Game On

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GAME ON

by

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Véronique Bernard
Signature of Second Reader
For my mom, Anna Loong
who inspires me every day
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ABSTRACT

“My life, in many ways, is a game space. Game dev - I guess any life - There's stress. And sometimes it's incredibly creative but… a lot of times... especially if you're doing it right...You don't necessarily know how it's going to turn out.” - Brenda Romero, *Game On*

*Game On* is a 25-minute documentary about game designer Brenda Romero and what it is like being a successful woman in a male-dominated industry. Over the last thirty-five pioneering years, Brenda contributed to nearly fifty game titles, developing innovative video and board games. My approach to *Game On*, the film, mirrors that of Brenda’s approach to her life – that her life is a game space. What do we learn from her process of “hacking” her life through games?
As I consider how to create an artist’s life - developing digital and physical experiences - balancing social practice, educating others while pursuing commercial and personal endeavors, I turn to books, films and games. By studying Brenda, I create my own journey, my version of The Artist’s Way, incorporating techniques from various media. I am inspired by the narrative structure established by R. A. Montgomery’s Choose Your Own Adventure series. As a game designer, Brenda says that she creates worlds, goals, challenges and experiences. Using film parlance, I examined different ways for people to enter the narrative. Instead of focusing on one specific strand of a story, I chose to combine the format of a traditional linear documentary and weave together elements of game and game play. Look for these themes throughout the following pages.  In colloquial terms, game on.
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

*Game On* is a 25-minute, character-driven documentary about outspoken game designer Brenda Romero, 52, whose TEDx talk has been viewed more than half a million times. On her social media and in person, Brenda shares her passion for games, her challenge to lose weight, and her devotion to her husband, fellow game designer John Romero -- creator and developer of “first person shooter” games *Doom* and *Quake*. Brenda creates board games that address marginalized members of society, leads workshops for at-risk youth, guides her video game company, Romero Games, and influences millions as a mom with four children in an ethnically blended family.

After securing a Fulbright to study the game development industry in Ireland, Brenda, John and the rest of their family relocated from Santa Cruz to Galway, Ireland. It is yet another new adventure for Brenda, a person who has “gamed” her life. She broke into the industry at the age of 15 as a game tester at Sir-tech, rising through the ranks working on game, level, and system design for *Wizardry*, the *Dungeons & Dragons* franchise, the Atari console, and more.

Once a contributor to the game *Playboy, the Mansion*, Brenda now uses her fame and expertise as a game designer to help the next generation make games and to also understand and problematize histories and social issues. Brenda, her husband John, and other members of Romero Games are developing a top-secret strategy game with Paradox Interactive. Balancing all her obligations, can Brenda keep the video game hits coming? *Game On* immerses the viewer in Brenda’s unique universe.
**Topic Summary**

*Game On* is important because it shows Brenda Romero as a woman living her life as a game designer. It depicts the communal creative process of how she leads her company and the intersection of work with her family. *Game On* features a woman with a public persona who deals with games through community outreach and in her personal life. Gaming is not just a profession; it is a lifelong learning tool. Games are not always “fun.” Games can be art.

Brenda’s “superpower” is that she identifies and articulates that games have a universal and emotional appeal. Brenda and her husband John are the game industry’s version of rock stars. They hold hands while walking outside; they tweet lovingly to each other. They have been targets of online hate and love. One gaming industry veteran, who wishes to stay anonymous, says, “Many in the business love them; many are perplexed, and intrigued by them.”

Why am I the right person to tell this story? I grew up with a passion for storytelling and making physical and digital experiences using computers and machines. I created my first video game, a stick figure moving through a maze, in the 8th grade on a Tandy Radio Shack TRS-80 computer, and learned to use a soldering iron to make a clock radio and a flashlight. Since then, I worked on one of the early MUDs (Simutronics’ *Modus Operandi*), touted by Time Warner as the first online game playable on different computing services such as Prodigy, Genie and AOL (Stalter). I produced interactive games for AMC’s television series *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* and I contributed to over ten other games. I also create hybrid digital and physical games about difficult historical and contemporary subjects. I am learning to play games as a means of expression and I have grown up with the medium as an artist, consumer, and creator. I hope *Game On* inspires others to follow their dreams. I would like this film to be a model for
young girls to transform digital culture, potentially integrating physical and digital games, and for these girls to think about process while they engage with it.

I am influenced by Sherry Turkle and hope to provide an alternative to the subtitle from her book *Alone Together*, which reads: “Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.”

This thesis addresses my learnings about personal documentary and reflects my growth as an artist, figuring out my own process by examining Brenda’s and others’ work. I examine gameplay and the role of games in one’s life - recognizing that it signifies and could signify a useful place in my life and those of others.

**Artistic Approach**

*Game On* is shot in 24p 4K video and is reflective of a personal, saturated style – a visual aesthetic contrasting the staccato nature of some games and the lyricism of others. This sensibility is interwoven with the handmade board games Brenda creates as well as with the beautiful landscape in and around Galway, Ireland, where Brenda currently lives. The film is intimate and draws the viewer into Brenda’s world, reflective of the way video games draw viewers into another kind of reality. I hope that *Game On* captures the feel of a game as Brenda’s story unfolds and takes viewers on her journey, each time to the next level.

**RESEARCH ANALYSIS**

I have researched Brenda Romero, the subject and main character, for six years, after first working with her on interactive games from 2011-2013. I interviewed Brenda twice over the
phone and conducted correspondence via email and text since 2013. I filmed for six days during two visits to Ireland in June 2017 and November 2017. Shooting focused on locations in Galway and surrounding areas in Ireland including the Romero Games office, McSwiggan’s, a pub where gamers meet, the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), the Galway Market, Cahir House Hotel, and Cahir Castle, Tipperary, Ireland.

My thesis relates to an existing body of media work and literature of personal documentary and character portraits, inspired by Alan Berliner’s Nobody’s Business, Doug Block’s 51 Birch Street, Sarah Polley’s The Stories We Tell, Alison Klayman’s The Brink, and Laura Poitras’ Risk. Film and life are complicated.

This thesis contributes to the particular artistic trajectory with which I engaged, that of a maker who creates work in both physical and digital media. Fundamentally, I’m looking at process. In my experience design work with museums, public spaces and companies, we create projects using the four Ds: Discover, Design, Develop, Deploy. We also have a motto: “prototype first.” I test this against Brenda’s model of how game designers create and incorporate her thinking and that of Mary Flanagan’s into my process.

THESIS PRODUCTION PROCESS

Game On is about growing up and creating a life worth living. It examines the once outsider gaming subculture that is becoming ever more mainstream. It is a portrait of an industry veteran who survived the ups and downs of working in the gaming industry for over thirty-five years, evolving her games, her personal life – and even her body – to become the woman she is today.
I intended to create a single-channel documentary influenced by coursework I completed at Hunter. Because of the subject matter, there is potential to transcend the single-channel approach, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. I chose the character-driven documentary because I felt it would demystify and hopefully destigmatize the life and career of a game designer to those who do not believe games can be tools for good.

**Kill Your Darlings: What Is Left on the Edit Room Floor**

Part of creating this documentary was making the decision to leave out illuminating interview footage of Brenda. The decision to include less footage than what I collected is a typical part of the filmmaking process. The background collection was important for me to understand Brenda and her process. Following is a description of some of what I left out, and what I learned by doing so.

*Matt Chat* is a web series developed by Professor Matt Barton, who interviews various game developer and designers. Episode number 235 features Brenda Romero. Brenda talks with Professor Barton about her work creating *Dungeons and Dragons Heroes*: “Moving to *Heroes* I’d never worked on a console game before. This was an action adventure even though it was called *D&D*. It was really different and I was going to be lead. So I had been lead before but I hadn’t worked on an action adventure game - hack and slash - on a console.” (Barton)

This interview did not make it into the final film. However, it inspired me to look closely at the *D&D Heroes* intro cutscene and use the shot of characters entering the castle.

The theme of *Dungeons and Dragons* is reiterated when Brenda and Mary talk about games and art. Mary reinforces this concept about *D&D* being transformative. Since Brenda already talks about it, I did not include Mary’s thoughts in the final film. Mary’s remarks are
timely: “D&D is an interesting example not just in terms of games and cultural reception of games, but I always think about it, because it seems like this interesting moment where just your imagination becomes political in society.”

The other important takeaway from the conversation between Brenda and Mary that did not make it into the final cut, but that informed the film, was Brenda asking Mary: “I want to know, when did you start doing that? Did you just always think of it [your games] as art work?”

Mary replies:

“For some reason I've always seen games as kind of a continuum in this space. And I'm not exactly sure why. Maybe it's because it's what you do... Art is what you do when you're not doing work; games are what you do when you're not doing work... I did really see them consistently and of course in my book *Critical Play*, I merged them completely... So I guess I've just been really stubborn about the way I think about this... My play space is as important to me as my literature space.”

I feel that with the influence of design thinking and the backlash from our time spent online, we have a desire to open ourselves to the idea of play space - of a game space.

Another scene that did not make sense to include in the final film, but that was influential to me, was a scene where Brenda lectures to children who meet her at NUIG. There, she presents an explanation of what game designers do. Brenda shows a set of slides and explains that designers:

-Create worlds

-Create goals

-Create challenges

-Create experiences
I hypothesize that in Brenda’s games and her life, she does just that - creates worlds, goals, challenges and experiences. I use this motif of creation throughout the film.

I crafted the Game On documentary film to be open, allowing, like a Choose Your Own Adventure story, various entry points into Brenda’s life. These entry points include looking at Brenda as a mom, a boss, a partner, a creator, and a teacher, through the trials and tribulations of her life. We observe Brenda’s relationship to her husband John, to the people who work with her, to other gamers, to her relationship with her daughter, and her relationship with history. All these things that you see are structured via rhythm and repetition to create the story.

Game Experiments During the Thesis Production Process

As a complement to my work creating Game On as a linear film, I explored making games as part of an intellectual growth process.

I experimented with games using the iPhone as game object and as the recorder for game documentation during Lynne Sachs’ class: Film as a Collaborative Art. We were tasked with making two short films. With my class partner, Paola DiTolla, we played catch, literally throwing the iPhone while capturing the footage it was recording in flight, upon catch, or upon landing elsewhere.

The other game we shot hearkened back to a game from my childhood; one that my mother taught me. Using pine cone needles and their white bud scales like inverted wishbones,
we played tug-of-war. Through these experiments, I learned to open myself up to the idea of play, and to create my own physical game.

With the group CreativeMornings, along with four of my colleagues, I facilitated a game design seminar at my office, Potion Design, where I work as a senior producer. At our work, making games helps us refresh our minds and our creativity. My colleagues presented the principles of M, D, A: Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics. AKA: Rules, System, Fun (Mignano). With a time constraint of 30 minutes, I created a two-player game using origami paper hats with my colleagues called Hats Off!

By watching people play and playing Hats Off! myself, I discover the dynamics that arise from the mechanics, and that players can subvert the rules, such as blowing on the other person’s hat to dislodge it. I learned about aesthetics in games. For instance, a player can make the other player laugh and cause the hat to fall off, which becomes equivalent to an “own goal.”

Hats Off! was inspired in part by the New Games movement, which I read about in Jane McGonigal’s book Reality Is Broken. From New Games’ web site (inewgames.com), I learned that “New Games are cooperative group interactive games that are played just for fun, even when there is competition.” I also read about Mary Flanagan’s game design model of critical play, and appreciate that Hats Off! aligns with one of her design steps: it allows for “diverse play styles + subversion” (Flanagan, 257).

Other firsts: I played and coded in Minecraft and played my first game of Dungeons and Dragons as an adult. The experience was good; I was a Dragonborn fighter named Esme, with great strength and constitution, and modest dexterity, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma. We engaged in collaborative play, though D&D can also be adversarial. Our D&D “Dungeon
Master” (DM) was Timm Woods, a professional “Dungeon Master” who was profiled in a *Wired* article for both his skills as a *D&D* facilitator and for his PhD thesis about *D&D* and its pedagogical benefits for communication: *Anything Can Be Attempted: Table-Top Role Playing Games as Learning and Pedagogy*. I am learning to incorporate more digital and physical game play into my own artistic practice.

**Analysis of Game On**

Following is a scene-by-scene analysis of *Game On*. We will walk through it chronologically because that is how it is structured, giving the reader and viewer the overview of the various entry points. There are scenes of work, lecturing, work, game history, early years of gaming, realizing that gaming is art, and an example of creating historical board games about difficult topics and how it impacted Brenda’s family. We segue to more history of video games (via Brenda’s early life) and to the game community in Galway, Ireland. Then we see Brenda creating a game with students at a workshop. This is followed by a segment of Brenda leading a workshop with medical professionals about creating games for a healthcare audience, using an example of gamifying weight loss. We revisit a scene with artists and academics Brenda and Mary, where Brenda switches modes into an art space. Brenda teaches her daughter Maezza about customizing crafts and games. Then John joins in the family scene. We transition to Brenda describing the game she created with students in Cahir Castle. Then we witness another family scene at the office, with Brenda teaching Maezza how to braid John’s hair while he is
working on the computer. We end with Brenda coming full circle, stating that “My life in many ways is a game space... I don't know how to think in any other way.”

The “Bechdel test” is a term used to describe a work that has at least two women in it, who talk to each other about something besides a man. I would like to consistently exceed the expectations of the Bechdel test in my work, when appropriate, and encourage others to do so as well. Let us expand the test and strive to depict women in positions of leadership. In *Game On*, I am not focused on the bare minimum of a woman as a character. What seems to be unusual in this film is the inclusion of a powerful scene between Mary Flanagan and Brenda Romero. Brenda has a realization that comes from another high-powered woman and artist; peer-to-peer, woman to woman. We also see the transmission of knowledge - a responsibility to share the knowledge of game and craft creation - to inspire a younger generation. It is visible during exchanges with Brenda and Brenda’s daughter, Maezza. Not only do we see a successful woman doing what she does day in and day out; but also, we see Brenda as a woman who is constantly reinventing herself.

Though a linear documentary, the narrative is not directly given to the viewer. The viewer can take away from *Game On* what they want, and latch onto the character that they want. Is it Brenda? Is it John? Is it Maezza? Are they the games themselves? I have included a number of ways that viewers can find a hook for themselves. By framing this non-narrative documentary, I feel that I do this in a way that is not heavy-handed; it allows viewers a way in by combining game strategies with traditional documentary.

Link to *Game On*, the film: [https://vimeo.com/337547973](https://vimeo.com/337547973) pwd: Game On
Scene-by-Scene Analysis of the Film

We start with a close up of Brenda Romero’s face - it’s a valorization of a game designer and humanizes her to the uninitiated. Brenda states, “My life, in many ways, is a game space.” We can wonder about this world, this game space of Brenda’s. The scene shifts and lands on the hands and face of someone painting wooden game pieces. At this point, it remains mysterious as to who is painting and what is being painted. This motif of hands and game pieces will be repeated later in the film.

We move to a shot of a cutscene from the video game *D&D Heroes*, of characters entering a castle. This castle theme is repeated throughout the film. Brenda talks about her goal to make people feel good as they play these digital video games she makes. She then alludes to her physical board game creations, saying, “and with my other games, it's just nice to make people feel.” I chose to juxtapose Brenda’s goals for her physical and digital games next to each other, since we will revisit them throughout the film.

We are introduced to Brenda Romero as a character who has made many games - over 50 of them - for over 36 years. She has created games such as *Dungeons and Dragons Heroes* and *Ghost Recon*. She runs Romero Games, a game company based in Galway, Ireland, along with her husband, John Romero. Brenda tells the crowd that John is one of the creators of *Doom*, *Doom 2*, *Quake*, and *Wolfenstein*. Brenda is lecturing to youth, teaching them about the importance of games, in Cahir Castle - a castle in Ireland that dates back to the 13th century. It is the first time the castle has opened its doors for such a conference: “Games to Inspire in Youth Work & Global Development Education.”
Brenda describes her world and her challenge as a game designer: “Do I spend all day playing games? Then the answer is yes, I do. However, my games are typically broken because they're not ready. And when they are ready, out they go and you get to play them and then I start on the next idea.”

Brenda and her husband John are larger-than-life personalities. John is a seminal figure in the creation of the first-person shooter game genre. He still wears his signature long hair and black nail polish. A challenge in making the film was keeping the focus on Brenda, while acknowledging the significant contribution of John in both the video game world and in Brenda’s life. I depict Brenda as a strong female figure when she states, “Coming up with ideas for games is easy. Actually making it come out right when there's a thousand ways for it to go wrong can be hard but experience helps and you surround yourself with people that are smarter than you are. Which is why John has me.” John smiles good-naturedly. The film is an interplay of Brenda, her family and her work.

As she mentions in her lecture at Cahir Castle, Brenda and her husband John are developing a top secret game that she cannot discuss. Because the details are confidential, we see blurred-out screens and hushed talk. Day to day game development is hard work, yet there’s time for fun. We enter the office and the world of Romero Games - it’s called “The Computer Club.” Framed artwork from one of Brenda’s daughters establishes that Brenda and her husband John are game designers. It reads. “My mom is a game designer [sic]. My step dad is a game designer [sic].”

Brenda is speaking with Ian O’Neill, talking about “game time,” which is different than our sense of time in daily life. Pauses and time pressure can be added to gameplay, to increase
the difficulty and to change the game dynamic. As a game designer, Brenda is creating the game world and the experience.

We cut to Ian Dunbar and Ronan Pearce pair programming. They are working together in front of one computer to problem solve. It’s a technique in agile development - one types; the other talks through the code. Denman Rooke is the art director who jokes and shows an app that allows him to look like he’s coding, even if he’s not. Challenged and encouraged by John Romero, Denman places his face on the keyboard and “facerolls.” In gaming lingo, a “faceroll” means that something is easy to do that you could literally use your face to play or program instead of your hands (WoWWiki). It works; Denman produces more fake code, then resumes making art.

We are introduced to Brenda and John’s trove of rare games and archives. Brenda says, “[John] and some other game designers recognized that there's value to [their] stuff; they valued their stuff. I think in part it's telling... I didn't value my stuff and I think it's in part also at the time because I didn't feel particularly valued in the industry.” In the background, we catch a glimpse of hundreds of game pieces from one of Brenda’s board games in development.

We transition to Brenda’s introduction to games. Brenda bought games at garage sales, and some of the board games were missing game pieces, giving Brenda the idea to assemble games and play. I placed this interview here because it reminds me of what Brenda says earlier about her digital video games, “my games are typically broken or I'm playing them in my head because they're not ready, and when they are ready out they go and you get to play them and then I start on the next idea.” I selected this scene because it shows the creativity needed to create board and video games. It depicts a challenge, an evolution of taking something that is incomplete and completing it, and of working with constraints. It is another way to relate to
Brenda, and to relate to the film, allowing the viewer to place upon themselves different kinds of emotional attachment or intellectual fulfillment.

Brenda talks about *Dungeons & Dragons* and says, “*D&D* has taken a lot of garbage flak over the years, but man it was like if somebody could just say so this is the rule set for your imagination and if you follow this you can go anywhere do anything you want to do.” It is one of the takeaways of how she has learned to game her life.

We are introduced to artist and professor Mary Flanagan, creator of the art piece *[giantJoystick]* and author of the book *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. It is a rare meeting; with Brenda living in Ireland and Mary in the United States, they do not encounter each other in person very often. They happen to be presenting at Cahir Castle for the “Games to Inspire in Youth Work & Global Development Education” conference.

Brenda and Mary joke about the joy of staying in and lecturing about games in a castle. From *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Wizardry* to *Mario Bros.* and *Overwatch*, castles loom large as locations in many video and board games. The talk shifts to a more serious tone. Brenda had not thought about her work as art until about ten years ago, when she heard Mary lecture in Savannah, Georgia: “So you were talking about your games, but you said “in my work.” And I don't know why... I'm sure I've heard somebody refer to games as “my work,” but the way you were presenting them - you were presenting them as an artist showing creations that they had made. You're treating them as art. And I've said before, I was in a box I didn't even know I was in.”

This exchange is important because it is with two women game designers and artists. They are at the top of their field. They create both board games and video games. For Brenda,
this process of recognizing her worth as an artist was, and as I show in the film, continues to be, a revelation. A work-in-progress.

We revisit a scene of wooden pieces and painting, and discover that the crafting and creation of this board game is assisted by Maezza Braithwaite-Romero, one of Brenda’s daughters. Maezza is painting hundreds - eventually thousands - of game pieces. Maezza says, “There was this one game my mom made when I was really young about the Middle Passage because I didn't understand it. So we made that one together.”

The film segues to Brenda talking about The New World, the game that changed her life. She created The New World, an effective, emotionally powerful game, to teach her daughter about the Middle Passage. Brenda says, “And I was just like I was blown away that this came out of the game not over book, a movie, nothing - it came out of the game.”

Brenda harkens back to her childhood love and creates her own games – one-of-a-kind board games, with no publisher or author to report to except her. Each game has a message. To modify Marshall McLuhan’s famous quote from Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, the (game) mechanic is the message. We move to another board game Brenda created, an historical board game about the Holocaust, called Train. John introduces it to the viewer because he also made a game - in his case, Wolfenstein, a video game about World War II - and was discouraged by others from making it. John thought Brenda designed Train, “in an incredible way that basically revolutionized board games.”

One of six board games in her series The Mechanic Is the Message, Train is a game inspired by events from the Holocaust. It won the Vanguard Award at Indiecade, an award for
independent game creators, in October 2009. As reported by Chris Baker in Wired’s December 23, 2013 article, “Playing This Board Game Is Agony. And That’s the Point,” some people cried after they played the game, and others tried to change the rules.

In Romero’s game *Train* (see fig. 1), tokens in the game are abstracted forms of prisoners, a concentration camp, and boxcars. The player touches the physical tokens, but does not know the exact representation of each token. The rules of *Train* are deliberately ambiguous. The explicit rules are that a player fills up a boxcar full of “tokens” and moves them to the other side of the board. While some players immediately understood the meaning of the game, other players did not.

As Romero states on her web site, blromero.com/train: “Train explores complicity within systems. It also asks two questions, “Will people blindly follow the rules?” and “Will people stand by and watch?” Some players tried subverting the rules and blocked the path to the terminus - once they understood where the game ended - because they did not want to move people from the station to the concentration camp.

Devin Monnens, a game historian and game artist, succinctly analyzes *Train* in “Tactility and Ambiguity: The Mechanics and Message behind Train”:

“Train arises in a field that is now becoming dominated by the concept of ‘the mechanic is the message’ – that a game’s meaning is derived solely through its game mechanics, or the rules and rule-systems (dynamics)... But to read Train solely from the perspective of rules is to ignore two major sources of meaning that are arguably only possible through the game’s analog nature: tactility and player interactions with ambiguity. As shall be seen, it is these two elements which prevent Train from being adequately expressed as a digital game and why it simply isn’t possible to talk about Train solely by discussing its ‘reveal’ (which in fact, this ignores a large part of the experience). (Monnens Draft 03-07-10)
In “Shambling Rambling Babbling,” Casey O’Donnell comments on the performative nature of Romero’s board games and how they reinforce the power of the in-person, face-to-face experience: “Each of these games must be experienced in person and with at least one other player, who in some respect is recording in their lives that you have played a game.” It is this – the learning takes place between two specific individuals after playing and reflecting upon their actions, which makes for a powerful experience – one that is reminiscent of writings by Sherry Turkle.

Brenda’s takeaway, which we want the audience to understand, are twofold:
One: “Games at this point in time were really still stuck in this... you've got to be fun. Why else would you make something? Movies - nothing else is stuck in that little bubble.”

Two: “The amazing part about it was that I loved is that which I'd never really thought of before, was that if you if you have a system, you can make a game. [It’s] just that simple, if there's a system, you can make a game... Then you can't really have... tragedy of scale, human on human tragedy on scale without a system. Just can't happen.”

We learn more about game development and Brenda’s introduction into the industry at age 15 while working at Sir-tec. I place that quote and compare it to the information that 400 people today who work at Electronic Arts (EA) in Galway are fielding customer support queries, similar activities to what Brenda used to do at 15. Is her career coming full-circle? We move to the present-day, to game night at McSwiggan’s, a popular bar in Galway, with both physical and digital game prototypes, and the inventors and fans of these games.

Romero Games Art Director Denman Rooke says of his independent board game prototype, “It's almost like if you paused it, slowed it down, and said, ‘This is what you would see. This is the thought process and the time freeze.’” I chose this scene because, like Brenda, Denman is a magician, playing with time and creating a world.

We move back to Cahir Castle, with Brenda teaching and working with a small group of students to create a game. There is a reluctant student, and then he comes out of hiding. We learn that every game “needs a setting, a goal and then we need a bit of a challenge...every game is about conflict.” Brenda continues, asking for “two things that make you happy. Because that's a feeling we're going for.” We also learn that “you create a character and that character can be anybody you want.”
Brenda is not perfect. She is trying. She is a mom of four, she has a full-time job and she teaches and she is stressed. When she is stressed, she eats. In the film, we see how she has dealt with losing weight, because she shares her story of gamifying the weight loss:

“So now I'm about probably 30 pounds up from where I want to be. But when I originally - I lost 100 pounds at one point in time - and during that hundred pound process I gamified the hell out of that because the notion of losing 100 pounds. Are you joking like that was ridiculous. And so it was way too much for me to even think about, but if I could give myself a five pound reward, that was cool. If I could give myself a 10 pound reward, that was cool. If I could get the community involved and... keep myself I guess responsible is the right term... there's a bit of discipline to that that was even better. And so I just did it... it wasn't an app, but I had especially when I did it, I just did a hashtag on Twitter called #GameDevDiet. And a bunch of game developers got into it and we checked in every single week: what we have lost; what we have lost total as a community.”

In a blog post, she (formerly Brenda Brathwaite) describes the rules of the game in more depth.

#GameDevDiet The Game
OCTOBER 19, 2009
by blromero

If truth be told, the reason that I lost my first 35 pounds was because of an epic bet. I wanted the prize, and I simply refused to lose that prize and what I perceived to be a game of sorts. I lost the 35 pounds, claimed my prize, and have continued to lose since then.

It occurs to me this same form of incentivizing would be helpful to everyone. While I am not in a position to offer epic bets, the following are now available:

Badges:

Operation DeFlab: Lost 5% of goal
Rolls Away: Lost 10% of goal
Quarter to Slim: Lost 25% of goal
Body Blast: Lost 50% of goal
Ass Be Gone: Lost 75% of goal
SuperMega DeFlab: Lost 100% of goal
Loss Streak: Continuous weight loss for 2 weeks
Super Loss Streak: Continuous weight loss for 4 weeks
SuperMega Loss Streak: Continuous weight loss for 8 weeks
Better on the Plate: Resisted Temptation (didn’t eat something you wanted to)
Off the Couch: Started exercise program
Muscle Shakes Less: Maintained exercise program for 1 week
Muscle Mass: Maintained exercise program for 3 weeks
Super MegaMuscle Mass: Maintained exercise program for 7 weeks

Got others? Add them here in comments, and I will update the list above.

The rules of the game shows awareness of how inclusive the game can be, using percentage lost rather than actual pounds lost.

In another blog post, Brenda explains the game and encourages others to join:

“If you’re a game developer who’s interested in losing weight, you may want to join us on Twitter (see my previous post on this for the optimized method of doing this). As of today, I’m closing in on 60 pounds gone, and I have 23 more to go. On Twitter, we use the hashtag #gamedevdiet. Here’s how to participate: Become a game developer (that’s the hardest part)…Post to #gamedevdiet, state that you’re in and note your desired weight loss goal in pounds or kilos. You don’t need to say your actual weight. Something like this is fine: “I am joining #gamedevdiet and hope to lose 23 pounds.”

Every Wednesday, we weigh in. Weigh ins follow this format: Week Loss / Loss So Far / Desired Total. In my case, and if I weighed in today, it would be “This Week -2 / So Far -56 / Goal -78”

As a note, some of our participants are actually trying to gain weight. So, you’re welcome to join us to do that, too.”
On Twitter, Brenda’s posts are retweeted. Her weight loss is celebrated:

Fig. 3. Twitter post from Steve Ince, retweeting @bbrathwaite

And reminders to check in are retweeted also:

Fig. 4. Twitter post from the International Game Developers Association, retweeting @bbrathwaite
Other successes are “liked” within the community:

![Twitter post from Josh Hamrick](image)

Fig. 5. Twitter post from Josh Hamrick, using the hashtag #gamedevdiet

Transitioning from gamifying weight loss to focusing on making art, Brenda and Mary discuss their art practice; even now, Brenda occasionally finds it hard to talk her work as art.

Brenda considers that she wanted to make her board games for herself: “I just wanted to see if I could do it, you know?”

Mary does know, talking about a studio practice as she “artifys” Brenda, casting a spell on her with her hands, as if a way to help a fellow artist embrace the role of being an artist.

Brenda says, “I have a room with my stuff -”

Mary interrupts, playfully, “that’s called a studio.”
Brenda adjusts her terminology, “That's called a studio. If I change stuff to work...I have a couple of sewing machines because I also... really like making custom jackets.” Brenda is reconciling her value as a maker and artist.

We head to the studio and watch Brenda sewing with her daughter, Maezza. This mother-daughter scene about crafts and jackets becomes a teachable moment making a connection between sewing to creating levels in game design. Brenda says, “So Maezza, see that jacket's pretty symmetrical, but if you notice that... I just have the sparkles on one side. So I make his jackets like I would make levels.”

As we return to game design and Cahir Castle, Brenda explains *Let Us Rock*, the game that she creates with the students in the castle:

Our game is called *Let Us Rock*. And it's a *Sims* style game where your goal is to try to build a big hair 1980s rock band. So it's like the *Sims*. Where you are a college kid in 1987 and you're primed to put together this band. You have to buy all your equipment. You have to make friends around you from other Sims who are willing to join your band and build good relationships with them. I'm guessing the better the relationships amongst the players the better your band and the better your music will be. And then from that you will get success and you will succeed in your dream of founding a big hair band of in 1987.

That's our game. Team Big Hair. All right so but so two things that I have to tell you guys. So really seriously that's actually what my job is. Now, the whole truth of that is usually this super creative phase is early on when you're coming up with a whole idea for the game and laying out the systems and everything like that but really that's what the game designer does for a living. And then it takes us three or four years to make what we came up with. Do you have any questions?

We transition to the office, where Brenda’s daughter, Maezza, learns to braid her step-father’s hair. It is an intimate family moment that takes place in the office. John continues to program on the computer while letting Maezza braid his hair. This scene reminds me of Kathleen Stewart’s book *Ordinary Affects*, as she describes a different narrative being held together, “with
the mortar of a singular through widespread form of ordinariness” (7). Stewart refers to Roland Barthes and his notion of the punctum - the wounding, personally touching detail that establishes a direct contact” (6).

John has long hair; John also happens to be part Mexican-American and part Yaqui (Native American). He is proud of his mixed heritage; as is Brenda. Brenda honors his ancestry in her board game Mexican Kitchen Workers; here, she makes a jacket including the colors that represent the Yaqui nation.

In the final scene, we see Brenda and John working at the Romero Games office, side by side. We cut to Brenda working at her computer. The film ends with Brenda on camera, saying what she does at the beginning of the film; with an addendum.

Off camera (and not in the film), I ask Brenda if she had an idea of a game that lives as a conceptual personal space, or if she had another way of how she brought games into her world. I include her response in the ending. Brenda replies: “My life in many ways is a game space. I don't know how to think in any other way.” Now the viewer more fully understands who Brenda is.

What I want the viewer to experience after viewing Game On is to feel that it is a representation of Brenda’s entire career, that of a female game designer. In the film, I discuss larger issues - of being a woman, of feeling pressured of balancing one’s family, of dealing with one’s thoughts about one’s body - through the ethos of the individual. The issues have been brought up in women’s feminist literature and in journalism. I hope that this is a different approach - to see these issues tackled through a film, and to see a life as a game space. How do you take someone’s being and transform it into another form of media?
FINAL PRODUCT, AUDIENCE AND EXHIBITION

The final product of *Game On* is a 25 minute documentary film created in the style of a traditional character-driven documentary. The target audience for *Game On* are gamers, millennials, and the Gen X demographic. I hope to expand the piece into a longer work. Potential festival screenings for *Game On* include SXSW, Galway Fleadh, and community screenings at the Game Developers' Conference and Galway Games Night. Intended broadcast distribution is public television in the US and TG4 in Ireland, with digital distribution on Amazon and iTunes.
APPENDIX

Brenda Romero contributed to this definition of a game from IGDA Curriculum Framework, “The Study of Games and Game Development”

Common to most definitions is the notion that games are systems that involve a player who makes choices that change the state of the system, leading to an outcome. For the sake of having a working definition that is “good enough,” we offer the following definition: A game is an activity with rules. It is a form of play often but not always involving conflict, either with other players, with the game system itself, or with randomness/fate/luck. Most games have goals, but not all (e.g. The Sims, SimCity). Most games have defined start and end points, but not all (e.g. World of Warcraft, Dungeons & Dragons). Most games involve decision-making on the part of the players, but not all (e.g. Candyland, Chutes & Ladders). A videogame is a game (as defined above) that uses a digital video screen of some kind, in some way.
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