

# WHAT CAN GAME DESIGNERS LEARN FROM COMPETITIVE REALITY SHOWS

Yifat Shaik  
York University

# LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# WHO AM I?

Yifat Shaik

Assistant Professor, York University

Experimental game designer and academic



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# INTRODUCTION

On August 23, 2000 more than 50 million Americans watched the final of the first season of Survivor, making it a cultural milestone and birthing the age of reality shows



Survivor, CBS



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# INTRODUCTION

**Reality shows are still being produced!**

- They are cheap to produce
- They are still very popular
- They proved that they are here to stay
- We do not talk about their cultural impact
- There is a lot they can teach us



The Circle, Netflix



**GDC**

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



1



# COMPETITIVE REALITY SHOWS



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

The footer features a dark blue background with a pattern of small white stars. On the left, there is a stylized purple and blue planet. On the right, there is a stylized orange and blue planet and a small orange figure.

# COMPETATIVE REALITY SHOWS

There are many genres of reality shows

- Documentaries like
- Skill-based competitions
- Docusoap and Celebreality
- Home Improvement
- Dating Shows
- Etc.

I would like to focus on one specific type of reality shows – competitive reality shows



GDC<sup>™</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# COMPETATIVE REALITY SHOWS

What are the specific elements off those shows:

## PRIZE

Those shows will generally involve a large cash prize

## ORDINARY PEOPLE

The contestants do not have any specific skills they are often chosen for personality and archetype they embody

## IMMUNITY

contestant can win the right to be exempt the next time contestants are eliminated from the show.



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# THE SHOWS



Survivor, CBS

For the sake of time and keeping the talk focused I will only focus on two shows: Survivor and The Circle.



The Circle, Netflix



2



# LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

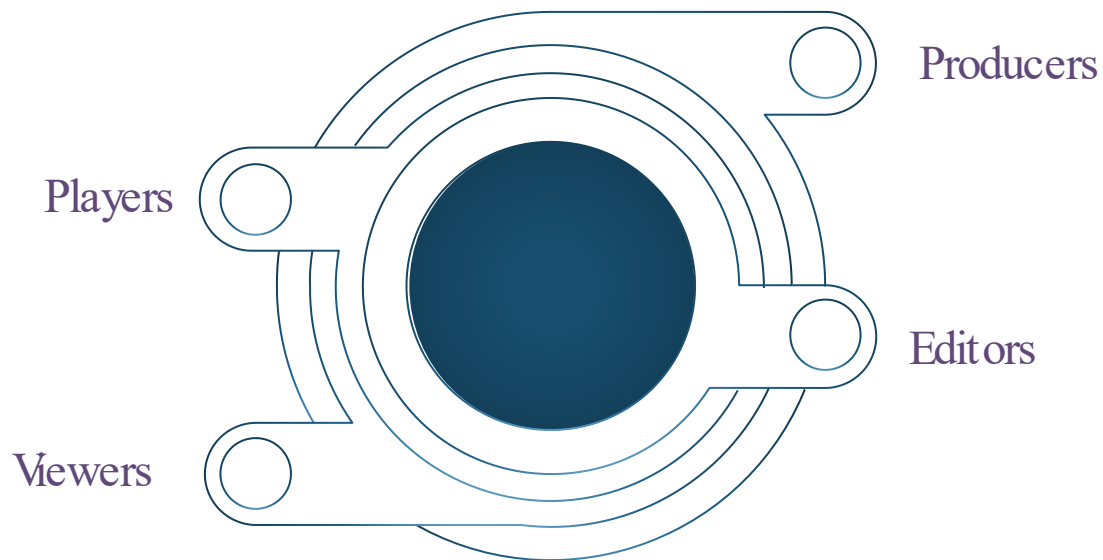


GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# THE PRODUCERS

The producers who act as both the game dungeon masters and game designers. They are there to design the rules of the game and make sure they are followed as well as making sure the production of the show is running smoothly

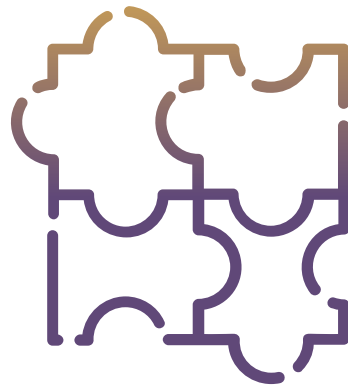


GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# THE PLAYERS

The players are the people chosen to play the game and they are the one who produce majority of the content in the show as they are the folks who are interacting with the rules set by the producers.

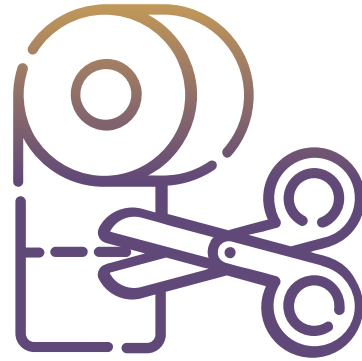


GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# THE EDITORS

As the players are often filmed 24/7 it is the editor's job to distill those narratives into chunks of about 45 minutes which tells the viewers everything that happened in a span of a few days and craft a coherent narrative from the footage they have.

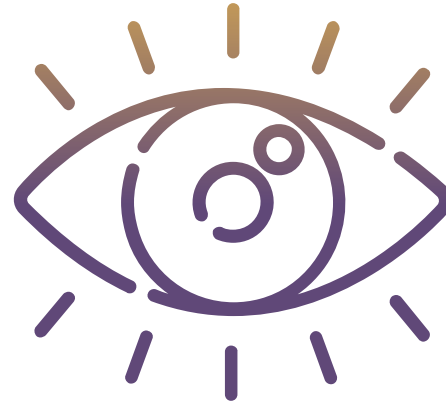


GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# THE VIEWERS

The last level of engagement is the audience itself which engage with the show as linear entertainment and in so have no power to control the narrative of the show but can engage in participatory actions when the need arise



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21





3



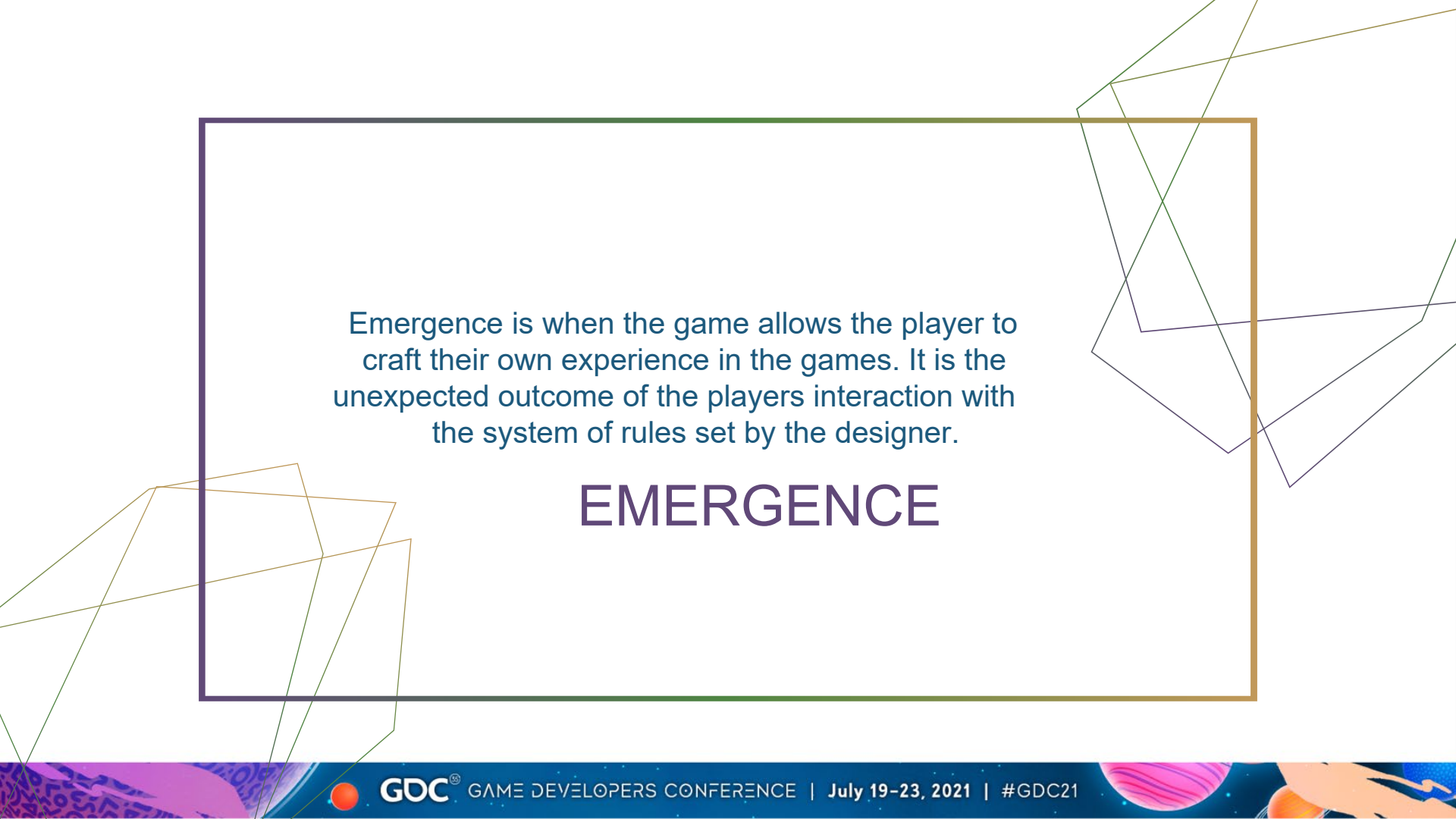
# EMERGENCE



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21





Emergence is when the game allows the player to craft their own experience in the games. It is the unexpected outcome of the players interaction with the system of rules set by the designer.

# EMERGENCE



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# THE CREATION OF ALLIANCES

The single most important act of emergence in Survivor happened in the first season

It was Richard Hatch, the eventual winner, who understood something that even the producers did not: Survivor is a complex strategic game

On day ten, he formed the plan which led to his victory: he formed a voting bloc or an alliance with three other members of his tribe

It formed the core gameplay loop, creating alliances and understanding which path you need to follow in order to win the game



Survivor, CBS



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# HOW EXILE ISLAND WAS MADE

The Ulong tribe just can't win and the last member of the tribe, Stephanie LaGrossa, has to stay and survive alone on the Island for a day.

This sequence of event lead to the creation of a new mechanic – Exile Island

This mechanic was introduced by the next episode and was a feature of the game for a few seasons (until it became redundant)



Survivor, CBS



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19–23, 2021 | #GDC21

# THE CATFISH DATE



The Circle, Netflix

Alex and Seaburn, both playing as a catfish, go on a “date”

This was the point when it was made clear how much “the catfish” mechanic adds to the game



GDC<sup>™</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



4



# DEVELOPMENT OF GAMEPLAY



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# DEVELOPMENT OF GAMEPLAY

The simple mechanics and  
the player interactions  
means that the strategy of  
the game evolve over the  
years, I wanted to give a  
quick overview of how those  
develop



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# TIMELINE

## SEASON 1

nobody knows what to do, the overall theme of the game will be determined

## SEASON 3

the mechanics and strategies are more refined and dominant strategy is emerging

## SEASON 5

twists are more common, new dominant strategy starts to emerge

## SEASON 2

strategies are more refined; players make less mistakes but there are still a few cases that will show future players what not to do

## SEASON 4

New strategies are introduced, probably as a twist on the dominant strategy



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# Dominant Strategies

The dominant strategy is the optimal move for an individual regardless of how other players act.

They will quickly make your game stale, and so they need to be neutralized as fast as you can

In reality shows this is often done by adding a twist

The dominant strategy can also create uncomfortable and often ugly situations when players are too observed in the Magic Circle to understand the repercussions of their behavior



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



5

# REALITY SHOWS AS GAMES



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

A decorative banner at the bottom of the slide featuring a space theme with planets, stars, and a stylized figure.

# REALITY SHOWS AS GAMES

Can those shows work  
as interactive games?

The answer is Yes, but  
we have to look at what  
the fans have done!



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# SURVIVOR: THE INTERACTIVE GAME

Released in 2001 and follows the original mechanics of the game. An official release, it was very bad!



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# FAN WORKS

## SURVIVOR: ALASKA

A fanfic that used dice  
to determine the result  
of each vote

## SURVIVOR EDGIC

An editing metagame  
in which players analyze  
the editing of the show  
to determine a winner

## SURVIVOR LARP/TTRPG

Survivor College Edition  
and Survivor  
Quarantine allow  
people to play an online  
(zoom) version of  
Survivor

## THE CIRCLE DISCORD

A LARP/TTRPG that is  
played on Discord



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21





6



# CONCLUSION



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21





# SO WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ALL OF THIS?

1. Pay attention to your players they are the one who is going to make or break your game
2. We can trace the way in which strategies evolve in those games
3. Dominant strategies will be introduced
4. If a mechanics can only be countered by one dominant strategy, then remove it from the game
5. Just because a mechanic was successful or unsuccessful in one season doesn't mean that the dynamic in the next season will be the same
6. A very good mechanic will allow strategy to become complex and the game to not be stagnant



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# SO WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ALL OF THIS?

7. simplicity is key for emergence,  
but messy games can work if the  
overall gameplay compensate for  
the messiness

8. It doesn't matter if the gameplay  
is good, if the players are bad the  
game is no longer enjoyable

9. The games are often unfair, but if the  
narrative is well constructed and the  
game is interesting enough the players  
will forgive you

10. Give the players freedom but  
make sure that you still have  
control (without being obvious  
about it)

11. moderation is important



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

# SOME RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFERENCES

- [Today in TV History: 'Survivor' Pondered the Existential Conditions of Snakes and Rats](#)
- [Perid iam](#)
- [The Circle's Creator Guides Us Through the Show's Beautiful Web of Lies](#)
- [30 from 30: The Thirty Moments That Shaped Survivor](#)
- [Survivor Casting Archetypes \[1\] \[2\]](#)
- [Survivor Edgic – An Introduction](#)
- [How Reality Hits Like 'Survivor,' 'The Circle' and 'Love Is Blind' Inspired Online Role-Playing Games During the Pandemic](#)
- [All-Star Survivor: Alaska](#)
- [The Quarantine Island](#)
- [It's Survivor: College Edition, As Students Create Their Own Reality Shows](#)
- [Push Me to the Edge: My Survivor Experience](#)
- [How People Built an Online Competition Inspired By Netflix's Reality Show The Circle](#)
- [Survivor: The Interactive Game](#)



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21



# THANK YOU!!!

DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTION?

Twitter : @yifatshaik

Website : [yifatshaik.com](http://yifatshaik.com)  
[yifat.space](http://yifat.space)



GDC<sup>®</sup>

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE | July 19-23, 2021 | #GDC21

The footer features a dark blue background with a pattern of small white stars. On the left, there is a purple and blue abstract shape. On the right, there is a colorful illustration of a hand holding a blue object, with a pink and orange abstract shape above it.