

A Life in Consoles: From Super Mario Sunshine to Spider-Man

I don't remember when gaming progressed from a hobby to an essential part of my life, but I suppose it all started not long after my brother gave me my first game controller. I was young, probably around five years old, and Isaac - my defiant older brother - handed me a bulky, silver behemoth of a controller with primary-colored buttons and clacky triggers. At the time, I had no idea that this controller, with its cord inserted into the openings at the front of our goodly console, would open doors to unheard-of worlds entirely unbeknownst to me.

My first console, the Nintendo GameCube, was released in Japan on September 14th, 2001 - four years after I was born to the day. It followed the release of the Nintendo 64 and was the company's first move away from cartridge-based media. It's important to note that the GameCube was Nintendo's first console in history that did not offer a Mario platform title at launch.

One of my favorite games on the GameCube, undoubtedly not the first one I played, was *Super Mario Sunshine*, released almost a year after the GameCube. In this game, Mario and Peach take a vacation to Isle Delfino, but when they land, an officer arrests Mario for supposedly painting and polluting the entire town. It's an imposter who looks mysteriously like Mario, running amok and destroying Isle Delfino. Mario and his bot companion, Fludd, must traverse the whole city, cleaning up the imposter's mess. While the summary of this game makes it sound no less interesting than the typical story of Mario rescuing Peach, the concept was mind-blowing to my childlike mind. Looking back, I particularly liked this game because it was three-dimensional, unlike most Mario games I had previously encountered. While many Mario games were side-scrolling platformers, which I am arguably the absolute worst at, this game had an open-world concept and challenges I could complete. It was astonishing to me.

Of course, this was not my only game; Isaac ensured I had a distinguished palate. One game I was allowed to play with him and his friends was *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. While never my favorite, I became relatively good at button-smashing for survival and even beat him and his friends a few times - which my younger self was undeniably proud of. Another game I sunk hours into was *Ty the Tasmanian Tiger*. It was like an Aussie version of *Super Mario Sunshine* with a Tasmanian tiger gathering mystical eggs to help locate talismans that would free his family from the Dreaming. Admittedly, I did not remember this plot in the slightest and had to Google a summary to explain it, so maybe it wasn't the most straightforward of games.

My original appreciation of video games stemmed from the bonding moments they afforded my brother and me. Like most siblings, we didn't get along all that well, and the only time I could ever hang out with him and his friends was if I agreed to be their player-four punching bag. I quickly learned how to hold my own. Games were the one thing I could participate in that wouldn't annoy Isaac. I spent a lot of my childhood watching him play. It was like an interactive movie, except I could ask him questions about how to play or the story. I could also tell him he was a dumbass when he inevitably got himself killed.

Isaac had a PlayStation 2 in his room that I was occasionally allowed to play. Sony released the PS2 in 2000, and its success stemmed from its backward compatibility with original PlayStation titles. My favorite game on this console was *Tony Hawk's Project 8*. I particularly relished using empty pools as half-pipes for my death-inducing tricks. There wasn't much to this game, at least not the multiplayer version, but the sandbox map was entertaining, and I spent hours exploring. Of course, I only ever got to play on the PS2 if Isaac was particularly generous.

I got a Nintendo Wii not long after it launched in late 2009. While it was not my favorite console, it offered something new to the gaming world. The Wii had motion controls, meaning

the console's sensor could detect the controller's movement and input from the buttons. This type of technology was utterly foreign to me, and like many others, I spent most of my total Wii game time playing the launch game, *Wii Sports*. While this game had a simple concept, different sports with different movements, it somehow captivated many a Wii owner and was the bestselling Wii game with over 76 million copies sold. Arguably, this only occurred because the title came with the Wii, but there's something strangely entertaining about *Wii Sports* bowling.

After the Wii, gaming found its place on the back burner of my mind. I didn't dislike it by any means, but it also lost what appeal it had. I think I stopped playing as often, partially because Isaac stopped letting me play with him and partly because I had yet to find a game that impressed me as much as *Super Mario Sunshine* had. Similar situations happened to me with other interests. I didn't enjoy reading until I read *Graceling*, and I didn't particularly appreciate playing piano until I learned about Jazz and Blues music. My losing interest in gaming was not all that surprising.

I met Natalie in the eighth grade. We had similar fundamental interests and a lack of good friends. Because of this, it seemed only natural to spend my time with her. I didn't know she would be my best friend and most trustworthy confidant almost eight years later.

Nat lives close to me, like a five-minute drive close. So I spent all my spare time with her. After learning of our shared interest in gaming, Nat decided we needed to play *Portal 2*, arguably one of the best co-op games. In *Portal 2*, you and your partner play as robots designed to help a different robot – named GLaDOS – run regular tests. These tests are essentially room escape puzzles where both players have a set of portals that they can use to help them escape. That's it, that's the game. The single-player campaign offers more story and context, but the co-op

campaign is more enjoyable. It's fun to mess around with friends and wreak havoc. Of course, Nat and I spent more time trying to screw each other over than we did solving the puzzles, but we eventually finished the game. By the end of the credits, our friendship solidified.

Of course, Nat and I played other games, but *Portal 2* was our all-time favorite. We played through the game multiple times on the Xbox 360, and when we both got computers, we beat it again. The two robot characters, P-Body and Atlas, seemed almost parallel to our friendship. While we weren't robots forced to complete test after test, we could relate through our love of the game. We also spent much of our time messing with each other, dropping the other into the water, or moving our portals right before the other tried to walk through them. It was a good time.

I got an Xbox 360 because of Nat. We spent a lot of time playing through *Halo*, and the love for the console inevitably rubbed off of me. I got the 360 long after it was released in 2005. I had the Nintendo Wii before the 360, which speaks volumes about my love of games in the mid to late 2000s. Looking back, I didn't play the console as much as I should have; I only bought a few games. A short list includes *Call of Duty: Ghosts*, a great game regardless of what anyone says; *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, which I never finished; *Grand Theft Auto 5*, which I barely even started; and *LA Noire*.

LA Noire was published in 2011 by Rockstar Games, who most notably released the *Grand Theft Auto* series. While *GTA* appealed little to me, *LA Noire* is a detective game that lets you traverse the city, solving crimes, primarily murders, and advancing your detective status. While I never finished this game, it was one of my favorite concepts that my murder-mystery-loving brain adored. I've tried to return to the game multiple times, but I find that if I were to do

that, I'd have to start from the beginning, and I frankly don't have enough time or patience to do that.

Our friendship evolved over the years, as did the technology we so clearly loved. I got a laptop during my early years of high school. It was a Dell, most certainly not made for gaming, and I didn't intend to use it that way. Of course, nothing went according to plan, as usual.

Valve Corporation released Steam in 2003. At the time, it controlled the patching process of Valve games, curbed cheating, and provided more accessible developer content. Its intended use was not to be the game distribution service it is now. I downloaded Steam in late 2014 after asking my brother how to play games. I had a long weekend and wanted to do something to occupy my time. Isaac told me about family sharing, which allowed me to play the games he had already purchased on my account whenever he was not using Steam. The first game of his I downloaded was *Fallout: New Vegas*, a post-apocalyptic survival game. All I remember was that I accidentally killed the entire town at the beginning and spent the rest of the time trying to redeem myself for my choices.

I eventually bought my first game after my brother continuously kicked me off Steam to use his account. I don't remember what I bought, but I have 120 games in my Steam library, and I don't predict a slowing down soon. Many Steam games are single-player story-based, but others are played online with other people. I generally use Steam for story games like *Skyrim* and *Witcher 3*, but I occasionally play online games like *Garry's Mod* and *Monster Hunter: World*.

While online gaming offers a plethora of beautiful experiences, I've found that the more memorable instances are those of toxicity. One of my favorite online games I've pumped over 800 hours into is *Overwatch*. *Overwatch*, which I've been playing since its release in 2016, is a first-person shooter where two teams of six battle it out to either control a point, push a payload,

or complete a hybrid of the two mashed together. Most of my closest friends play this game, and we've had a fantastic time winning games, messing around, and meeting new people. In its entirety, the game is excellent. Still, I've unfortunately come across many a salty man who either believes a woman's place is not in the gaming industry or calls me slurs the moment I talk until the game is over.

Before I continue, I think it's important to mention that *Overwatch* has two levels of severity players can participate in. The first level is quick-play, where most people don't care about winning and want to have a good time playing with friends. Of course, you occasionally come across people in this mode who take the game too seriously, but generally, it's a chill atmosphere. The second level is competitive, where people start to care about the game's outcome. Competitive assigns each player a rating based on ten placement matches, and you have to keep winning to improve that rank. People desperately care about competitive mode.

Usually, I wouldn't set foot in a competitive match, but if you play enough games, you can earn enough points to get a golden gun. They're sparkly and add some excitement to each character. I have a golden gun for my main hero, and it's primarily the reason I play competitively. Because of the intense competitive games, teammates expect you to use a mic to communicate with your team, a rarity in quick-play. Speaking in a chat, specifically as a woman because that's my only experience, can go one of two ways. One, no one cares, and they treat you like they would anyone else. You would expect this to be the norm, but it's not. Two, they hear you talk and immediately turn all blame and hatred onto you.

I've had this second outcome occur more times than I can count. Name-calling, slurs, degradation, nothing is too much for the assholes of *Overwatch*. One time, while Nat and I were playing a competitive game, we got called "feminist cunts" the minute we opened our mouths,

and the name-calling continued until the game ended. Then, in a shocking turn of events – it wasn't – the guys on our team thought it would be appropriate to ask us for nudes after spending the whole game degrading us. We stayed long enough to see our scores – we carried our team – and then quit queueing competitive for the rest of the night. This treatment is ridiculous. No one should face ridicule because their gender doesn't align with their interests. Who even decided gaming was a man's world in the first place? One person or another doesn't own hobbies, and gatekeeping who can or can't play games is pointless and alienating. Treat people like people.

I got a PlayStation 4 Pro last Christmas, mostly because I wanted to play *Spider-Man*. The release of the PS4 Pro in 2016 offered 4k gaming and entertainment, meaning games look more detailed and are graphically demanding. *Spider-Man* was always my favorite superhero growing up, and once I saw the trailer for the game, I knew I had to play it. Of course, the game is fantastic, and I would suggest that anyone who has ever thought about getting a PS4 to play it should do it. I have other games on the PS4, including *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, but nothing has come close to the marvels of *Spider-Man*.

I had other gaming devices while growing up. I owned a Game Boy Advance SP, which still works and is sitting in my closet gathering dust, a Nintendo DS Lite that I broke and got replaced, and a Nintendo 3DS, which rarely gets played anymore. Over the years, I've found that I don't enjoy handheld devices nearly as much as consoles or my PC, so I've yet to get a Nintendo Switch - at least, I haven't yet while writing this. Also, Nintendo games are becoming less and less attractive to me, other than the *Zelda* games. I prefer darker, more realistic games rarely found on Nintendo's consoles.

I don't think this level of obsession could end in anything but devotion. In February, I volunteered to write for a gaming website, so on top of all my school work and projects, I also write four articles a week about *Overwatch* and *Apex*. Other than these areas of expertise, I cover the progress eSports has explicitly made regarding *Overwatch*. eSports puts the best of the best head to head, and players compete for prize pools and notoriety. The first eSports tournament occurred at Stanford University in 1972 for the game *Spacewar*. The prize for winning the competition was a one-year subscription to Rolling Stone magazine. To put that in perspective, the current *Overwatch* League has a combined prize pool of \$3.5 million. Each player earns a minimum salary of \$50,000 on top of health insurance and retirement savings plans. There are even stadiums in the works for local teams. eSports is becoming more prominent than anyone ever expected, and with it, eSports journalism.

And this all leads to something. My senior project for my Bachelor's degree also revolves around my love for games and the growing importance of story and narrative. I've been writing a storyboard to help combat sexism, promote inclusion in modern games, and tell a story that players from all walks of life can enjoy. I want to continue working in the industry and, hopefully, make it a better place for other women interested in video games and the surrounding communities. Believe it or not, women belong in the gaming industry just as much as men, and I want to help make that idea a reality.

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