifiers (UUIDs), each of which is a 128-bit randomly-generated number composed of a series of hexadecimal digits that, due to the sheer quantity of numbers involved, is all-but-guaranteed to be unique.[11] Due to the length and variability of these numbers, a fan

[{"id":"b63be8c2-576a-4d6e-8daf-814f8bcea96f","lineup":["0eddd056-9d72-4804-bd60-53144b785d5c","80e474a3-7d2b-431d-8192-2f1e27162607","20be1c34-071d-40c6-8824-dde2af184b4d","006e1d32-9742-48ef-a6ba-36545e93b9e3","5a26fc61-d75d-4c01-9ce2-1880ffb5550f","c22e3af5-9001-465f-b450-864d7db2b4a0","7fed72df-87de-407d-8253-2295a2b60d3b","8903a74f-f322-41d2-bd75-dbf7563c4abb"],"rotation":["9d6f3d23-bc26-40e6-93aa-0b1c693e0ba8","a38ada0a-aeac-4a3d-b9a5-968687ccd2f9","af6b3edc-ed52-4edc-b0c9-14e0a5ae0ee3","889c9ef9-d521-4436-b41c-9021b81b4dfb"],"bullpen":["b019fb2b-9f4b-4deb-bf78-6bee2f16d98d","c4418663-7aa4-4c9f-ae73-0e81e442e8a2","4aa843a4-baa1-4f35-8748-63aa82bd0e03","97ec5a2f-ac1a-4cde-86b7-897c030a1fa8","d5192d95-a547-498a-b4ea-6770dde4b9f5","b7adbbcc-0679-43f3-a939-07f009a393db","12577256-bc4e-4955-81d6-b422d895fb12","21d52455-6c2c-4ee4-8673-ab46b4b926b4","2b9d6b50-3ce2-4cb1-8cd1-2a0fc05733e3"],"bench":["66cebbbf-9933-4329-924a-72bd3718f321","1aec2c01-b766-4018-a271-419e5371bc8f","0daf04fc-8d0d-4513-8e98-4f610616453b","0cc5bd39-e90d-42f9-9dd8-7e703f316436","d0dafd4e-fca2-4d9c-accc-d65678e7589f"],"seasAttr":[],"permAttr":["LIFE_OF_PARTY","ELECTRIC"],"fullName":"Miami Dale","location":"Miami","mainColor":"#9141ba","nickname":"Dale","secondaryColor":"#cd76fa","shorthand":"MIA","emoji":"0x1F6A4","slogan":"¡Dale!","shameRuns":0,"totalShames":84,"totalShamings":63,"seasonShames":0,"seasonShamings":0,"championships":0,"weekAttr":[],"gameAttr":

Visiting https://www.blaseball.com/database/allTeams technically gives fans a glimpse of much of the inner workings of the teams, but most of the information is a collection of impenetrable UUIDs.

is highly unlikely to be able to memorise them, and would certainly not be able to recognise one at a glance, and as such, a player seeing a list of UUIDs will not be spoiled until they have cross-referenced the IDs and produced a list that matches information across several API queries. The use of UUIDs, then, rather than a more transparent identifier scheme, helps preserve a separations between different types of fan engagement.

Of course, the technical measures The Game Band employ with the API are only useful up to the point that a fan has assembled all the data and connected stats to players. From that point on, sharing the compiled information can expose other fans to secrets and inner-workings that they may wish to remain ignorant of. To guard against this, The Game Band and fans have developed the concept of Forbidden Knowledge, which the Blaseball Wiki defines as "is a subset of information about Blaseball that we would consider canonical, but is considered significantly spoiler heavy in any context."[12] More explicitly, Forbidden Knowledge is "the

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[11] Leach

[12] "Help:Forbidden Knowledge"

underlying structure and algorithmic makeup of the game and simulation that is hidden from public view, as opposed to information and mechanics visible on blaseball.com."[13]

As a social system of signposting, the concept of Forbidden Knowledge fits well with Consalvo's understanding of attitudes towards cheating as existing on a continuum. On the one end, where Consalvo identifies the "purist" who "believ[es] that anything other than a solo effort in completing a game is cheating,"[14] we can see an analogue to players who loathe the idea of encountering anything beyond information that's completely public; on the other end of the continuum Consalvo identifies players who see cheating as wrong only if it degrades another's experience, and may even participate in cheating "for the pleasures it can bring,"[15] an attitude that we can see in the Society for Internet Blaseball Research (SIBR), a group that delights in digging into the hidden information in the game and producing deep analyses of the game's statistics. Flagging Forbidden Knowledge allows both the purists and SIBR to coexist happily, as each group can make an informed choice and enjoy their preferred style of play without degrading the other's experience.

Blaseball fans themselves have also been instrumental in using the affordances of the web platform itself to create spaces where multiple visions of the game can coexist without one or the other dominating the rest. This is especially apparent when examining how players have resolved the potential for friction between versions of the players themselves, which can differ greatly depending on the writer or artist behind a particular version.

Because, as discussed above, there is very little canonical information on players that defines their physical features, fans are free to assign their own preferences to each individual player, and no fan will ever find that their own vision for the player is contradicted in the available data. Furthermore, because what little physical data there is on players—fingers, being the most obvious—is considered Forbidden Knowledge, it is highly unlikely to factor into fans' visions of the characters. Ultimately, any sense that there is a true form of a player is suspended indefinitely,

Two different visions of the popular Jaylen Hotdogfingers player appear in the First Edition collection of Tlopps Blaseball cards.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Consalvo

[15] Ibid.

and instead each version coexists with every other version, free from worry that an official proclamation will ever render it obsolete or even secondary.

Perhaps the best example of the indefinitely suspended form of a Blaseball player is Pitching Machine, who originally joined the lineup of the Unlimited Tacos in Season 8 after the Tacos fans conspired to have the team's entire pitching roster rendered unable to play.[16] While the only description the game provides of Pitching Machine is the name, fans quickly filled out the details and began to craft a persona for the new pitcher.

While the obvious interpretation of "Pitching Machine" is the mechanical ball-throwing device used by players to practice their batting, *Blaseball* fans delight in finding oblique interpretations of the game. "Given blaseball's naming conventions," Philippa Warr writes, "Pitching Machine could be someone's legit name OR it could be a robot with a blood collection."[17] The two options Warr proposes are reflected in some of the many interpretations fans came up with for the player: a regular pitching machine wearing a cap[18], a Frankenstein-like assemblage[19], a humanoid robot[20], and a largely human-appearing character.[21]

Although the diverse conceptions of Pitching Machine are largely irreconcilable, the Blaseball community has developed a solution to allow each of these visions of the character to coexist. The developers of the Blaseball Wiki created a feature known as the "Interdimensional Rumour Mill," (IRM) which "is a system of wiki extensions that allows for contributors to offer their unique interpretations of Blaseball players without invalidating any preexisting or future interpretations."[22] Because the wiki is a webpage, the content being served to users can be changed each time the page is loaded, and so the IRM "will show the reader a randomly selected interpretation each time the page is reloaded."[23] This system places all of the

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[16] "Pitching Machine"

[17] @philippawar

[18] @HetreaSky

[19] @2skele2bells

[20] @sparksel

[21] @occultclassic

[22] "Help:Interdimensional Rumor Mill Guide"

[23] Ibid.

interpretations on even footing and allows fans to encounter each interpretation with the same level of respect and gravitas as the next.

Another element that helps disrupt the sense that there might be an implied hierarchy or a preferred interpretation is the Interdimensional Frequency number, or IF. Similarly to the UUIDs discussed above, and unlike a serial number, which would imply some sense of order or chronology, the IF number is randomly generated[24] (with the possibility of being overridden for narrative purposes), and is described by the wiki's administrators as being "a sort of radio station tuning to a specific dimension where your Rumor lives."[25] This analogy underscores the degree to which these interpretations are a matter of taste: if a fan doesn't like what they're hearing, they can simply tune in to another station.

The IRM and the IF numbers demonstrate well the ways in which the affordances of the web can support diverse visions of a game: websites like the Blaseball Wiki can draw from a deep well of interpretations, giving fans an opportunity to contribute their own voice to the conversation and know that, at least some of the time, it will be the voice that other fans hear. By paying attention to the subtle hierarchies that can be established by serial numbers, thoughtful developers can develop numbering systems like UUIDs or IF numbers that offer gamers a non-hierarchical classification system that nonetheless works seamlessly with the requirements of modern web technologies.

As the above examples show, between clever design that makes the most of the technological affordances of websites and the careful development of community expectations, it is possible for fans of a game to enjoy it in a number of radically-different-and-even-mutually-exclusive ways without ever jeopardising another fan's ability to enjoy the game. While *Blaseball* is aided by a fanbase that, at least for now, does not have a segment of fans that goes out of its way to grief the other segments, it nonetheless shows the potential for other web-based games to foster such an agreeable and diverse community. Just as cheating must be understood at the intersection of technological exploits and social practices, so too must inclusive design: where the former must be understood so developers can prevent one group from ruining the fun of others, the latter must be understood so that developers can support all groups in their unique approaches to enjoying the game.

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

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ZIWA MUELLER 🗣

LARS TAYLOR 🌞

QAIS DOGWALKER 🛥

PITCHING MACHINE 🌮

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