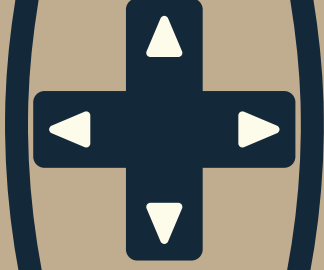


Freedom | Oppression | Games & Play



Edited by
Koenig | Denk | Pfeiffer | Wernbacher | Wimmer

FREEDOM | OPPRESSION | GAMES & PLAY

Editors: Nikolaus Koenig, Natalie Denk, Alexander Pfeiffer, Thomas Wernbacher, Simon Wimmer

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INTRODUCTION

File #0

Title: Introduction

Subtitle: -

Author(s): Nikolaus Koenig, Natalie Denk, Alexander Pfeiffer, Thomas Wernbacher, Simon Wimmer

As conflicts between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes rampage throughout Europe and across the world, we are once again reminded that the opposition between Freedom and Oppression rests firmly at the center of any conceivable human struggle: the inner struggles that tear us between our desires and anxieties, our hopes and limitations; the struggles in our relationships to others, where we are torn between commitment and intuition, between hedonism and responsibility; and finally, the struggle between communities, nations, and ideologies, the struggles of class, gender, race, tearing us apart between different ways of thinking, of living, of loving.

The questions are always the same: how much freedom do we need? How much oppression can we bear? Can we resist the urge to oppress? How much freedom do we grant others? And how much freedom can we bear ourselves?

Freedom and oppression are determining factors of the human condition, but they are not simple opposites. They form a dialectic relationship, in which one cannot exist without the other. Freedom is an ephemeral state that we can hardly grasp when we experience it in full, but even the slightest threat of oppression can make it almost physically tangible; freedom begins to shine once it contrasts against oppressive forces. At the same time, oppression becomes the most effective not when it is absolute, but when it gives a certain, calculated amount of leeway to the oppressed.

These are the insidious mechanisms of oppressive regimes, but they also lead us right into the realm of Games & Play, where the mutual facilitation of freedom and oppression is a driving force of the medium and its experiential capabilities: the art of game design rests on the designers'

capability to limit player actions in such a way that the experience of those freedoms still available is maximized; and from the players' perspective, playing a game does not simply mean to be free, but to struggle for freedom against constant attempts to oppress it.

In most cases, this is a benevolent oppression, aimed at enabling enjoyment, insight or even empowerment through play. But the calculated freedom of play can also make us oblivious to the persuasive power of the game's rules and can even serve to oppress our critical capacities in order to impose questionable ideologies on us: just as oppression can sometimes urge us to strive for freedom with even more dedication, the promise of freedom can make us submit into oppression and deceit even more willingly.

This carries over into all those areas which have the air of playful freedom about them, and which are therefore all the more in danger of being governed by oppression: we look behind the curtains of the gaming industry, and instead of playful creativity and artistic freedom, we often find inequality and exploitation; we turn to gaming cultures, and instead of liberating play and community spirit, we often encounter sexism, peer-pressure and hate-speech; and even in academia, a domain very particularly associated with "freedom", the supplement "games-" makes it significantly harder to criticize the oppressive elements inherent to the system. After all, how serious can oppression mechanisms be if they evolve around a free activity such as play?

This difficult relationship between freedom and oppression, games & play, gains yet another dimension in the pedagogical context. Not unsimilar to game designers, we expect educators to take a role of benevolent guides, who temporarily steer those entrusted to them in certain directions, but with the aim to help them define and reach their own goals in the end. But this relationship can take a darker turn when these goals are already predetermined by hidden interests, secretly pushed on students by a corrupted pedagogical process, unbeknownst not only to them, but often even to the educators themselves? And what could better conceal these interests than the seemingly inconspicuous and freedom-promising act of play?

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It almost seems as if freedom and oppression were so tightly interwoven that any step towards one will also bring us closer to the other. And so we might think that it might not even be worth the effort to strive for freedom when oppression follows so closely on its heels. And even worse, play and games cannot only give us a motivating taste of freedom, but might make us overlook or disregard existing oppression just as easily. But as freedom and oppression intersect with matters of Games & Play on so many levels - theoretically, creatively, academically, and performatively - there is a powerful twist that should keep us from despair: as game scholars, creators, enthusiasts and activists, we are true experts on the complex relationship between freedom and oppression. What do we make of it?

Can we expand our knowledge of play and games to uncover new aspects of freedom and oppression in the real world, to understand how to achieve one and avoid the other? Do we look ever more closely into the oppression mechanisms in our own turf by studying oppressions and injustices in the games industry, in gaming cultures, in academia, how they leech on the idea of freedom, and how true freedom can be won back? Are we creating games to promote freedom, to sharpen the senses for oppression, and to unravel the complex and deceptive relationship between both?

The 16th Vienna Games Conference "Future and Reality of Gaming" (FROG) 2022 - hosted by the University of Krems' Center for Applied Game Studies in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Chancellery - has brought together game scholars, creators, educators and activists to reflect on the often complex relationships between freedom, oppression, games & play.

During the resulting discussions, three distinct basic areas of investigation have emerged, which also inform the structure of this anthology.

1. The first section revolves around the idea that matters of freedom and oppression always play into the act of playing a game, as well as into the process of making games. In other words, it explores players' and designers' experiences of freedom and oppression.

Shifting the analogy of "language as a game" to "games as language", XAVIER ARANDA ARREDONDO delves into a philosophical investigation of agency and norms that aims to touch on the very foundations of our field; PAULA GOERKE takes an interest in game designers' awareness of their own power, as they set limitations in their in their games that also perpetuate real life restrictions - and in the potential of games to work against these real-life boundaries; WOLFGANG HOCHLEITNER, JEREMIAH DIEPHUIS, ANKE SCHNEIDER, JULIA HIMMELSBACH and DAVID SELLITSCH present a design approach that focuses on "moral courage" as a game mechanic, and discuss the challenges of balancing out the limitations of social impact games with players' expectation of agency; this is taken to a more general level by by HARALD KOBERG's argument that play, while usually considered free and voluntary, is indeed forced upon us by coercive demands - but there might still be a (Brechtian-informed) way to break free of these demands.

The corporate grip on modern media franchises and the strict limitations it imposes on otherwise great creative potentials is the focus of RALPH J. MOELLER's contribution; JUAN CARLOS PONCE REYES uses four case studies to discuss different forms of agency, and relates them to the idea of codephagy - the mutual "devouring" of cultural codes; FELIX SCHNIZ and CHRISTOPH KAINDEL present a game based on landscape gardening, and examine how freedom and constraint play into as a design principle, from both the players' and designers' perspective; and MICHAELA WAWRA and ALEXANDER PFEIFFER present a literature review on lootboxes, in preparation of a closer examination of players' freedom of choice in regard to financial investments in games.

2. The second section deals with representations of oppression in games, and how they can be used in educational context, or as contributions to critical social discourse?

This section starts off with KÜBRA AKSAY's discussion of games about tedious office work, which shows how even play experiences based on oppressive bureaucracies in dystopian environments can be engaging and even joyful, while at the same time making clear statements about freedom and oppression; ALON KFIR and REBEKAH TUMASUS focus on narrative hierarchies and ludic affordances underlying the relation between player characters and NPCs, and specifically the

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power (im)balance between players and their companion characters, and use case studies to examine the "Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution" that marks possible changes of this relationship; JAMES BAILLIE takes a close look into history to show us how the imaginations about the oppressive dark ages that fuel many historic and fantasy games have little to do with actual medieval societies - and how this misconception makes us miss out on some great games; SONJA GABRIEL examines possible connections between digital games and ethical thinking - the former providing safe spaces to explore and consider complex ethical dilemmas, the latter being a potential safeguard against oppressive tendencies in politics and society;

KATRINA HB KEEFER discusses the challenges of creating a game about the trans-Atlantic slave-trade in the 18th century - and the ethical considerations that limit the freedoms of game designers when they approach complex heritages that carry matters of trauma and responsibility until today; GUNNAR GRAESBECK, SWEN KOERNER and MARIO S. STALLER examine how video games can make the holistic teaching approach of "Nonlinear Pedagogy" available to the world of fencing, before Swen Körner joins forces with Mario S. Staller to trace a pedagogical potential of violence in videogames, as an instance that triggers reflections on the meaning of violence, and the conditions under which players are encouraged to ask why, rather than how, violence is used in specific situations;

With her concept of "imposed bleed", FIONA SPENCER SCHOENBERG proposes a way to make systemic oppression tangible in games - and uses a case study to show how this may contradict expectations of play, but can in exchange provide a deeper understanding of human experiences that is valuable on a very different level; and finally, drawing on practical examples, STEPHANIE WOESSNER explores the potential of game-based, future-oriented learning to promote freedom, tolerance, and democratic principles as means to meet the challenges of our time.

3. The third and final section puts the focus on how people are oppressed either with the help of games, or in the world of gaming.

Here, DARIA BALAKINA and ALESHA SERADA show how the Esports sector - in spite of proclamations to the contrary - still presents significant barriers for women striving to become Esports professionals; NILS BUEHLER discusses the oppressive dimension of game regulations, as well as their ability to facilitate a kind of freedom on another level; and, taking #GamerGate as a starting point, RICARDA GOETZ-PREISNER makes oppression mechanisms geared toward women in the world of game development tangible, while also considering the preconditions for a more inclusive future;

RUDOLF INDERST argues that, at least in Germany, game studies are still in a "liminal state", which can on the one hand foster academic freedom, but at the same time poses its own limitations on game scholars; Distinguishing between obvious and subtle forms of political oppression, HOSSEIN MOHAMMADZADE and ATEFE NAJJAR MANSOOR take a close look on how video games can either criticize or promote oppressive ideas; LULAMILE MOHAPI applies South African protest-dance (toyi-toyi) to video game design, and discusses the potential of such games to serve as tools against the "New Apartheid"; and NIKITA STULIKOV investigates how the Russian game industry and game culture might have become entangled with propagandistic efforts during Russia's shift from authoritarian to totalitarian politics.

Please note that - in accordance with the publications theme - the authors were free to use whatever citation style they chose for their papers; the unusual variety in this regard is not due to an accidental lack of editorial oppression, but to a dedication to freedom in every way possible.

Also, talking about possibilities - we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all the amazing contributors who - as speakers, authors, and reviewers - have made the conference and this publication possible and satisfying. Our special thanks, as always, go to Herbert Rosenstingl, whose patronage has once again given us the freedom to bring together colleagues from all over the world, to explore new and exciting ideas, and to let the FROG community grow yet another bit further.

And it is this community that we want to thank above all else: it is your commitment over the years and across all distances that keeps us going, and the inclusive and

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affectionate environment that you create ensures that even during the most heated debates, no opinions are oppressed, and every thought can be expressed freely. This is truly appreciated.

SECTION I

**HOW FREEDOM AND OPPRESSION ARE
PART OF PLAYING & CREATING GAMES**

File #1



Title: Between Agency and the Normative Space

Subtitle: Game as a Constitutive Unit of Meaning

Author(s): Xavier Aranda

The following paper will provide an attempt to philosophically ground the study of games, finding the conditions for a general concept of 'game', where such conditions must be able: 1) to delimit what a game is (distinct from another while preserving the same universal features), 2) to provide a demarcative notion (which defines what a game is but also what a game isn't), and 3) to explain how a game can be constitutive of meaning (that is a kind of content), such that can be subject of analysis independently of an specific context (whilst always presupposing a context that is). The current approach to this philosophical grounding will take inspiration from contemporary epistemology, and philosophy of mind and language. Starting from the analogy of 'language as a game' I'll provide an argument to reverse it so there's a way to understand 'game as a language' and apply several philosophical concepts valid to language analysis. Therefore, my aim is to show that to ground the notion of game, and by extension a general study of games, there is no possible a priori starting point, so a holistic non-reductive approach is a requirement as well. I'll show this by underlining the obstacles of choosing an a priori starting point (focused on norms or agency), proposing to understand the constitutive relation between rules and agents as immanent.

Keywords: Philosophy, Philosophy of Language, Freedom, Agency, Normativism

1. GROUNDING THE STUDY OF GAMES: A PHILOSOPHICAL JUSTIFICATION

In the context of multidisciplinary studies the idea of 'grounding' might suggest a stubborn pursuit that leads to a kind of reductionism (the idea that a less objective discipline can be simplified, reduced or explained by a more objective discipline therefore giving it the status of secondary, or epistemologically dependent), or a position contrary to epistemological pluralism (the idea that there are several valuable ways of knowing that which be complementary and enriching, contrary to the idea that there is only one type of objective knowledge, i. e. scientific knowledge).

Grounding a discipline in the philosophical sense of this proposed task, implies to determine more clearly its object of study to show the possible performance of its theoretical activity, as well as its possible results. To ground 'game' as a concept that provides us with a type of novel and interesting analysis implies a serious interest in game studies, but not a displacement or theoretical imposition of a predominantly philosophical perspective. This idea is not in conflict with the plurality of multidisciplinary backgrounds of game studies, though it does raise the need for a 'general theory of games' (GTG as I will refer to it onwards) as a general approach to the concept of game, but placed a posteriori, that is, in a way that the alleged GTG presupposes game studies as pre-existing and without disrupting them¹, interested first in the notion of game itself and in the manifestations and implications of games later.

In the previous sense, it is crucial to understand the game as a unit of conceptual analysis, to delimit it so that its

¹ This approach to 'grounding' has its inspiration in Hegel's speculative philosophy. Hegel's understanding of ground represents an alternative to a traditional grounding approach (a priori and metaphysically necessary, in Hegel *Werke*, Bd. 6 L II, 80-81), which I believe is crucial to overcome some of the more serious difficulties of the present work exposed at the end of section 4 (as the problem of choosing either having norms or content as metaphysically prior). Due the difficulty of Hegel's works it's necessary to point out that this interpretation relies in a 'revised' or 'contemporary' metaphysical interpretation of his philosophy (Houlgate 2005, Stern 2002, and Westphal 2003, among others).

study provides us with different results from what the mere application of tools from other disciplines can produce and that may well dilute the concept of game or sucit it to a reduction, this, so the future application of interdisciplinary tools enriches the analysis and does not turn it into a derivative or non-novel result (this is a purely theoretical or philosophical enterprise at its core).

For the precise reason this grounding attempt is a predominant philosophical effort since the philosophical questions that arise within every discipline lead to a 'philosophy of' and not to a reduction of these theories by revealing themselves as epistemologically dependent on philosophy. At the same time, philosophy has the freedom to relate various fields of study, streams of thought, and theories, without diluting the critical and necessary questioning of the problems it confronts.

From this perspective I'd like to emphasize that a GTG interested in a general notion of game which links all the manifestations of play under a concept with demarcative performance (a concept that can explain what a game is but also what a game isn't), can bring new light to the way in which other related concepts are assumed in all the possible approaches within game studies.

This drives the question to what is the purpose of understanding the concept of game as a constitutive unit of meaning? Since our interest lies in understanding games, finding a general definition (and not only assuming that all types of games are so because of a contextual classification system) would allow this general stance to link all the different manifestations of 'play' (that I propose to take only initially as the development of a game from the point of view of an agent), while granting a conceptual delimitation necessary to give a direct account of the game phenomenon and not only presuppose its nature as that of a diffuse entity which possibly cuts through all facets of human activity.

However, before acting on such a philosophical undertaking, it is necessary to clarify what kind of performance a GTG would seek to obtain from a definition of game, that is, what kind of results it would expect to obtain from that analysis. On the one hand, it can take inspiration from the common goal of an aesthetics of game, application of narrative studies, semiotics, anthropology, sociology and

even psychology of games (among many other possible approaches), which together show a reflective purpose (although not exclusively) in their examination: to understand the nature of game, relevance, and other implications in their respective fields. On the other hand, it could take inspiration from approaches focused on the study of game as an analysis on rational decision making, such as game theory in mathematics, where the driving ambition would be predictive.

Contemporary philosophy has made several contributions to the study of language and mind, and important developments such as Wittgenstein's (2003) stance on language and the constitution of meaning rely in the use of 'game' as a deliberately open metaphor emphasizing the pragmatic nature of how speakers relate to language as a normative space. In that regard the idea that there might be a fruitful relationship between the language-as-a-game metaphor and a general study of games is not without merit. So, the overall intention will be to import some of those notions (and treatments), such as the aforementioned metaphor, the concept of agency (the capacity or the set of conditions that enable making decisions, according initially to a causal theory of action in Piñeros & Tenenbaum, 2003, 2), volitions, and the notion of dispositions as related to mental content; aiming to generate a possible argument to explain what a game is or how it could be understood from a general and purely abstract perspective.

In the previous sense, the analysis that will result from the application of concepts originated from epistemology and philosophy of language to the notion of game will determine the possible performance and orientation of our exam which, as I will show, must be aimed at abandoning the predictive goal in a GTG (due reasons that I'll explain in section 6).

The argument will proceed as follows: First I'll introduce the importance of the 'language as a game' metaphor for the contemporary philosophy of language, pointing out key aspects of how meaning (usually understood as an equivalent to mental content which is the content of mental states, a notion widely used by contemporary philosophy of mind, epistemology, and the philosophy of language) is understood as constituted by speakers insofar they relate to a normative space (language-game rules) that must be objective in itself (via Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein's private language paradox, 1982), and which has open the way for a

contemporary use of the language-as-a-game metaphor as a kind of study of normative² relations (between speakers and language-rules).

Second, I'll propose inverting the metaphor to study game-as-language, presenting an argument which pays attention to the equivalent role of the speaker as an agent (since agents are language-rule followers), which is dependant of understanding agents as those who possess volitive states (or volitions) as a kind of mental content (just like meaning is a kind of mental content), showing how for the sake of the game as a rule system (or a normative space), constituting meaning as content or developing agency (through decision making) as content is basically the same. The hard part of this argument is making the case that there's no real need for volitions to exist to explain how agency is possible, and how dispositions are not enough to explain agency (as a kind of spontaneity of individual action) altogether.

Third, I'll show how the notion of agency-as-content constitution is in danger following an assumption of what metaphysical necessity entails (a problem of reduction if we choose to give metaphysical priority to the normative space or the individuals-as-agents). This danger will show the theoretical need to ground the concept of game, whereas I'll claim there's an alternative to both options (norms are prior or agents/ content are prior) if we pay attention to some of the most important arguments in contemporary epistemology, suggesting an explanation of agency that doesn't rely in it being an essential property of agents nor an essential property of the normative space.

Fourth, I'll finally conclude that the concept of agency must be understood as co-determined by the game as a normative space, in which case agency can not be taken as a concept given a priori, but as the concept through which we can understand the relation between agents and rules. This explanation of how content is then constituted by this mutual relation requires the abandonment of the predictive ambition of a GTG since it would entail that the conditions constitutive of content of a game-as-a-language are immanent (developed from the game-agents relation).

² Representative works in normativism are McDowell & Pettit 1986, and Brandom 1994.

2. LANGUAGE AS A GAME

Our approach to the task originates in the use of the analogy of 'language as a game', which gained special relevance thanks to the influence of the *Philosophical Investigations* of L. Wittgenstein (2003) originally published in 1953, who decisively changed the way we understand language.

Motivated by the desire to move away from the previous analytical characterization of language in his 1922 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (2016), which presented the logical form of the proposition as a type of rigorous generalization, Wittgenstein now proposed instead to understand language as a game, highlighting the diffuse character of this notion.

Wittgenstein argued that most of the times the meaning of a word is its use (2003; §43), so the idea of an analytical (universal and a priori) grounding of meaning (akin to finding a logical structure of language which would possess metaphysical priority over natural language) would be against the pragmatical spirit of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Wittgenstein does not define what a game is, neither gives an analytic criterion through we could determine a particular language-game or clearly differentiate it from others. Instead, he uses the term 'family resemblance' (Familienähnlichkeit, 2003; §23), which is a purposefully vague term to show how games relate one to another. This led his philosophy to show how meaning should be constituted in a holistic way and through speakers' usage, where words as meaning-use instances would need to be evaluated by other speakers as well (commonly understood as the 'private language' argument in 2003; §244-271).

Saul Kripke famously brought up the evaluation aspect to the philosophical discussion in *Wittgenstein on rules and private language* (1982), taking as starting point the passages no. 201 and 202 from the *Philosophical Investigations* (2003) where Wittgenstein argues that the belief of following a rule is not a good enough criterion for following that rule. Kripke underlines that for

evaluation to be possible the rules must be objective in themselves (1982; p. 110-111)³.

Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein underlines that meaning is normative, and it's been especially relevant to a philosophy of normativity which follows Kripke's claims that meaning understood as kind of mental content is therefore normative as well (specially in McDowell & Petit, 1986 and Brandom, 1994).

My initial hypothesis has been that it is possible to reverse this analogy, moving from language as a game, to the game as a language, pretending to obtain immediate returns on a (universal) notion of the game. But to show how such an argument is possible, it would first be necessary to address the core of the issue.

What will allow the inversion of the analogy is to establish an analogy in turn between the concept of 'agency' (initially in line with the previously noted casual theory of action) and meaning or mental content. Being able to make the analogy between agency and meaning, respectively taking agency in relation to the normative space of the game (just as meaning is for language), and understanding both as types of content in relation to the normative space (of language or a game), will allow to show not only the relevance, but the fruits of the application of these notions from various branches of philosophy (epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language) to a GTG.

Why is the notion of agency so important? Freedom is a crucial notion to understand what a game is (of any kind), not only from the perspective of J. Huizinga (1980), R. Caillois (2001), and E. Fink (2016): a stance on freedom must be presupposed in the very concept of agency for it to work. This merely points out that every belief possesses an ontological commitment of some sort, yet it's especially relevant to clear out the implications of the metaphysical status of freedom as I'll show, those implications put at

³ Norms must be metaphysically prior to content, but this isn't to say that norms are metaphysically prior to a community of evaluation. Kripke just wants to avoid a social or community-wide version of the dispositional theory of content (1982; p. 111-112).

risk the notion of agency-as-content to be introduced in the next section.

3. HOW TO REVERSE THE ANALOGY OF LANGUAGE AS A GAME?

Here I'll present an argument that will allow us to reverse the analogy of language as a game. However, this argument will be supported by other arguments important to epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind.

- i. The first step is to show that agency can be explained without resorting to causal processes of an essentially mental nature, where I'll rely on the argument of G. Ryle in *The concept of mind* (2009), who rejects the idea that acts are based on volitions (understood as types of mental content whose function is to account for when an act is intentional or unintentional) as flawed, for it assumes a causal link between volitions and acts, which the same volitions can't possess between each other otherwise it would lead to an infinite regress (p. 54).
- ii. Thus, if agency can't be explained by 'volitions', then we could argue that there is not a big difference between 'being able to say what we want to say' in the twist of a given sentence, and 'being able to say we did what we did' in a given situation, since agency as a kind of content (the one that agency constitutes) could be explained dispositionally. That is, we could present agency in terms of a dispositional theory of content (equating meaning and agency as types of mental content). This doesn't necessarily entail equating mental content with agency-content, we might as well expect both to be labeled as different kinds of content⁴ (both being content nonetheless), but such labels are not important as I'll be focusing on the problematic aspect of them being dispositional.
- iii. I'll refer now to an argument against content as determinable from a dispositional theory of content

⁴ In fact, following the main thesis of Ryle's *The concept of mind* (2009), mental content (if we are still able to label it like that) wouldn't even be inside someone's head.

in Kripke (1982). Kripke's argument postulates a possible mathematical operation that can be confused with another⁵ since both could produce the same result in a certain range, but a different result in another. The example uses a mathematical operation as an instance of an objective rule that would produce objective results, so there's no ambiguity left. Kripke aims to show that being able to forget what specific rule we used in a past case would still yield the same objective result (it wouldn't affect it at all), showing how even if we aren't clear about our dispositions (i.e., we forgot what kind of rule we applied in each context) since the rules are objective themselves, dispositions are not needed to explain

⁵ Kripke poses the following skeptical challenge: as a result of the operation of adding $68 + 57$ we obtain the result of 125, however, let's look at the two uses of 'plus' that are exposed here, a) the operation ($68 + 57$) in its correct arithmetic use which results in 125, b) the same operation in the sense of the metalinguistic use of the term addition (as the word that designates the arithmetic operation) and that leads us to the same result. Kripke's example lies in posing a skeptical challenge about the possibility that our metalinguistic use is wrong. What would happen if there were two operations that are possible to be confused with one another, 'plus' ($x + y$) and 'quus' (identical in all cases less than $68 + 57$, but whose result in operations greater than or equal to $68 + 57$ was different as 5)? Given the right circumstances (altered states of consciousness, etc.) how could we assert that our metalinguistic use for obtaining 125 was 'plus' and not 'quus'?

According to the skeptic in Kripke's example, the present use of addition would not be in question since it would be enough to ask the speaker which of the two operations they mean, in fact, this solution is taken as a dispositional theory of meaning, which would assume the use employed (arithmetic or metalinguistic) as determined by our willingness to think about certain specific values in particular cases - this position is commonly linked to descriptive epistemologies such as Quine's (specifically his thesis of the 'indeterminacy of meaning'). However, what about past uses of plus (in the case of quantities less than $68+57$)? Could we say with certainty that our past use of plus always designated the usual addition or could it have been 'quus'?

Kripke's main idea is that there is no solution in terms of our dispositions, since when asking about past uses it is not possible to point out such dispositions for all cases, because the relation of the use of a given rule (in $68+57$) is normative, not descriptive as a dispositional solution to the argument would pretend (Kripke, 1982; p. 37). Similarly, Kripke points out a certain resemblance to Hume's critique of causality in Wittgenstein's argument: "no past state of my mind can entail that I will give any particular response in the future." (Kripke, 1982; p. 53)

how speakers (or agents in this case) are able to constitute contents.

- iv. Which would allow us to relate the constitution of meaning with the constitution of acts insofar as both can be understood as types of content...
 - a. For content related to the normative space of language would be what we usually understand as meaning, and that somehow could be separated from the decision-making process (agency).
 - b. While content for a game is in fact 'decision making', since the actions of an agent or player are the only meaningful things for the game to hold on to (understood as a normative space), that is the interaction between rules and actions carried out by agents, allowing us to reverse the analogy of language as a game.

4. GAME AS A LANGUAGE

The above argument showed that to explain agency there's no need to invoke volitions as mental causes for actions since explaining what we do through our dispositions is sufficient to do it (just like it is for meaning and mental content). Then went to show that dispositions are not objective enough to constitute meaning-as-content and a normative relation with rules is required such that for agency-as-content the same condition would be needed. And since games are normative spaces -as content is concerned- there's no real distinction between actions and words, allowing games to be understood as language⁶ just like language can be understood as a game.

I would now be inclined to point out how the way in which players relate to the rules is constitutive of agency, but Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy (1982) showed that the analogy between language and games presents some possible options in the way in which rules (such as the

⁶ In the sense of how language works and not that of a particular language.

normative space of speakers or agents) and mental meaning or content can be constituted (in Glüer & Wikforss, 2018):

1. The content engenders normativity (the content is metaphysically prior to the norms),
2. Content determines normativity (norms are metaphysically prior to content).

This perspective that determines the agency from either (1) or (2) would seem to lead us to understand it as: an essential property of the agents in the first case (where content is metaphysically prior to norms) who would have to own agency before participating in any game (as the very condition to be able to play); or perhaps to assume that agency falls into the normative space of the game (the second case where norms are metaphysically prior), which would lead us to an approach where agency would be what the game determines as such, and where players are not fully free (metaphysically), but only to the extent that agency-as-content is meaningful to the game.

From the perspective of the normative space (2, norms are prior) there's a couple of options to consider: first, normative space can mean either the rules of a specific game (the same game, e.g., chess, or a specific game carried out at a certain time and space, e.g., the 10th game between Carlsen and Anand on November 22, 2013) or the normative space of the totality of games.

Referring to 'the normative space of all games' has the virtue of referring to a holistic understanding of what a game is, but it also entails the problem that it prevents us from being able to separate games in a conceptually rigid way from each other: one game would imply others and there would be no real border between them (just as Wittgenstein intended). This way leads to a dead end if the intention is to make some kind of conceptual delimitation when analyzing a certain game (either chess or the Magnus Carlsen game).

Conceptual delimitation is possible if I refer by 'the normative space' to the rules of a game (whether it's chess or Carlsen's match), but ends up determining in a very categorical way the sense of agency as that constituted from the actions recognized by the rules as meaningful (giving rise to a type of reductionism of agency to norms). This

of course has predictive utility since it allows the postulation of a model with adjustable knobs depending on the possible decisions to be placed in the system. It's also circular in that the question of agency could not be answered in terms of what agency is⁷, but in terms of what the system preconfigures as agency.

From the perspective of the player or agent (1, content is prior), we would have to assume that agency is already a precondition, which imposes other limits on the notion itself: insofar as the notion is no longer really significant for the conceptual analysis of a GTG, but only the repercussions of agency (the acts) would be significant for a GTG, in addition to postulating agency as a type of essentiality outside the scope of GTG's analysis (thinking of freedom as essential to the human being). It also conflicts with the spirit of Ryle's argument (2009; p. 54) in that agency would rest if not on ghostly volitions, then on some other type of given content that would exercise the same function (to provide agency to acts).

The latter perspective (1, content is prior) to some extent safeguards the reflective analysis (of aesthetics, narrative studies, semiotics, etc.), but delegates the study of agency to a discipline other than a GTG. Although it also shows the relationship between human beings and games under an essentiality, the analysis is anthropocentric and therefore leaves out the following questions:

- Can animals play in the same way as human beings, that is, can their games constitute meaning? And...
- Can artificial intelligences play? Where this question is the same as the previous one, but in a different context.

⁷ 'What is to be able to make decisions?' Versus 'what a certain system defines as a range of possible decisions? (Whereas choosing one is a matter of a criterion for rationality)'. The second ends up being circular as the rationality criterion is previously defined by what the system wants agency to be e.g., the best decision for an agent is one that ends up gaining information, spreading information, etc. In terms of an 'open system of rules' like the case of large language models, the question should point where the system jumps from a model of (predicting) language to a model of (predicting) knowledge.

Then, neither AI's nor animals would be able to constitute content through a game.

Both ways I mentioned in which players or agents relate to rules as a relation constitutive of agency (content or norms prior) put at risk the idea of agency-as-content as a central notion for a GTG. If norms are prior, agency-as-content ends up being circularly defined. If content is prior, it could be objected that agency-as-content is not novel enough to warrant a GTG a domain of its own, or that the analysis ends up being restricted to what anthropologically can be done with the concept of game (which otherwise opens relevant issues like animals and AI's), even if the conceptualization I have presented so forth could be rich enough for game studies and other disciplines interested in the game phenomena.

Before providing a solution to the present dilemma I will introduce some key elements to understand what kind of answer would be necessary. That is, what philosophers have learned from the study of the philosophy of language, epistemology, and philosophy of mind, and which I can now apply to concept of game aided by the metaphor of 'game as language'.

5. PHILOSOPHICAL LESSONS

Some of the most influential arguments in contemporary philosophy of language, epistemology, and philosophy of mind reside in what is called an attack on the given, that is, on categories or concepts that are taken as pure, assumed, or necessary (in the metaphysical sense) for content, showing how the latter is not constituted hierarchically (e.g. from a first concept, first experience, etc.).

Three of the most influential texts in this regard are "Two dogmas of empiricism" by W.V.O. Quine (1951), "Empiricism and the philosophy of mind" by W. Sellars (1991), and the *Philosophical Investigations* of Ludwig Wittgenstein (2003, specifically the argument against private language).

The idea behind the present section is to collate some of the lessons of these influential texts in relation to our previous exposition showing the relationship between agency and the normative space.

In "Two dogmas of empiricism" (1951) Quine attacks two substantially important issues, first the idea that it is possible to clarify the notion of meaning (the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions), and second, the idea of reductionism.

According to Quine the notion of meaning is not only diffuse, but impossible to elucidate, considering that the use of meaning is not very different from the use of essence for classical philosophy. Meaning as content according to Quine, cannot be explained a priori (as a given content in a pure way).

Reductionism falls into a similar criticism, since, on the one hand we should be able to reduce every instance of meaning (in the case of Quine's argument) to a set of experiences or a sense-datum vocabulary which is an unfeasible task, on the other, Quine points out that no statement is immune to evaluation, indicating that even logical laws can be revised.

Assuming the previous lessons, it would be necessary to underline the problem that arises when trying to point out that agency would be explicable as something essential to the agents. If it is not possible to come up with a concrete notion that explains what agency is (for example, volition or freedom in the broadest sense), then we would be making a mistake similar to what Quine finds in the notion of meaning. In the same way, it arises with the claim that agency could be reduced to the normative space of game while the rules of games themselves are reviewable either because they are determined insufficient (they are not able to contemplate some behavior of the players) or too diffuse (in the case of children's games in which children can make the rules as they play), showing that reduction is not a good enough explanation for agency in the context of an universal concept of a game.

Sellars' text "Empiricism and the philosophy of mind" (1991) contains the famous argument against the 'myth of the given'. The given represents any type of content that is assumed as pure, e.g. categories, concepts, definitions, conditions, qualities, first experiences, etc. were Sellars concludes that if the given contents are not propositional then they have no epistemological utility (they can't generate or

transmit knowledge or information as content), and if they are propositional, then they are the result of another type of propositional content in turn (such as other inferences). Like Quine, Sellars also points to another kind of holism in the form of the logical space of reasons, the normative space (of all games and not of a game).

The lesson to be taken would be that both norms (thinking of a game and not the normative space of all games) and agency are in a process of mutual mediation, and that therefore a state of pure rules or pure agency is not possible.

Now, if combined these lessons with Wittgenstein's idea in the *Philosophical Investigations* to abandon the logical form of the proposition (analytical definitions), we will arrive at a holistic notion of the normative space of all games, begging the question it would clash with the idea of being able to give a conceptual delimitation to the game as a unit of analysis. However, the possibility of avoiding this conclusion lies in reflecting on Wittgenstein's intention in establishing this diffuse condition of games.

A non-analytic notion of games would therefore have to be presented on the base experience of play. There, the agency-as-meaning or content arises in mediation with the norms and is not the result of the a priori condition of the norms: just as the agency cannot be the result of the norms, and neither the norms nor the agency can be taken as given nor appealing to some kind of essentiality returning to Quine's critique. And although it is clear how we can possess an understanding of norms not a priori but pragmatically, being subject to revisions depending on what is needed case by case, the idea of agency as a non-essential attribute to players, or even human beings, is more problematic.

6. CLOSING ARGUMENTS

At the end of section 4, I mentioned that from the perspective of the player (who would have metaphysical priority over norms), agency is explained as a type of essentiality often attributed to human freedom that we qualify as anthropocentric (regarding the case of animals and artificial intelligences), leading us to ask if there

is a non-human concept of freedom (agency taken as an essentiality).

The objection is twofold, from the potential problem of non-human players being unable to constitute content through games (one could even generalize that they would be unable to play because playing would already be a 'human-ity'), and from the idea that an essentiality does not define or clarify what agency is supposed to be.

I argue that the question so far is badly posed, and it should ask instead: whether the agency (i.e., its essentiality) should be posed a priori? This question allows us to avoid the anthropological trap in which we pigeonhole the concept of game.

The error consists in assuming that the concept of agency (or freedom) is detached from the concept of game, that is, if the players are free, they are free externally to the game, or if the game gives agency to the players, it is the game that grounds the sense of agency without yet contemplating the de facto actions of the agents.

In this sense, the concept of agency (or freedom) cannot be grounded univocally, either on the side of the player, or the game. Nor is it useful to problematize the possibility of the a priori condition of such a foundation since it would necessarily imply such a univocacy. The option I propose is to take the notion of agency as co-determined by the game and the player.

Being able to play (as well as the desire to play) implies the necessary factual setting of the game, which is not something assumed a priori, neither on the side of the agents, nor on the side of the rules (even of a game that involves strict rules and social conventions). One is free to play since freedom refers to the freedom of players who are already (by definition) involved in the activity of playing. Therefore, the question about freedom would not be alien to the concept of the game, on the contrary, both would be concepts that determine each other.

The player is free to the extent that it can leave the game yet continues to play it, but not as long as this possibility is determined a priori; since it is the fact of starting to play that determines whether the player can continue playing

or stop to do so, otherwise the notion of agency leads to the contradictions that I have explored before.

The solution would appear to be circular as in "the players are free because they play", but this would only be the case if we continue to expect an a priori determination of freedom, in fact, what I argue here is closer to "the players are free because they continue to play (or were free because they stopped playing)".

Whether an agent can stop playing does not depend entirely on the agent, since the decision to stop playing makes sense only in the context of playing, and the game is a structure made possible by the (necessary) recognition that it is only a game. This last characteristic that would seem trivial extols it's not-merely-ontological status, but the deontological status of the game insofar as 'is' and 'ought' are aligned and that is expressed as the very concept of agency-as-freedom (mutually determined by rules and players).

My proposal is precisely that the deontological status of the game is immanent to the play experience in order to achieve the conceptual delimitation that I seek: to be able to understand the game as a constitutive unit of content, allowing to talk about the game while inserting it into the normative space of all games without there being any real tension between both levels.

Since the concept of immanence is loaded with a long metaphysical tradition, I propose advocating for a type of 'local' immanence (opposed to global or classical immanence), understanding it as follows: if a question is conceptual, I ought to answer it through concepts in turn (without any other metaphysical assumptions needed in between), therefore, if the question of agency (or freedom) is posed in relation to play, it must be answered through the very concept of a game exhibiting it's deontological status.

The distinction between one game and another, or between one game and the normative space of all games, lies in the immanent development of the deontological status of a particular game: what makes it 'what it is' as a delimited unit but always in relation to other games or to the totality

of games, since playing a game is an experience in context with playing or having played other games.

The deontological status surpasses the limit present from one game to another, insofar as the question is relating to the context in question, i.e., asking about a game related to another, or asking about the normative space of all games, since the development I propose is to follow through immanence. Therefore, the notion of agency-as-freedom developing at the same time as the question itself implies a difference in the comprehension of both of those notions of what a game is implies (asking about one game or asking about the normative space of all games).

Consequently, agency can no longer be a metaphysically grounded concept before there's a discussion about agency in the context of a game. Though it can be provisionally defined. I can have an idea of what agency is supposed to be, but only the immanent development of actions through agency in a game (developing at the same time as the concept of a game) can show how agency is grounded as agency-as-content. Just like using a word in a determinate context constitutes meaning-as-content, but to consider how that particular use of a word constitutes objectively any content requires the communal evaluation through a normative space.

This is the sense behind the question about freedom when placed in the context of a game: Freedom is agency as metaphysically grounded through the development of agency-as-content just like the game is grounded as a unit constitutive of content (such as meaning) in its deontological status (that coincidence between 'is' and 'ought').

Although the scope of this paper ends at this proposal, I maintain that any other constituent element of the game (and that accounts for the deontological structure of the game itself) should also be understood as immanent. Therefore, a consequence of this conceptual development would be for a GTG to give up on the predictive aim of a possible notion of a game since agency could not be preconfigured in the way of a mathematical model expects it to be.

A concept of game such as the one I propose has sufficient elements to support a GTG, since 1) it explains the objective constitution of content, 2) it allows to delimit a game

among others (without having the task of analyzing a game being an analysis of specific contexts), and 3) its epistemologically normative, since it explains not only what is a game but what is not a game. It also underlines some of our initial goals: this grounding effort wasn't 'traditional' (not an a priori, universally necessary definition) since its metaphysical performance doesn't entail a necessary priority over previous theoretical development, it is a holistic notion, and in that regard hopefully it can shed new light on concepts previously determined by game studies such as agency, the relationship between rules or actions and narrative, the possibility of aesthetically analyzing a game, semiotic analysis, etc.

There's still work to be done, specifically studying the pragmatic nature of the game, i. e. how it is possible to change the rules? How it is possible to epistemologically delimit the game not only from playing it but from observation alone (like when something seems like a game but is not, or when something does not seem like a game but is one)? The relationship between narrative and competition, among other topics that could be re-evaluated from the perspective of the deontological structure of the game that I have shown.

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File #2



Title: (Un)Restricted Play

Subtitle: How Prospective Game Developers view the Boundaries of Games

Author(s): Paula Goerke

Limitations are a key component of life and of video games. However, these limitations do not create themselves, they are made by the people behind the curtains - the game developers. While there is plenty of research focusing on the game industry itself, there is very little knowledge about the game developers themselves. To fill this research gap, four interviews with prospective game developers were conducted and analyzed using qualitative content analysis regarding their image of humanity and ideas of the limitations of and within games. The results show that there are six main categories of limitations identified by the interviewees; however, these categories do not match the theoretical assumptions extracted from the existing literature to the full extent. This research allows some first insights into the perceptions of limitations, and therefore a part of the images of humanity, of (prospective) game developers.

It shows that, according to the prospective game developers, it is less technology or ethical doubts that influence game development but rather social and interactive aspects. Furthermore, games offer opportunities to overcome boundaries found in the real world.

Keywords: game design, game development, game studies, image of humanity, video games

1. INTRODUCTION

Limitations, both natural and artificial, are an inherent part of human life, restricting humans in their movements, their thoughts, their interactions, and their general freedom. One opportunity to escape such real-life limitations is through (video) games. As players play - online or offline, alone or with friends, on a console or their computers - they step out of their everyday lives and become someone or something else. While their bodies may remain in the same position for hours, their minds experience new adventures, no longer bound by the limitations of their human existence.

However, the freedom that players experience in their virtual adventures is not completely unrestricted. Rather, it is heavily influenced by the many constraints imposed by the game developers - the people who conceived the game and whose actions brought it to life. Therefore, this in-game freedom can only be properly enjoyed within the limits that its creators allow(ed) and have thought of. The question, then, is how these game developers perceive the boundaries of games.

The question of how individuals perceive boundaries and limitations is situated within one of the greatest questions in the humanities, "What is man?" (Kant as cited in Fahrenberg, 2014) and is therefore part of each individual's image of humanity - the way a person thinks about what humanity is like (Fahrenberg, 2014). While these questions have been asked by representatives of many different fields and disciplines, there is very little research on the current images of humanity held by people in software development in general and video game development in particular.

Because these fields, more than others, need to be current and on the pulse of the times, it is incredibly important to study not only those who have a lot of experience in the discipline but also those who are just starting out, as it is their actions and behaviors that will shape the future. In the following paper, the people working in the field of video game development are referred to as game developers. As there are many possible ways to refer to the people working in this industry, in the context of this paper, the term game developer was chosen as it can be used to refer to any person working in the context of game development,

e.g., game designers, programmers, artists, or audio engineers.

Based on these conclusions, the following research question was originally formulated: How do university students who want to work as game developers express themselves regarding their image of humanity based on selected topics? However, as the present paper focuses only on the subject area of perceived limitations, the aim is solely to answer the following subquestions: What boundaries do prospective game developers perceive in the context of video games? And how can these boundaries be overcome? To answer these questions, four interviews were conducted, analyzed, and discussed in relation to existing research. The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings, limitations of the research, and implications for the future.

2. HUMANS AS GAME CREATORS

While games are an integral part of human life, the ways in which they are created can vary widely. Children's play is sometimes claimed to begin at an infant age (Huizinga, 1951), and game creation begins as early as preschool and continues to develop as they get older (Vygotsky, 1967). However, this free play is not the only form of play that people encounter throughout their lives. It is more often "professional" games that people think of when they talk about them.

Games can be a great way to experience and explore freedom. Children make up their rules of play as they go along and take on different roles almost naturally, and the same tendencies can be seen when players turn to sandbox games such as *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011). These games offer the players opportunities to create, adventure, and interact with the game's environment without a linear narrative they must follow (Gabbadini et al., 2017), which is very similar to the free and unrestricted play described by Huizinga (1951). *Minecraft* can even be used to support players in expressing their creativity and improving their innovative skills (Rahimi & Shute, 2021). However, while playing games, be it as a child or an adult, on a computer or on the street, is a means to freely express oneself or experience what it is like to take on a role different from their regular everyday life, the industry behind professional game development is a diverse multi-million dollar industry consisting of many different fields, such as game design,

game art, game programming, level design, and sound engineering (game - Verband der deutschen Games-Branche, 2018). These roles can be taken up by different people, depending on the available time, human and financial resources they might even all be performed by a single person. To encompass this vast variety of professions and professionals in the field, this paper uses the term game developer to refer to any person participating in the production of a game, unless specification is required.

As diverse as the industry itself is, so is the research in this field. Some researchers may focus on economic factors of game development, such as the gender composition of development teams and studios (Bailey et al., 2021); others may examine the impact of societal events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on gaming (Pallavicini et al., 2022), or how gaming can be used for learning purposes (Amin & Wahyudin, 2022). In addition, there are many studies that focus on the process of video game development and research on video game development.

In this regard, Martin (2018) noted that research on video games has intensified in recent years, but the development processes remain unclear. However, it can be taken as a fact that the video game development industry is interdisciplinary.

In a literature review, Berg Marklund et al. (2019) addressed these processes in greater detail, with the goal of tracing the understanding of industry personnel in particular. They found that while the development processes are referred to as agile, it is not an adequate term; development is spontaneous and based on the developers' own experiences, but truly agile methods are not used. However, these working methods are reflected in the structures of the processes. In addition, the researchers found that the perceptions of developers and the actual development processes do not necessarily have to coincide.

In another study, Dubois and Weststar (2022) examined the shift in the game industry towards a focus on "games as a service". Along with this change in the games themselves, there are also changes in work processes, employees' perceptions of their work, and their perceptions of themselves.

Lysova and Khapova (2019) were even more explicit about video game developers, specifically their paths into such an uncertain industry that exists without explicit career structures. For this reason, individuals develop more creative and individualized paths into the industry, which they need to back up with appropriate knowledge of the business field. It is only through this knowledge that they have been able to create spaces in the industry that they can fill themselves.

However, there is a general problem with this research: surveys tend to have small sample sizes, which is especially problematic in a world as heterogeneous as video game development. In addition, access to the industry is often difficult for researchers (O'Donnell, 2014).

While these results show that there is some research on video game development in various fields, there is very little research on the actual people and their thoughts and motivations behind the development. The current paper offers a first attempt to fill one of these research gaps by examining the image of humanity of game developers, specifically prospective game developers - students who were studying to work in the field while the research was taking place.

3. IMAGES OF HUMANITY

"What is man?" as asked by Kant (as cited in Fahrenberg, 2014) is one of the greatest questions in the humanities and has been examined by pedagogues, philosophers, and economists alike. One of the best-known sentiments regarding this question was expressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his Social Contract: "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, 2002). However, this is only one of many possible perceptions of mankind. Every individual, expert or layperson, has some kind of image of humanity, and it is these basic beliefs that influence and shape their work and interactions with other people.

Images of humanity are defined as the "set of assumptions and beliefs about what human beings are by nature" (Fahrenberg, 2014). They are responsible for an individual's decisions, actions, and opinions. They are formed on the basis of people's experiences, their education, and the

society in which they live (Galliker, 2015). These images of humanity often include different dimensions, such as culture, body, and social aspects. One thing that greatly influences humans is the boundaries they encounter throughout their lives. These boundaries not only exist between and within humans, but also separate them from the non-human, from technology, or from gods (Wulf & Zirkas, 2014). Understanding the boundaries that humans face also allows them to be positioned in relation to the freedoms they can enjoy, or how these freedoms can be restricted.

One of the most important images of humanity regarding (video) games is the Homo Ludens as described by Johan Huizinga. This explanatory model states that human culture, and therefore humans, and play are inherently interwoven, meaning that all aspects of life, the serious and less serious, are in fact play. Additionally, Huizinga attests humans some form of irrationality as beings, as play is irrational, yet humans still play. He also sets play in relation to freedom, meaning that forced play can no longer be called such. Still, some forms of play seem more like a need than a want of the participating parties, and still, even in this need, there is freedom, freedom to do things because they are pleasurable and have to be done for the individual's happiness (Huizinga, 1951).

While images of humanity are often considered as basic beliefs that are mainly implicit and can only be described as theoretical concepts, for the purpose of this paper, it has to be assumed that such an image of humanity can be studied empirically (Fahrenberg, 2014; Galliker, 2015). When it comes to images of humanity in relation to play and even more so games, different approaches can be taken.

Some researchers view the avatars in games as manifestations of the players' image of humanity; others analyze player interactions with each other as representations of their perceptions of humanity; and others still research the possibilities of images of humanity to be formed through the simulation-aspects of a computer game. When doing so, the images of humanity underlie different boundaries, as the options of the medium restrict what can be portrayed. At the same time, these images of humanity have a deeper purpose - as the one portrayed in the game needs to be internalized by the players to fully engage with the game (Schröter & Thon, 2012).

While there have been all these different kinds of research in regard to images of humanity and their acquisition, representation and manifestation in video games, there is less research on the people who design and make these games, even less so for students who are currently attending universities to later work in such a field. However, as these are the people who were researched in preparation for this paper, some examples of images of humanity in technology by students will be presented here.

Berger and Ziegler (2021) examined the motives, beliefs, and interests of first-year teachers to further understand their paths, studies, and career choices. To do so, they interviewed 499 students, of whom 366 were studying to teach at grammar schools and 133 were studying to teach at vocational schools, since the winter semester 2016/17. Their study showed that the students had similar motives and convictions, even if they had different educational histories and experiences.

Kleinn et al. (2013) examined the image of the world of computer science students regarding humans, technology, and the world. The study consisted of group discussions held with students from five German universities, as well as narrative individual interviews with up to five students. The results showed that the students have a primarily positive image of technology, but are aware of possible issues and limitations. These limitations encompass many different aspects: the complexity of computer science, which means that there are many different ways and possibilities to achieve the outlined goal; the fact that it is impossible to properly portray both humans and technology using only technology, and it is therefore impossible to portray reality; and also, that there are things that simply shouldn't be attempted to replicate using computer science. However, not all students interviewed perceived these boundaries; some of them mentioned no practical or moral limitations at all (Schinzel, 2013).

Lehmann and Ebner (2011) used two studies to determine the metaphors used by students of economic education to describe teaching, which consisted of a total of 514 students from a German university. They concluded that humans need to use multiple metaphors and phrases to define complex phenomena, as they cannot break these things down into simple words.

Based on this previous research, it can be assumed that students who choose the same field of study will have a similar image of humanity, even if their individual paths are different from one another. Furthermore, students who choose to study computer science, while aware of its possibilities, are also capable of identifying its limitations. Thus, interviewing students who have chosen to pursue a prospective career in game development will offer insights into their complex images of humanity of people in this field, including possible limitations and restrictions. However, these results also show that there is only limited research available regarding the images of humanity of students and even less so on the images of humanity of people working in video game development, so that the present paper can add to the existing knowledge not only of students but also about game developers and their perceptions of the world.

As the theoretical concept of images of humanity was used as the base framework for the overarching research, it still needs to be discerned in the context of the present paper. However, while the research on which this paper is based aimed to completely encompass the image of humanity as held by the interviewees, the present paper focuses solely on the aspect of boundaries as these are the ones which are most closely related to the questions of freedom. Both in relation to the game developers and the prospective players.

4. BOUNDARIES IN GAME DEVELOPMENT

Boundaries, when considered in the context of images of humanity as part of pedagogical anthropology, exist in two states: firstly, there are boundaries within humanity, which are represented by dichotomies like male and female or sick and healthy; secondly, there are boundaries of humanity, such as the distinctions to God, technology and animals (Wulf & Zirfas, 2014). Regarding the present paper, different boundaries seem to be relevant. The limitations of technology appear to be prevalent due to two reasons: for one, technology has been heavily influencing humans in the last years, opening up the question of how humanity has to be redefined in the context of digitization (Ahrens, 2014). Secondly, technology plays a big part in the development of video games, on the one hand because it is used for the development, like different game engines, development platforms and programming languages, on the other hand

because new technological advancements influence the game development, like the development of VR- and AR-Technologies allowed new forms of interaction within games and the further usage of wearable devices made mobile gaming ideas more feasible for companies (Camps-Ortueta et al., 2021).

Furthermore, it seems that ethical norms and morals play a crucial role in defining the boundaries of games. Again and again, scientific research is conducted on how games can be designed to teach ethics (e.g., Bagus et al., 2021), how different moral concepts can be conveyed through gaming (e.g., Hodge et al., 2019), or how ethical the implementation of certain game mechanics is (e.g., Neely, 2021). It has also been shown time and again that these facets can represent limits. For example, higher monetary investments can lead to better game results, because real money can be used to buy a higher amount of loot boxes or premium items, and consequently, lower investment opportunities, both financially and in terms of time resources, lead to a worse game result (Neely, 2021). In terms of content, the ethical and moral ideas of the culture in which a game is embedded can represent a boundary that is enforced and checked by external bodies such as the USK in Germany, PEGI in Europe, or the EXRB in Canada and the USA (Dogruel & Joeckel, 2013).

Another aspect that needs to be considered when developing games is the analysis of the potential target group as well as the associated boundaries with said group. These can include but are not limited to the consideration of motor, cognitive, and mental difficulties. For game development, this can include offering options to overcome these boundaries, so that players feel empowered rather than incompetent (Bayrak, 2020). However, many mainstream video games are still a long way from being accessible, and the approaches taken are not of a high enough quality and lead to further segregation of disabled players. In addition, tools that allow developers to improve accessibility are not necessarily accessible themselves, therefore hindering the development of more accessible video games (Aguado-Delgado et al., 2020).

Based on these theoretical insights, which were already partially confirmed by Kleinn et al. (2013), it is assumed that the prospective game developers will identify two main categories of boundaries with regard to their game development: technological limitations, both in the sense of soft- and hardware, and ethical and moral limitations,

influencing both game content and development. Potentially, issues of accessibility might also come up. However, no assumptions can be made regarding the weight of these boundaries or what other limitations people who work in the field might perceive.

5. METHOD

To answer the stated research questions, a qualitative research design was chosen as it allows an explorative approach to previously lesser researched areas of interest (Kelle, 2014). To do so, four semi-structured interviews with students fitting the selection criteria were conducted. They were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which allowed a focus on the content of the interviews, both explicit and implicit. The analysis used both deductive and inductive approaches, which were then combined to identify different categories. To do so, the interviews were first analyzed separately; afterward they were set in relation to each other.

The interviewees represented two different German universities, one offering degrees in educational science and one offering degrees in media informatics and interactive entertainment. However, no matter their chosen degree, all interviewed students had had contact with theoretical or practical aspects of video game development, such as taking up the roles of game designers or artists in student led game projects or researching the possibilities of game based education. The four interview partners were equally divided between the two degrees, bachelor's and master's degrees, and identified 50 % as female and 50 % as male.

As the original interviews were framed by the much bigger research question regarding the images of humanity held by the university students, they encompassed six different subject areas (subject, space, culture, body, social, and limitations) and took between 40 and 72 minutes. However, this paper, as stated previously, solely focuses on the limitations perceived by the interviewees. The students were asked the following questions regarding this subject area: What boundaries do players encounter in video games? How can these boundaries be overcome? As the interviews were analyzed as a whole and not individually by subject areas, some of the results regarding the limitations in the

following section, are based on answers given in other segments. Before the interviews started, the interviewees were presented with definitions of both images of humanity and video games. Images of humanity were defined as the assumptions and ideas someone has about the nature of humans, which are shaped by the individual's world views and influence their decisions, actions and opinions. Video games were defined as electronic games, that are presented via a monitor and controlled using a tool, such as a computer mouse, keyboard, or controller. As an alternative term, the phrase computer game was introduced. These definitions need to be kept in mind regarding the answers given by the prospective game developers.

6. RESULTS

After independently analyzing the four interviews, 16 subcategories in six main categories were identified. These offered a wide range of different perceptions of the boundaries encountered by players and game developers. However, the aspects identified by the interview partners did not necessarily match the expectations that were formed based on the literary research.

7. TECHNOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES

Technology plays a big part in the development of video games, as it is one of the key requirements to be able to work with and experience video games. However, the prospective game developers barely mentioned such technological aspects.

The one technological limitation that was mentioned is the devices used by both the game developers and the players, as one group can only create within the specifications set by their equipment and the other group can only experience within those specifications. For the game developers, this means that available software and hardware influences the quality and details of the developed game. For players, the software and hardware they use can influence how close to the best possible game experience they can get. Playing on a substandard computer means that players won't be able to experience the graphics, and therefore the environment and story, to the fullest extent possible.

8. DEVELOPER CENTERED BOUNDARIES

In addition to these technological aspects that influence the work that can be done by the game developers, the interviewees identified another boundary that primarily affects them themselves. This boundary is closely related to the forming of the individual images of humanity by the prospective game developers as they relate to their experiences, which shape their present and future work and perception of the world and the people within it.

The skills, abilities, and personal experiences of game developers are a limitation, as an individual can only work within their own field of experience and shine when they do things that they are good at. The interviewees were concerned with the limited experiences that they have had, both in life in general and in the world of game development.

9. ECONOMICAL BOUNDARIES

Associated with this developer centered boundary, which is mainly concerned with the individual characteristics of persons, there are also overarching economical boundaries in the developmental process. The interviewees mainly referred to time constraints in this context.

Time constraints or limitations exist in multiple ways. The objective of the game to be developed influences the development time, meaning that more elaborate games require more time investment from the developers. Depending on the approach taken by the studio or the developers, this has different consequences. If they are operating under strict time constraints, there might only be limited content which can be developed in this time. At least as long as ethical and moral standards of work are adhered to. If it is more important to develop certain content before the game's release, release times might have to be pushed back.

This indicates that the objectives of development limit the developers themselves. They have to adhere to the set schedule for the game and operate within these boundaries. According to the interviewees, these plans should only take up a fragment of the actual existing time to develop and need to be complied with, as development always takes longer than expected.

10. PLAYER CENTERED BOUNDARIES

While these previously mentioned boundaries affect the general ability of developers and players to interact with and develop games, there are also limitations for and within the players themselves. The prospective game developers identified four subcategories regarding these player-centered boundaries.

One limitation players encounter is access options, which includes the technology they can use to play video games, both hard- and software. While this boundary is mainly an issue faced before being able to play the game, other limitations are faced during game play, especially concerning other players. One of these limitations, as perceived by the game developers, is the physical distance between players, as they can be located all over the globe, even though they feel a lot closer to each other when playing a game together.¹

Another boundary is the limit of interaction, which shapes the possibilities of interaction the players have both with the in-game world, like items, the environment, and NPCs, as well as other player characters. While interacting in the real-world, humans face a near endless array of possibilities of how to interact with each other and the world around them; however, when playing a video game, only those interactions implemented by the developers can properly be used by players. This is both a technical boundary and an emotional boundary, hugging a person who is upset feels different when touching them than it does when pressing a button to have your Avatar perform the same action in a virtual world.

¹ While the interviewees also saw the possibilities of overcoming such boundaries of distance using games (see below), physical borders, especially the difference between different countries, were mentioned. The interviewees did not further elaborate on this aspect of limitations; however, one possible explanation might be that the interviews were conducted in German asking about possible "Grenzen", which can be translated both to boundaries and borders in English. Therefore, the prospective game developers might have been referring to this other meaning of the term "Grenzen". Another possible explanation would be the differences in culture between different countries and players in these countries. However, as the argument wasn't elaborated further, these are only possible explanations of the perception of distance as a boundary.

The prospective game developers also identified some limitations on what games can impart, as not every piece of knowledge can be conveyed using a video game as a medium. At the same time, video games are underestimated by educators and the public as they can be a huge aid in trying to convey information to players.

11. LIMITS OF CONTENT

Not only are the players themselves limited by certain boundaries implemented by the game developers, but these limitations also affect the content that is provided in a game. Regarding this super category, the prospective game developers identified different subcategories.

One important aspect is the spatial limits players encounter while playing video games. This includes both the players' view of the video game and the space in which they can move their avatar. The players' view includes everything of the game that they can perceive at the moment they are playing. This space includes all the assets that have been implemented by the developers to be part of the game. Behind the borders of these spaces, there is nothing.

The end of the game is another limitation identified by the prospective game developers. This means that players can only experience the amount of content intended by the game developers within the rules set by the world.

Another boundary identified by the prospective game developers are the limits of experience. According to them, some experiences cannot be taught using video games and that touching and interacting with artifacts can be more beneficial to learning than sitting in front of a (computer) screen.

Video games are also subject to ethical and moral limitations, which some prospective game developers view as something non-negotiable that should not be crossed, whether in real life or in the game context. One example is the possibility of exploring homophobic themes, which might be allowed in some countries but should not be part of video games. The ethical and moral limitations are influenced by both the developer's personal background and history, as well as external organizations tasked with youth protection.

These examples show that there are different limitations to the content in a video game. These limitations affect the players in different kinds of ways, like the choices they can make and the stories they can experience.

12. OVERCOMING BOUNDARIES

While the prospective game developers identified a variety of limitations that shape video games, they also focused on the possibilities of overcoming these boundaries. This applies both to technological and personal aspects.

On the most basic level, both players and developers can overcome the identified technological boundary, the limitations provided by the hardware they use, by upgrading their equipment. This allows developers to have an easier time during development and players to experience games more vividly (e.g., if they are able to play using higher graphics settings). Furthermore, players can use other technology to overcome boundaries of technology. For example, they utilize tools such as Discord (Discord Inc., 2015) and TeamSpeak (TeamSpeak Systems, Inc., 2001), to communicate with other players verbally or in writing even when the games they are playing are not offering their own measures to do so.

Additionally, one of the main traits of players identified by the prospective game developers is the need to overcome boundaries set by the game developers and, therefore, the game. A reason for this need to overcome is the emotional connection players form with the games they play and the emotional investment they feel. The players want to continue playing. One way to overcome these boundaries is the creation and implementation of mods, short for modifications, which work as an expansion to a game and allow the players to add additional content to the game provided by the developers. In this step, players stop being consumers of a game but can become producers, game developers who create new game content.

Furthermore, games allow different ways to overcome social limitations. For example, it is possible for players to overcome their own prejudices. Interviewees explained that people might not want to interact with others based on their looks; however, when playing, these looks become irrelevant. While other aspects of sociability, and the overcoming of

boundaries in this context, could be imagined, they did not come up during the interviews.

However, the interviewees did mention the possibility of transcending the boundaries of one's own experiential spaces. Games allow players a change of perspective, both on their own lives and the lives of others, which they otherwise would only experience from an outside perspective.

Finally, while playing a game can bring to light the physical distance between players, as mentioned before, it also allows players to meet people from all over the world in the first place. More specifically, this means that individuals can get to know people from all kinds of cultures and classes just because they play the same game, even if there are no other commonalities. This also applies to players whose personal circumstances might not allow them to live the way they want to. In these cases, video games offer the possibility of overcoming the individuals' limitations.

In summary, video games can be an answer to the different limitations people encounter in their day-to-day life. According to the prospective game developers, players are not only aware of these possibilities, but they actively try to overcome these boundaries by developing their own content. Even the act of simply playing a game can be viewed as overcoming the limitations of their own lives.

13. DISCUSSION

After presenting these different super- and sub-categories of the research, it becomes clear that the freedom experienced by both game developers and players is strongly influenced by different boundaries. At the same time, it can be seen that only a few parts of the students' answers coincide with the expected points: for example, aspects of technology were named as limitations by only one person, and the areas of ethics and morality, as well as happiness, received no attention at all. Across the four respondents, however, similar ideas of boundaries emerged, within which the respondents placed different emphasis based on their own personal backgrounds and experiences. These results match the findings of Berger and Ziegler (2021) that students have similar convictions, even if they come from different backgrounds and experiences. However, because of the small

sample size of the presented research, not too much weight should be placed on these quantitative insights, as they are in no way representative of the actual population of students who want to work in game development. Still, the insights gained by both the qualitative and quantitative analyses can be viewed as a first step into understanding the images of humanity of the students and how they might relate to the expectations formulated based on theoretical research.

As stated at the beginning of the paper, the research presented here was part of a bigger project concerned with the overall image of humanity of game developers. Boundaries, and the perception of them, are a key aspect of these images of humanity, as they are used not only to differentiate between different humans but also to separate humans from things that are non-human (Wulf & Zirfas, 2014). Understanding boundaries also allows insights into the perception of freedom by the prospective game developers. Both because they act as limitations of activities and experiences, and as there is a perceived need to overcome boundaries, therefore expanding the freedom experienced by players and developers, both in life and in the context of playing.

There appear to be some similarities between the perception of boundaries by the prospective game designers interviewed in the context of this research and the theoretical basics presented earlier in this paper. As Huizinga (1951) described, play is freedom and therefore might include an aspect of pretending, stepping out of everyday lives into a temporary otherness. And the interviewees perceive these aspects of play as well, as a possibility to experience lives outside the players' own past, present, or possible future, and to interact with people who otherwise might not be a part of their lives.

Regarding assumptions of technology, the results found in the research partially match the findings of Kleinn et al. (2013). As the interviewees also spoke about the issues of portraying humanity and experiences through technology and the incapability of portraying "reality" through technology. Additionally, the prospective game developers also identified the possibilities of achieving goals through different measures, just as the students interviewed by Kleinn et al. (2013).

Overall, it appears that the prospective video game developers establish a differentiation between reality and virtuality and perceive them on different levels. On the one hand, there are interactions, both interpersonal and between people and their environment, that can only be depicted to a limited extent within video games. On the other hand, they distinguish between the relationships that players can enter into. Again, these are primarily the aspects of interaction that, within the context of a game acquaintance, cannot be performed in the same way as relationships that take place outside virtual worlds. However, they also perceive the possibility of entering into new and different kinds of relationships through playing video games, as it becomes possible to interact with people who otherwise would not be a part of their regular social circle, be it due to physical distance or personal prejudices.

While the prospective game developers did differentiate between some aspects, their answers were often rather surface level. For example, they did not explain how different kinds of video game development might be affected by the intended platforms or devices, or how it might be easier to upgrade a PC than a console. They also showed different perceptions of boundaries, by viewing physical distance both as a limitation (even though it wasn't explained what exactly was meant by that) and as a possibility to be overcome by video games. This lack of contemplation is quite likely based on the form and approach of the interviews, as they were aimed at extracting an entire image of humanity of the interviewees rather than focusing on the topic of boundaries, which they perceive in the context of video games and video game development.

However, these first results can be used in future research, both to deepen the understanding of what these initially identified boundaries might imply for game development and the playing of games, and to verify whether they are shared sentiments by other (prospective) game developers.

14. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the perceptions of boundaries as well as the possibilities of overcoming them by prospective game developers were investigated. For this purpose, four interviews were conducted with students from different disciplines who have some experience with the field of video

game development whose goal is to work in the video game industry in the future or who are already doing so. This research allows insights into the actual humans who shape video games, rather than only seeing them as a part of the industry.

Boundaries were chosen as a topic of interest as they are part of any human's image of humanity and play a vital role in defining the freedoms game developers and players encounter while interacting with games. Images of humanity, on the other hand, shape the individual's interaction with the world; therefore, how game developers perceive the world influences the choices they make in the developmental process, and thus also the games themselves and the experiences provided to the players. In consequence, these video games might influence the image of humanity possessed by the players.

A review of the current state of research shows that the question of the nature of human beings has played an important role for mankind for many hundreds of years and has been considered from different perspectives. In the field of software and explicitly video game development, however, little research exists on the image of humanity held by those working in these fields, even though researching it might give relevant insights into the developmental processes and the influences of games on their players. It is apparent, however, that the groups of people who were interviewed have a similar view of humanity within their fields, even if their individual experiences differ. However, just as O'Donnell (2014) stated in their research, this contribution to research on game developers also suffers from a very small sample size and the very specific access to the field. Therefore, generalizations should only be made sparingly, and all results presented must be interpreted against the background of their emergence.

Even though there is little research on the images of humanity of video game developers, video game development is still studied from other perspectives and with other epistemic interests. It is apparent that the field has received increasing attention in recent years, but that the people involved in development often play only a secondary role.

The present findings offer a way to fill these research gaps by revealing a first approach to understanding the image of

humanity among video game developers, specifically in terms of boundaries. In the analysis of the interviews, six central categories emerged: technological limitations that arise, for example, from the hardware and software used and required; developer centered boundaries, which influence the development process; economical boundaries of the development process; limitations that players face and that arise from their existence; the limitations of the game content, and also the possibility of overcoming limitations. However, based on the nature of the initial research, these are only the base categories, which were often not further elaborated on by the interviewees. Therefore, it would be interesting to confront other (prospective) video game developers with the findings of this initial research, both to verify its validity and to gain deeper insights into the issues that were brought up.

Ultimately, more research is needed to verify these initial findings with a greater amount of data. Furthermore, the results presented here are only a sample of the original research - more focused research at this point could provide deeper insights and understanding of how video game developers view people.

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File #3



Title: Designing Game-based Moral Courage

Subtitle: -

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We describe an approach to designing games that convey the principles and actions related to moral courage. We show that these games can be categorized as persuasive social impact games because they aim to trigger a specific behavioral change, namely acting morally courageous to become an active bystander ready to intervene when necessary. We base our design strategies on findings from the literature that identify relatedness and autonomy as important aspects of moral courage. Together with a list of factors that enable morally courageous behavior, we develop a narrative used in three distinct game designs for a hybrid card game, a virtual reality experience, and an urban game. We give a list of essential considerations that should be considered for the narrative as well as aspects of the VR experience. We also describe the games, report findings from user tests and discuss the paradox of agency that can occur with such games. Our results indicate that these games were effective as people could expand their repertoire of actions and initiate a process of reflection.

Keywords: Moral Courage, Game Design, Agency, Virtual Reality

1. INTRODUCTION

Moral courage, also known as civil courage or *Zivilcourage* in German, is the willingness to stand up for what is right, even when it is difficult or unpopular. It is an act of

bravery that involves confronting an injustice, violating ethical principles, or defending someone's rights, even when it may come with a personal risk or cost (Osswald et al., 2010, 2012). Such acts can include advocating democratic values and human rights, setting actions against climate change, or standing up to discrimination of fellow citizens. The importance of moral courage in everyday situations is ever-growing. Meyer (2005) lists several scenarios in daily life situations: violence and mobbing in schools, xenophobia, racism, or a general lack of willingness to help others in dire situations. He also alludes to a trend that such situations tend to increase rather than the opposite.

Therefore, it is safe to say that moral courage is an essential trait that is needed in today's society. It is the foundation of many social and political movements that have shaped the world, such as the civil rights movement, LGBTIQ+ movements, and Fridays for Future. Without moral courage, injustices would go unchallenged, people would remain oppressed, or change might not happen at all.

For the individual, moral courage situations are typically much more mundane. Imagine being in a crowded train station and witnessing a group of young people harassing an older man. They are verbally abusing him, pushing him around, and threatening him with violence. Most people in the station seem to ignore the situation or try to walk past it as quickly as possible. But everyone in this situation has a choice: do you ignore it and walk away, or do you step in and do something about it?

In this scenario, showing moral courage might mean standing up to the bullies, defending the older man, or trying to defuse the situation through a diversion or unexpected action. Yet, all of this may involve risking personal harm or facing social ostracism. Overcoming the feeling that "these people might have a legit argument which I should not be part of" is something that needs to be learned and trained. So are successful strategies that can work in this kind of situation.

Workshops held by social or non-governmental organizations are a popular method of teaching people moral courage, values, and strategies. These workshops are often held in schools to raise awareness for this topic as early as possible. They make young people active bystanders (Staub, 2015) and give them the means to deal with these situations

that are likely to occur in their daily environment, e.g., in school or when going out (Lazar, 2014; Meyer, 2005). These workshops often feature the element of role-playing so that people can experience different sides of a moral courage situation in a safe environment.

Computer games can be another method of providing just that: the ability to take someone else's perspective while being in a safe but believable space and experiencing the consequences of one's actions without the fear of being responsible for someone else's suffering and the possibility to do this repeatedly.

Therefore, this paper focuses on designing three different moral courage games developed over two and a half years. We report our findings concerning the development and evaluation of these games and discuss how agency—the freedom of choice within a game or other interactive format (Murray, 1998)—is both important and dangerous. We first discuss the relevant state of the art of moral courage in games before describing our game prototypes and the paradox of agency that emerges. The paper closes with a discussion.

2. MORAL COURAGE IN GAMES

The topic of moral courage has been explored in different ways, both in commercial games and research. Games such as *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), and *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios, 2014) might immediately come to mind because they challenge players with difficult moral decisions. In *Papers, Please*, the player takes the role of a border inspector who decides which people are allowed to enter a fictional country and which get rejected. This affects not only other people but also the well-being of the player and his fictional family. These ethical dilemmas appeal to the player's inner moral compass regarding decision-making (Sicart, 2019). In *This War of Mine*, players must decide about survival in times of war and between their survival and helping others, where altruism can be costly for players (de Smale et al., 2019). These two games exhibit typical traits of morally courageous actions, namely standing up for principles and helping others even at high personal costs. However, the situations these games depict (responsibilities of border control and war) are not something most people would experience daily. When raising awareness or even training

moral courage, these scenarios do not reflect the everyday situations of most people.

The field of *immersive journalism* tries to address this issue precisely. Using extended reality technologies (e.g., virtual reality), a story is told to the audience that depicts a real scenario, thus the aspect of journalism. The players can experience the situation firsthand while in the middle of the action (de la Peña et al., 2010). Interaction is usually minimal, though. Players can freely look around in the scene but are typically moved to specific locations based on unfolding events. One of the most influential works in immersive journalism is *Hunger in L.A.* (Emblematic Group, 2012); players experience an incident at a food bank in Los Angeles where a diabetic man waiting in line collapses. While there is virtually no way to interact in this experience, other examples include more interactive elements. *Use of Force* (Emblematic Group, 2014) allows players not only to view excessive police violence against a Mexican national but also to use their virtual cell phones to capture footage of the scene. This enables the creators of such experiences to gather information on how people react in such a situation: do they stand by, or do they take a more active role? In this case, this means documenting the injustice. Nevertheless, since the narrative of these experiences adheres to an actual sequence of events (often conveyed by on-site audio or footage), the restricted interaction or agency severely limits the use of immersive journalism experiences for moral courage awareness. While they can create empathy (Sánchez Laws, 2020) and depict scenarios that could happen to everybody, they do not allow players to make choices and follow their moral compass.

This calls for a middle-ground approach that gives players the agency to act based on their own choices but remains in realistic scenarios. *Social impact games* strive to do that. They are a particular form of serious games and can be classified as persuasive games (Bogost, 2010), a specialized form of persuasive technology (Fogg, 2003). They intend to sensitize players to specific topics, i.e., to increase empathy and awareness and encourage activism (Tillmanns, 2014) and prosocial behavior (Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010). Players should help others, reflect on moral and ethical issues, and learn about ethical and social problems (Ruggiero, 2013). How these games' influence (impact) is understood and evidenced varies widely (Stokes et al., 2015). Barrett & Leddy (2008) define five dimensions that

they see as essential: a compelling story, awareness, engagement, creating a movement, and social change. Ruggiero (2015) demonstrates in a study with 5,000 students that playing a social impact game can improve the attitude of players towards homeless people. Papoutsi & Drigas (2016) highlight the value of these games for teaching empathy. In a meta-analysis, Kolek et al. (2022) show that narrative games have the power to change players' attitudes toward a topic. A comparative review of 21 years of games for behavior change by Ndulue & Orji (2022) reports that over 75% of the analyzed studies showed a positive outcome in terms of the desired behavior change.

Considering these aspects, we classify moral courage games as a form of social impact game: they are set in a real-world scenario; they want to induce social change by informing (if not persuading) players about acting morally courageous; and they want to create activism in the sense of creating active bystanders that are willing to engage when necessary, even if it comes at high personal costs (Staub, 2015).

3. DESIGNING FOR MORAL COURAGE

Based upon the conclusions from the previous section, the design of games for moral courage shares many aspects with that of social impact games or persuasive games in general. Specific approaches for persuasive games can be found in (Siriaraya et al., 2018; Visch et al., 2013), but it is common for games to include persuasive strategies directly. The Persuasive Systems Design (PSD) Framework by Oinas-Kukkonen & Harjumaa (2009) is a well-established source.

Yet, persuasive strategies for moral courage have rarely been considered by research so far. Himmelsbach et al. (2023) conducted a study identifying relevant strategies for moral courage in games. They concluded that persuasion for moral courage has different requirements than classic social impact games. They identified *autonomy* and *relatedness* as two core concepts that should be implied throughout the design process, from creating the narrative to designing the central game mechanics. Autonomy in a game context refers to players' agency regarding activities and choices. Relatedness in a game involves interaction with fictional characters or other human players and emerging social belonging.

Röderer et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis and identified a list of dispositional and situational factors that affect moral courage. Among these are social responsibility, risk-taking, attention & emergency awareness, intervention skills, or empathy, all with high to medium effect sizes.

We decided to use the list of factors from (Röderer et al., 2019) as a basis for game designs of three different moral courage games. Additionally, we followed the findings of (Himmelsbach et al., 2023). The following section will describe the design and implementation process of these games.

4. CREATING THREE GAMES FOR MORAL COURAGE

We created three games that foster morally courageous behavior during a two-and-a-half-year-long research project. The idea was to develop concepts with different levels of abstraction and immersion. The first game was a hybrid card game, played with classic playing cards but supported by a mobile app that advances the narrative and keeps track of the score. The second game was a virtual reality experience that allows playing through a moral courage scenario in a virtual but plausible environment. The third was an urban game played in a city's streets, involving possible interactions with real people. We will first describe the card and urban games since they exhibit similar mechanics in how the story is told: an external entity explains the scenario and requires players to act. The VR simulation, on the other hand, puts the players into the situation without any explanation and thus enables the most pristine reaction to it.

The first step consisted of developing a narrative for the games that fulfilled the concepts of autonomy and relatedness and is built upon factors from (Röderer et al., 2019).

5. DEVELOPING THE NARRATIVE

Before developing the narrative that includes the individuals and the setting, we selected relevant factors from Röderer et al. (2019) that would suit a game design.

We sorted the factors according to their effect size and category and initiated an expert discussion to determine relevant factors. We then teamed up game designers with a human rights NGO expert who had held moral courage workshops for several years. This gave us insights into typical scenarios that were role-played in these workshops. Together with the assessment of the game designers, we could reduce the list of factors to eight that were necessary for the narrative to exhibit the required elements but also implementable in the games. Table 1 shows the selected factors and their intended use in the game designs.

The narrative was then developed by experts from our project consortium, among them game designers and members of the previously mentioned NGO with experience in real moral courage scenarios. Such scenarios typically implement an imbalance between an affected person (victim) and a perpetrator (Staub, 2015).

Area	Factor	r	Role
Attitude & Values	Social responsibility	0.7	Appeal to the social responsibility of the players.
Competence	Attention & awareness	0.4	Support players in becoming aware of a situation that requires moral courage.
	Intervention skills	0.3	Teach players different ways of intervening.
	Empathy	0.3	Invoke empathy through the situation.
	Emotion	Sense of responsibility	0.3
Personality	Risk-taking	0.5	Convey that a moral courage situation involves taking risks.
Situation	Victim behavior	0.4	Display the affected person (victim) properly.
	Bystander	0.3	Introduce bystanders or external respectabilities.

Table 1: The selected moral courage factors and their area and effect sizes taken from (Röderer et al., 2019). The role describes the intended use of a factor in the game design.

Bystanders can but must not necessarily be a part of such an incident. The player then joins this constellation and has multiple ways to resolve the situation (or not). This is the most crucial part of the game, as it strives to convey actions and the core values of moral courage.

We considered multiple scenarios: racism against a person of color, domestic violence, sexual harassment, aggression toward a homeless person, and mobbing. All of these seem very important and plausible, but there are some things to consider before choosing.

Applicability to various people: Is this scenario applicable to a broad target audience? Will young people understand it in a major city the same way as in rural areas?

Potential for violence as the first or only solution: How much violence is potentially involved when solving the scenario? Players should not choose violence as their first attempt or at all but rather find different ways of intervening. Moral courage strives to create a non-violent world (Staub, 2015). Therefore violence can never be an optimal solution.

A case for criminal prosecution: Does the scenario contain elements that would trigger criminal prosecution? If yes, the only responsible solution is to call the police. While this is undoubtedly correct behavior, it does not fulfill the definition of morally courageous behavior (cf. Osswald et al., 2010).

Stereotypes: Certain stereotypes can help the players to develop a greater relatedness to the scenario. If the number of employed stereotypes is too high, the scene might be perceived as ridiculous and not taken seriously.

Gender: Women and men show different behavior in relevant situations, e.g., concerning courage (Pury et al., 2007) or heroism (Becker & Eagly, 2004). Choosing the identities of the involved persons is, therefore, crucial.

These considerations led us to the development of the following scenario:

A woman is selling newspapers from a social initiative for homeless people in front of a supermarket. She is being harassed by a man wanting to get a shopping cart. He claims she is blocking his way, but he's ultimately only seeking trouble. A dispute can be perceived when the man accuses the woman of standing in his way; he tells her to get a proper job, that her newspapers are worthless, and that she should leave immediately. The player then enters the

scene and has multiple means to solve this dilemma: talking to the newspaper seller, appeasing or provoking the perpetrator, calling in an external authority, or doing nothing.

This scenario fulfills the abovementioned criteria: People selling newspapers as part of a social initiative can be found in cities and the countryside. Aggression towards these people happens frequently. The risk for violent behaviour is low, and calling the police is not immediately necessary since no crime has been committed. However, calling the store manager is a viable option to resort to authorities if necessary.

To confirm our assumptions and refine them where necessary, we interviewed a person who has been selling such newspapers in Linz, Austria, for several years. She confirmed that aggression happens because people experience a guilty conscience or are on edge when approached by newspaper sellers in front of a supermarket. She also reported that she had never personally faced violence.

The eight selected factors from (Röderer et al., 2019) are also reflected in this scenario. It displays an injustice and thus appeals to the *sense of responsibility* and the *social responsibility* to act. It trains *attention & emergency awareness* since it gives players an idea of how such a situation can go down. The *victim behavior* creates *empathy* and leads to acting. The aggressive perpetrator communicates the necessity of *risk-taking*, but the problem can ultimately be solved through *intervention skills* or the help of *bystanders*.

With a defined narrative in place, the development of the prototypes began.

6. THE HYBRID CARD GAME

The hybrid card game combines the physical features of a traditional card game with digital elements known from computer games. It consists of 58 playing cards and a mobile app. First, a game is started in the mobile app. The players then select the number of players and enter their names. The app then selects the scenario in which a woman selling newspapers in front of a supermarket is being harassed. A first moral courage situation is presented via video or

animation and players must try to resolve the problem by intervening through morally courageous actions. This is done by playing cards that contain these actions. A score is displayed in the app to show the success of the action. This score can change through the played cards (and by random events). If it reaches the bottom, the players have lost. They have won if the upper end of the score is reached. Courage points are needed to play cards; each player has six at the beginning of the game. The required courage points are shown on each card. If a player has too few courage points for a card, this card cannot be played. Through cards or random events, the courage points of a player can change up and down during the game. The current courage points of each player are displayed in the app.

The players can discuss strategies and possible actions. Since they act as a group, they will win or lose together. The app informs players of the consequences whenever a card is played, enabling them to devise strategies and learn. Different tactics can be tested, and outcomes can be experienced by playing multiple times. The app can also be used to teach the players about moral courage. Before the game or during the game (random events), questions/tasks about moral courage are asked (e.g., “please save the emergency number 112 in your cell phone now”). These tasks prepare the players for possible real-world encounters. Figure 1 shows three people playing the hybrid card game with the phone running the app. The icons on the cards display the change of courage points.



Figure 1: The hybrid card game consists of actual playing cards combined with an app on a mobile phone. The app conveys the scenario and keeps track of the players' progress.

6.1. Implementation & User Feedback

We printed the playing cards for our working version of the card game and created an Android companion app using the Unity game engine. The game supports between two and eight players, ranging from 15 to 30 minutes. We then conducted user tests to gather qualitative feedback for the game.

Positively mentioned aspects were that the game enables a discussion about moral courage. Through playing in groups, a collective reflection is possible. While playing, the atmosphere was rated positively, even humorous, and players found quickly into the game. The app worked well and caused no problems.

Negative aspects were that the overall goal was not always clear and that the number of players did affect the chance of winning. The playtesters asked for a more diverse repertoire of morally courageous actions so different paths could be examined.

7. THE URBAN GAME

Urban Games combine street games, mobile technologies, and urban culture to achieve a game experience. Games can range from fully analog games (with maps and plans) to fully digital games (mobile or computer games) or a mix of both elements (AR apps for city maps and game cards). The challenge in urban game development lies in successfully combining game design, technology development, and urban culture and content.

For our moral courage urban game, we developed an atmospheric single-player audio game in which players interact and progress with their environment and others around them by making decisions through a telephone dialog system. In addition to this system, the player receives supplementary cards. These cards contain meta-information, including narrative-style game instructions, the phone number needed to start the game, and evocative illustrations that stimulate the player's curiosity and introduce them to the fiction. They serve as a transition into the game world. The player calls a specific phone number to start the game. An automated phone call handles everything else. The game takes the players to certain public places where a (thematically localized) fictitious discrimination scenario with

intervention possibilities is presented. Players are asked to choose an intervention, which is then brought back into the public space as a minor action (e.g., addressing victims in the scenario will address people in the public space). Figure 2 shows a player listening to the dialog on the phone and waiting for the next instructions.



Figure 2: A player listening to the audio dialogs of the urban game.

The approach is comparable to the hybrid card game where an external entity (there is an app, here a voice on the telephone) drives the narration and confronts the player with a situation that requires a morally courageous intervention. Also similar to the card game is an empathy meter that informs the player of their current standing. If it reaches a certain level, the game is finished successfully; should the level of empathy be too low, the game is lost. The game ends with a reflection phase where the selected actions are reviewed and interpreted.

7.1. Implementation & User Feedback

The phone system is implemented using the Plivo phone API and a node.js web server with a Mongo database running the game logic. When a player makes a call, the phone API receives it and queries the web server for the call information. In return, the web server checks the database for the phone number and, depending on the player's progress, starts the game at the right place and plays the

corresponding audio file. After that, two types of interactions are possible:

1. Making decisions by pressing numbers (press 1 to go left or 2 to go right). Usually, this is a number between 1 and 3.
2. Entering numbers based on the questions (enter the number of people you see in the cafe). These numbers can be between 0 and ∞; they are stored in the database along with the player's ID to retrieve different answer choices later.

The game logic is implemented by a state automaton stored as an XML file, which moves the players through the game states based on their interactions and plays corresponding audio files. Decision interactions thus trigger state changes.

The user tests revealed that the instructions were clear, and the story was delivered compellingly. Due to the turn-based interaction (the story only progresses after interacting with the phone), there is time to think and reflect.

Negative feedback included the story being too long and the robotic computer voice being hard to understand. Players wished for an undo function to revert a specific action and asked for more possible actions.

8. THE VIRTUAL REALITY EXPERIENCE

The virtual reality (VR) experience is a single-player experience of the newspaper scenario. The player begins standing in front of the supermarket, clarifying what they need to buy on their mobile phone. The phone can be used later in the experience; it is attached to the player's hand, which is tracked by the VR headset. No controllers are necessary. Continuing in the scenario, a friend approaches who involves the player in a simple dialog to train the means of interaction and select dialog options. After this, the scene starts as the player perceives a loud discussion in front of the supermarket.

As the player approaches two people quarreling—the woman selling newspapers and the man attacking her verbally—they are presented with a series of choices on how to deal with the situation. They can listen to what is happening and do nothing. The player can come closer and film the scene with their mobile phone or approach the two people and initiate a discussion, either with the man or the woman. Talking with the woman removes the man from the conversation, thus taking his momentum. When talking to the man, calming strategies or more confronting words can be chosen. Before the situation escalates, the store manager or even the police can be called. Alternatively, players can ignore the problem entirely and go shopping without intervening.



Figure 3: In the VR experience, the player arrives at a dispute between a newspaper seller (left) and an aggressor (right). The game presents three different options for acting, which are selected through gaze (by looking at the respective eye symbol for a specific time).

The experience has a total of six different endings; each is followed by a monologue explaining the consequences of the chosen path so that the actions can be contextualized. Figure 3 shows a scene from the experience where the player has three choices on how to act (go towards the people, listen but look on your phone, listen and watch).

8.1. Implementing in VR: Design Decisions

When it comes to implementation in a medium such as virtual reality, many more details need to be considered than, for example, with the card game. We compiled a list of design decisions that need to be made before the game can be

implemented. When neglected, they severely affect the game's purpose to enable morally courageous behavior.

Who am I in the game, and who's wearing the headset? Representing the player character is usually unnecessary in virtual reality as a first-person perspective is employed. Since the narrative relies heavily on audio dialogs, these must be recorded. Unless voice lines for multiple genders are recorded, players might have a reduced plausibility illusion (Slater, 2009) and might not react with a natural response.

How do the affected person and the perpetrator look, sound, and behave? Again, according to Slater (2009), the depicted scenario must feel as if it is actually occurring. Therefore, the two main characters' depictions must be realistic and plausible for players to believe what is happening.

How does the player interact with the world? What is the primary interaction paradigm for the experience? Are controllers necessary, or can more natural hand gestures be used for interaction? Is gaze an option?

How do dialogs work? Determining the complexity of the provided dialogues is essential. How many options does the player have for answering? Is not answering also possible?

8.2. Implementation & User Tests

The VR experience was developed for Meta Quest 2 using the Unity game engine. It uses the Quest's hand-tracking features and employs gaze to select options in the game. Most 3D assets (especially the characters and environment) were custom creations. Only a few assets (e.g., cars in front of the supermarket) were bought as asset packages. All voice lines were self-recorded together with the facial expressions of the voice actors so that the proper facial animations could be created.

Positive feedback from the user tests included intuitive handling; hand gestures and gaze interaction worked well overall. The scenario was perceived as real, and people could identify with it.

Negative aspects were the limited dialog and options for action. Players did again ask for more ways to intervene. The characters' movements and the environment were perceived as too static. The playtime could have been longer in the eyes of some testers.

Before discussing the design decisions and the received feedback of the game, we want to discuss the topic of agency first since it was involved in the input of all three games.

9. THE PARADOX OF AGENCY

Although the interactive nature of games offers significant potential for persuasive storytelling (Bogost, 2010), it also presents a particular challenge: how can game designers lead the player to make decisions that follow the intended story structure without appearing to control them? Referred to as narrative paradox (Aylett, 2000), this issue pervades virtually any story-driven game and requires careful narrative development and balancing. In general, a high level of agency provides a great deal of freedom (e.g., in open-world games), but this can easily distract players from central elements of a game, inhibiting progression and potentially even frustrating them. If, however, the level of agency is low, players tend to quickly notice patterns in the story structure and attempt to make more strategic decisions regarding the perceived branches of the story tree rather than truly experiencing the narrative.

Crawford (2012) proposes a few general approaches to handling this problem, including such techniques as manipulating the environment or employing non-player characters to more subtly establish a need for certain decisions. Another frequently employed technique is to utilize a form of abstraction with the available actions so that players cannot always predict what the outcome will be. Such an action could be the expression of an emotion that is then interpreted through an in-game dialogue or monologue. In this way, players can react more naturally and with a more plausible sense of uncertainty (like in real-life situations) without requiring an immense amount of complexity.

In the case of social impact games, player agency can be particularly tricky as the goal is to foster reflection and

motivate actual behavioral change, not just forward the narrative. The inherent uncertainty of a moral courage situation needs to be preserved for it to be effective. Players also need to feel that they are voluntarily making choices and that these decisions have actual consequences so that reflection is truly justified. In our approach to the VR experience, phrasing played a very important role in both setting the scene and disguising dialogue choices. Actions were available as general intentions (e.g., “just listen” or “try to calm down the man”), which were then contextualized through the dialogue. Each of the potential endings also featured an inner monologue that served to initiate the reflection process without judging the player’s choices.

10. DISCUSSION

Our user test results showed that the games and the scenario were perceived as realistic, fairly close to everyday life, and immersive. In the case of the board game, 46.7% of all playtesters compared actions in the game to scenes from reality without being asked. Playtesters of the VR experience reported that it was “*really something where you could now put yourself in it because you could also imagine that this happens to yourself.*” Players of the urban game reported that the story was well told and well imaginable. This fortifies our initial assumption that relatedness is an important concept that needs to be carefully employed in game design.

One player of the VR experience explicitly noted that it is “great that you could play through such situations without having to be afraid [because I often had that in everyday life].” This supports the claim that games can convey potentially uncomfortable topics in a safe space, thus making them more tolerable.

The negative feedback from all three games showed that the players felt that the actions they could actively choose were too limited. This refers to agency and autonomy and shows us that players expect this, especially when taking action is the game’s central theme. Yet, this agency has to be carefully planned. We recommend focusing on the game’s essential features—in this case, the options for taking

action. Our limited set of actions prevented players from drifting off into meaningless side tasks and kept them focused on the goal of our games. If players can perform actions that are not necessary or that do not make sense in the course of moral courage, these actions will, at some point, be chosen by the players. This will break the game and defy its purpose.

While the feedback from user tests was essential to understand if and how these games would work, their use in practice will still be different. All three games are meant to be used in an educational workshop context, meaning that some form of moral courage training accompanies them. Therefore, players receive a set of possible actions beforehand and can apply them successfully in the game context. Of course, deliberately failing and experiencing the consequences can also be a valuable experience. The benefit of a workshop setting is the possibility of reflecting upon the perceived experiences with a professional trainer. Discussing the chosen actions and reflecting upon their applicability in a real-life scenario is a meaningful and vital supplement to the game prototypes. We hope this insight into developing games for moral courage will encourage others to follow and employ this medium to foster morally courageous behavior.

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File #4



Title: For Play's Sake

Subtitle: What makes us play and how we can fight it

Author(s): Harald Koberg

It's not play if you have to. That is one part of a definition of play that most of us might be able to agree on. Foucault probably wouldn't. Because it is power structures that make us decide. What we want can never be fully separated from what we ought to want. And games offer counter-places and counter-publics to live up to those needs.

To play, at the same time, is to be rebellious. It's about choosing new sets of rules and testing them. But it's happening in the in-betweens of the analogue and the digital, reality and fiction, the actual and the virtual, earnestness and fun. And it's happening on the turfs of huge corporations. So how rebellious can it be?

Based on my qualitative research among players and their social surroundings, I understand play as a source of experiences of empowerment. I analyse them against the background of social realities that are increasingly coined by a struggle for individual relevance and that invoke in many people a feeling of not being able to reach what they are owed or supposed to achieve.

In this paper it is being asked, how real this empowerment can be and how it might impact social dynamics. Are games the padded cells of a system that lets us romp and rage for a while, until we are ready to fit in again, into the roles it has in store for us? Or might they also encourage us to rethink the system itself?

Keywords: individualism, heterotopia, flow, neoliberalism, epic theatre

1. DELVING IN

There is no such thing as objective knowledge. Especially not, when it comes to analyzing the impact of digital play on social realities. This paper does not intend to uncover a truth but to offer perspectives that might add to a deeper understanding of said impact.

The following pages are based on several years of qualitative research in the form of interviews and participant observations embedded in my everyday work life as a media pedagogue and cultural mediator, trying to support all sorts of people in their strive to better understand gaming culture, its social relevance and the pedagogical implications that arise from its continuously growing popularity. One major aim of this qualitative research is to tackle the question of what players are hoping to gain through playing digital games. My work traces the needs and longings that motivate people to play and goes on to asking, why the satisfaction of these needs and longings has been moved into the ontologically challenging mists that are digital game worlds.

With this specific paper I present a train of thought drawing from a broad range of theories and observations that links the urge to play digital games to what Marc Augé describes as an excess of individuality which he analyses to be one of the fundamental symptoms of present-day societies in the global north.¹ I try to position the longing for individual relevance as a key affect of today's network capitalism and analyze the displacement of its satisfaction into the volatile realness of digital realms as a consequence of said capitalism's breaking of promises. Finally, I discuss the potential of digital play to spark subversive thinking and to be a source of change.

2. LONGING FOR RELEVANCE

If there is one desire that connects the motivations of the players I talked to, it's the desire for agency. A finding,

¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places*, 36.

that should not come as too much of a surprise for people who have theoretically worked on games and play, since agency has repeatedly been identified as the unique distinguishing feature of games as entertainment media.² Teenagers, to give one example, play digital games as a means to access public spheres and to appropriate spaces for their own cultural forms of expression.³ The games themselves are quite often not the primary reason for them to play. When in 2019 the world of »Fortnite«⁴ was sucked into a black hole and the game disappeared for one and a half days,⁵ a young man visited my workplace at Ludovico. We chatted about streaming games for a few minutes, before he suddenly mentioned »Fortnite« and said: "I hope the game just never returns. I hope we can go on to playing something else. I'm only there because everybody else is."

Minors use digital games to get away from the supervision and the control of their parents and teachers. They do so in reaction to a social reality that increasingly limits their freedom of movement and of deciding how to use their free time. Their world, as Benedikt Sturzenhecker points out, is being paved with warning signs and rules of behavior before they get a chance to make their own experiences with it.⁶ And the *ludisphere*⁷, as Celia Pearce describes "the larger framework of all networked play spaces on the Internet" provides them with opportunities to make up for that; to feel relevant and powerful.

Many heterosexual men, on the other hand, utilize digital games and the communication spaces that surround them, for a specific form of doing gender, trying to live up to an idealized image of masculinity that has seen a decline of acceptance due to feminist criticism in many other spaces of their everyday lives.⁸ This gender performance is not so much focused on the games' narratives and heroes but much

² E.g.: H. J. Backe, *Entfremdete Pixelhelden*, 41 or Kristen Lucas, and John L. Sherry, *Sex Differences in Video Game Play*, 508 or Katharina Mittlböck, *Persönlichkeitsentwicklung und Digitales Rollenspiel*, 108.

³ Harald Koberg, *Freies Spiel*, 125.

⁴ *Fortnite*, Epic, 2017.

⁵ see Kingzi Kingz, *Fortnite: "The End Live Event FULL REPLAY! Chapter 1"*, YouTube 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0x-Fks8boM>

⁶ Benedikt Sturzenhecker, *Prävention ist keine Jugendarbeit*, 15.

⁷ Celia Pearce, and Artemesia, *Communities of Play*, 137.

⁸ Koberg, *Freies Spiel*, 133.

more on the acceptance of dominant and aggressive behavior in competitive gaming contexts and on the culture of expertise that has evolved around the medium of digital games.

Digital games emphasize the relevance of the playing individual. They place us, the playing subjects, in the center of the experience. And by doing so they stay true to a key aspect of modernity that has increased in significance during the past decades, after modernity was repeatedly described to be over. The historical period and intellectual movement subsumed as the Enlightenment is closely connected to a new focus on the human ability of rational thought and its supposed power to take possession of the world. By heightening humanist values, it brought about a new understanding of what it means to be human by separating humanity from nature and highlighting the uniqueness of the individual.

It seems reasonable to argue, that it was this focus on the individual, that provided the soil for capitalism and, even more obviously, for present-day technology-driven neoliberalism that has aptly been called *surveillance capitalism*⁹ or *cognitive capitalism*¹⁰. As I argue in this paper, it is the promise of individuality that keeps us running in the hamster wheel. And it's the illusion of individuality that is being sold to us through digital games and many other products of rapid technological progress.

3. INTERCHANGEABLE UNIQUENESS

In his theory of non-places, Marc Augé describes an excess of individuality as one of the three defining phenomena of our present which he characterizes as *supermodernity*.¹¹ Modernity, he argues, has not been replaced or surpassed. It has been accelerated to an extent which makes it impossible for us to grasp in its full extent. "The world of supermodernity does not exactly match the one in which we believe we live, for we live in a world that we have not yet learned to look at."¹² This acceleration has led to three forms of excess that are closely related to each other: an

⁹ Shoshana Zuboff, *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*.

¹⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 97.

¹¹ Augé, *Non-Places*, 36.

¹² *Ibid.* 35.

excess of space, an excess of time and an excess of individuality.

Summed up very briefly, Augé depicts a social reality in which advanced means of communication and travel have enabled us to physically travel around the world in a few hours and to virtually be present at the other side of the planet within seconds. We can watch the whole world from the privacy of our living rooms and spend our vacations as well as attend conferences wherever we please (and can afford). This situation - the excesses of time and space - provides us with an overwhelming number of possibilities of personal unfolding. Given the capital needed, we can be pretty much everything everywhere. Thinking about, as well as working on, the individuals we want to become is taking up increasing parts of our everyday lives. Nothing ever seems to suffice. Nothing seems final. And many of us struggle with the expectation of constant self-improvement parallel to the pursuit of a very demanding understanding of happiness.

Social Media and other forms of networked communication offer tools to organize and consume the surplus of information while, at the same time, adding to the overflow and, even more, to the pressure on the individual to be presentable, admirable and inspiring. First and foremost, however, they greatly reinforce the humanist argument, that the world is there for us, and it is on us to make the best out of it. Present-day networked societies are not just there for us, but, as they don't stop to stress, they are there for you. A very specific form of "you" that Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes in capital letters. One that is constantly at risk to cease to exist if it stops to develop, to update, to improve. If YOU don't update your status, if YOU don't use that new messenger, if YOU have nothing new to present, YOU will not be seen. And, most importantly for the argument of this paper, a "YOU" that, in Chun's own words, "is relentless and would seem to mask the fact, that YOU are 'they'"¹³

Their catering to our desire to be more relevant as individuals is one of Social Media's central selling points. The technological truth, though, is, that each and every one of us is just a stack of values to the systems behind these platforms while the economic truth is, that we as individual users are primarily a source of data, harvested through our

¹³ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 46.

interactions. "YOU are a character in a drama called Big Data."¹⁴ Translated into the exemplary play world of »The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt«¹⁵ you are your individual version of Geralt of Rivia. You choose your armor, you define your play style and you experience your very own adventure, based on your decisions. Technically, however, there are but a few switches that distinguish one playthrough from another. Most of the individualization is illusion. You are actually they.

A parable for Wendy Chun's theory can be found in Spike Jonze's 2013 film "Her"¹⁶. Here the main Character Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with an Artificial Intelligence that runs all his digital systems. He does so, because the AI seems to understand him like nobody else does, knowing about all of his needs and desires. The two of them are in for a happily ever after until Theodore discovers that the same AI is having millions of similar relationships with other users, which appears obvious to the AI but breaks the illusion for him.

In a social reality that nourishes the urge for individual relevance and that directly connects success and failure to individual skills and discipline, large parts of what we consider to be 'the internet' aims to satisfy just that urge. Relevance, however, is a relative concept. If everybody is highly relevant, then nobody is. So, in order to make us feel very special, the algorithms and AIs need to conceal from us, that everybody else is special too - a goal they attempt to achieve by keeping us in the flow of engaging consumption.

4. GOING WITH THE FLOW

When Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi developed his influential concept of *flow*, he had a counter-narrative to the Marxist class consciousness in mind; something that would motivate people to contribute to a capitalist society. And he put his hopes in the empowerment of individual consciousness reaffirmed by experiences of flow.¹⁷ Flow, in the words of Celia Pearce "is a psychological state in which the individual loses

¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

¹⁵ The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, CD Project RED, 2015.

¹⁶ Her, Warner Bros, Spike Jonze, 2013.

¹⁷ Braxton Soderman, Against Flow, 32.

track of time and becomes completely absorbed in the activity at hand" and it is "achieved when the level of challenges is maintained in balance with the level of skill."¹⁸ Hence, flow is what game designers strive to facilitate for their players. At the same time, according to Braxton Soderman, "flow theory privileges the individuals over social collectives. It embraces unified, intentional agents over fragmented subjects. It privileges self-determination over the idea that human action and consciousness are shaped by external forces."¹⁹ It is a very modern thing, so to speak, emphasizing the ideals of humanism in a way that suits the neoliberal system.

Flow produces the experiences of individual relevance we so long for. It "connects people to their actions", "pushes aside worry and uncertainty", "conquers self-criticism" and "cultivates self-determination and a powerful sense of individuality, intention and agency."²⁰ And it keeps us from sticking the head out of the water to realize, that we are all going with the same flow, being treated in the same way, that we are actually like everybody else. "Flow", to quote Soderman again, "does not erase thinking, but it does inhibit thoughts about anything outside an activity while concentrating our thoughts on the activity itself."²¹ "Its enjoyable properties can cause people to overlook how capitalism mobilizes flow to extend the duration of consumption and marshals it as compensation for an alienating and anxious existence."²²

Players cope with the supermodern excess of individuality described by Augé, by delving into flow-inducing ludispheres catering to their desires to feel powerful and relevant. The neoliberal system, to view the same scene from the opposite angle, produces and sells experiences that motivate us by making us feel special while keeping us from considering the bigger picture. A picture that would dispel the invigorating sensation of individual exceptionalism. Thus, these experiences are not real in every extent of its meaning. On a basic level they are not 'real', because the characters, the weapons and the trees in the games are not 'real'. They are digital representations. Furthermore, they are not

¹⁸ Pearce, *Communities of Play*, 130.

¹⁹ Soderman, *Against Flow*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²² *Ibid.*, 212.

'real', because they need to hide the bigger picture in order for the emotional experience to work. We cannot all be exceptional. They are also not 'real', because we as social beings decide, that games are not 'real'. They are just as 'real' as we want them to be.²³

This last aspect, the fact that we as players get to choose how 'real' we want the game to be, can be helpful to stay in the flow. As Jesper Juul argues, it enables us to enjoy failure within games (It's just a game, after all.) while keeping it 'real' enough to sustain our motivation to try hard.²⁴ This regulation of 'seriousness' or 'realness' can even happen amidst the process of play. Players who win tend to relate their success in the game to character traits they own beyond it while players who loose like to underscore the fact that games are detached from reality and have no significance outside of their confines often described as the *magic circle*.²⁵ This magic circle, as Celia Pearce points out, "is really nothing more than a mutual agreement to abide by a set of social constraints."²⁶ And these constraints can be renegotiated with fellow players as well as with ourselves, if it is just us who play, enabling us to regulate the tension of play, increasing either our motivation or our tolerance for failure, ultimately upholding the balance between individual skill and enjoyable challenge that enable the state of flow.²⁷

5. EVADING IMPOTENCE

The modern ideal of human exceptionality accelerated by the capitalist creed of individual responsibility and multiplied by the supermodern excess of options for individual growth have led to widespread mental overload and feelings of insufficiency.²⁸ Videogames offer relief by providing spaces detached from the power structures of the everyday that make it a lot easier to live up to the expectations. They are what Michel Foucault describes as *heterotopias*, counter-

²³ Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters*, 16.

²⁴ Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure*, 45.

²⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18.

²⁶ Pearce, *Communities of Play*, 244.

²⁷ Soderman, *Against Flow*, 3.

²⁸ Zuboff, *Das Zeitalter des Überwachungskapitalismus*, 34.

spaces that oppose the rules of the spaces around them and offer temporal escape from their reign.²⁹

Foucault examples for heterotopias range from the funfair to the prison; both places where behavior which would elsewhere be deemed abnormal is being shifted to. In his thinking there is no qualitative difference between choosing to move to a counter space and being forced to do so. Our choices are based on what we believe and want, both of which are heavily influenced by social norms and ideologies. More than ever before, to use an image drawn by Ulrich Bröckling, has the shepherd withdrawn to the heads of the sheep.³⁰ Present-day systems of power tend to govern by shaping our needs and imaginations. They make us go to the funfair just as much as they put us in prisons. So, are we playing as a result of the freedom of our choice or are we made to play by social realities that make us long for constant individual improvement and relevance while withholding from most of us the potency to achieve just that? The dichotomy seems to be the misunderstanding. We choose to be pushed and are pushed towards choices.

In order to experience success in trying to live up to perceived expectations of supermodern individuality we decide to become a YOU. We jump into the flow of digital play and experience ourselves as powerful, despite knowing about all those other YOUS that are just as special as we are; and anonymous at the same time which takes us back to Marc Augé, theorist of supermodernity. Videogames do not just fit into Foucault's concept of heterotopias, they also match what Augé describes as *non-places*: places of far-reaching anonymity that largely ignore social hierarchies, look and feel similar all around the globe and make everyone the same, urging them to stay within clearly confined scopes of action.³¹ Like freeways that we drive on in order to go with the flow of the traffic, feeling like free individuals as we do so. "What reigns there is actuality, the urgency of the present moment."³² A description strongly reminiscent of Csikszentmihalyi's flow as well as Soderman's criticism of its tendency to keep its subjects from seeing (and evaluating) the bigger picture.³³ Even more so, as Augé

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Die Heterotopien*. Der utopische Körper, 10.

³⁰ Ulrich Bröckling, *Gute Hirten führen sanft*, 44.

³¹ Augé, *Non-Places*, 79.

³² *Ibid.*, 104.

³³ Soderman, *Against Flow*, 154.

continues: "The temptation of narcissism is all the more seductive here in that it seems to express the common law: do as others do to be yourself."³⁴ Add the need to update and we are back at Wendy Chun's theory of the YOU: an illusion of individuality based on the quantification of subjectivity which enables algorithms to "identify us in relation to others 'like us'"³⁵ from which it derives the knowledge of how to make us feel special with minimal expense. "The quantified subject", according to Rosi Braidotti, "replaces the classical liberal subject, just as competition replaces exchange, inequality replaces equality and entrepreneurship replaces production. Neoliberalism is killing our freedom softly."³⁶ And if we let it, it uses games as a powerful tool to succeed.

As a spearhead of the entertainment industry, videogame publishers sell digital counter spaces to enable neoliberal subjects to cope with an increasing individualization of responsibility and a growing feeling of personal insufficiency, both necessary incentives to keep those subjects in their cycle of production and consumption while harvesting their data. (Bear with me here, at this pessimistic climax of this paper. I will be looking for more optimistic readings soon.) The gaming industry, following this thought, capitalizes on overburdened individuals in need of relaxation and reassuring experiences by selling them heterotopias characterized by a state of flow that will keep them engaged, consuming and ignorant of the real causes of their plight. "Play and flow", according to Soderman, "are extended over life in order to make the exhausting conditions of hyperproductivity tolerable."³⁷

6. BREAKING THE ILLUSION

In search of a more uplifting perspective, let's turn to the German playwright Berthold Brecht. He broke with theatrical traditions of his time by dismantling the illusion and distancing his audience emotionally from the plays they were watching. Through this method of alienation he hoped to raise awareness for the fictional character of his *epic theater* which, according to his thinking, would lead to the

³⁴ Augé, *Non-Places*, 106.

³⁵ Wendy Hui-Kyong Chun, *Discriminating Data*, 217.

³⁶ Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 94.

³⁷ Soderman, *Against Flow*, 240.

realization, that things could have taken a different course and characters are not determined by fate.³⁸ He wanted to encourage the audience to occasionally leave the flow in order to think about its origins, its direction and the implication of this specific path.

It appears reasonable to argue, that games do just that: In order to play them successfully, we need to be capable of thinking about rules, inputs and external social conventions while at the same time experiencing ourselves as part of the game world, dreading the monsters within it and tilting our heads while drifting through a curve in »Mario Kart«³⁹ During play, "the physical and the virtual", using Gordon Calleja's words, "are both aspects of what we perceive as real."⁴⁰ Finger movements on keyboards and controllers, unsuspected reactions of the program to our actions, thoughts about the limitations established by the game's rules - they all alienate us from the fiction. Games, according to Diana and Vlad Melnic, invite us to "access the fictional world not by means of suspending one's disbelief, but rather by entertaining a feedback loop between user and game world."⁴¹ This feedback loop contains the external perspective that forces us to consider the game as a work of fiction and a system built by designers inviting us to think about alternative versions of narratives and rule sets. Hence, clinging to Brecht's optimism, videogames should by nature be epic in a Brechtian sense.

While flow, according to Soderman's reading of Csikzentmihalyi "occurs *in ludes*, or 'at play,'" "moments of worry and reflection occur *inter ludes*, or 'between play'."⁴² If we hope to pin down play's potential to change the world, it seems to be these little interruptions, the moment, when the head is raised above the flow, that we should be focusing on. "In those situations, the users can" according to Stefano Gualeni's and Daniel Vella's existentialist analysis of digital play, "engage in practices that encourage and facilitate reflections about (and potentially transformations of) their actual selves",⁴³ encouraging them "to embrace 'what could be' over 'what

³⁸ Berthold Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* in 20 Bänden, 302.

³⁹ *Super Mario Kart*, Nintendo, 1992.

⁴⁰ Gordon Calleja, *In-Game*, 183.

⁴¹ Diana Melnic and Vlad Melnic, *Shortcut to Posthumanism*, 170.

⁴² Soderman, *Against flow*, 140.

⁴³ Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella, *Virtual Existentialism*, 112.

is'."⁴⁴ "Play", quoting a much older text by Michael Jackson, "enables us to renegotiate the given, experiment with alternatives, imagine how things might be otherwise, and so resolve obliquely and artificially that which cannot be resolved in the 'real' world."⁴⁵ For Miguel Sicart, it "is finding expression, it is letting us understand the world, through that understanding, challenging the establishment in which boundaries can be broken by merely acting through play."⁴⁶ Brecht's optimism, therefore, is broadly shared by game scholars who have high hopes for critical reflection of play and playful interaction with 'serious' matters. "Let's tap into the gamer's unique affinity", we are being challenged by Amanda Phillips, "for tuning in to questions of power, balance, and exploitation and the game's unique ability to shape flows of attention, affect, and power and see what else we can do."⁴⁷

What can be done, however, might not always meet the scholar's expectations and intentions. For years we have encouraged players to use their creativity to think against the narrative. And one of the most influential and consequent things they came up with, was Gamergate. Since the emergence of Game Studies, scholars have upheld the potential of playful interactions with every-day life. And one of the most outstanding examples for this kind of interaction is QAnon, an alternate reality game if you will. One that incites violence and threatens democracies. "One person can feel the freedom of the magic circle", writes Christopher Patterson, "while another can be victim to it. In this sense, the gameworld does not differ from the real world. It is not a playful bubble exterior from it but a reflection of the world's pleasures and desires as they impact the body."⁴⁸

7. FEELING THE FEELS

Imagine the player as a swimmer doing the breaststroke. In colloquial terms we describe this swimmer as being in the water, just as we describe the player as being in the game. What they both really do is moving into and out of the matter in circular motion. Just as the moments above the water do

⁴⁴ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁵ Michael Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica*, 28.

⁴⁶ Sicart, *Play Matters*, 18.

⁴⁷ Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*, 183.

⁴⁸ Christopher B. Patterson, *Open World Empire*, 44.

not necessarily mean that the swimmer is perceiving what is happening around the pool, the phases in meta-reflection of the game do not necessarily provoke critical thinking about its implications. But the potential is there and many forms of play encourage it. Game designers definitely have an influence on whether their games favor an absorbing flow or if they make players stop and think about the bigger picture. First and foremost, however, it is the players' inclinations and predispositions, their habitus, that define what they make out of game.

Playful attitudes and thoughts against the narrative have, clearly, not only led to Gamergate and QAnon but also to a huge variety of beautiful variations of gaming culture. From »Games done Quick« to Bo Ruberg's *Queer Games Avant-Garde*⁴⁹ and from many highly inclusive community-events to that twelve-year-old that told me, »Call of Duty: Modern Warfare«⁵⁰ made him think about his Muslim classmates and their feelings about Islamist terrorists being the opponents in many of the shooters of that time. Ludispheres can help us view the world from other perspectives, and understand, what it means to stand in someone else's shoes. But "digital subjectivities", as Gualeni and Vella point out, "are fundamentally rooted in actual subjectivities and there is a definite hierarchy between the two."⁵¹ In other words, games cannot make us feel things that are not in some form anchored in the person that we are, when we start playing. If the mentioned »Call of Duty«-player did not possess the empathy he obviously had, he would not have realized that the worlds he played with might make some of his classmates feel uncomfortable. "Play", to quote Gualeni and Vella again, "allows us to recognize that we contain multitudes."⁵² It can help us to experience ourselves in very different and even unforeseen ways. It can, however, only bring to the surface what has already been part of us.

Games have repeatedly been described as *empathy machines* by scholars such as Johanna Pirker,⁵³ implying that they can help us develop empathy towards others and the world around

⁴⁹ Bo Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

⁵⁰ *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, Activision, 2007.

⁵¹ Gualeni and Vella, *Virtual Existentialism*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵³ Darryl A. Armstrong, "Interview with Johanna Pirker, Researcher & lecturer at Graz University of Technology," *Rise up Daily*, <https://www.riseupdaily.com/88namespodcast/2021/04/16/johanna/>.

us. And, coming back to Brecht's optimism, empathy seems to be the key to motivate us to change the world after having realized through alienation, that it is possible. Why else should we lift our heads above the soothing flow and burden our minds with the complexity of the world around us? Why shouldn't we just play »Call of Duty« without wondering about someone else's emotions? Games, I want to argue, can amplify empathy. But there needs to be something to amplify in the first place. We need empathy in order to get the empathy machine running. So, if we want to keep up our hopes that games and playful interactions can contribute to a better world, rather than lulling us in neoliberal flow, the focus needs to lie on the players much more than the games. The one factor, according to recent research, that most significantly supports media competency and critical use is mediated co-use.⁵⁴ Hence, if we want to become more emotionally competent players, we should all discuss games more sentimentally, talk more about what they do with us and less about how their systems work and indulge in fruitful conflicts about how games should change rather than thinking up supposedly objective number ratings. "The most important thing", writes Amanda Phillips, "is to stay with the trouble".⁵⁵ A certain amount of chaos, according to Katharina Mittlböck, is necessary to facilitate learning and personal development.⁵⁶ And ludispheres as Foucauldian heterotopias and as Brechtian epic games that are to be taken just as serious as we want them to be might be the ideal places to find the most engaging form of chaos we can think of.

8. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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⁵⁴ Olaf Kapella and Merike Sisak, Country reports presenting the findings from the four case studies, 34.

⁵⁵ Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*, 183.

⁵⁶ Mittlböck, *Persönlichkeitsentwicklung und Digitales Rollenspiel*, 51.

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File #5



Title: Endangered Species

Subtitle: The Corporate Grip on Creativity

Author(s): Ralph J. Möller

Taking a look at the modern world of media - be it streaming, gaming, the movies; or any other kind of audiovisual media you prefer to consume - one cannot help but wonder at the sheer richness and diversity of the modern entertainment industry.

There seems to be something for everyone: Romance, Thrills, SciFi, Horror, Mystery, you name it. Creativity seems to be in full bloom and story worlds seem endless.

But is that really the case? Is there a downside to all of it? Is the sheer mass of content too much to consume for even the largest audience? This paper shall have a critical look at the modern media market; not only from the fan / consumer's perspective but also from the financial and professional critic's point of view.

We will have a critical look at the role media giants like Amazon or Netflix play in current events as well as at the history of their involvement that led to today's market and their control of it.

This paper will mainly focus on the European and American market. The reason is simple: This is the main field of the author's expertise.

Keywords: Creativity, Franchise, Sequel, Prequel, Cancellation

1. STREAMING

In 2023 the streaming market in the US is dominated by these content providers:

- Amazon Prime Video 21%
- Netflix 20%
- Max¹ (Warner) 15%
- Disney+ 13%
- Hulu² 11%
- Paramount+ 7%
- AppleTV+ 6%
- Others 7%

(Source: statista.com)

This data shows that the two largest stations, namely Amazon Prime Video and Netflix, share more than 40% of the US streaming market. Potential for growth and expansion is seen in the European market according to analysts (Source: marketplace.org).

This development is seen with growing skepticism. According to French film critic Frédéric Mercier, Hollywood-like production methods might change European film production drastically:

We see new training courses – new schools even – that are turning out young film industry professionals capable of producing content as if they were working on an assembly line – like the majors do in Hollywood.

Content production is a business. A big business. According to macrotends.net, the 2022 annual revenue of Netflix was more than 30 billion USD. Even as some analysts already see the streaming giant in crisis, they still managed to increase their growth by 6.46%. Too bad (from the stockholder's point

^{1,2} Max and Hulu are not available in Europe at the time of this paper's publication.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

of view), Netflix was unable to keep their growth rate (2020: 24.01%, 2021: 18.81%).

Some analysts refer to such development as "crisis". Now, in what aspect does this affect creativity?

Streaming service subscribers have recently seen a development in which shows have faced cancellation after too little time to even build up a constant following or fanbase.

Taking a look at Netflix's cancellations of recently, it becomes apparent that the streaming giant seems to be following a "throw junk to the wall and see what sticks" strategy:

Show	Seasons	Cancellation
The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance	1	September 2020
Away	1	October 2020
Jupiter's Legacy	1	June 2021
The Crew	1	July 2021
Cursed	1	July 2021
Cowboy Bebop	1	December 2021
Another Life	2	February 2022
Archive 81	1	March 2022
Resident Evil	1	August 2022
The Midnight Club	1	December 2022
1899	1	January 2023
Uncoupled	1	January 2023
Lockwood & Co.	1	May 2023

This is just a short compilation of a much larger list (currently counting 100 entries) to be found on [decider.com](https://www.decider.com/cancelled-netflix-original-shows): Cancelled Netflix original shows.

What we see is that Netflix

- does not refrain from pulling the plug on shows that from the beginning have been created as multi-seasoned productions (*1899*, *The Midnight Club*, *Cowboy Bebop*, *Jupiter's Legacy*)
- cancels shows starring big names (*Away*, *Another Life*, *Uncoupled*)

- kills off productions set in well-established franchises (*Resident Evil*³, *Cowboy Bebop*)
- seems to have little confidence in producers that have created successes in the past:
 - “1899” was created by the same team that created “Dark”, a huge success for Netflix
 - “The Midnight Club” was conceived by showrunner Mike Flanagan whose credits include “The Haunting of Hill House”, “The Haunting of Bly Manor” and “Midnight Mass”, all of which were very successful as well as appreciated by critics and audiences alike

Also, checking the list on *decider.com* we can see that the number of premature cancellations of Netflix original productions per year increases drastically:

2014	1
2015	0
2016	3
2017	6
2018 ⁴	12
2019	12
2020	24
2021	11
2022	18
2023 ⁵	12

With the exception of 2021 we see a massive rise in cancellations of Netflix’ serial productions.

³ in which case the cancellation was actually a good thing (author’s opinion)

⁴ 2018 includes several Marvel shows Netflix lost the production rights for as

⁵ At the time of writing this cancellations for the second half of 2023 have not been made public

Now, what is the impact of all this on creativity?

Take a look at the data collected so far from a creative's perspective: You will probably realize that the chances of your creative product to survive a first season are not too good. Therefore, you will probably adapt your creation to better match the streaming service's expectations.

This is not a new development, of course. Movie and series productions have always been a business and need to make a profit. This is one of the rules of capitalism. But never before has the market been this harsh and unforgiving if a product fails.

For example, when the Netflix show "Sense8" proved too expensive to continue production after two seasons in 2017, a film was produced to wrap up the story.

Only five years later, a show like "1899", with no ending that could be called such, is scrapped without any chance of continuation. And this is just one example of many.

2. VANISHED CONTENT

Some productions even vanish. Two prominent examples are listed here:

- Willow (Disney+, 2022)
- Star Trek: Prodigy (Paramount+, 2021-2023)

"Star Trek: Prodigy" is an animated show produced by Paramount+. In June 2023 the service announced that after finishing the production of the show's second season the show would be cancelled and immediately be removed from the streaming service. To date it is unclear if the second season will ever be published or production will only be finished for tax write-off purposes (see [Slashfilm.com: Prodigy's Cancellation Signals A Shrinking Of The Star Trek Franchise](https://www.slashfilm.com/2023/06/23/star-trek-prodigy-cancellation/)).

Disney+, on the other hand, has already removed "Willow" from their service. It is unsure whether the show will ever

surface again, however, there is no real doubt about the reasons for the decision to remove the show: It's all about the money.

According to several sources⁶, the decision to remove the show is due to its lack of performance on the service. It seems that even the cost of keeping the show available on Disney+ exceeds the profit it makes for them, thus the decision.

Due to the nature of the streaming services' business model, success from the view of a streaming service is mainly seen in subscription count. One can therefore only speculate what the actual reason was for the removal of "Willow", but if one takes into consideration that a show is only successful if it

- attracts new subscribers
- entices existing subscribers to keep their subscription,

it seems that "Willow" has obviously failed at both - thus the removal. Its failure must have been huge as the decision to remove "Willow" came only a few months after its premiere.

3. IMPACT ON CREATIVITY

Now put yourself into the role of a showrunner for a big player like Disney+ or Netflix and ask yourself these questions:

- would you like to produce content that is actively sent to the digital graveyard?
- if this happened to you, would you ever get another chance?

⁶ McCoy, Joshua K / Screenrant.com (2022); disneyplusinformer.com (2023)

How many creative persons are asking themselves exactly these questions right now? How does it impact them?

One can only speculate on the range of this impact, but there is little doubt that there is an impact on creativity, and presumably a huge one. Already, production development has changed, and not for the better. Services are searching for the next "Stranger Things" or "Squid Game" (both of which were surprise successes). Still, "Stranger Things" will be ending after an upcoming fifth season. It remains to be seen if Netflix will give the creators the chance to once again develop another franchise from an interesting prospect into a multi-seasonal phenomenon - or rather call it a day after a not-so-well-performing first season (see "1899"). Nobody - and certainly no show - seems to be safe these days.

There will still be prestigious tentpole productions, but it seems that those are going to be movies rather than serials.

Movies win prestigious prizes like the Academy Awards. Recent years have seen streaming services try hard to battle for prestige with films like "All Quiet on the Western Front" (Netflix, 2022), "The Irishman" (Netflix, 2019), "Coda"⁷ (AppleTV+, 2021), "Roma" (Netflix, 2018) amongst others (see Screenrant.com: Best Award Winning Streaming Movies⁸).

Also, movies can just as easily be turned into a franchise if they perform well enough: see the "Tyler Rake: Extraction" franchise (Netflix 2020, 2023). The second movie in what seems to be a new flagship movie series for Netflix did score very well for the streaming service, having the strongest opening weekend in 2023 and even outdoing 2022's success "Glass Onion"⁹.

To better understand the topic one has to take a look at one of Netflix' main competitors in the field of streaming that has not been in the focus of this paper yet: Amazon and their Amazon Prime service.

⁷ "Coda" won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2022

⁸ I leave it to the reader's judgement to decide if those are really the "best" pictures

⁹ See Romanchik, Shane (2023)

From the consumer's viewpoint Amazon Prime is a great service: you get your orders sent to your home almost at lightning speed without any extra cost, and on top of that, they run a streaming service that matches Netflix' service in many aspects. In recent years, Amazon has begun to produce original content to sometimes big success, available, again, for free for every Amazon Prime subscriber. All this at a reasonable price, at least, if you only look at the balance of your personal bank account.

But Amazon's growth comes at a price for the creative industry, and a big price it is. To find out about the motivation of Amazon Prime one only needs to listen to their founder Jeff Bezos, as quoted here: *I want to draw a moat around our best customers!*¹⁰

Again, for consumers Prime certainly seems like a good thing. Bezos even seems to be on their side, like when he saved the SciFi Show "The Expanse" by giving it a new home on Prime after it was scrapped by SyFy.

But at what cost does Amazon - not only Prime - come for the creative people without whom no content would ever be produced? To understand their perspective, one needs to take a look at a creative market segment in which things went a little further, in part because it has been in existence for much longer: books.

A much more detailed analysis of how Amazon took control of the book market, selling *more than 50% of physical copies in the US, and even more ebooks and audiobooks*, can be found in Giblin/Doctorow: "Chokepoint Capitalism". Some of the highlights are:¹¹

- publisher *Melville House Publishing* would not comply with Amazon's demands, resulting in a complete block of purchasing options for their products on Amazon's services. The "order now" button would simply disappear from their product pages and listings¹².

¹⁰ See Del Rey, Jason (2019)

¹¹ Giblin/Doctorow (2022), p20

¹² Giblin/Doctorow (2022), pp21 and Packer, George: Cheap Words, New Yorker Feb 9, 2014

- When publishing house *Hachette's* supply agreement with Amazon was due for renewal, negotiations took more than six months. To enforce a solution, Amazon removed preorder capability from all of *Hachette's* major releases, took weeks to ship in-stock books, raised prices and even recommended books from other publishers instead¹³.

A few years later (now), streaming has become a major asset of Amazon and the Prime service. If one considers the cases just presented, one must conclude that independent content producers will sooner or later experience the same pressure put on them by the streaming giant.

Now, take two other things into consideration:

- The events caused by the pandemic
- The currently inescapable discussions about AI

and you will find a fatal mélange.

On the one hand, the pandemic pretty much drove us all into the home office. This means that your typical creative person does not necessarily need to be close to home to work for you, They could live in Nepal or China. So why hire somebody local who might, after all, even be organized in, let us say, the Screenwriter's Guild?

To make matters even more interesting, put AI in the mix. Just look at the current AI discussions¹⁴ all around the world: if a major studio owns AI algorithms that create simple screenplays, the only thing needed for a movie or serial to go into production is a bunch of anonymous script-doctors to overhaul the existing screenplay - which was created by the AI - to make the whole thing useable for filming. Said script-doctors are normally editors who receive no intellectual property credit for their work!

¹³ Giblin/Doctorow (2022), pp22

¹⁴ One is tempted to assume that said discussions are mainly lanced to generate uncertainty in workers to fear for their jobs. For let us be honest: A lot that is currently discussed about AI is still fiction.

This results in the studio automatically being identified as the sole copyright owner of the intellectual property. If these AI products make money, why engage screenwriters in the first place? What will those screenwriters Frédéric Mercier talks about in his article do for a living if *ChatGPT* does the job for them?

Both aspects (home office and AI) target not your average blue-collar worker, but rather white-collar intellectual jobs in lower-middle income classes; exactly where you will find your everyday creative writer working for the Hollywood industry.

Taking all this into consideration, it is naïve to consider that a company like Amazon who has, in the past, been seen to press every penny out of their "partners", would treat their streaming studios differently once the market is won over.

But there is resistance.

4. CURRENT DEVELOPMENT IN HOLLYWOOD

As of writing this paper in July 2023, news breaks that in the USA the Screen Actors Guild of America urged their members to strike, thereby following the example of the Screenwriter's Guild who have already been on strike for several weeks, thereby putting the whole Hollywood film industry to a grinding halt.

It seems that the issues we have seen developing in recent years have now reached a boiling point: Creatives are finally no longer willing to contribute to a development that is only beneficial to large-scale Netflix / Disney shareholders or people like Jeff Bezos.

One must not be romantic: those people strike for their right to work, to make a living. They do not strike for creativity alone. But the right to create is what makes the whole machine run in the end. Also, we are not talking about

stars like Robert Downey, Jr., Matt Damon or Fran Drescher¹⁵. We are talking about thousands of actresses and actors in every segment of content production who face harsh working matters on a daily basis.

Actors are, amongst many other things, on strike for remaining sole proprietor of the rights to their physical image (cnbc.com: Hollywood actors join writers on strike), trying to prevent studios from using scans of their physiology in future projects without the consent of the person, and of course without any compensation.

5. GAMES

Be honest with yourself: How many truly innovative, new, different games have you played recently? Especially ones produced by a real independent developer, not some pseudo-independent acquisition of one of the large multimedia giants?

On the other hand: How many sequels/prequels/tie-ins or add-ons of a well-established franchise have you loaded onto your console or computer in the same period of time?

As great as it feels, being supportive of support independent game developers by buying and playing their products, one must not feel bad about playing "mainstream" games. These are well-designed products with a lot of appeal, that's why we choose to play them in the first place. Playing a Star Wars game can be great fun, just as much as the last incarnation of FIFA Soccer. I myself was absolutely tempted to buy the latest edition of FIFA when I heard they licensed F.C. Richmond¹⁶.

¹⁵ Fran Drescher (of „The Nanny“ fame), the current president of the Screen Actors Guild of America held a well-received speech on June 14th, 2023 depicting the current situation of the Guild's members and lining out the motivations for the strike. Damon and Downey, Jr., amongst others, laid down publicity work for their new movie "Oppenheimer" immediately after the strike declaration, a move "Oppenheimer" director Christopher Nolan declared his full solidarity with.

¹⁶ You never heard of F.C. Richmond? Shame on you. Now go and watch Ted Lasso!

But here we already find ourselves at the center of the problem. How many fans of *Ted Lasso* did actually buy the game (a AAA game with a retail price of EUR 69.99 - current consoles editions) for exactly that reason? How many indie / alternative games could they have bought for that amount of money. This is how big corporations think: They are using a beloved comedy show as a cross-market vehicle to increase sales figures for the biggest football game franchise on the planet (as if it were not enough already).

This is the issue: Big players like EA or Ubisoft dominate the market and pretty much do as they please. If one of their games turns into a best-selling franchise, it will be exploited for as long as success stays with the brand. If sales drop, the franchise will be either discontinued or rethought (like the "Assassins Creed" series). Real innovation can be found in the independent market, but this is an often short-lived glimpse of hope: if a game really wins the hearts of fans and sells big, chances are that the developer or publisher will be bought by one of the big players. Once that is done, we more and more often see one of these scenarios unfold:

- the studio is turned into another treadmill to create content for the new owner (several EA and Ubisoft acquisitions) or
- after a hugely overfinanced release fails, they close shop never to be heard from again (Daedalic Entertainment) or
- they were only acquired for their intellectual property or even their name alone (see Bullfrog, see Origin, see Westwood) and close shop right after the acquisition.

The strategy for such acquisition strategies is easy to see: Remove young and small competition from the market by buying them before they become too large (and expensive) for even the big players to just gobble them up¹⁷.

Remember *Rockstar Vienna*? Remember the big fuss going on about a game development studio in Austria, a country with

¹⁷ See Aguilar, Adam / cbr.com (2021)

a not-so-big game development scene? Here's a very short summary:

Rockstar Vienna was founded in 1993, then named *Neo Software Produktions GmbH*. The company had an early success with the game *Whale's Voyage* (1993); other prominent and successful titles were *Der Clou*¹⁸ (1994), *Rent-a-Hero* (1998) or *Die Völker*¹⁹ (1999). In 1999 a majority stake of Neo was acquired by Computec Media. Following further changes of ownership, Neo finally found themselves part of Take-Two Interactive (2001), responsible mainly for ports of Take-Two's license games. Their first - and well-received - port was that of acclaimed shooter game *Max Payne* to the Xbox platform (2001). In 2003 the company was renamed "Rockstar Vienna", visibly becoming part of the well-known family of Rockstar studios. This seemed a big step for an Austria-based development studio at that time.

While working on the port of the controversial game *Manhunt 2* Rockstar Vienna was abruptly shut down in 2006 due to cost reductions.^{2021?}

Creativity? Or just another figure in an exec's quarterly report?

6. OVERALL

Is creativity dead? No. Is it in peril? Yes, definitely so. The playground for multimedia content has changed drastically since the beginning of the "age of streaming", and streaming success has the upper hand over creative decisions.

It is not just a decision of a handful of corporations currently ruling the streaming market. It is us, the consumers, to decide what we want to watch, after all. But if we keep consuming the main channels, if we keep our Netflix subscriptions even if "there is nothing good to

¹⁸ Rebranded *The Clue* for the international market

¹⁹ Rebranded *Alien Nations* for the international market

²⁰ For a more detailed summary of the events see Wikipedia: *Rockstar Vienna*

²¹ An interesting article about the rise and fall of Rockstar Vienna can be found on *DerStandard.at* (warning - nudity!)

watch" instead of going for a different kind of service where creativity still has a meaning; if we watch intelligent cinema - which still exists - instead of the next iteration of superheroes, then we can make a point.

It is - still - up for us to decide.

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Now let's go and watch some great movies!

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File #6



Title: Agency and Codephagy in Mexican Video Games

Subtitle: Four Case Studies

Author(s): Juan Carlos Ponce Reyes

Through the examination of four case studies, this paper aims to explore how issues of cultural identity come into play within a Mexican context and how different actors put distinct forms of agency in motion. This agency can be understood as *codephagy* (codigofagia), a concept coined by Mexican-Ecuadorian philosopher Bolívar Echeverría, to describe the relations in which cultural codes 'devour' one another; the dominant code is transformed from the inside due to the remnants of the dominated 'eaten' code. In this paper, I explore the notion of code, both as informatical and cultural. The selected cases show different instances of cultural codes: the video game *Mulaka*, developed by the Mexican Studio Lienzo, where the indigenous codes from the Rarámuri people are 'in play' with the codes of the game industry; the speedrunner 'The Mexican Runner' and his *NESmania* challenge, in which stereotypical Mexican codes are used in conjunction with images from different video games; Minecraft's "Mexican Mod" that introduces through the informatical code images and music from Mexican urban everyday life; and the piece *8 Bit Bolero Boom Box* from the Mexican artist Arcángel Constantini, which creatively interprets the word bolero, taking 8 Golden Age bolero songs and arranging them to 8-bit timbres. Each case explores different means of agency—the capacity of individuals to exercise change in their everyday life—in the form of *codephagy*, the interpenetration of cultural identities in the context of a dominating relationship.

Keywords: Video Games in Mexico, identity, codephagy, codigofagia, culture, agency

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore the concepts of agency and *codephagy*¹ applied to four instances of video game practices taken from the Mexican context: production of the video game *Mulaka* released in 2018 by the Mexican Studio Lienzo; video game modification in The Minecraft Mod “Mexican Edition” from around 2019; play (streaming) in the challenge *Nesmania* conducted by Piotr Delgado who goes by the nickname ‘The Mexican Runner’; and appropriation in “high arts” in the sound art piece *8 Bit Bolero Boom Box* by the Mexican sound artist Arcángel Constantini.

Codephagy is a concept coined by Mexican-Ecuadorian philosopher Bolívar Echeverría. He devised this term to primarily describe urban cultural life in Latin America, with a particular focus on Mexico. The concept is employed to avoid the biological connotations that other notions, such as *mestizaje*² or hybridity, have³. Echeverría defines *codephagy* as:

[The] process in which different codes of social behavior that, at their encounter, try to devour one another. [...] this process [...] is maybe the most characteristic [in Latin America]. The act in which [Latin America] begins to exist [is] the process through which the European code ‘devours’ the remains of the pre-Hispanic code, at the same time that it is transformed by those same remains which, as the dominant code, tries to integrate it within itself. The main role of the indigenous people in America is the most interesting aspect of this process. They are the ones who rebuilt not their code but the code of the Europeans. It is them who, by doing that transformed the

¹ The original term in Spanish *codigofagia* has been translated by other authors as “Codephagocytosis.” Here, I opt for translating it as *codephagy* because of the genealogy of the term relating it to the “Manifiesto Antropófago” of Oswald de Andrade. “Antropófago” derives from the Greek words *anthropos* and *phagia*. The English word “anthropophagy” retains these two roots. Therefore, I consider it pertinent to retain the term’s roots and relation to the anthropophagy in my translation.

² The dictionary from the Real Academia Española (Royal Spanish Academy) defines *Mestizaje* as the crossing of races. Sometimes it is translated as “miscegenation”. As the notion of race is no longer understood as a biological trait, it is avoided in several academic instances.

³ Bolívar Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco* (México: Era, 2000), 51.

code essentially from within.⁴⁵

I also follow Chris Barker's definition of "agency" in his Dictionary of Cultural Studies:

Agency can be understood to mark the socially determined capability to act and to make a difference [...] acts that make a pragmatic difference [...] Neither human freedom nor human action can consist of an escape from social determinants [...] socially constructed agency involves differentially distributed social resources that give rise to various degrees of the ability to act in specific spaces.⁶

Since Bolívar Echeverría coined the term *codephagy* to explain cultural processes during the sixteenth century in what is now Mexico, it has been employed in the analysis of different aspects of New Spain, such as historical texts⁷ and the complexities and contradictions in visual depictions from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸ Therefore, there is a risk in using a concept related to New Spain in the context of a different historical epoch, because it may convey the idea of an essentialist concept of the "Mexican," suggesting that there is something shared with the people

⁴ "[El] proceso en el cual los distintos códigos del comportamiento social, al encontrarse lo que intentan es devorarse los unos a los otros [...]este proceso [...] es tal vez el fenómeno más característico [en América Latina]. El acto con el que comienza a existir [es] el proceso mediante el cual el código europeo 'devora' los restos del código prehispánico, al mismo tiempo que es carcomido y transformado por esos restos que él, como código dominante, intenta integrarse a sí mismo. La función protagónica de los indios [es] lo más interesante de este proceso. Son ellos, los que reconstruyeron, no su código, sino el código de los europeos. Son ellos los que, al hacerlo, lo transformaron esencialmente desde dentro." Bolívar Echeverría, *Mestizaje y codigofagia*, accessed February 27, 2023.

[https://www.lai.fu-](https://www.lai.fu-berlin.de/forschung/lehrforschung/wissenproduktion_lateinamerikani_scher_intelektueller/bolivar_echeverria/m/index.html)

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⁵ All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

⁶ Chris Barker, *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*. (London: Sage, 2004), 4-5.

⁷ Alejandro Viveros, "Codephagocytosis in the visual texts of the description of the city and province of Tlaxcala (1584)," in *Boletín del Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino* 23, no. 2 (2018): 9-25. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-68942018000300009>

⁸ Antonio Jaramillo Arango, Margarita Cossich Vielman and Federico Navarrete Linares, "Un mapa de la conquista de la Nueva España: El 'Lienzo de Tlaxcala'", in *Glocalism Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, no. 2 (2021): 1-28 DOI: 10.12893/gjcpi.2021.2.7

from centuries ago that is still present nowadays. Hence there may be a nationalist ideology in the background which considers that "Mexico" has existed ever since as a nation, as a culture, or even worse, as a homogeneous set of cultural traits. Such an idea would reproduce what indigenist politics promoted during the first half of the twentieth century in Mexico.⁹

It is worth noting that Bolívar Echeverría considers *codephagy* as part of his theory of a historical ethos, which comprises modes of behavior and not time periods. The ethe are the ways in which every one of us in Latin America reacts and internalizes modernity and capitalism "in the spontaneity of everyday life."¹⁰ Echeverría opposed the idea of a substantialized culture as something fixed, and mentions that "if cultural identity stops being thought of as a substance but rather as a 'state of code' [...] then that 'identity' may be seen as an evanescent reality, as a historical identity that, at the same time it determines the behavior of the subjects that uses it, is being made, transformed, and modified by them."¹¹ *Codephagy*, thus, is a process in which the code that is trying to be the dominant one is disassembled, prevented from substantially dominating other codes.¹²

Thus, the notion of codes continuously 'devouring' one another counters the idea of an essentialist identity. It is in this sense, that *codephagy* has been used to analyze

⁹ Leif Korsbaek and Miguel Ángel Sámano-Rentería, "El indigenismo en México: antecedentes y actualidad," in *Ra Ximhai Revista de Sociedad, Cultura y Desarrollo Sustentable* 3, no. 1 (2007): 196.

¹⁰ Echeverría, *La modernidad*, 171.

¹¹ "Si la identidad cultural deja de ser concebida como una sustancia y es vista más bien como un 'estado de código' [...] entonces, esa 'identidad' puede mostrarse también como una realidad evanescente, como una entidad histórica que, al mismo tiempo que determina los comportamientos de los sujetos que la usan o 'hablan', está siendo hecha, transformada, modificada por ellos." Echeverría, *La modernidad*, 31.

¹² Carlos Oliva Mendoza, "Cinco notas sobre literatura y filosofía latinoamericana," in *Revista de Hispanismo Filosófico*, (2014). Accessed February 28, 2023. <http://hdl.handle.net/10391/4437>

social action¹³ and social practices.¹⁴ Moreover, I employ this term following Itala Schmelz¹⁵ when analyzing contemporary media. In her work, she studies Mexican science fiction movies, while here I focus on video game practices in Mexico. In all of these cases, *codephagy* has been associated with notions of cultural and political resistance against hegemonic powers, bringing it closer to the idea of agency, because it explains a process in which subjects make a pragmatic difference in their specific context in the face of social constrictions.

It is important to remember that Mexico is not a dominant culture in video game development. According to Penix-Tadsen¹⁶ and Antonio Corona,¹⁷ Mexico (and Latin America) is a region that, while not being part of the centers of production of video games, such as Japan, the United States, and Europe, represent an area in which consumption has had constant and rapid growth, approaching the levels of consumption in those dominant regions. This aspect entails that the video games played in Mexico are mainly produced in other countries, and that the representations portrayed there are directed primarily towards those dominant regions.

This can be related to a characteristic of the *codephagy* process as seen in cities: "the urban indigenous people, exiled from their original communities, who came to work [...] and established in the cities [...] let the remnants of their old civilizing code [...] be devoured by the Europeans' victorious civilizing code."¹⁸ The following

¹³ Evelyn Azucena Elenes Díaz, "Resistencia cultural desde la frontera México-Estados Unidos Reflexiones desde el movimiento artístico chicano," in *Revista de Estudios AntiUtilitaristas e PosColonialis* 6, no. 2 (2016): 102-122.

¹⁴ María Cristina Ríos Espinosa, "Estética y hermenéutica de la irrupción festiva: devoción del Niño en Xochimilco," *Alea: Estudios Neolatinos* 22 (2020): 75-92.

¹⁵ Itala Schmelz, *Codigofagia: cine mexicano y ciencia ficción* (Mexico: Akal, 2022).

¹⁶ Phillip Penix-Tadsen, *Cultural Code Video Games and Latin America* (United States: MIT Press, 2016), 97, 99.

¹⁷ Antonio Corona, *Identidad, agencia, espacio. El videojuego desde los estudios culturales* (México: Fontamara, 2018), 7.

¹⁸ "Los indios citadinos, desarraigados de sus comunidades de origen, que habían llegado para trabajar [...] y se habían asentado en las ciudades [...] dejaron que los restos de su antiguo código civilizatorio [...] fuesen devorados por el código civilizatorio vencedor de los europeos". Bolívar Echeverría, *Modernidad y blanquitud* (Mexico: Era 2010), 190.

cases exemplify different ways in which we can see how the codes coming from the dominant cultures are reconstructed in the Mexican context through the 'devouring' of the local ones. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on identifying what we may consider the dominant codes and some aspects of their reconstruction in each case.

2. *MULAKA* (2018) BY THE MEXICAN STUDIO *LIENZO*

Mulaka was released in 2018 by the Mexican studio *Lienzo*. The original idea for the game came from a conversation between Edgar Serrano and Adolfo Rico, who were the developers and founders of the studio. They imagined what it would look like to make a *Zelda*-like game that tells a storyline based on the myths of indigenous people, notably the Raramuri. Also known as Tarahumaras, they are natives of the northern region of Mexico.¹⁹ The visual designer said in a promotional video that "there are no [visual] representations of the myths, so we had to create them by taking inspirations from the abstract patterns used for their clothes."²⁰ Additionally, from the gameplay perspective, they took inspiration from the myth of the three souls of the Sukúrame, a mythical being in Rarámuri culture, which were treated as 'lives' in the game.²¹

In this instance, the dominant codes are those of the video game industry itself: third-person perspective, exploration and combat. These elements constitute a "Zelda-like" game. The urban-based development team from *Lienzo*, aided by anthropologists, reconstructs the codes of game design. By incorporating the Raramuri cultural codes into those of the video game industry, they are transforming them "from the inside."

However, it should be noted that the development team is in a position of power in relation to the Rarámuri people, but at the same time, they have to move within the constraints

¹⁹ "We're Lienzo, developers of *Mulaka*, available today on the Nintendo Switch. Ask us anything!" https://www.reddit.com/r/NintendoSwitch/comments/816u45/were_lienzo_developers_of_mulaka_available_today/ Accessed February 28, 2023.

²⁰ Lienzo, *Mulaka - The Mythological Creatures*. Accessed March 1, 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSLfNMG-Pog>

²¹ Lienzo, *Mulaka - The Mythological Creatures*.

of the industry. In one of the promotional videos, we can see an elderly Rarámuri woman supporting the video game because it is a way to reach the youngsters who are moving to the cities and becoming “Mexicanized” by not speaking their native language or adhering to their traditions. The Lienzo team concludes that this technological product would be a way to reach them.²²

The concept of agency, as defined by Baker, acknowledges the unequal distribution based on the social constraints at play. Here we can see this situation in action. While the Rarámuri people have little agency due to a long history of oppression against the indigenous people in Mexico, the *Lienzo* studio is in a much more privileged position, having more mobility within social constrictions and actively making a pragmatic difference.²³

3. MINECRAFT MOD “MEXICAN EDITION” (2019)

There are many Mexican-themed mods for *Minecraft*. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the “Mexican edition,” because it is one of the better-known examples thanks to being popularized by YouTube content creators and streamers.²⁴

This mod showcases textures and images representative of everyday life in Mexico, like street advertisements, religious iconography, and popular music icons. For example, one can see the Sun being covered by a photo of Luis Miguel, a pop singer nicknamed ‘The Sun of Mexico’ (*el Sol de México*). The mod is designed to evoke Mexico City; images of local politicians adorn the walls, like the former governor Claudia Sheinbaum, while *Minecraft* carts are

²² Lienzo, *Mulaka - The Game*. Accessed March 2, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-omk0r3rzs0>

²³ It is worth noting that *Lienzo* planned to donate part of the profits to organizations working on supporting Rarámuri people. Lienzo, *Mulaka: Origin Tribes - Kickstarter Trailer*. Accessed March 2, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32eWS-b7sUE>

²⁴ See as an example: MonsterGaming, *NUEVA ACTUALIZACIÓN, Minecraft Mexican Edition 2, Textura Mexicana para Minecraft PE - MonsterDroid*. Accessed March 6, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejfMPuxqRXY>

redesigned to reflect the color scheme and logo of the Mexico City subway system.

Video game modding has been described as a “participatory culture” by Henry Jenkins. According to him, one of the characteristics of participatory culture is inequality in media literacy and unequal access to opportunities and development, due to differences in access to technology and cultural activities.²⁵ We can relate this situation to the definition of agency, which is also unequally distributed. Nevertheless, Nardi and Kallinikos propose that modding allows the players to introduce their personalities into the games in different ways than those in the game's design. Through this process, playing is enhanced. Thus, Nardi and Kallinikos suggest that agency and technology are mutually strengthened.²⁶

In the case of “The Mexican Edition,” the modders have introduced “their personalities” into Minecraft and, by doing so, have strengthened their agency. This concept may also be understood as a form of *codephagy*, considering that the game's code ‘devours’ the “Mexican” cultural code implemented by the modders. Additionally, here are relations of power beyond the digital code. According to Kücklich's definition of “playbour,” modding is a precarious form of labor which benefits game companies that are able to maintain high prices, as it works as a source of free innovation and creativity, and functions as a ‘recruitment pool’ for game companies.²⁷ As a form of *codephagy*, the modders that programmed “The Mexican Edition” reconstructed the game industry's codes of programming, changing the textures, and distributing a piece of software, but the industry codes are phagocytizing the modders' code by benefiting from their precarious labor.

²⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), xii, 16 – 20.

²⁶ Bonnie Nardi and Jannis Kallinikos, “Technology, Agency, and Community: The Case of Modding in World of Warcraft.” In *Industrial Informatics Design, Use and Innovation: Perspectives and Services* ed. Jonny Holmström, Mikael Wiberg, and Andreas Lund (Pennsylvania: IGI Global, 2010): 174-186.

²⁷ Julian Kücklich, “Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry,” *Fibreculture* 5, no. 1 (2005): 1-5. Accessed February 25, 2023. <https://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>

In other words, Minecraft's digital code and the industry codes are 'devouring' the codes of Mexican everyday life and the labor of modders. The digital code is the dominant one because the modders are not modifying the internal rules of the video game, and the gameplay stays the same. In addition, the economic and market distribution industry codes remain dominant in relation to the pragmatic difference the mod supposes for players and modders looking for a "Mexicanized" version of Minecraft.

4. NESMANÍA CHALLENGE BY PIOTR DELGADO, 'THE MEXICAN RUNNER'

NESmania was a challenge undertaken by Piotr Delgado, who goes by the nickname 'The Mexican Runner.' Following Antonio Corona's²⁸ consideration that different forms of play, such as counterplay²⁹ and emergent gameplay,³⁰ can be considered as modes of agency.³¹ Nonetheless, those two forms of play cannot be thought of as *codephagy*, because they do not involve the reconstruction of codes. Here, however, I want to draw attention not to what happens 'inside' the game, but rather to what happens when video game playing happens.

The challenge's title, as Piotr explains, draws inspiration from the TV show *Nintendomanía*,³² which aired in Mexico in

²⁸ Antonio Corona, *Identidad, agencia, espacio*.

²⁹ "[Counterplay is] an account of play that emphasizes how the relationships between players and digital games oscillate between compulsion and adaptation, training and practice [...] it opens the possibility of an antagonistic relationship between the digital game and player. [...] [when] during the course of play the player produces results that were otherwise unanticipated during the design process." Tom Apperley, *Gaming Rhythms, Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2010), 102, 103.

³⁰ "Emergent gameplay can be described as either an aspect of the game itself, a subjective experience of the player, or an interaction between the player and the game." Jesper Juul, "Emergent Gameplay," in *A Dictionary of Video Game Theory*, (2005). Accessed March 9, 2023. <https://www.half-real.net/dictionary/>

³¹ Corona distinguishes the two terms by establishing that while counterplay is a conscious act of resistance to the game design, emergent play cannot be conscious and is embedded in the game design. See Corona, *Identidad, agencia, espacio*, 74.

³² Piotr Delgado, *Project*. Accessed March 9, 2023. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190420183711/http://themexicanrunner.com/project/>

the 90's. It showed tricks, walkthroughs, and news pertaining to Nintendo games. *NESmanía* began in 2014 and ended in 2017. It involved completing all 714 officially licensed Nintendo games for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) during live streams.³³

Here, the games' digital codes are untouched, and Piotr's livestreamed gameplay appears at first glance to merely follow conventions of Twitch. But by rebuilding the conventions in his stream, he actively made a pragmatic difference. The dominant codes I recognize are the use of the English language used predominantly in the context of video game streaming, the games themselves, and the employment of Mexican stereotypes.

We can observe that 'The Mexican Runner' does not reject the codes and stereotypes, but rather accepts them with a parodic twist. For example, 'The Mexican Runner' speaks with a noticeable accent (this, of course, could be a consequence of his usage of the language). However, his near-constant swearing in Spanish, which became a meme in his community, comically defies in an 'unthreatening' way the English language convention of the platform.

Another important element in this 'rebuilding' of codes is that, for several of the games he played, Piotr displayed parodies of the game cover images. Certain elements of these parodies were not recognized by some viewers due to their localized character. For example, the title *Galaga* was replaced by the name of his home city, Xalapa, a joke not understood by some users.³⁴

This attitude can be identified as ' *echar relajo*,'³⁵ following Itala Schmelz's elaboration on the notion of the

³³ Ethan Gach, *After Three Years Speedrunner Finally Beats All 714 NES Games*. Accessed March 9, 2023. <https://kotaku.com/after-three-years-speedrunner-finally-beats-all-714-nes-1792763769>

³⁴ See the comment on the Facebook publication of the modified box art. Accessed March 9, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=921350864567334&set=pb.100058310700547.-2207520000>.

³⁵ *Relajo* does not have a precise translation into English. Its meaning can be defined as having fun in an uncontrolled and chaotic way. It can include making fun of something or someone.

phenomenology of *relajo* from Jorge Portilla, combined with Echeverría's baroque ethos. 'Echar *relajo*' in Schmelz's elaboration involves acting or playing (as in a theater play) the values of modernity and reproducing them without truly believing in them.³⁶ In doing so, the imposed ideals of modernity are sabotaged by "making a portrait of ourselves as a grotesque reflection [...] that makes operate our nonconformity against imposed identities."³⁷

In this same vein, Piotr's uses Mexican stereotypes, such as "Mexican" hats, however reductive or problematic, follows the baroque ethos and the process of *codephagy* by apparently accepting the stereotypes, but employing them in humorous ways. It is a process of making fun of ourselves "that seems as 'only *echar relajo*' without confronting the dominant system; it is a form of resistance inasmuch [...] it results disruptive of hegemony and weakens its veracity."³⁸

5. 8 BIT BOLERO BOOM BOX BY ARCÁNGEL CONSTANTINI

Playing with the term 'bolero' in his sound art piece *8-bit Bolero Boom Box*,³⁹ Mexican sound artist Arcángel Constantini⁴⁰ arranges eight bolero songs from the 'Golden Age' with an 8-bit timbre. The 8-bit timbre is one of the

The RAE dictionary defines it as disorder, lack of seriousness, and relaxation of the norms. Accessed March 29, 2023.

<https://dle.rae.es/relajo>

³⁶ Schmelz, *Codigofagia*, 78-83.

³⁷ "un retrato de nosotros mismos como un grotesco reflejo que [...] hace operar nuestra inconformidad contra las identidades impuestas." Schmelz, *Codigofagia*, 78.

³⁸ "aparenta 'sólo echar *relajo*' sin confrontar al sistema dominante, es una forma de resistencia, en tanto que, [...] resulta disruptivo de la hegemonía y debilita su veracidad". Schmelz, *Codigofagia*, 14.

³⁹ Photos of the piece can be seen on the artist's website.

Accessed March 10, 2023. <https://arc-data.net/8bitboleroboombbox/index.html>

⁴⁰ Constantini has been considered to be one of the precursors of net art in Mexico. Rossana Lara, "Poner la escucha en (corto) circuito. Arte electrónico y experimentación sonora en México. Dos décadas" (PhD diss, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2016), 112 and 117-119. He also has been recognized as one of the first in Latin America to make art based on new media hacking. María Luján Oulton, "The Nuances of Video Game Curation," in *Video Games and the Global South*, ed. Phillip Penix-Tadsen, (Pittsburg: Carnegie Mellon, 2019), 246.

most easily recognizable elements of video game codes because it was made by the first personal computers,⁴¹ arcades, home consoles, and handhelds systems⁴². Additionally, the term 'bolero' in Mexico also refers to a type of informal job mostly practiced by men, cleaning and shining shoes. They often use a small wooden box where they store their tools, and it also functions as a footstool for their customers. Constantini's musical box is shaped after these small shoe shine boxes.

In this piece, we can see several codes coming from different contexts. On the one hand, the bolero songs and the *bolero* box could be considered codes from urban everyday life in Mexico. Conversely, I perceive the 8-bit video game music and sound art to be cosmopolitan urban codes. Since the box loses its original function as a work tool, and the bolero songs are arranged and heard in the context of a museum sound installation, it seems to me that their codes are being 'devoured' by the dominant ones of 8-bit music and sound art. Constantini rebuilds the codes of 8-bit music and sound art and transforms them from the inside with the 'remains' of the bolero music and the *bolero* box by de-contextualizing and taking them out of everyday "Mexican" life.

Following Echeverría, it is necessary to highlight the importance of these processes as being related to everyday life. He explains that the transformation of the dominant code happens when the reconstruction takes place in its "daily use, [it] claims its own singularity."⁴³ *Codephagy* "happens from below in everyday life, it affirms the reality of a civilizing combination [...] stopping the process [...] of the Spanish conquest."⁴⁴ Thus, the codes coming from daily life, such as urban bolero music and the *bolero* box, are

⁴¹ Karen Collins, "From Bits to Hits: Video Games Music Changes its Tune," in *Film International* 12, (2005): 4-19.

⁴² Melanie Fritsch, "History of video game music," in Peter Moormann (Ed.), *Music and Game: Perspectives on a Popular Alliance* (Switzerland: Springer VS Wiesbaden, 2013), 11-40. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-18913-0_1

⁴³ "en su uso cotidiano, reivindica su propia singularidad". Bolívar Echeverría, *Vuelta de siglo*, (Mexico: Monte Ávila 2017 [2006]), 195.

⁴⁴ "se da desde abajo en la vida cotidiana, afirma [...] la realidad de una combinación civilizatoria [...] viene a frenar el proceso [...] de la Conquista". Echeverría, *Vuelta de siglo*, 224.

transforming from the inside the dominant ones, stopping the impositions of the video game industry.

It is worth noting that 8-bit music is not considered to be "high art," but the piece is intended to be heard in a sound art installation and not in a private home setting, as would happen with 8-bit music coming out of a home video game console. It is necessary to remember that there has been a debate about whether or not video games can be considered to be art⁴⁵ and if they should be displayed in a museum.⁴⁶ This discussion is partially due to their social status as neglected media "because of lack of cultural prestige and scientific coverage."⁴⁷ Therefore, here the video game code is also being 'eaten' by the sound art code, a more 'serious' code. Thus, Constantini is rebuilding the sound art code with the remnants of 8-bit video game music code.

By merging two elements from the past, Golden Age boleros and 8-bit timbre, I consider this piece to be a sound uchronia, that is to say, speculation based on historical facts with alternate endings that "generate a discontinuity in the semantic codes or known cultural codes, to call attention to the state of things."⁴⁸ In this case, it is an imagining of what would have happened if there had been a video game industry during the splendor of bolero songs in Mexico. Hence, Constantini draws attention to the promises of technological progress represented by video games (a technology brought to Mexico from "developed" countries) but sabotages them by devouring the codes of everyday Mexican life.

6. CONCLUSIONS

These four case studies demonstrate the utility of agency and *codephagy* to describe and analyze, in terms of code, the

⁴⁵ Aaron Smuts, "Are Video Games Art?" in *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2005): 6.

⁴⁶ Georgina Goodlander and Michael Mansfield, "Press Start: Video Games in an Art Museum" in *Journal of Interactive Humanities* 1, no. 1(2013): 4.

⁴⁷ Philipp Reichmuth and Stefan Werning, "Pixel Pashas, Digital Djinns," in *ISIM review* 18, no.1 (2006): 47.

⁴⁸ "generar una discontinuidad en los códigos semánticos o culturales conocidos, para llamar la atención sobre el estado de las cosas." Schmelz, *Codigofagia*, 118.

power relations in social practices inherent in video games, such as production, modification, play, and appropriation in the Mexican context. It is evident that these concepts enable observation of these practices without severing the continuum between culture and video games using theoretical tools.

The different ways of agency or pragmatic difference—here as *codephagy* through the ‘devouring’ of codes—in which video games are culturally employed, can be thought of as strategies to deal with cultural tensions. This is similar of how Schmelz views Mexican science fiction as a strategy of apparent acceptance while actively resisting the forces of global imposition.⁴⁹ In the cases presented in this paper, the cultural tensions are generated when the video game industry codes (coming primarily from “developed” countries), circulate and are consumed in Mexico, a country where video games are mostly consumed but not produced as much as in the United States or Japan.

In this study, I argued neither against globalization nor in favor of “Mexican” nationalism. Instead, I have showed how there are power tensions by using the concept of *codephagy* in the practices described. These practices may serve as an example of the particularities in which these tensions operate, referring to Mexico as an axis for the cases discussed.

In Mexico, with the realization that we are outside the promise of technological capitalistic progress, one response to this happens through *codephagy*, a pragmatic difference that rebuilds the dominant codes. As mentioned throughout this paper, the dominant codes are represented by video games, seen as technological products brought from “developed” countries. Furthermore, at the same time that Mexican everyday life codes are ‘devoured,’ they transform the dominant codes from the inside. Quoting Schmelz, “the fact that we are located in the zones where the benefits of the first world are diluted, turns Latin American culture

⁴⁹ Schmelz, *Codigofia*, 12.

into some sort of degenerative or *codephagic* digestion of the developmental paradigms.”⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ “el hecho de encontrarnos en las zonas donde se diluyen los beneficios del primer mundo, convierte a la cultura latinoamericana en una especie de digestión de-generativa o codigofágica de los paradigmas del desarrollo”. Schmelz, *Codigofagia*, 17

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File #7



Title: A Walk in the Park?

Subtitle: The Freedom and Constraints of (Virtual)
Landscape Gardens

Author(s): Felix Schniz, Christoph Kaindel

This paper explores the artistic potential of game designers (understood as creators of virtual environments) and the motivations of players (as visitors of these environments) by reinterpreting them as, and comparing them to) landscape gardeners and flâneurs. Our thesis is that both sides are equally artists and recipients of their respective other, striving to achieve an aesthetic experience through their actions. At the same time, however, said experience is entangled in distinct freedoms and oppressions due to their co-dependency.

We present this relation of creators and connoisseurs of spaces in shape of a historiographic and philosophic debate. On the one hand, we provide the perspective of the landscaper/designer from the French and British traditions of the 18th century to modern theme parks and video games as purposefully designed spaces, with a focus set on the concrete rules of gardening and landscape to the adaptation of these virtual environments and into the creation of video games for playful exploration. On the other hand, we enter these playgrounds from the perspective of these very explorers - the walking explorers in real and virtual worlds - and their motivations. We shed a light on bourgeois flâneurs and their walking traditions, the system-defying walking practices of the situationists, contemporary ways of exploration, and how they help us understand the appeal of video game genres like the walking simulator. To inspire further discussion, we end this paper by providing a visual compass symbolising the wandering roles of gardeners, designers, flâneurs, and players.

Through these interplayed observations, we ultimately challenge the concept of artistic creation of the human being in the digital age.

Keywords: Design, Flâneur, Garden, Landscape, Space, Walking Simulators

1. INTRODUCTION: TIME FOR A STROLL?

Why do we enjoy a walk in the park? Most people would probably say they like being surrounded by nature, bushes, and trees that hide the concrete city beyond. In an often-cited study, Ulrich and Addoms found out that the passive experience of nature was the most important factor for visiting a park, more important than active recreation by sports and play (cf. 1981, 61).

Yet, a park is also a deceitful environment - meant to look like a natural habitat but, ideally, carefully arranged by a landscape gardener. It is a designed space, a tamed nature built from organic elements to nurture practical orientation and aesthetic pleasures.

In this paper, we argue that parks, real-world architecture, urban environments, and games are all designed spaces and thus, may provide worthwhile lessons for the understanding and making of video games. In order to triangulate the relationship between humans, computers, and interactive art, we approach this paper as a textual journey from the concrete rules of gardening and landscape to the adaptation of these virtual environments and into the hypothetical field of procedurally generating such landscapes in video games for playful exploration. We begin by discussing the art and act of walking in the analogue and the digital world. We focus on the design of the English landscape garden (or landscape park) and its relationship to digital games. And we extract lessons game designers have learned from garden designers, and what they could still learn from them.

Thereby, we juxtapose the freedoms and strict rules of landscape creators to the free will - or the lack thereof - of the promenading explorer setting out to make specific

experiences. Through these interplayed observations, we ultimately challenge the concept of artistic creation of the human being in the digital age and ask, in conclusion, and together with the audience:

How can we quantify the logical rulebook of virtual landscape gardens - and if yes, would we even desire to do so?

2. WHO WALKS YONDER?

In western philosophies, the idea of aware, contemplative walking through an environment is archetypically connected to the flâneur. These solemn walkers are a projection surface of *wanderlust* (Solnit 2001, 198) and as such, are equal parts literary trope and cultural myth. While there arguably is no precise definition of what makes a flâneur a flâneur, it evokes the image of a solitary character, walking, and typically embedded in an urban environment (ibid.). Ever since, the flâneur has become a willing canvas to authors who wanted a protagonist to share a sense of the atmosphere they were passing through, may it have been Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* ([1840] 2006), Henry James' Lambert Strether from *The Ambassadors* ([1903] 1998), or, in more recent incarnations, video game protagonists such as avatar Henry from the video game *Firewatch* (Campo Santo 2016). More importantly though, the odd (urban) wanderer has found its way into our cultural memory as an image of careful contemplation - for how else could we explain the idea that Aristotle himself taught his students while strolling around with them, a myth which has long been debunked (Lynch 1972, 74) but is still kept in our collective knowledge, fostering the idea of a philosopher as a smart person walking around to make sense of their thoughts.

The flâneur-motif may be well connected to the idea of strolling through an urban environment (cf. (Solnit 2001, 198), but it nevertheless encapsules the intent to trace a Romantic ideal. Romanticism can be regarded as a cultural and artistic paradigm shift which has the main impulse, as professor Irving Babbitt supposedly said, is defined by the "eagerness to get [one's] own uniqueness uttered" (in Waterhouse 1926, 40). Truly, the Romantic era was an age of the self, the seeking of religious, spiritual, philosophical, or personal meaning outside of societal order and thus, an active aim to break with the constraints of a rigid communal living (8). Moreover, nature was rediscovered

as a realm of exceptional "spiritual feeling and teaching" (ibid., 9) in Romanticism. Authors and thinkers of the era sought out important realizations about themselves via reclusive journeys to natural spheres, akin to how park environments offer the city-dweller a temporary retreat from the bustling life of an urban environment.

Due to their oscillating character, constantly in movement and actively aiming to literally step out of the social picture, flâneurs can be described queer agents within their given reference framework/environment (cf. Ruberg 2019, 2). Ruberg not only evokes the common associations between the flâneur, the dandy, and the fashionable escapist of gender identities (cf. Ivanchikova 2007) but reframes the flâneur as the character breaking out of a systematic pattern - just as the avatar of a video game. A flâneur walks and gazes within an environment in the role of an outsider or tourist, and, likewise, the avatar serves as the spatial misfit of the video game. Avatars are embedded within their virtual environment but instead of being guided by the input-output rules of the algorithm, they are guided by human, subjective player impulses. Wherever they go, they are outsiders, not integrated into to a scenery but merely a spectator passing by.

There is a lot that connects modern gaming to the myth of the flâneur. The first one who never just strolled around a video game to take in its level design may throw a stone here. It is not just that creed of walking and thinking that connects us here though but also the fact that our freedom is, in fact, only as free as it is intended by the designer, or, in case of real-life parks, an actual gardener.

3. THEME PARKS AND VIDEO GAMES

The theme park is the one form of popular entertainment that allows the flâneur to enjoy the feeling of being an avatar in a real-life video game - experiencing adventures in carefully designed fantastic environments, aided by NPCs dressed in fanciful costumes and engaging visitors in exciting activities. A theme park is an amusement park with an overarching theme that connects all its rides and attractions. Visitors are guided from one ride or show or food stall to the next following winding pathways. Main attractions can be seen from afar and are reached by passing lesser attractions before. Pleasurable experiences are

accumulated and allowed to culminate in a main experience to remember.

The similarities between theme parks and video games are obvious. What Lukas writes about theme parks could, without changing a single word, also be said about video games:

Unlike cinema and theatre, in which audience members passively watch the action on the screen or stage, and unlike the narratives of television and books, which are static, the theme park uses the immersion of the individual inside an unfolding and evolving drama as the basis of its unique form. (Lukas 2008, 8)

Disneyland may be regarded as the globally best-known example for a theme park. Disney designers have elevated the design of theme parks to an art form, and they are, basically, real life video games:

I found that theme parks are designed to move guests from one adventure to the next in the most effective way possible, much like a well - designed game level. [...] I noticed that the creation and structure of Disneyland bore a strong resemblance to creating and structuring a video game world. The basic progression of creation is this:

-Disneyland: world to land to attraction to scene.

-Video game: world to level to experience to moment- to - moment gameplay. (Rogers 2010, 208f.)

But the carefully designed artificial worlds of the theme parks did not appear out of nowhere. Their precursors were the pleasure gardens, intended for the entertainment of the masses, that were founded in the 17th century. Vauxhall Gardens, regarded as the first internationally famous pleasure garden, was founded in 1661. Other examples are London's Ranelagh Gardens and the Prater in Vienna. In pleasure gardens there were dance exhibitions, performances by acrobats, food stalls, fireworks and, beginning in the 19th century, mechanical rides like carousels and rollercoasters, and even animatronics. (cf. Lukas 2008, 23-25)

The pleasure garden can be considered the source of the 'play and entertainment' aspect of the theme park. The art of carefully crafting the natural environment to tell a story and lead the visitor through an adventure must be

traced to another precursor of the theme park: The English Landscape Garden.

In the following pages we follow the evolution of the landscape garden, its design principles, the role of the flâneur and, finally, the implications on game design.

4. ORIGINS OF THE LANDSCAPE GARDEN

The tradition of English landscape gardens has its origin in the French formal garden. The prime example of this style is the park of Versailles, created in the 17th century by the garden architect André LeNôtre for Louis XIV, and later copied by many European courts. The *Schlosspark Schönbrunn* and the Belvedere gardens in Vienna are parks in the French style. In the early *jardin à la française* the same principles of symmetry and geometrical forms were used as in Italian Renaissance gardens. (cf. Mukerji 1994, 662) Flower beds were arranged into multi-coloured ornaments similar to the baroque floral patterns that adorned furniture and fabric of the period. Bushes and trees were cut to geometric shapes - cylinders, cones, or spheres. Wide avenues and canals were laid out in bilateral symmetry. Stairs and ramps, decorated with statues and stone ornaments, connected the levels of the garden.

The French formal garden was designed as an extension of the chateau itself. It provided a ceremonial stage and allowed the rituals of court life to move beyond the walls of buildings. The design of the garden was a representation of absolute political power as well as the power of mankind over nature, artificially shaping nature to assume the most unnatural forms. The gaze and the steps of the visitors were, ultimately, always directed towards the chateau, the seat of the absolutist ruler. Louis XIV himself wrote itineraries for the garden promenades at Versailles that were used for diplomatic occasions. Visitors were entertained and fed as they moved along these prescribed routes. The itineraries assured that visitors would not miss any part of the garden and were properly impressed by the gilded statues, the fountains, waterworks, aqueducts, and the sheer size of the place. (cf. Mukerji 1994, 659-661) Both the rules of arranging the elements of the French formal garden as well as the movements of the visitors were highly regulated and constrained.

The English landscape garden, on the other hand, at first glance looks fully natural, allowing almost complete freedom of movement. It seems to "represent the more democratic English form of government" (Gerber/Götz 2019, 141). In fact, however, it was as undemocratic as the French garden, being reserved for use by a noble elite until the late 19th century. Like the French garden it also was a demonstration of power, but a more unobtrusive one. The English landscape garden sought to present an image of nature that was more natural than nature itself - the ultimate demonstration of mastery of mankind over nature. It aimed to be pleasing to the eye, to emphasise the greatness of its owners, to provide relaxation, awe and surprise, and, just like the French landscape garden, to guide the gaze and the steps of the visitors by its design.

John C. Loudon, the editor of the works of the great British garden architect Humphry Repton (1752-1818), draws a broad distinction between the two methods of gardening: "The art of laying out the grounds which immediately surround a country residence, may be displayed in two very distinct styles: the first of which is called the Ancient, Roman, Geometric, Regular, or Architectural Style; and the second, the Modern, English, Irregular, Natural, or Landscape Style." (Loudon 1840, v.)

English landscape gardens combined several natural formations into a pleasing arrangement. The main design elements were groups of trees and small forests, lawns, and bodies of water. As space was limited, these formations usually were a lot smaller than in natural surroundings. The English landscape garden was often more expensive to build than a park in the French style, because in many cases major ground movement was necessary to create artificial hills, rivers and lakes (Gerber/Götz 2019, 142).

The English landscape garden has been seen both as a manifestation of Enlightenment ideals, embodying the ideals of a liberal society and a more scientific approach to landscape design, and an early representation of Romanticism with its emphasis on mythology, spirituality and the Unseen (cf. Borgmeier 2009). Notable landscape gardens in Austria include the *Schlosspark Grafenegg*, the *Schlosspark Laxenburg*, the largest English-style park in Austria, and the English garden in *Kleinwetzdorf*, Austria's smallest one. Size, however, appears to be only a minor aside to the

flâneurs to whom the actual act of walking is what shapes the central quality of their experience.

5. OPPRESSING ARCHITECTURE VS. FREEFORM EXPLORATION: A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

Walking has, in a sense, always been connected to the idea of liberation from social norms - for the better or worse, historically speaking. In a time when most of society was locally bound to their profession, only a few, distinct groups of people travelled around by foot, including pilgrims, artists, but also thieves (cf. Wallace [1983] 2011, 29-30). While their vocations allowed them greater freedoms than others and to see more of a country than many of their contemporaries, it also marked them as outsiders rarely calling a homestead their own. The closer we verge to the modern era, the more walking has found a role as a positively connoted element of freedom in society. With the advent of industrialisation, the formation of a working class and the diversion of many European societies into the bourgeois and the proletariat, having the leisure to stroll surely could be regarded as a status symbol. To the better-suited gentleman and woman, these strolls nevertheless meant a different kind of freedom - an opportunity to ditch the constraints of the non-magical and ordinary. As Moser and Schneider elaborate, for example, taking a stroll was one of the few means of the middle class to escape the norms, roles, and expectations of a tight societal corsage (2007, 9). Going for a walk in the park allowed a person to be by themselves, and to focus on their own thoughts. It also allowed them to dictate the tempo of their actions freely, when, and how they wished to stop, for example, and what to gaze upon. Finally, it is worth mentioning that walking thus had a liberating quality especially for the women of the era, for whom a walk in the park was one of the few means to escape the restricting regime of the household they were expected to lead.

In the mid-20th century, the leisurely stroll - the means to escape for those who could afford the free time just an era ago - underwent an anti-capitalist transformation. French avant-gardist Guy Debord, for instance saw walking as an effective mean to counter the dictate of capitalism (cf. Debord [1957] 1981, 26). Debord's understanding of a walker was that of a disruptive element: In an age of expanding car traffic, early-morning commutes to work, and

a manyfold of other capitalist symptoms dictating the rhythm of daily life, walking leisurely meant to interrupt this routine and to focus on other things. Under Debord's situationists, para-scientific methodological terms for acts of walking were shaped, such as the *deambulation*, which is an utterly aimless walk and act of purposefully losing oneself in an environment (Coverley 2012, 186) and the later *derivé* (or, drifting, Debord [1958] 1981, 62). They all are carefully framed to encourage walking without a specific action in mind and thus, a raised awareness of the ambience and effect that a place has on us, our sentiments, and our thoughts.

This trend of walking as an act of emancipative liberation continues in the 21st century. As Western societies granted more liberties in general but were and are still, by and large, shaped by a capitalist 'bigger, better, faster' mentality, other traditions of walking emerged that show a spirit of defiance towards the dictates of purpose and productivity. One of them is *parcours*, or 'free running'. Instead of relying on sports equipment and dedicated spaces, *parcours* runners climb publicly accessible walls, reimagine ordinary elements such as park benches as obstacles to jump over and thus, turn an ordinary environment into an action playground. *Parcours* is arguably more than just 'playing the environment', however, as it can be seen as a means to think outside the box of urban constraints. It is, as Brett David Potter argues "the trope of the city "smoothed out" by creative movement is bound up with a return to nature, particularly in our own era of climate change and the degradation of urban spaces" (2019, 9). Another trend came in the shape of urban exploration. People started to take strolls into abandoned areas, derelict buildings, or otherwise 'lost places' (2014, 1). Aim of this practice is to get a more personal and immediate sense of the past that is not filtered or shaped by the ideologies of history books or tour guides. Video games, finally, began to introduce walking in distinctly digital virtual spaces. While their medial position is still a topic of debate, especially concerning the aforementioned anti-capitalist notions of walking traditions before, it is still one of the media forms to seek contemplation and the picturesque in. After all, the design of landscapes in video games can rely on a rich history of artistic traditions.

6. FROM THE MYTHOLOGICAL TO THE PICTURESQUE

The first English-style gardens were created in the beginning of the 18th century by garden architects like Charles Bridgeman (1690-1738) and his successor William Kent (1685-1748) (cf. Richardson 2007, 83-88; 265-268). Their patrons possessed large estates that were transformed into artificial landscapes reflecting the classical education of their owners. Perchance also due to that education, landscape paintings of the time served as inspirations for the landscapers. In fact, William Kent and other landscape gardeners were painters themselves (ibid, 266). To them, the landscape garden ideally was a series of "walkable paintings". As in many landscape paintings, motives from classical mythology and Arthurian legends were used. The early landscape garden was "packed with meaningful symbolism in the form of temples and other garden buildings; statuary, obelisks and other structures; plantations, topographical features and practical diversions such as plunge pools, boating lakes, banqueting houses and bowling greens." (Richardson 2007, 8) In the middle of the 18th century, the emphasis shifted from complex mythological scenes towards an idealised image of nature. The most influential and prolific landscape gardener of this phase was Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1715-1783). He worked primarily with natural, not architectural forms. While early landscape gardens were intended to appear strange and mythical, Brown's garden design re-created idealised, comfortable and familiar pastoral scenes:

The Brown landscape look, of sweeping pasture grazed by animals right up to the house, a large lake in the middle distance, clumps of trees naturalistically adorning hilltops, and a dramatically engineered entrance drive, made the most of the landscape-garden pioneers' habit of drawing the surrounding countryside into the garden, and of idealizing the view. (Richardson 2007, 469)

Brown's style, even though it has been criticised for a formulaic approach and lack of creativity (ibid, 471f.), inspired most of the parks in the English style that were created in Europe and the United States in the 19th century and formed the image of what is regarded as the 'typical' English landscape garden today.

But it is the following phase in landscape garden design that we believe is most interesting when viewing the landscape garden through the eyes of a game designer. In

1759, Edmund Burke wrote his theory of the sublime as a form of greatness that encompasses terror and vastness. The sublime was a category mostly used for works of art, but also could be found in nature. "The sublime in gardening refers to that delicious admixture of fear and pleasure engendered by dizzy precipices, gushing torrents, rickety bridges, mysterious hermits and dark woods." (Richardson 2007, 472) Some of these could already be found in the earliest garden designs, and now they were revived and refined to create the picturesque landscape garden. The painter William Gilpin (1724-1804) was one of the first to define the idea of picturesque beauty. While the most important quality of beauty, according to Burke, was 'smoothness', Gilpin argued that the main qualities of picturesque beauty were 'roughness' or 'ruggedness' (cf. Gilpin 1794, 5f.). The picturesque style was inspired by foreign places like the Alps and the Apennines with their impressive vistas and deep gorges. Ruins and grottoes were often used as design elements. The picturesque landscape garden was intended to evoke feelings of awe and terror, but also to inspire a sense of great beauty.

Many games, ranging from dedicated walking simulators such as *Firewatch* but also action-focused titles such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) or *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games 2017) clearly use an art and level design style similar to the Picturesque,

a style [that] is characterised by broken and rugged features and bold outlines, the trees and shrubs being arranged in irregular plantations, deep and tangled in portions. Sudden variety and contrast are freely employed, and with broken scenery, cascades and rapid streams, rocks, etc., when such natural advantages can be obtained, make a scene which would form the delight of a painter. [...] natural roughness of ground is indispensable. (Hughes 1866, 41f.)

7. STORYTELLING IN PARKS AND GAMES

Depending on the style of the park in question, architectural or natural design elements were used. Some techniques were universal to this endeavour, such as the usage of paths of different widths offering more (or less) evident routes through the park. It was not desirable to reach the other end of the park as fast as possible, however: Winding paths should give the impression that the park was larger than it

really was. The garden should never be encircled by a path along its boundaries, writes William S. Gilpin (nephew of the painter William Gilpin), because "the hanging perpetually on the boundary, by betraying the real dimensions of the place, destroys all idea of extent as effectually as it does that of variety." (Gilpin 1832, 64) For the same reason, adjacent paths should be concealed from one another by raising the ground between them (ibid, 66).

Just like today's game designers, garden designers used the elements of surprise and wonder. Interesting landmarks could be glimpsed from afar, were then concealed by a hill or group of trees, then suddenly appeared in front of the visitor. Excitement was fostered and resolved; visitors should constantly wonder what they would find around the next bend in the path.

Landscape gardeners used several methods to enable the visitors to form a story in their minds. 'Natural' elements like trees, bushes, rocks, grottoes, lakes and rivers were used to obstruct, attract and guide the view. Buildings, trees, rocks, and waterfalls often formed intricate compositions. In parks with a mythological theme, deep knowledge of Greek mythology and Arthurian legend was necessary to really appreciate the design of the garden. Ruins played a big role in environmental storytelling. They were intended to remind the visitors of the transience of existence. When looking at a ruin, visitors will be inspired to think about the former glory of the place. Thoughts of change and decay, regret and veneration will come up naturally, tinted with melancholy (cf. Symes 2016, 117; 132).

The English landscape garden told stories that were only available to a few - those who had access to the garden and were familiar with the source material meant to be discovered. A walking simulator, on the other hand, tells a story that is available to everyone. Or does it? Like a landscape garden, a game requires effort from the player. Players may enter a so-called walking simulator with certain expectations as raised by the medium itself. They may expect to be told a story. They may expect that it will be necessary to do some exploration, to discover clues in the form of images, written or narrated texts. They may expect that there will be no combat, that the game will progress at a leisurely pace, that there will be environmental storytelling, maybe a few light puzzles to solve. And like

almost every game, a walking simulator requires knowledge gained from playing other games - most of all how to move in a first-person game and how to interact with the environment. A play-through of a game like *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012) may therefore be quite close to the experience of walking through an English landscape garden.

The theme of freedom versus (often hidden) oppression also comes up strongly. Silke Steets describes the experience of walking through the park of Wörlitz, the first English landscape garden in Germany:

Visitors are [...] smoothly guided through the garden by its spatial and architectural organization. While walking from one visual axis to another, a story is being told. This seems to be very similar to video games. Going through the story is at the same time the act of telling the story. [...] You do not get instructions: move from point A to point B, then turn left, and so on and so forth. Games give you the impression of freedom, even though you are obviously strongly bound to a limited space. There are very "hard" algorithms behind the supposed freedom of movement. (Gerber/Götz 2019, 87)

It is interesting to note that the apparent "freedom of movement" in parks often was, like in games, restricted by invisible walls. To give the impression that the park was much larger, many landscape gardens were surrounded by walls called ha-ha or A-ha, an onomatopoeic name describing the expression of surprise visitors were expected to utter when they suddenly stood before one of these sunk fences.

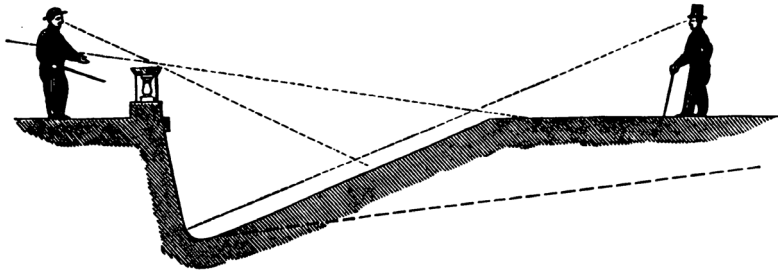


FIG. 30.

Fig. 3: A Ha-ha (Hughes 1866, 45).

A ha-ha is a wall hidden in a ditch. The ditch formed a gentle slope from the outside of the landscape garden towards a wall whose top was equal to the garden's ground level. Ha-ha were intended to keep people and animals from wandering into the garden, but not obstruct the view to the outside. Ideally, a ha-ha should only be seen when one was literally standing on top of it. To avoid the danger of visitors failing to notice the ha-ha and falling into the ditch, railings were often placed on top of the walls. Hughes - who differentiates between the carefully designed area of the garden and the parkland around it - writes: "In most cases, where the ground is level, the writer would separate the garden from the park by an unobtrusive ha! ha! with an almost invisible coping, and iron railings which are strong, cheap, and scarcely visible." (Hughes 1866, 46) Charles Bridgeman has been credited as the inventor of the ha-ha, but in fact the sunk fence had already been around for decades before his time (cf. Richardson 2007, 88).

Another element that supported storytelling in parks was the employment of ornamental hermits - comparable to a game's NPCs. Ornamental hermits were people employed by the park's owner to live on the premises. They could be consulted for advice and entertained visitors with stories. Garden hermits were supposed to live in grottoes or huts built for them, dress in rags or furs like it would be expected from a hermit, and generally play the part: "Archibald Hamilton, afterwards Duke of Hamilton [...] advertised for 'a hermit,' as an ornament to his pleasure-grounds; and it was stipulated that the said hermit should have his beard shaved but once a year, and that only partially." (Timbs 1866, 162) Even in the 18th and 19th centuries it was, however, rare for garden owners to employ a full-time ornamental hermit.

Summing up the experience of walking through a landscape garden compared to a video game, Andri Gerber writes:

The English landscape garden [...] is not about bounded spaces; on the contrary, exactly as in video games, it is about concealing the boundaries that are there, yet should not be perceived by the users. It is about time and movement through an "open" landscape, and movement is directed towards selected point de vues and architectures.

The entire landscape is constructed around a certain atmospheric effect, which should-in the best case scenario- evoke the sublime. (Gerber/Götz 2019, 144)

8. NO EXPERIENCE WITHOUT EXPERIMENTS

Virtual worlds are dictated by the rules of unique environmental capabilities. Their geography is strongly interconnected to how much freedom of exploration players may experience (cf. Smith and Tosca 2016, 129-140), to the plethora of different mechanical genres players may engage with during their playthrough (cf. Beil 2015), to how they may immerse in a game's fictional world and the story it tells. From a narrative perspective, these capabilities are typically expressed by the term environmental storytelling as it is used by Henry Jenkins (cf 2004). Every element of a virtual geography, may it be an in-game item, a 3d-modelled tree or shoreline, or the texture used for the cover of a book that players can see in a shelf but not interact with, is an analytical instance that serves players to shape an understanding of the fictional world through which they walk.

Walking simulators tend to be immensely open to interpretation (Pickard 2016, n.p.). They function on a kind of aware minimalism (Keogh 2015, n.p.) that grants players only the most limited means to interact with their environments. Thus, players, must rely fully on their personal awareness and observations to gain an understanding of a walking simulator's world, thereby "turning the most basic forms of interaction and living into golden discovery" (Cross 2015, n.p.). They cherish the mystery of the environment and the curiosity of their players, relying on the provision of an interpretable environment rather than on overt explanation. Thereby, they create a strong relation between the narrative capabilities of the video game and the concept of the flâneur, who watched and took in their surroundings rather than engaging with the places they passed or their inhabitants.

To experience these freedoms, however, players must first learn how a game is played. Every new video game is a new system of input and output relations, of rules and win-conditions to decipher for the players. What they experience in the first moments of playing a game can be described as a *Geworfenheit* of sorts, in the Heideggerian sense (if we follow Moralde 2014). The introductory moments of a video game strand players in a new world, dictated by a delicate interplay of its own fictional components and rules (cf. Juul 2005). As players, we know that we must interact with this world in order to experience whatever it holds for us,

so it encourages us to learn its rules. Moreover though, in these initial moments - and typically many more moments down the road - players will test out the limitations of the rules the game gives them. Can I jump over that fence? Can I kill that non-player character? Can I enter this building if I just find a way to jump over that hedge? The game's initial sensation of *Geworfenheit* thus furthermore encourages players to break with its constraints.

But Moralde sees more in a video game's *Geworfenheit* than a thorough philosophical grasp on how players assess their worlds. Moreover, he argues for that a player's initial lack of ontological embeddedness in a virtual world can, in fact, find expression in an aesthetic longing that encourages players to explore their surroundings. On the example of *Dear Esther*, he elaborates on how the game's geography is designed in a way that gives players something akin to a landscape painting, yet not fully following artistic principles of landscape paintings, such as in the opening moments of the game *Dear Esther*. The game opens with a fade from black, suggesting that the player avatar awakens on a pier, sees an abandoned lighthouse in front and a rocky shoreline slightly to the left, with a yet unidentified tower with a red signal light in the distance. The raw, Hebridean scenery captures the reverence of great, powerful nature motifs that is oftentimes connected to the British romantic ideal in landscape painting (cf. Decker 646-647) and enriches said tradition with the appeal of the virtual and immersion. Instead of a static picture following clear rules of harmony and ratio, we are free to arrange our avatar's perspective according to our player will. Due to the general arrangement of the landscape - and, of course, the fact that we progress the game by moving through it - the game "connects to both a British tradition of walking (and thinking) through landscapes and a Romantic tradition of landscapes as external figurations of inner states" (Reynolds 2014, 54).

9. DESIGN PRINCIPLES OF THE LANDSCAPE GARDEN

A landscape garden idealised and exaggerated nature, so the first logical step in planning a park was to observe nature itself. Repton stated that to be a good landscape gardener one needed to combine the abilities of a painter with that of a gardener. He used to look at the proposed site of a garden like he would compose a painting: "The masses of

light and shade, whether in a natural landscape or a picture, must be broad and unbroken, or the eye will be rather distracted employed by the flutter of the scene." (Loudon 1840, 79f.)

The transformation of farmland to a landscape garden took a minimum of 10 years. (Downing 1855, 113f.) The most important consideration was to enhance the desired view as much as possible. Trees, bushes or even hills should be removed when obstructing an interesting view. The perceived size of parts of the scenery depends on the size of objects around it. Free-standing elements generally appear larger. Following this principle, an artificial perspective can be introduced and a site can be made to appear larger than it really is. (cf. Loudon 1840, 148f.)

Particular care needed to be taken in the design of lakes, as described by Hughes: "Avoid the shape of a guitar. Endeavour to give some intricacy, where it will be seen that, small as the pond is, its limits cannot be discovered from any one place. For producing intricacy and concealing the limits of a piece of water, islands will be found very useful." (Hughes 1866, 169) Hughes even provides advice for placing paths around the lake:

The vista lines must be drawn with great care, and in no case should a path take its course by the edge of the pond, it should advance and recede. If the ground is very flat and uninteresting, raise mounds and introduce islands; these last give scope for the imagination, and will much assist in masking the sources and terminations. If the one be a cascade and the other a good stream, there is no need to mask either [...] (ibid, 171)

If there is a viewpoint close to the lake, care must be taken to provide the very best view on the lake from this viewpoint (ibid, 173).

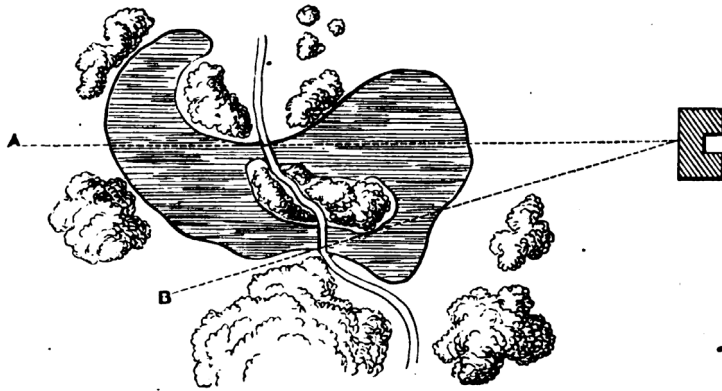


FIG. 185.

Fig. 2: Arranging a Lake (Hughes 1866, 173.)

One of the most important considerations when planning a landscape park was, of course, the planting of trees. Repton compares natural groups of trees to planted ones. The latter are planted at regular intervals, so the trees have room enough to grow, and the stems are vertical. The former however grow at irregular intervals, often the trees grow too close together and the stems grow at an angle. Visitors may not notice these details consciously, but they will notice that something is 'off' or unnatural. (Loudon 1840, 170f.) Downing describes in detail the patterns to be used in planting groups of trees to achieve different visual effects, like the beautiful or the picturesque. (Downing 1855, 102f.) William Gilpin devotes a whole chapter to the discussion which forms of trees are to be used for which visual expression, and how to combine them. About the weeping willow, for instance, he writes:

The weeping willow [...] is not adapted to sublime objects. We wish it not to screen the broken buttress and Gothic windows of an abbey, or to overshadow the battlements of a ruined castle. These offices it resigns to the oak, whose dignity can support them. The weeping willow seeks a humble scene—some romantic footpath bridge, which it half conceals, or some grassy pool over which it hangs its streaming foliage. (Gilpin 1791, 62)



Fig. 3: Example of a Picturesque Scene (Downing 1855, 272).

Buildings and decorations were designed in Grecian, Roman, Gothic or 'rustic' styles. A small summer house at some distance to the main house could be fit with a fireplace to be 'suited for a romantic situation.' (Hughes 1866, 125) Architectonic elements like covered seats were placed at the end of a path where they offered seclusion or a particularly pleasant view. Quite similarly, video game developers have picked up these traditions and learned to offer pleasant overviews and sights for their players, oftentimes combining them with a rewarding gameplay experience even. For the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (Ubisoft since 2007), encouraging players to climb vantage points in return for additional points on their maps and a spectacular view has been a trademark feature since the very first game.

However, some players may be offered a seat at the end of a long journey and they still do not want to take it. Alas! At times, I wonder why I even bother designing things for them...

10. PARK DESIGN AND GAME DESIGN

The previous observations have shown that the design of a landscape garden, from the placement of obstacles to the careful use of lighting situations, is comparable to the work of a level designer. Is there a direct connection between landscape garden design and video game design? Have level designers used the wealth of information on landscape garden design to create open world levels? In 1998, Ernest Adams wrote:

Lancelot "Capability" Brown designed an entire landscape of lawns, sculptures, waterfalls, copses of trees, and little buildings - usually imitations of Roman shrines. One of the principles of his designs was surprise. Following a path would lead to an unexpected vista or a statue that was hidden from the main house. The landscape garden encourages - and rewards - the visitor's inclination to explore.

This is another worthwhile principle to consider in game design. The obvious parallel is to adventure games, where exploration is the point, but it can apply to other kinds of games as well. (Adams: 1998)

Landscape architects have been involved in several game projects; for instance, the environment of *The Witness* (2016) was developed by Fletcher Studio, who approached this task in a similar way that they would tackle a real-world landscape design assignment. (Fletcher Studio: 2017) But we found little evidence that the English landscape garden has regularly been used as a template for game design.

So, the question remains: Is it useful or even possible to apply the rules of landscape park design to video game design? We suggest that even on a basic level, both in terms of game play (walking in virtuality) and real-life peripatetic practices (the ways in which gardens are designed or walking practices are executed), that there is much that both fields can learn from one another. There is a great body of literature on garden design that could be helpful for designers of open world games, as both are artificial spaces that create a condensed, idealised representation of nature in a limited space. Even more interesting could be the application of landscape garden design principles with the help of an AI. It should be possible to use the many clearly defined rules of landscape garden design and the maps of existing gardens in the English

style to teach an AI and have it turn out interesting open world designs. This might be one of our future projects.

11. A SERIES OF PARKS, A COMPASS OF INTENTIONS

This vivid exchange of four perspectives - the park designer, the game designer, the flâneur and the player - shows that design processes that are particularly concerned with landscape arrangements, both analogue and digital, reveal an intricate relation between creative offerings and aesthetic demands. To visualise these delicate crossroads, we arranged them as the directions of a metaphoric compass.



Fig. 5: Our Designer's Compass.

Game designers and landscape architects shape environment with a creative mission statement. They are either seeking inspiration by traversing environments or by transforming these inspirations into self-arranged geographies, settings, or theme parks that, ideally, draw from a wealth of established rules to provide an aesthetic experience. - They are concerned with the shape of lakes, the setup of ha-has, or the mechanics they may or may not grant to the flâneurs or players visiting their worlds. Landscape development is the creative freedom to provide a sense of freedom in a carefully designed area. Even if ever so gallantly, it oppresses its visitors into a carefully crafted aesthetic framework of paths and stylistic elements.

Flâneurs/players, meanwhile, wishes to experience the liberation of the peripatetic act. They may seek aesthetic pleasure or serenity as they traverse a different surrounding. Confrontations with the oppressive on their journey - fences and limitations in real gardens or video game landscapes are countered by seeking new paths and

alternative ways to approach an environment, perchance as a speed run in a video game or as a *parcours* runner or urban explorer in real life.

Our compass is, of course, not meant as a precise tool, but a visual aid to track the facets in the shared making of a landscape experience between gardener, designer, walker, and player. Akin to a journey through a landscape, these roles are in constant motions between creative potential to realise, the freedom to do so and the constraints that will be met at some point, and the sentiments which artists and connoisseurs alike seek out.

12. CONCLUSION

This paper took a gander at the relations between landscapers, flâneurs, and what we can deduce from them about the relation between game designers and players. A historical approach to the issue that spanned French and British landscaping traditions, as well as Victorian British and modern French understandings of walking, revealed a set of surprising conjunctions: landscapers made use of a variety of tools that resemble design strategies for video game environments, ranging from (invisible) barriers to environmental markers and even human non-'player' characters. Flâneurs, meanwhile, just as players in a video game environment, are misfits in their surroundings - not a pre-conceptualised part of it but a visitor to a different environment, learning to literally play by its rules. Their aim is to interpret their surroundings and to draw from its ambient aesthetics. This is especially cherished in games of the walking simulator genre that foreground self-destined, calm exploration without overt narrative reigns or mechanic challenges. In the game design process, this oscillation between design tools and player needs reveals that there are moments of freedom (creative, explorative) on both sides, just as much as there are moments of oppression (design limitations, the need to follow pre-designed paths). Understanding this sensitive compass of needs and demands may provide inspiration for future approaches to walking simulators, may it be their analysis or their design. This includes AI approaches to the topic.

Like a game that is not complete without a player, a park is not complete without a flâneur. A game without a player is a realm of possibility. A game played is a realm of

experience. True nature - a mountain range, a swamp, a desert - in itself does not have a purpose, it can exist without humans, indeed it is better off without them. A park needs visitors to fulfil its function. Therefore there are three aspects we have considered in our analysis: environment, experience and expression. Environment is the artificial, carefully designed world the flâneurs find themselves in. Their experience, though guided by the garden designer or game designer, will be different for everyone. Expression, finally, stands for both the intentions of the designer represented by their work and for the way our flâneurs choose to move through and act upon the park or game world. Environment, experience, and expression are closely intertwined - one cannot be looked at without looking at the others.

Laying bare this thought process may also inspire further research at the crossroads of real and virtual landscape design. Photo composition may be such an area, for instance. More and more video games, such as Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019) feature opulent tools for in-game photography that grant a range from actual camera functions like focus and exposure, to options concerning the photographed motif - i.e. the option to let the avatar pose for the camera in fashions that would break with in-game logic, or to arrange weather and sun position to fit the sensitivity of the photographer. As in-game photography is a feature belonging to, but rarely essential to the win-conditions of a game, they are a decidedly peripatetic feature, void of any meaningful progress but that of self-experiencing the video game through the self-chosen lens of the artist. Furthermore, one could set forth from this paper and ask how parks and video games are elements of relaxation and leisure for those not wishing to engage them personally. Studies have shown that parks also mean emotional respite for those not visiting them regularly (Ulrich & Addoms 1981, pp. 60-63), and a growing number of people consuming video games not as players but as passive streamers on online platforms such as twitch.tv suggests that there is a target audience drawing joy from an awareness of and interest in games without a need to play them. Finally, our back and forth bears a distinct relevance in the age of AI-generated content. With the needs of players, the intends of flâneurs and designers, and the tools of landscape gardeners exposed, could one train an AI to generate parks?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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A WALK IN THE PARK?

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File #8



Title: The Freedom of Choice

Subtitle: A Preliminary Analysis of Lootboxes in EA FIFA Ultimate Team and the Introduction of a Player Type Model

Author(s): Michaela Wawra, Alexander Pfeiffer

This paper presents a first literature review on the game mechanics of loot boxes, with a focus on their impact in Electronic Arts' (EA) FIFA Ultimate Team (FUT). It introduces a player type model categorizing players based on their engagement with loot boxes and provides a preliminary analysis of each category's experience. The purpose of this short paper is to lay the groundwork for a full study examining the freedom of choice players have when engaging with loot boxes, the consequences of their financial investment, and their overall gameplay experience.

Keywords: Loot boxes, Gambling, FIFA, Player types

1. INTRODUCTION

The monetarization strategy of the video game industry has changed from selling physical or digital games as a source of revenue to the implementation of in-game microtransactions (Lemmens, 2022). Microtransactions are anything you spend money on in the game to unlock different features and aspects such as consumable or cosmetic items. A form of consumable item is a loot box (Gusmão, et al., 2019). Zendle, et al., 2020 defines loot boxes simply as "items in video games that players may buy for real-world money but have randomised contents." (Zendle, et al., 2020). Johnson & Brock, 2019 describe a loot box as an "in-game item purchase consisting of a virtual 'box' (or 'crate' or 'chest') that rewards in-game items to players based on

mechanics of chance and probability." (Johnson & Brock, 2019). Loot boxes are henceforth virtual items purchased with in-game currency that includes random content that it based on chance.

The first major game developer to incorporate loot boxes into its games was Electronic Arts (EA) with FIFA 09, also known as FIFA Ultimate Team (FUT), in 2008. EA's revenue from FUT in 2021 was estimated at \$1.6 billion, largely due to the introduction of loot boxes (Lemmens, 2022). Therefore, loot boxes have become a prevalent game mechanic in the gaming industry. The mechanic incorporates elements of gambling, as players purchase or earn loot boxes without knowing the exact contents, leading to potential financial consequences and addiction risks (Zendle & Cairns, 2019). This short paper reviews the current literature on loot boxes and introduces a player type model, providing a preliminary analysis of each category's experience with loot boxes in FUT.

2. RESEARCH GOAL

The purpose of this paper is to set the stage for a full study investigating the freedom of choice players have, when engaging with loot boxes, the consequences of their financial investment, and their overall gameplay experience. By examining the player type model in detail, the study will contribute to the ongoing socio-political discussion surrounding loot boxes and their potential regulation.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on loot boxes has primarily focused on their psychological and financial impacts on players and ethical implications. A study by Zendle and Cairns (2019) found a significant correlation between loot box spending and problem gambling, raising concerns about the potentially harmful effects of this game mechanic. Similarly, King and Delfabbro (2018) emphasized the predatory nature of loot boxes, arguing that they exploit players' psychological vulnerabilities and contribute to excessive spending and addictive behavior.

Pfeiffer & Sedlecky (2020) bring into discussion that loot boxes have constantly gained popularity, and therefore it could be argued that game designers, driven by a desire for profit, have incorporated subtle mechanics into games that closely resemble gambling. These mechanisms can lead players to inadvertently engage in gambling-like activities, spending real money on virtual items that may not provide any direct, tangible value to their in-game character or account.

However, other research has examined the appeal of loot boxes and their role in player enjoyment. Hamari et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis exploring the reasons behind players' purchase of virtual goods, finding that players are motivated by factors such as enjoyment, social interaction, and self-expression. This suggests that loot boxes may not be inherently harmful but can contribute to a positive gameplay experience if used responsibly.

Sakhapov & Brown's (2020) study revealed that gamers view loot boxes as an opportunity for monetization for the video game industry. As long as loot boxes are not used excessively, participants agreed that loot boxes are generally acceptable. The study also found that some players actually considered opening loot boxes satisfying and had fun with them, as long as the chance to win the loot was balanced and there were no pay-to-win mechanisms. However, participants also agreed that loot boxes were very similar to gambling and that the frequency of loot boxes increased in almost all games.

In addition to the psychological aspects, the literature has also addressed the broader context of gaming and in-game monetization strategies. Macey and Hamari (2019) explored the emergence of loot boxes in the context of the gaming industry's shift from one-time purchases to ongoing monetization through microtransactions. They highlighted the need for further research on the effects of such practices on player behavior and well-being.

The debate surrounding loot boxes has also led to discussions about regulation and policy. The regulators have been dedicated to the two main areas of gambling and consumer exploitation with loot boxes. The most discussed regulatory decisions concern Belgium and the Netherlands, which have already taken serious measures. While Belgium recommends a

ban on loot boxes, the Netherlands has already banned loot boxes based on gambling (McCaffrey, 2019).

Gainsbury (2019) examined the challenges and implications of gambling and gaming convergence for regulation and responsible consumption. The author called for greater clarity in defining and distinguishing between gambling and gaming, as well as the implementation of harm-minimization strategies to protect players.

From a consumer protection perspective, loot boxes generate concerns because their random reward mechanism is very similar to gambling. This issue could be a steppingstone to gambling for any player. Due to their limited knowledge of costs and odds and their lack of impulse control, children are particularly susceptible to these types of mechanisms. However, more research on the effects on children is needed to show the corresponding consequences (Cerulli-Harms, et al., 2020).

Once again, it is apparent that many stakeholders are interested that loot boxes are designed in an ethical way. Most notable is the way loot boxes resemble gambling mechanisms. Meschik (2018), an educational scientist, argues that the mechanics of "loot boxes" closely resemble gambling machines in terms of appearance and function. The abstraction of real money, similarities in audiovisual design, and manipulation of random algorithms are just a few of the numerous techniques that seem to have inspired the gambling and video game industries. However, some arguments oppose the recognition of "loot boxes" as gambling, such as the inability to obtain financial value from invested money or the fact that players always receive something in exchange for their investment, albeit not necessarily the desired items. From a pedagogical perspective, it is crucial to acknowledge that "loot boxes," "loot crates," and similar mechanics bear strong resemblances to gambling and are easily accessible to children and adolescents through digital games. Meschik says it is necessary to openly discuss and reflect on this issue with the target audience. Given that young individuals are generally more familiar with the medium than their teachers or parents, a fundamental attitude of openness, curiosity, and persistence is required.

In conclusion, the literature on loot boxes reveals a complex landscape with significant concerns about their

psychological and financial impacts on players, particularly due to their similarities with gambling. Studies have indicated correlations between loot box spending and problem gambling (Zendle & Cairns, 2019), as well as their exploitative nature (Cerulli-Harms, et al., 2020; King & Delfabbro, 2018). Conversely, research has also highlighted the positive aspects of loot boxes, such as their role in player enjoyment, social interaction, and self-expression (Hamari et al., 2019; Sakhapov & Brown, 2020). The broader context of gaming and the industry's monetization strategies also play a crucial role in the lootbox phenomenon (Macey & Hamari, 2019; Pfeiffer & Sedlecky, 2020; Sakhapov & Brown, 2020). The convergence of gambling and gaming has raised challenges for regulation and responsible consumption (Gainsbury, 2019; McCaffrey, 2019), further emphasizing the need for clear definitions and harm-minimization strategies. Finally, Meschik (2018) underscores the importance of pedagogical professionals engaging with the target audience to openly discuss and reflect upon the issue of loot boxes and their potential effects on children and adolescents. This multifaceted issue necessitates a comprehensive approach that balances the enjoyment and monetization aspects of loot boxes with the protection of players, particularly younger and more vulnerable populations.

4. PLAYER TYPE MODEL

In FUT, players can collect professional footballers by opening loot boxes in the form of packs to create a dream team (Siuda, 2021). The player type model provides a foundation for examining the varying experiences of players with loot boxes in FUT. For instance, esports players or streamers may rely on loot boxes to maintain a competitive edge, while players with self-imposed budgets might use them responsibly to enhance their gameplay experience. However, players seeking a high division push or those under constant pressure to purchase may be more susceptible to the negative consequences of loot boxes, such as financial loss or addiction.

- **Esports players or streamers with predefined budgets:** This category includes professional esports players and content creators who operate within set budgets, ensuring that their personal finances remain unaffected. These individuals often require top-tier squads for competitive gaming and content creation purposes.

- **Self-budgeted players:** This group comprises players who allocate a budget for loot box purchases and typically adhere to it. They may also request vouchers for special occasions such as birthdays or holidays. These players manage the balance between earned and free loot boxes.

- **High division aspirants:** These players are confident in their ability to reach high divisions and seek a competitive edge through loot box-purchased players. They occasionally exceed their budgets, rationalizing the extra spending with thoughts like "this is the last time I'll buy in-game currency." These players often make impulsive purchases during special events or offers and may eventually realize that skill, rather than team composition, is the primary determinant of victory. Although they may experience financial loss, it is generally not severe enough to be existential.

- **Pressure-driven purchasers:** This category encompasses players who make purchases due to constant external or internal pressure. Sources of pressure may include peer groups, social media posts showcasing others' success, or a belief that a better team is necessary for victory despite lacking confidence in their own skills. These players may struggle with more complex challenges, such as winning a specific number of games in a special mode. Spontaneous purchases can result in budget overloads, which, in extreme cases, may lead to a loss of livelihood.

- **Road to Glory players:** These players pride themselves on their success without spending any money on the game. They are typically skilled gamers who have built exceptional teams without any financial investment. They consistently earn rewards from high divisions, the Ultimate Team esports mode, and special quests, and they strategically engage in Squad-Building Challenges, trading unneeded cards for valuable ones.

5. DISCUSSION

The proposed player type model, informed by the literature, serves as a starting point for future research examining player interactions with loot boxes in FUT. This research may shed light on how different player types manage their engagement with this game mechanic and the subsequent

consequences, both positive and negative. Furthermore, this research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of loot boxes in the overall game experience and advance the understanding of player type models in other games.

The full study will explore the player type model in greater depth, examining each category's motivations, spending patterns, and experiences with loot boxes. Additionally, it will seek to identify any subcategories or unique player experiences that may be overlooked in the preliminary model. This comprehensive analysis will contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding loot boxes and help the understanding how loot boxes influence the player's experience.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GAMING INDUSTRY AND POLICY MAKERS

The findings from this and future research on loot boxes and the player type aim to have several implications for the gaming industry and policy makers. A better understanding of how different players engage with and are affected by loot boxes can help game developers make informed decisions about the design and implementation of such mechanics. For instance, they could consider alternative ways to monetize their games, such as cosmetic items or optional content, that do not rely on gambling-like mechanics (Gainsbury, 2019).

Moreover, the research can inform policy makers in their efforts to regulate loot boxes and protect players from potential harms. Based on the findings, they may choose to implement restrictions on loot box sales, such as age limits, spending caps, or transparency requirements for the odds of obtaining specific items (Macey & Hamari, 2019). Furthermore, policy makers can promote responsible gaming practices and support initiatives that educate players about the potential risks associated with loot boxes and other forms of in-game spending.

7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

This short paper has provided an overview of the literature on loot boxes and introduced a player type model based on

the game FIFA Ultimate Team as a basis for future research. The full study will aim to examine the model in depth, explore the motivations, spending patterns, and experiences of different player types, and contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding loot boxes and their impact on players and the gaming industry. The study will be conducted through a survey that will be posted in various forums and other platforms to better comprehend player types and their behavior on loot box spending. Ultimately, this research can help inform both game developers and policy makers as they navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by loot boxes and other in-game monetization strategies.

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SECTION II

HOW REPRESENTATIONS OF FREEDOM AND
OPPRESSION CAN FUEL EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS
AND SOCIAL DISCOURSE

File #9



Title: Work, Play, Escape

Subtitle: Freedom and Submission in Video Games
about Office Jobs

Author(s): Kübra Aksay

Video games can be seen as escapist due to their ability to transport players to virtual worlds and allow them to take on different roles and identities. However, not every video game offers players freedom and countless adventures in expansive worlds that are different from everyday life. It is difficult to consider the non-navigable, grim, constrained office spaces and stories about labor and authority featured in a number of video games such as *Papers, Please*, *Beholder 2*, and more recently in *Not for Broadcast*, as popular images of a world many players dream about escaping to.

This paper discusses how representations of constrained environments, stories about dystopian governments and oppression, and the limitations of interaction in gameplay can create engaging video game experiences. Parallels and distinctions between approaches to the concepts of freedom and submission among games about office jobs are analyzed in order to conceptualize what can make these games enjoyable for their audience.

Keywords: dystopia, labor, spatiality, serious games

1. INTRODUCTION

Papers, Please, originally released in 2013 and published by 3909 LLC, is a video game where the player takes the role of a border inspector, and the main actions players perform

in the game can be roughly summarized as sitting at a desk and inspecting documents. In the game's sole developer Lucas Pope's own words, "[i]t is hard to describe the game and make it sound fun" (qtd. in Lee). Following the success of *Papers, Please*, a considerable number of - mainly independent - video games such as the *Orwell* series (*Fellow Traveler*, 2016-), *Beholder 2*¹ (Alawar, 2018), and *Not for Broadcast* (tinyBuild, 2022) have also featured gameplay that simulates various desk jobs. With a few expectations, such as *Job Simulator: The 2050 Archives* (Owlchemy Labs, 2016), a comical virtual reality game that allows for a high level of freedom and interactivity despite the setting of office space, the majority of desk job-themed video games limit the player's freedom to a remarkable extent. But if this is the case, what makes these games with all work and no play, set in a constrained office space, enjoyable? My main aim in this paper is to answer this question by examining how video games about office jobs approach the concept of freedom.

My examination of freedom -or rather the lack of it- in these games focuses on three dimensions that many of these games about office jobs share. The first one is the spatial dimension. The office worker's tasks in these games sometimes take place in a virtual office space, as in *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013) or *Papers, Please*, and sometimes on a simulated screen of an electronic device which becomes the mere interface of the game as in *Uplink* (Introversion Software, 2001), the *Orwell* series, *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015), and *Hypnospace Outlaw* (No More Robots, 2019). It can also be a combination of representations of both the screen and physical space as in *Beholder 2*, an adventure game developed by Warm Lamp Games, in which the work assignments are completed on a simulated computer, but the player character can also navigate the building where the job is performed. Whether it is fully represented in the game or not, the setting of office spaces in these games merits attention for two main reasons. Firstly, the office space is typically not a playground, it is where work is performed and the representations of these spaces in games are full of reminders of work, such as tools, documents, and instruction manuals. Secondly, the characteristics of such a setting are significantly different than spaces in many other video games, particularly open-world games, which often represent expansive and highly navigable game worlds.

¹ The first and third titles in the *Beholder* series do not have office room setting although all games focus on the simulation of a job and touches upon similar themes.

Some prominent theories of spatiality in video games such as Henry Jenkins' idea of "game designers [...] as narrative architects" and the significance of spatial representation or the navigation of space (as theorized by e.g. Manovich and J. Murray) are the reference points in my understanding of this dimension.

The player's lack of freedom to move and interact within the environment is further reinforced by the player character's obligation to follow a certain set of rules and bureaucratic procedures according to the game's plot in all examples that are mentioned in this paper. Thus, the second dimension to be examined in regard to freedom is the representational one. It is hard to overlook the fact that like *Papers, Please*, quite a few other games that simulate desk jobs take place in fictional countries with authoritarian or totalitarian governments in power. While dystopian settings in video games as well as popular media in general are vastly common, titles such as *Papers, Please, Orwell*, and *Not for Broadcast* share quite specific themes about political corruption and oppression such as invasion of privacy, surveillance, and media censorship. More importantly, the roles of player characters in these games and their initial inability to take action against the political systems show striking similarities. Previous work on these representations, such as Soraya Murray's chapter about the influence of George Orwell's work in video games and Miguel Sicart's analysis of *Papers, Please* in regard to ethics constitutes the main conceptual framework to discuss this second dimension of freedom.

Lastly, from a game design and player-experience point of view, it is necessary to also consider the sense of freedom provided to the player. Freedom in this context can be in terms of decision-making, as another similarity between the games mentioned so far is that they all offer branching narratives and multiple endings. When interpreted in this manner, the freedom of choice ties in closely with the representation of freedom of the player character I mentioned above, thus the analyses of the narrative of such games (e.g. by Sicart) are also helpful to understand the player's experience of narrative choices. In addition to decision-making, when approached from a different perspective, another parallel between the game mechanics of mentioned games is the repetitive tasks. This aspect is closely associated with what makes these games enjoyable according to Ian Bryce Jones, who applies the concept of

process genre from film studies to video games in his article series "The Process Genre in Videogames: In the Shadow of *Papers, Please*". The term *process genre*, introduced by Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, refers to films that focus on the process of completing tasks and overcoming obstacles to achieve a certain goal (Skvirsky 33). I find that this genre's focus on the processes of performing tasks is not specific enough to refer to the games I focus on in this paper. Nonetheless, when applying the *process genre* to video games, Jones makes certain observations about how the aesthetics of office jobs in games can improve player engagement which will be relevant to the arguments in this paper. Although repetitive work tasks may not immediately appear relevant to the aspect of freedom, the last component of my theoretical framework, Marc LeBlanc's concept of *submission*, associates the two. The concept is first introduced as part of the taxonomy of aesthetics commonly referred to as "eight kinds of fun" by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek in their influential framework "MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research". Greg Costikyan further explains the concept of *submission* in his work "I Have No Words & I Must Design". I use this concept as a reference point to understand the possible appeal of following instructions, performing repetitive procedures, and/or trying to defy the oppressive structures in games about bureaucratic jobs.

2. WORKPLACE AS THE GAME WORLD

According to Janet Murray, "digital environments are spatial", and although other media can describe places and environments, in video games spatiality is unique because video games can afford the representation of an interactive and "navigable space" (J. Murray 79). Considering that navigable spaces have been regarded as one of the strengths of video games by a number of scholars (most notably by Lev Manovich and Janet Murray), the most compelling aspect of office environments as game worlds is that they are often static spaces and the player usually only sees the game world from a single, stationary point of view.

In *Papers, Please*, the game's main interface, the checkpoint inspector's booth, is displayed from the player character's perspective and despite the low-resolution visual style, various items inside the booth are depicted in detail. A majority of these items are directly related

to the player character's job, such as stamps which are used to approve or deny entries through the checkpoint, a rulebook that lists the rules of inspecting entry documents, (i.e. an intradiegetic set of gameplay instructions), several other pieces of paperwork like the bulletin that is updated on every in-game day and an audio transcript which shows all dialogues between the inspector and the entrants. Numerous other items ranging from keepsakes to a gun cabinet can be added inside the booth as the player progresses in the game. The player character itself is never visible² and cannot move inside or leave the booth. At the end of each work day, the view of the booth on the screen is replaced with a text-based summary of the player's finances, information about family members' health, and special events. The only possible interaction on this summary screen is the clickable "sleep" button which takes the player to the next work day in the booth. In addition to the limitation of interaction in it, the lack of an environmental and visual representation during the end-of-day screen further emphasizes the game's focus on the player's mere role as an employee. These deliberate limitations to gameplay choices, especially regarding spatial traversal, are evocative of restrictions in early video games. It is no coincidence that *Papers, Please* also looks and sounds like it is from an earlier era. As Jess Morrisette observes, the "purposefully primitive" visual style, as well as the sound design with repetitive tones, further reinforces *Papers, Please's* "oppressive, totalitarian ambience".

In the more recent title *Beholder 2*, unlike in *Papers, Please*, the player can navigate the main character in a more extensive and interactive game world. The player character's workplace called *the Ministry* in the game is a large, domed building that is reminiscent of the *Große Halle*. While it is traversable and more expansive in comparison to the inspector's office in *Paper's Please*, *Beholder 2* also limits the player's freedom inside this building. The gameplay in *Beholder 2* is a combination of paperwork akin to *Paper's Please* and exploration of the Ministry in order to talk to other characters and manipulate objects with the ultimate goal of sabotaging co-workers. Despite this component of the gameplay, the freedom to explore the space is restricted by inaccessible areas and the length of a work day, as every

² A silhouette of the character can be seen in some cutscenes during the game.

action in the game consumes a certain amount of in-game time.

The visual style in *Beholder 2* and the design of the Ministry as the main setting undeniably complements the game's story set in a fictional totalitarian state in the 1980s. While the game's visuals are not entirely monochrome, the office building is displayed as almost completely black and white except for the lights and screens of electronic devices in it. The entrance to the building has a security system that the player character must pass through at the beginning of each workday in the game. The representation of the workplace, whether it is an entire ministry building or a tiny booth, can contribute to the narrative about office work and authority in these games. However, in titles like *Orwell* and *Hygnospace Outlaw*, a depiction of the office environment is non-existent. Instead, these games simulate the screen of a device where the work is performed. These games, according to Jones,

[...]blend influence from *Papers, Please* with the 'simulated computer UI' genre that was pioneered by *Uplink* (Introversion Software, 2001) and had a banner year in 2015 with *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015) and Nina Freeman's marvelous *Cibele* (Star Maid Games, 2015).

While players can explore the game environment with little or no movement in the constrained spaces of *Paper's Please* and *Beholder 2*, movement or direct observation of the game world becomes out of the question when the simulated screen is the mere interface of a game. Players can only indirectly acquire information about the game world through the in-game device they interact with. However, such a design choice can also improve immersion by removing the border between the player's screen in their empirical reality and the simulated screen in the game. Janet Murray refers to the player's screen as "a reassuring fourth wall" that divides the player's physical space and the game world (134). In *Orwell*, this dividing wall disappears as the game presents the interface of an imaginary, but ordinary computer software. The player takes the role of an investigator using this surveillance software to perform work and using this software is nearly identical to using social media websites. Soraya Murray notes that the interface resembles Facebook and "the use of a similar blue, grey, and white colour scheme is no accident" (257). *Orwell* also features an end-of-workday summary screen like *Paper's Please*, and the only possible interaction on this screen is starting the next working day.

3. REPRESENTATIONS OF POLITICAL OPPRESSION

The boundaries of freedom player characters have in the games I mentioned so far are established not only by the limitations of space but also by the narratives of political oppression these games share. While the jobs mimicked in *Papers, Please*, *Beholder 2*, and *Orwell* are about collecting and inspecting data, the games do not put the player character in a position where they can access data freely. On the contrary, the player character is explicitly shown as an entry-level employee starting the job at the beginning of the game and as a "cog in a machine" (S. Murray 254). In all three games, the general political stance of the fictive governments is clear from the beginning, but apart from that the player is not directly given any further context. As Sicart observes,

Papers, Please is also an exploration of what it takes to be a moral citizen in a morally failing state. In the game, players are told what to do, but the reasons behind the laws, the border rules they have to apply to let people in or out, are left in the dark. There are rules and laws in the state, but those are of obscure origins, brutally enforced, and subject to random changes. This is how authoritarian power operates. (152)

However, despite taking orders from others, in all three games, the player character can choose to secretly work against the government, support resistance groups, and try to flee the authoritarian/totalitarian state, although the exact decisions that lead to such endings may not be clear.

Not for Broadcast (2022), an episodic full-motion video game by the British studio NotGames, uses an example of state-controlled media to address the topic of authoritarian oppression. The game takes place in a fictional United Kingdom-like country led by a far-left political party that unexpectedly wins a landslide election. As the game progresses, the party becomes increasingly dystopian authoritarian. The player character's position in the game is a studio director who manages the live broadcast of a fictional tv channel that later becomes nationalized. The game immediately emphasizes that the character has no experience in this profession. Formerly a janitor in the same building, the player character takes the position of the previous studio director who flees the country at the beginning of the game. A similar first-day-at-work narrative exists in other games about office jobs. For instance, in

Papers, Please, the inspector is assigned to the checkpoint after winning a "labor lottery" during the game's prologue. The character's lack of professional experience adds to the player's uninformed position in the game world that Sicart points out (152).

As the ruling political party in *Not for Broadcast* introduces new reforms, the player character's professional responsibilities become revised, and start to include tasks such as censoring anti-government statements during the live broadcasts. While intentionally or unintentionally failing to perform all tasks does not immediately end the game, successful performance at work affects the payment the player character receives at the end of each working day. In this regard, the gameplay works in a similar way to *Papers, Please* in which the failure to follow instructions will have a negative influence on the character's payment, and failing to pay for food, heat, and medicine at the end of each day will end the game. Consequently, in both games, the player must carefully decide when to disobey -if at all. In *Not for Broadcast*, despite the player character's seemingly disempowered position, the choices made in the studio control room can affect the public's opinion about the government and certain characters' actions. Depending on the player character's political stance throughout the game, one of the 14 conclusions can be reached at the end of each playthrough.

4. FREEDOM OF CHOICE

The oppressive themes in these games are closely intertwined with the freedom of choice they provide the player with. Even though the characters are often disempowered by the political regime and oppressive work environments, they need to complete their tasks at work as the continuation of the game depends on it. Making decisions is one of the recurring tasks in these games and is never refusable (Sicart 152). As both Sicart and Soraya Murray note, the player is often required to make a moral choice that affects other characters in the game without being able to predict the exact consequences of them (Sicart 151, S. Murray 258). Moreover, as the in-game work tasks become increasingly complex due to more components being added to them and/or shortening time limits as the game progresses, the player may not be able to choose the desired option in order to avoid failure. Despite the increasing level of complexity, the bureaucratic

work represented in these games remains repetitive to a certain degree, especially if the player decides to follow the rules of the job. Variations to the routine work simulated by the games are often the result of defying instructions given to the player.

This kind of variation to gameplay is particularly evident in *Beholder 2*, in which the player is required to earn both income and a different in-game score called *authority* in order to progress. The game presents the bureaucratic documentation work at the Ministry as one way for the player character to make money and increase authority, but not as the sole method. Many of the other actions the player character can take, ranging from smuggling stimulants into the Ministry to bribing co-workers, can generate both money and authority. While the consequences of these, often immoral actions in the game are hard to predict, when completed successfully, the game rewards the player for taking these alternate paths with a high amount of in-game currency and authority score that would take considerably longer to generate by merely performing the 'legitimate' desk job. Nonetheless, it is difficult to determine whether disobedience is the intended way of playing *Beholder 2*. Although the bureaucratic paperwork simulated in the game is more repetitive than the high-risk and morally questionable shortcuts the game offers, the routine of performing the in-game work tasks can be associated with LeBlanc's concept of submission, which is listed as one of the eight kinds of "game pleasures" (Costikyan 26) that LeBlanc, Hunicke, and Zubek use to explain what makes a video game fun in their article on the MDA framework. Whereas the original article does not explain the concept in detail, Costikyan in his own work refers to LeBlanc's concept and interprets submission as a "transaction" to be made when playing games (30). Fully accepting the structures and rules of the game is one of the pleasures of play. The concept of submission to the game's structure can be extended to always following the game's instructions and possibly the notion of *grinding* in games, but Costikyan also concludes that:

Figuring out the structure, and figuring out how to beat it, or manipulate it to beat your opponents, or gain your goals in the gameworld, is what gameplay is all about.
(30)

Thus, submitting to the unexplained rules of a desk job and the oppressive game world is perhaps, for some players, or in some points in the game, completing office work with

minimum failure each day, but it can also be insubordination and a search for a shortcut or a way of escape from the in-game repression.

5. CONCLUSION

A common conception about video games is that we play them for fun. The existence of the term 'serious games' which can be used to refer to the games I used as examples in this paper implies that games in general are not serious. Work, on the other hand, is often seen as the opposite of play and fun. The idea of simulating work, especially serious and bureaucratic work as gameplay may subvert these conceptions about the opposition between work and play.

Games examined in this paper, namely *Papers, Please*, the *Orwell* series, *Beholder 2*, and *Not for Broadcast* share a considerable amount of themes and characteristics. These games that specifically simulate bureaucratic desk jobs and take place in game worlds represented as oppressive and dystopian states also offer statements and experiences about freedom and oppression in similar ways. My analysis of the notion of freedom and the restriction of it in these games focused on the three dimensions of game environments, stories about oppression and political themes, and the freedom of choice in terms of gameplay. Although the games seem to limit players' freedom in all aspects upon first inspection, these limitations support the game's aesthetics and players' involvement in the game world in various ways.

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File #10



Title: Further Discussion on Companion NPC Design

Subtitle: Narrative Hierarchies, Ludic Affordances, their Evolutions and the In-Game Impact

Author(s): Alon Kfir, Rebekah Tumasus

Past works have been published about non-player characters in digital games, as well as specifically about companion characters that accompany the player throughout the majority of the game. Design characteristics that promote companion believability have been proposed and iterated upon. This paper proposes two new aspects which describe the dynamics between a single prominent companion and player characters and thereby, with the players themselves. First is the Narrative Hierarchy describing the power balance between the player character and the companion from a narrative perspective. Second are Ludic Affordances representing the level of control the player has over the companion. These aspects can change or remain static throughout the game, defined as the Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution. Based upon that, two additional design aspects were identified. Ludo-Narrative Correlation, which determines whether or not the Narrative Hierarchy and the players' Ludic Affordances over the companion evolves in a similar direction. Ludo-Narrative Synchronicity refers to game moments when Narrative Hierarchy and the Ludic Affordances change (positively or negatively) and determines whether those moments occur concurrently. Seven case studies were used to examine these two new aspects and their potential development throughout each game. Finally, a new case study was designed with two scenarios, positive and negative evolutions, where these aspects evolve in tandem.

Keywords: Games, Player Character, Companion Non-Player Character, Narrative Hierarchy, Ludic Affordances, Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution

1. INTRODUCTION

In video games, NPCs (Non-player Characters) have a major role in giving the players something with which to interact. They may have various roles ranging from allies and merchants to enemies and villains, all playing a part in the overarching narrative and gameplay.

NPCs may be examined from various angles and lenses. From ludic (mechanics) aspects such as how players interact with them and their roles, to a narrative-based analysis, such as character arcs and motivations. In addition, they can also be categorized based on the magnitude of their presence in the game. Some NPCs make brief appearances while others are more persistent. Dan Pinchbeck defined the Persistent NPCs as characters who appear repeatedly throughout the game (Pinchbeck 261-279).

This paper aims to examine a subcategory of persistent NPCs, which is companion non-player characters (CNPC), more specifically a single CNPC. In the context of this paper, companion NPCs are individual NPCs that accompany the player throughout most, if not all, of the game. They are present generally from beginning to end and have a major narrative significance. In fact, it might be said that CNPCs are crucial to the story in a sense that it does not exist without them. CNPCs are usually, but not necessarily, the player's allies and are either physically or auditorily present beside them.

Bouquet et al. discussed various design aspects regarding CNPCs (145-153). This paper extrapolated from these existing aspects to propose two specific design aspects - Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances. Narrative Hierarchy refers to the relationship and power balance between the player character (PC) and the CNPC. Who is in charge? Which one holds power over the other? Or are they on the same level, like equal teammates? On the other hand, Ludic (or mechanical) Affordances mean to what extent the player controls the CNPC. Some games may allow the player to take full control over the companion, some give players control over a limited selection of actions, while others may leave control over the companion solely at the hands of the game's AI.

Finally, the Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances will be examined from a ludic-narrative perspective. This research will review how they change and evolve over time throughout relevant games. Does the power balance between the PC and the CNPC change? Will the player's possible actions regarding the CNPC increase in number? This paper will explore the ways these evolutions are manifested and potentially work together to enhance the PC-CNPC relation arc.

2. DEFINING THE CNPC

2.1 NPCs

NPCs are video game characters that aren't controlled by the player. The term originated from tabletop games and referred to characters played by the Game Master (and not the players). Richard Bartle initially coined the term for video games, specifically MUDs (multi-user dungeons) (Bartle). NPCs are generally controlled by the game's AI.

2.1.1. NPCs' Roles

In his 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell described eight character archetypes that can be found throughout the hero's journey. Each of them has its own drives and motivations. Those archetypes are the Hero, the Mentor, the Ally, the Herald, the Trickster, the Shapeshifter, the Guardian and the Shadow (Campbell).

Richard Bartle discussed the various roles NPCs occupy in video games in his 2003 book, *Designing Virtual Worlds*. These characters occupy the game world and fulfill varying roles within it. These are determined by the type of function and interaction they have with the player and can range from peaceful to malevolent towards the player character. Bartle defined 7 NPC roles, which are: buy, sell and make stuff, provide services, guard places, get killed for loot, dispense quests (or hints to quests), supply background Info, do stuff for players, and make the place look busy.

Henrik Warpefelt and Harko Verhagen expanded on Bartle's NPCs' typology (Warpefelt and Verhagen). Warpefelt identified new roles and refined Bartle's list: buy, sell and make stuff, provide services, provide combat challenges,

provide mechanical challenges, provide loot, give or advance quests, provide narrative exposition, assist the player, act as an ally in combat, and make the place look busy.

Warpefelt further expanded the typology by adding a layer of metatype - more generalized categories to NPC roles: Functions, Adversaries, Friends and Providers (Warpefelt 81-96). Within each category we can find several different roles. NPCs can of course have several roles during the game, sometimes concurrently. He also renamed each role: functions, vendor, services, quest giver, adversaries, enemy, opponent, friends, sidekick, ally, companion, pet, minion, providers, storyteller, and loot provider.

When discussing CNPCs, we can expect to find some roles more present than others; specifically, but not limited to, Sidekicks, Allies, Companions (as defined by Warpefelt) and Storytellers.

In a later work, Warpefelt and Verhagen employed their previously constructed typology to discuss and suggest a framework to enhance NPC's believability (Warpefelt and Verhagen 39-53). On top of the typology, Warpefelt and Verhagen added a layer of interaction. Each type of NPC can act, react, interact or be capable of a combination of those possibilities. For example, an enemy may act (attack the player) and react (respond to an attack and fight back).

2.2. Persistent And Companion NPCs

In his 2009 paper, Dan Pinchbeck defined Persistent NPCs (PNPC) as non-player characters who appear repeatedly in the game and are usually significant in the reality of the game. PNPCs are distinguished from other NPCs due to their significance which may stem from repeated appearances, or relevance and importance to the plot (Pinchbeck 261-279).

Warpefelt and Verhagen defined Companion as Persistent NPCs which accompany and assist the player and can be controlled by them (39-53). In traditional media, such as books, television and film, they may be referred to more commonly as Sidekicks. A Sidekick's most notable role is to accompany the main character throughout the plot.

2.3. Companion NPCs Design Aspects

Extensive work on companion NPCs has been done by Katharina Emmerich et al. (141-152) and later by Elizabeth Bouquet et al. (145-153). They discuss the design of companions in several categories. Bouquet's work describes the following categories: Appearance, Sentience, Individuality, Behavior, Communication Capabilities, Relation to the Player, and Significance (145-153). The most relevant to this work are Individuality, Relation to the Player and Behavior.

Individuality refers to the companion's Personality, Agenda, and Background. The companion NPC's personality may affect their choices and actions, especially in narrative-heavy games. This also includes their background story and agenda (Bouquet et al. 145-153).

Second, Relation to Player describes the relationship between the hero (PC) and the companion. This relationship has been previously described using three different aspects: Interdependence, Power Dynamics (how one's powers are more dominant than the other) and Obligations (Bouquet et al 145-153; Emmerich et al. 141-152). Interdependence and Power Dynamics are generally ludic-focused. They are determined based on the abilities the companion has, which may be needed to assist the player's progression (via the PC), and how they may establish the dominant and powerful character. Obligations explore the social connection between the hero and the companion from a narrative standpoint. This refers to the level of obligation the PC has towards the companion, or vice versa, which may manifest in either character's motivation.

Finally, Behavior includes three characteristics: Context Sensitivity, Autonomy and Initiative & Activity. Context Sensitivity describes a companion NPC's ability to react and adapt to changing situations. For example, going in and out of battle, or responding to the PC's (or other NPC's) presence. Autonomy and Initiative & Activity may be considered as opposite sides of the same coin. Autonomy describes to what extent the companion NPC can be controlled by the player's input. Companion NPCs may be wholly autonomous, wholly dependent on player input, or any degree in between. On the other hand, Initiative & Activity describes the level to which NPCs may act independently. The more autonomous the companion NPC is, the more they are able to act of their own volition.

2.4. The CNPC And New Design Aspects

This paper refers to companion non-player character (CNPC) as a single and prominent character that accompanies the player (physically or auditorily) throughout most, if not all, of the game. They are crucial to the story in a sense that it does not exist without them.

The three design aspects of Individuality, Relation to the Player and Behavior are brought together and adjusted to propose two new aspects regarding the CNPC: Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances. Narrative Hierarchy describes the power balance between the player character and single companion. Thus, it centers mainly on the narrative and social aspects of Obligations and Agenda. Ludic Affordances refers to the control the player can exude over the single companion. Therefore, it leans on the aspects of Autonomy and Initiative & Activity.

3. PC-CNPC NARRATIVE HIERARCHY

This paper defines the Narrative Hierarchy according to the dynamic between the PC and the CNPC within the game's narrative. It refers to two elements: the power balance and strength of the bond between these two leading characters. The power balance can be determined by family relations, military ranks, agenda, strong vs. weak, etc. The strength of the bond will dictate the manner in which the two characters interact with one another. These elements can dictate who is more superior and in charge, which is normally the PC. These dynamics are generally established early on in the game to acquaint the player with the characters.

The elements that are used to define the Narrative Hierarchy are based on two previously established companion design aspects which are Individuality and Relation to the Player (Bouquet et al 145-153; Emmerich et al. 141-152). Individuality is dictated by the companion NPC's Personality, Agenda and Background to define what makes them "who" they are. Whereas Relation to the Player is dictated by Interdependence, Power Dynamics and Obligations. These companion NPC aspects, more specifically the Agenda and Obligations, mold the potential relation to the PC and their interaction with one another.

Furthermore, the Narrative Hierarchy may change and evolve throughout the game. Therefore, there can be a shift either in the power balance, strength of the bond or both. It could be caused by a revelation, such as a change in the Obligations or Agenda of one of the characters. This influences the existing dynamic and can either bring the two characters closer or tear them further apart, which could further impact the experience the player has during the game.

4. LUDIC AFFORDANCES ON A CNPC

Player affordances refers to the influence the player has over the game world, meaning the elements within it that can be affected and controlled by the player. Specifically, Ludic Affordances on a CNPC refers to the level of control the player has over the companion. There are varying degrees of Ludic Affordances on a CNPC: full control over all actions, some control over certain actions or none at all. Additionally, there are different realms of control such as movement (actions related to positioning), combat (actions related to fighting) or puzzles (actions related to solving mechanical / environmental challenges). It is important to note that although there may be a form of narrative control over a companion, such as in RPGs, these are put aside in this paper in order to focus on affordances that are common in cases of games with a single CNPC.

It is based on the companion NPC design aspect called Behavior, in particular Initiative & Activity and Autonomy. Initiative & Activity determines the degree to which the companion acts independently, whereas Autonomy determines the degree to which the companion can be controlled by the player (Bouquet et al 145-153; Emmerich et al. 141-152). This paper brings these aspects together to form the Ludic Affordances that determine the level of control the player has over the CNPC.

Similar to the Narrative Hierarchy, the Ludic Affordances may also change and evolve throughout a game. Such changes can manifest in either the gain or loss of commands the player has over the CNPC. New options could become available in certain situations, or the player may choose which abilities to unlock. These options could potentially affect the player experience and the way each tackles a given situation.

5. LUDO-NARRATIVE CO-EVOLUTION

Aarseth addressed the topic of the relation between ludology and narratology in games. He suggested four dimensions of examining games from a combined ludo-narrative standpoint: World, Objects, Events and Agents (Aarseth 129-133).

World refers to the virtual environment in which the game takes place. This environment is composed of a mixture of ludic and extra-ludic spaces. Further on, Aarseth describes how the game's environment may result in, or be a result of, the story structures. Linear stories require linear spaces (corridors) while non-linear stories may benefit from an open-world space. Next, Objects refer to in-game items. Those objects may be purely decorative, usable or even created by players. Third, Events are the bits that comprise the story, be it the main story or side-stories. Last, Agents are the game's characters that can be classified according to their range between depth and shallowness, and their malleability for the player to control. All of these dimensions could be placed in the Variable Model, which describes each either closer to the narrative pole or to the ludic pole (Aarseth 129-133).

While Aarseth examined each dimension on a spectrum of opposing poles, this paper aims to delve into the Agents' (CNPCs' specifically) utilization and combination of narrative and ludic elements. Despite the Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances being separate aspects that can change independently, they can also evolve together at certain key points of a game. Therefore, this paper's claim is that the intersection of the Narrative Hierarchy and the Ludic Affordances can be critical to a coherent gameplay experience. This intersection creates a Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution that facilitates a well rounded CNPC development and increased player engagement.

6. CASE STUDIES OF EXISTING GAMES

The following games chosen to be analyzed are representations of certain developments either in the Narrative Hierarchy, Ludic Affordances or both. Games that present a dynamic between the PC and a single CNPC that is prominent throughout the game were chosen. Therefore, games that feature multiple companions or a narrative aspect of

choice over the companion were set aside. Each game has a unique aspect or dynamic for which it was selected:

- *The Last of Us*: strong and positive Narrative Hierarchy development, yet no change in Ludic Affordances
- *God of War*: strong and positive development in the Narrative Hierarchy and some evolution of Ludic Affordances
- *Ico*: An almost completely dependent CNPC, but with an ability crucial to progression
- *The Last Guardian*: A non-human pet-like CNPC that is physically stronger than the PC, yet they share a mutual dependency
- *BioShock*: an auditory CNPC and a negative development in the Narrative Hierarchy
- *BioShock Infinite*: the CNPC is the focus and undergoes the most changes
- *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West*: The CNPC is the focus and starts as the superior in the initial Narrative Hierarchy

The following are the summaries of the evaluation of these games.

6.1. The Last of Us

The initial Narrative Hierarchy in *The Last of Us* features a superior PC in age, strength and purpose. The CNPC starts off merely as a package to be delivered in order for the PC to get something in return. Therefore, the bond between them is very weak, with them being complete strangers. However, this evolves throughout the game and ends with them becoming much closer. The dynamic between the two develops into a father-daughter like relationship, and their bond is much stronger considering they grew to care for one another.

On the other hand, the Ludic Affordances over the CNPC are non-existent. As long as the CNPC functions as one that follows the PC, the player has no control over the actions she performs. Even when she functions as support, such as shooting at enemies, the player has no control over when or where she shoots. Additionally, during environmental puzzles, the CNPC acts as the puzzle itself to move from place to place, rather than being helpful in solving it. Although there is a section in the game where the player gets full control over the CNPC, in that moment she briefly becomes the PC rather than being a CNPC. Therefore, this section isn't relevant while examining the change in Ludic Affordances over the CNPC.

To summarize, this game features a positively evolving Narrative Hierarchy due to the PC and CNPC becoming close, with no changes in the Ludic Affordances over the CNPC.

6.2. God of War

The initial Narrative Hierarchy of *God of War* also features a stronger and older PC, although there already is a father-son relationship between the PC and the CNPC. Still, the bond between them is very weak, and their interactions are very stiff and pragmatic. The connecting thread between them until that point was the PC's wife and CNPC's mother who had died right before the game's start. During their journey to spread the mother's ashes, the two overcome perils and challenges that test their relationship by the state of their bond to one another. Slowly, the duo become closer to one another as the PC shares more about his history and state of mind with the CNPC. By the end of the game, as they complete their goal, the pair are closer than they've ever been before and their bond is a strong one, contrary to the beginning state.

The Ludic Affordances allow the PC to utilize the CNPC's ability to fire arrows and have two manners in which they develop in this game. The first is gaining new arrow types following story moments, which allow for a variety in attack, as well as in puzzle solving in the environment. The second is through a menu that allows the player to choose which skills to unlock for the CNPC. As the game progresses, the player can unlock abilities for the CNPC until maximizing the entire skill tree.

To summarize, both the Narrative Hierarchy and the Ludic Affordances evolve in a positive direction. There are a couple of moments where the two coincide and evolve together. However, for the most part the player chooses which of the CNPC's skills to unlock and when to do so based on experience points gained.

6.3. Ico

In *Ico*, the PC and CNPC meet due to their shared experiences and captivity. Therefore, the initial Narrative Hierarchy puts the two as strangers on almost equal ground and has them immediately bond over their circumstances. This is what drives the two forward as they try to escape. They become closer as the game progresses, mostly due to the game's structure rather than through specific story beats. Their strong bond is shown during the game's climax when the CNPC is taken away, and rather than have the PC continue towards freedom, he chooses to go back for her.

There are some Ludic Affordances over the CNPC, although they remain the same throughout the entire game. The player can grab the CNPC's hand in order to coax her into moving quicker in a certain direction. In addition, the CNPC will wait if she is unable to progress and the player, through the PC, can call her to approach in order to help her through obstacles.

To summarize, The Narrative Hierarchy evolves in a positive direction having the PC and CNPC become closer to one another through the game's experience. There are minimal Ludic Affordances over the CNPC, which remain rather static and do not evolve throughout the game.

6.4. The Last Guardian

The initial Narrative Hierarchy in *The Last Guardian* puts the PC and CNPC as complete strangers. However, unlike most of these evaluated games, the CNPC is far bigger and stronger physically, even though he is chained and injured. Therefore, the CNPC tries to attack the PC upon initial interaction. Despite this, the PC assists the CNPC and frees him from his bond, and the two work together to get out of where they are. Subsequently, the two become closer as they assist one another while continuing on their shared journey.

The Ludic Affordances over the CNPC evolve twice throughout the game. First, by gaining a skill that allows the player to eliminate obstacles using the CNPC. Second, by unlocking several skills at once that allow the player more direct control over the CNPC. The explanation for the more substantial gain in control over the CNPC is due to the growing bond between the pair.

To summarize, both the Narrative Hierarchy and the Ludic Affordances evolve in a positive direction. Despite the gain in the Ludic Affordances being explained, it still seems rather drastic and sudden.

6.5. Bioshock

BioShock features an interesting case where the CNPC is an auditory one. In the beginning, the CNPC establishes himself as the PC's guide and helper within the Narrative Hierarchy. They are friendly to one another, and the CNPC enlists the PC's help in saving his family and getting out of a declining city. However, in this instance, the turning point that occurs a bit after the middle of the game turns the Narrative Hierarchy in a negative direction. The CNPC reveals that he has been controlling the PC and aims to kill him. The two then turn into enemies, and it culminates into the PC having to fight the CNPC by the end of the game.

Since the CNPC is an auditory one, there are no Ludic Affordances over the CNPC, and the PC has no way of controlling the CNPC's actions. It is revealed that in fact it was the other way around, but that doesn't show effect in the form of game mechanics.

To summarize, the Narrative Hierarchy in this game is a negatively evolving one from a friendly disposition to that of enemies. There are no Ludic Affordances from start to end of the game, which means it remains static.

6.6. Bioshock Infinite

In *BioShock Infinite*, the Narrative Hierarchy starts off with the PC and CNPC being strangers to one another. The PC is the superior and rescuer of the CNPC who acts as the quest given to the PC. The PC's goal is to find and deliver the CNPC to mysterious debt collectors. Over the course of the game, the dynamic changes mostly in a positive manner,

with a brief decline in their relationship mid-way. Overall, the bond between them strengthens and ends with the two as father-daughter, but due to the story, it isn't presented in a conventional way. On the other hand, while examining the power balance, the CNPC becomes more powerful towards the end of the game and is the one taking control in the very end.

Regarding the Ludic Affordances, there is an interesting mix between the player's control over the CNPC and the CNPC's autonomy in interaction with the game world. When the CNPC is met and freed, she starts off by simply following the PC. As the game progresses, the player gains additional levels of control, such as lock-picking and granting additional combat and maneuver possibilities. She can also autonomously react to the world around her and gather supplies for the PC. However, in order for the player to receive these supplies, a button must be pressed, which brings back a slight measure of control. There is an instance where the PC chases the CNPC after their relationship deteriorates, which presents a loss in Ludic Affordances until the two reconcile and these are regained.

To summarize, both the Narrative Hierarchy and the Ludic Affordances evolve in a mostly positive direction and generally coincide with one another, thus occurring in tandem. There are a couple of exceptions to the positive evolutions in the middle (temporary decline in relationship) and the very end of the game (power balance shift towards CNPC).

6.7. Enslaved: *Odyssey to the West*

Enslaved: Odyssey to the West features a PC that is physically stronger to the CNPC, yet the CNPC is the one that establishes superiority over the PC early in the game. The CNPC uses her knowledge in tech to put a restraining headband on the PC that subjugates him to her will. Therefore, the initial Narrative Hierarchy has the power balance leaning heavily in the CNPC's favor. The CNPC is the one that pushes the story forward and goes through major character development. Still, the Narrative Hierarchy evolves throughout the game and ends with the two becoming comrades.

The Ludic Affordances present an increasing number of CNPC mechanics afforded to the player. Although, for the most

part, this occurs early in the game with some puzzle mechanics presented around mid-game.

To summarize, the game's Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances evolve in a positive direction during the course of the game. However, this evolution does not coincide with one another.

7. CO-EVOLUTION DESIGN ASPECTS

Different types of Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances in digital games were evaluated, as well as their evolutions throughout. It is clear that there is no one decisive way to design the Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution. However, two additional design aspects were identified relating to the Co-Evolution: Correlation and Synchronicity.

Ludo-Narrative Correlation determines whether or not the Narrative Hierarchy and the players' Ludic Affordances over the CNPC evolves in a similar direction. For example, *God of War* presents a positive Ludo-Narrative Correlation, where players get more and more control over the CNPC while the relationship between the PC and CNPC grows closer and closer. On the other hand, the *Last of Us* displays zero Ludo-Narrative Correlation, since there is no evolution in Ludic Affordances. It is relatively rare to find games with a negative Ludo-Narrative Correlation. One such example can be seen in the 2021 *Guardians of the Galaxy* game. Players control the leader of a dysfunctional team of vigilantes. If one looks at the entire team as a whole, one can say the dynamic between the leader and the team evolves in a positive direction, the team grows closer and works better together. During the majority of the game the Ludic Affordances evolve positively as well. However, towards the end of the game, members of the team take initiative and act on their own, without the leader's direction. Actions which were triggered before by the player are now triggered automatically. This is an interesting case of a negative Ludo-Narrative Correlation in which players lose a measure of control, but the narrative is enhanced by it.

Ludo-Narrative Synchronicity examines the game moments when either the Narrative Hierarchy or Ludic Affordances change (or both together) and whether those moments of transformation are shared by the narrative and gameplay or

not. Evolutions with shared moments shall be referred to as synchronous while those in which the Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances evolve separate of each other shall be referred to as asynchronous. For example, the use of light arrows in *God of War* allows players to unlock this ability immediately following a dramatic story moment. Similarly, shock arrows are unlocked after a moment of great excitement shared by the characters. For these instances we choose to view the PC-CNPC dynamic evolution in *God of War* as synchronous. On the other hand, in *The Last Guardian*, players unlock the main control over Trico (the CNPC) somewhat out of the blue, with no story moment to accompany it. This type of evolution is asynchronous. In many games, the CNPC may be improved, and new abilities can be unlocked through an upgrade system. Using such a system in which players may evolve their own affordances over the CNPC leads to an inherently asynchronous evolution. In this way, a game can have both synchronous and asynchronous PC-CNPC evolution.

Game	Narrative Hierarchy Direction	Ludic Affordances Direction	Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution	
			Correlation	Synchronicity
<i>The Last of Us</i>	Positive	None	None	None
<i>God of War</i>	Positive	Positive	Positive	Synchronous & Asynchronous
<i>Ico</i>	Positive	Generally none	None	None
<i>The Last Guardian</i>	Positive	Positive	Positive	Asynchronous
<i>Bioshock</i>	Negative	None	None	None
<i>Bioshock Infinite</i>	Mostly positive	Mostly positive	Positive	Synchronous
<i>Enslaved: Odyssey to the West</i>	Positive	Positive	Positive	Asynchronous

Table 1. The seven case studies that were examined using Ludo-Narrative Correlation and Ludo-Narrative Synchronicity.

8. SUBJECTS - CREATING A NEW CASE STUDY

SUBJECTS is a game project that was developed in order to test the manner in which the Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances could evolve together on a small scale. The Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution in SUBJECTS is positively Correlated and is completely Synchronous. It revolves around two lab-working mice who find new areas around them that they weren't aware of prior. They decide to explore the new space together while figuring out their way around traps and learning more about the lab's secret work.

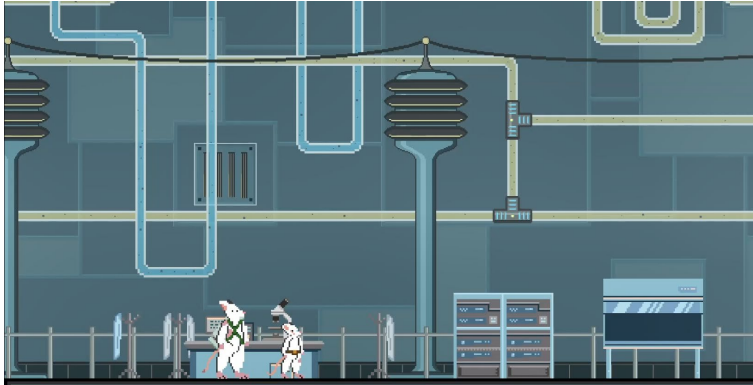


Figure 1. SUBJECTS - in game image.

While developing the concept for the game, the standard approach was to proceed with a positive development similar to most common game cases. This meant that the Narrative Hierarchy between the two mice, who serve as PC and CNPC, becomes stronger and closer as they explore further. Furthermore, there was an increase in Ludic Affordances, having the players gain companion abilities over time. The implementation of the Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution of the two aspects meant the increase for each one would happen at the same time: an increase in the friendship level (1-5) between the two would be followed immediately by a gain in a companion ability (0-4). In this way the Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution of both aspects correlates and happens synchronously.

However, it was not enough to create and examine a positive development. It felt prudent to create and examine the effect of the lesser used negative development. In the negative version, the developing Narrative Hierarchy would be a

negative one from friendly to dislike between the PC and CNPC. The players would start with all of the companion abilities available and would lose them one by one along the way, incurring a decrease in Ludic Affordances. The negative evolution has specific narrative and puzzle points where there is a decrease in friendship level (5-1) along with a loss of an ability (4-0). Similarly, to the positive version, Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution of both aspects correlates and happens synchronously.

Therefore, two versions of the game were developed: positive and negative. The game has two levels with traps and puzzles to solve and pass through as well as an overarching narrative that motivates the players forward. The levels were maintained as similar as possible in both versions, although some changes were made to accommodate the number of abilities the players have in each level. The overarching story remained identical in both with the same narrative beats and lore notes found in each level. The tone of the dialogue between the two characters was altered in each version to reflect the varied friendship level development in each. The ending of each version was also altered to reflect the development. The positive version features both PC and CNPC making their escape together as partners. The negative version has the tear between the two reflected in the CNPC choosing to stay behind, not willing to follow the PC anymore.

In order to be able to examine the effect each experience has on potential players in an unbiased manner, the game was set up to randomize which version each player gets. The players are unaware of the two existing scenarios, and when the play button is pressed, either the positive or negative version is selected at random. This was tested in an exhibition and proven useful as a proof of concept. It could be used in the future in a more closed setting with organized groups of testers.

Game	Narrative Hierarchy Direction	Ludic Affordances Direction	Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution	
			Correlation	Synchronicity
<i>SUBJECTS</i> (positive scenario)	Positive	Positive	Positive	Synchronous
<i>SUBJECTS</i> (negative scenario)	Negative	Negative	Positive	Synchronous

Table 2. SUBJECTS case study using Ludo-Narrative Correlation and Ludo-Narrative Synchronicity.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances can serve as new perspectives in order to examine CNPCs in a dynamic space with the PC and players. Although they are based on previously identified design aspects, these push beyond what was previously established in examining their change over time to create a compelling experience. Additionally, the two can share common evolutions in a Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution to potentially increase the experience.

Following the examination of several existing case studies, it is evident that there is no one definitive way to create a PC-CNPC dynamic. Different forms of Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances were evaluated, as well as the Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution during the game. Evidently, in most cases the evolution of the Narrative Hierarchy is a positive one, where the bond between the duo strengthens and brings them closer. Regarding the Ludic Affordances, there was greater variety in the amount of control and development throughout the games. Still, the most common change was a positive one. Some games feature some degree of Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution, where the change in Narrative Hierarchy is also presented with a change in the Ludic Affordances. This can be described using Correlation and Synchronicity. Correlation refers to whether the directions of the Narrative Hierarchy and Ludic Affordances are similar or not. Synchronicity on the other hand, describes whether changes in the story and mechanics occur simultaneously or not.

The new terminology suggested in this paper can be utilized in the development of future games with single CNPCs. While developing the dynamic between PC and CNPC, the Narrative Hierarchy, Ludic Affordances and their evolution can be used to propel the characters' growth, narratively and mechanically, throughout the game. It is suggested that the process of narrative and mechanics development happen simultaneously with each other in mind.

The prototype SUBJECTS was created to examine two types of development: positive and negative. Each version was randomized for the players to inspect the level of player engagement and impact of key story moments and the game in general. The game's effect was examined on a small scale in non-lab conditions to prove its viability. In the future, this prototype could be modified and utilized for closed testing groups to evaluate players' reactions more closely and accurately.

Future work should include variations of Ludo-Narrative Correlation and Synchronicity, such as zero Correlation or negative Correlation. Zero Correlation - positive Narrative Hierarchy evolution but no change in the Ludic Affordances. Negative Correlation - positive Narrative Hierarchy evolution and a negative change in the Ludic Affordances. Future iterations could also feature asynchronous Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution. Furthermore, the effect of games that feature a strong Ludo-Narrative Co-Evolution on player engagement and motivation should be explored. It could also be interesting to examine the different impact that multiple companion characters may have, for example, in RPGs (Role-Playing Games) or RTT (Real-Time Tactics) games.

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FURTHER DISCUSSION ON COMPANION NPC DESIGN

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File #11



Title: From Vardzia to Val Royeaux

Subtitle: Identity, Oppression and Power between
Medieval Caucasia and Modern Games

Author(s): James Baillie

Role-playing games tend to negotiate dynamics of power and oppression in ways familiar to modern audiences. This may mean importing analogous factions and beliefs, speaking to current concerns, or at times avoiding representing certain power systems in more fantastical settings. In the case of medieval and fantasy settings, this poses two risks: it risks absolving modernity of the horrors players witness by reassuring them that they are seeing only a distant imaginary, and it can also risk portraying such dynamics as eternal and thus inevitable.

Here I unpack these issues by examining a real medieval society, that of the 12th century Caucasus. I compare historical dynamics of power and identity to those presented in modern medieval-fantasy games, bringing in examples from major published digital role-playing games and using reflections from my own game design work. By examining how people in the medieval Caucasus navigated their highly diverse world, we can then see alternative ways that state and royal power, factionalism, and identity may function in our ludic imaginings of the medieval. These, in turn, potentially transform our play with the imagined past - reshaping medievalist games from systems where these dynamics are inevitable into routes through which they can be questioned and reimagined.

Keywords: Role-playing Games, History, Ethnicity, Caucasus, Power

1. INTRODUCTION

Many modern computer games, especially in strategic and role-playing genres, are set against the backdrops of imagined historical or fantastical societies - and, to that end, they represent and simulate power and its structures. Such imagined societies are frequently narratively or aesthetically attached to distant parts of the past, especially the medieval period (ca 500-1500AD). The use of the medieval past as a gaming aesthetic is a very broad phenomenon, one with a wide range of reasons. Among these are the association between the distant past and the strange or fantastical, the escapism of providing a space clearly distinct from the modern world, and the association between heroic combat and an era before massed long-range warfare. Additionally, a wide network of further existing tropes and ideas already connected to medievalist aesthetics become accessible through use of medievalist imagery and concepts in gaming.

The models of power used in games, however, tend to speak to modern rather than medieval concerns, as we shall see throughout the rest of this paper. Given that games need to speak to their contemporary audiences, the concerns and fears and hopes of a modern world are expressed even through the explicitly un-modern, distant lens of a pseudo-medieval setting. This disconnect may be inevitable, but it is not without issues that demand examination, especially when it comes to depictions and simulations of power. Embedding a modern power structure, and modern oppressions, into an aesthetically medieval environment can give the impression that such structures are inevitable continuities from the distant past to the present, or even a natural feature of human societies. By placing these modern horrors into the past, it can also absolve the audience of concern and responsibility for them, emphasising the extent to which they are distant from the gamer's lived experience, even if they are close reflections of events or power structures found in the world today. We also close off the experiences - as best we can reconstruct them - of those who did live in historical periods, and therefore reduce the range of stories and ideas available to developers and players alike.

This paper aims to assess some of these issues analytically, and then consider some ludic possibilities for resolving them. For that, we need a framework for discussing the historicity of games and game elements. Initial approaches

to history in games tended to focus on overall questions of accuracy and fidelity to the past, and this approach is still used in popular discussions of the topic.¹ This sets a bar that no game can clear – no medium can model every aspect of reality, and no modern gamer can fully replicate the thought processes and ideas that would have occurred most naturally to a person from many centuries ago, raised in a very different environment. It also risks obfuscating certain issues: high accuracy in one area of a game does not necessarily translate to other areas. Visual fidelity to material culture, for example, may be very high in some games even when the social and power structures presented are very much alien to the medieval world. Replacing the accuracy approach with ideas of authenticity, of creating the expected feel of a medieval, past has done much to broaden the field and permitted more engagement with the extensive medievalisms used in fantastical settings.² This approach, however, also has its difficulties. Whilst it is better suited than accuracy to judge a game overall, it struggles to consider questions of inspiration beyond their immediate effect on the player experience. It therefore easily avoids issues such as which medieval ideas or processes might be excluded from games, or alternative approaches and elements that work with our knowledge of the medieval period regardless of a player's feelings about their perceived authenticity.

Instead, the approach taken in this paper will largely be concerned with the computer game as a process of *curating* history. Rather than setting a bar of accuracy or indeed authenticity against which to test the game as a whole, the more interesting question may be what does and what does not get included in a modern game, and why these decisions are made. This framework allows us, like the accuracy approach, to consider a game closely with regard to its historical inspirations, but without making a pre-emptive judgement on the overall impact or validity of those inspirations and their uses. This approach focuses on decisions made by

¹ Recent examples include Teresa, Charlene, 'Most Realistic Games Set in Medieval Times', *TheGamer* (2022), <https://www.thegamer.com/most-realistic-medieval-games/>, accessed 16/03/2023; Mitra, Ritwik, 'The 20 Most Historically Accurate Video Games Ever Made, Ranked', *GameRant* (2023), <https://gamerant.com/historically-accurate-video-games/>, accessed 16/03/2023.

² Kapell, Matthew, and Elliott, Andrew, *Playing with the Past* (London, 2013), 361.

developers as curators of history rather than the experience of players as media consumers. It is often difficult to accurately gauge wider player reactions to games media and the influences on their understanding of history, which may make curation and development processes a comparatively fruitful alternative area to study.

With this approach and these core problems laid out, we can now move to consider an application of this framework for the rest of the paper as a way of looking at power, freedom, oppression, and their presentation in medieval settings. To this end, we move to a comparison of games' curation of power structures in medieval settings with the current research on a particular region of our own world in the medieval period - the high medieval Caucasus.

2. THE MEDIEVAL CAUCASUS

The reception of the medieval Caucasus in modern games is limited. Very few commercially produced games have settings derived from Caucasus literature and history, and the representation of those cultures in games is largely restricted to a small number of strategy games, which tend to include the Caucasus largely from the perspective of completionism. Games like *Crusader Kings 3* (CK3) or *Medieval 2: Total War* (M2TW), which have maps covering Europe and the Middle East, must generally include the Caucasus: but M2TW includes only politically static 'rebel' provinces for the region, owned by local nameless entities who will almost certainly be absorbed by the Turks shortly after game start.³ CK3 makes a more detailed attempt, but the complexities of cross-cultural and cross-faith interactions are often lost due to systems in the game that tend to penalise players for or simply block the pursuit of inter-faith marriages and alliances. Indeed, in the game, Georgia's culture is listed as 'communal' in nature and its cultural bonuses include the 'Caucasian Wolves' trait giving them superior access to mountaineers and the 'Castle Keepers' trait strengthening their fortifications. This has the effect of presenting the Georgians as primarily a rugged, insular culture surviving by adapting to inhospitable terrain - which, as we shall

³ Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings 3*, Windows PC (Paradox Interactive 2020); The Creative Assembly, *Medieval II: Total War*, Windows PC (Sega, 2006).

see, may be misplaced as a reflection of the social processes that shaped Caucasian history in the medieval period.

The presentation of the Caucasus in role-playing genres is even more muted. Few RPGs use entirely historically grounded settings, and medieval themed examples have been heavily focused on central and western Europe. Medievalism in RPGs is far more prevalent in fantasy, but here, too, the medieval influences on the genre tend to be filtered through either a western Tolkienesque-Gygaxian fantasy or the milieu and tropes of Japanese RPGs. Neither particularly incorporates any quintessential elements of Caucasus culture and folklore. We do not see devs or kadjis or Kursha the flying dog, we do not meet Avtandil, Vis, or Amiran, we do not go to the Kingdom of the Seas, to Kadjeti, or to Gulansharo.⁴ A brief mention should be made of the indie game and tournament management simulator *Tourney*, which includes Gulansharo, the mythic city of flowers from the Georgian 12th century romance the *Knight In Panther Skin*, as the location of its final tournament – but as this was the present author’s suggestion to the game’s developer, it may largely serve to be the exception that proves the rule.⁵

This fact of muted reception, however, makes the medieval Caucasus an interesting case study when we consider games as historical curation. By considering an example that is likely to have been very much under-used across games, we may have a better standpoint from which to explore the issues and the lacunae in game presentations of medieval worlds and cultures. I will particularly focus from here on the high medieval Bagrationid polity, centred on Georgia but which sat at the centre of a broad network of alliances that dominated the Caucasus by the end of the 12th century.

⁴ Shota Rustaveli, *The Man in Panther Skin*, trans. Wardrop, Marjory Scott (Tbilisi, 1966), 235-6; Rayfield, Donald, *The Literature of Georgia: A History* (Abingdon, 2013), 69-75; Hunt, David, *Legends of the Caucasus* (London, 2012), 351-355.

⁵ Tusky Games, *Tourney*, Windows PC (Tusky Games, 2021).

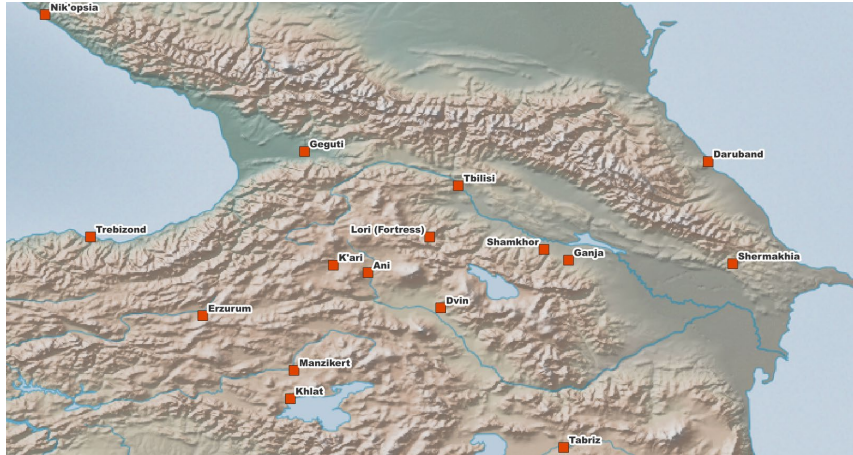


Figure 1. The Caucasus in the 12th Century

The Georgian Bagrationids had been the leading power in Georgia well before the 12th century, but under David IV Aghmshenebeli ("the Builder") they incorporated Kakheti and Hereti in eastern Georgia, captured Tbilisi, an independent city-emirate for some centuries previously, and projected power into neighbouring Muslim Shirvan and the Gregorian-Armenian Christian (as opposed to Georgia's Orthodox Christian) lands to the south. They maintained this dominance for most of the following century, under David's successors Demet're, David V, Giorgi III, Tamar, and Giorgi IV Lasha. Under these rulers, especially Tamar who was Georgia's first ruling queen, there was also a notable flourishing of Georgian literary culture and architecture, including sites such as the cave monastery at Vardzia or epic romance literature such as the *Knight in Panther Skin* and the *Amirandarejaniani*. Khwarezmian and Mongol invasions ultimately ended this period in the 1220s: the 12th and early 13th centuries later became known as the Georgian 'Golden Age', a term still frequently used in academic literature on the period.⁶

Whilst the term 'Golden Age' raises more questions than it answers - especially begging the question of exactly for whom it was golden and for whom it was not - the high level of influence the Georgian court exerted over the Caucasus region is notable. The question of which factors contributed most to producing this hegemony is still much debated. We

⁶ E.g. Met'reveli, Roin, *Golden Age* (Tbilisi, 2010).

can, however, suggest that there was a strong correlation between the effective incorporation and co-option of other elite groups from across the Caucasus in the Bagrationid monarchs' successes. This was a highly diverse culture that drew upon manpower and support from people of a wide range of faiths and ethnic backgrounds. Core elements included the effective use of Alan-Ossetian and Kipchak forces, large numbers of the latter having been resettled in Georgia under David IV.⁷ Georgian rulers also had prominent nobles with Armenian ethnic roots or connections, notably the Orbeli and Mkhargrdzeli families who between them provided a large number of the polity's most senior officials and military commanders.⁸

Politics tended to be quite centralised - we see strong regional identities but little serious regionalist politics within Georgia, and disputes tended to be over which member of the Bagrationid dynasty should rule. That does not necessarily mean, however, that resource control was centralised. We see very little programmatic expansion of Georgian institutions, and the monarchs and some court functions were clearly often mobile, indicating that there was a significant benefit to moving to other parts of their realms where they could hunt alongside local nobility, hear petitions, and provide personal decisions and governance more effectively.

In the rest of the paper, we can explore some of these elements further and how they relate to games - especially covering two broad and overlapping areas, the presentation of the use of power, institutions, and factionalism, and that of the interactions between identity categories and the use of power.

3. POWER, FACTION, AND THE STATE

We tend to find, in role-playing games, that a state clearly exists in a form that modern audiences will recognise, with largely modern concerns expressed over its operations and

⁷ Met'reveli, Roin, and Jones, Stephen (eds.), *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, trans. Gamq'relidze, Dimitri, Abashidze, Medea, and Chant'uria, Arrian (Tbilisi, 2013), 179.

⁸ Baillie, James, 'The Dating and Significance of the Orbeli Rebellion: A Reassessment' *Chronos* 3 (2022), 13.

politics. In particular, states tend to be fully sovereign independent entities, armies tend to be centralised, and the extraction of resources for the state can be managed in a very top-down fashion. In *The Witcher 3*, for example, King Radovid manages to capture several neighbouring kingdoms and repurpose their armies as part of his own in a remarkably short period of time.⁹ In *Skyrim* the state is explicitly imperial, and despite the nominally Jarl-centric system of rule in *Skyrim*, both the Imperial and Stormcloak armies seem to operate on professional, paid lines: the fortresses in the Civil War storyline are always held directly by their respective armies' uniformed troops, rather than the local Jarls.¹⁰ In games set in Faerun, such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*, city-states led by oligarchies or single powerful lords are instead the norm, a form of government that has some significant historical roots but often lacks the superstructures of religion or relations with larger land-based powers that significantly shaped the development of, for example, the Italian city-states of medieval Europe.¹¹

The social aspects of dealing with state functions are frequently limited in games, because those functions are presented in a modern, state-driven way. A unit of soldiers in a game for example is usually treated as a defined, professional unit of soldiers, not a variably sized levy that may significantly vary in its efficacy depending on the personal relationships and negotiations between figures at different levels of the hierarchy. Similarly, where economic considerations are raised, they are often at the level of taxation and industry rather than subsistence and labour services, despite the latter being a more key aspect of most medieval economies. We meet farmers in *Neverwinter Nights* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, but these appear to be essentially free smallholders rather than the largely absent peasantry.¹² Meanwhile in *Black Geyser: Couriers of Darkness* and *Baldur's Gate*, economic concerns are major plot drivers, but in both cases they focus on state control of mineral

⁹ CD Projekt Red, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, Windows PC (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

¹⁰ Bethesda Studios, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Windows PC (Bethesda Softworks, 2012).

¹¹ BioWare, *Neverwinter Nights*, Windows PC (Infogrames, 2002); BioWare/Overhaul Games, *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition*, Windows PC (Atari, 2012).

¹² BioWare, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Windows PC (Electronic Arts, 2014).

resources, the problems of a strategic, centrally-controlled industry rather than more localised and distributed economic relations.¹³ These aspects in turn force the upper socio-political echelons of the societies presented in the game to act in a more modern way, with competition for economic resources and sites of activity given primacy with little thought to extensive land use or the difficulty of marshalling human resources.

This assumption that direct state control is effective and rapid, and that states are conceptually clear entities to which people have abstract allegiances, reduces the extent to which concerns about legitimacy and the presentation of power exist in these games. Monarchs are usually seen as essentially absolute, except in times of war and explicit rebellion: either they have complete control, or they have total gaps in their control, with limited options for other actors to pressure them or negotiate between those points and few requirements that would force them to use their power in certain ways. This also means that power is treated in a largely zero-sum way: a powerful, strong ruler is one who does not have other powerful people or institutions around that can challenge or threaten to usurp the power of the state.

There are some examples of schisms in computer RPGs within polities, though a small number of possible circumstances dominate, mostly evolving around this zero-sum model. Royal legitimacy and succession is one, largely explored in terms of the risks of civil war, usurpation or anarchy when a clear successor is lacking (examples include *Dragon Age: Origins'* Landsmeet in Ferelden, or its successor *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* Winter Palace segment in Orlais, or the genesis of the Civil War in *Skyrim* which is triggered by opposing claims and styles of legitimation).¹⁴ The other possibility is a material dispute, where control of a resource both causes and permits a schism (as in *Black Geyser*). In this case, too, the challenge to state authority tends to be presented as an unsubtle one. The idea that rulers have ongoing relationships to their vassals that might express more nuance than a simple state of either

¹³ GrapeOcean Technologies, *Black Geyser: Couriers of Darkness*, Windows PC (GrapeOcean Technologies, 2021).

¹⁴ Bioware, *Dragon Age: Origins*, Windows PC (Electronic Arts, 2009).

total acquiescence or absolute rebellion is much more rarely explored in games generally.

The experience of the medieval Caucasus in this regard is very different. Like in most medieval polities, state functions such as military recruitment were fundamentally decentralised. In order to raise an army, a ruler such as Tamar had to call upon the ducal *eristavis*, who then called upon generals and local leaders to raise forces, most of whom were not full-time professionals. Medieval Georgia in particular also relied on significant contingents of allied forces, Ossetians and Kipchaks, whose leaders could owe direct allegiance to the monarch of the day and which may not have been raised within the local structures of the *eristaviates*. The important impact that this has, compared to a system backed by the machinery of a state, is that the monarch's ability to get this system to function on a social level was a primary test of their power, and their capacity to obtain and utilise resources without it was very limited. It did not take a succession crisis or major material dispute to make it necessary to demonstrate the monarch's grasp of the court and socio-political system, because it was precisely this control that was needed to prevent such occurrences from arising. Direct questions of manpower and resource were thus intrinsically linked to more seemingly abstract questions of legitimacy.

Demonstrating legitimacy through symbols and actions was crucial to the recorded actions of medieval Caucasian leaders.¹⁵ Indeed many of our narrative sources themselves can in large part be thought of as documents written to support the familial legitimacy of particular rulers (something explored in for example *Crusader Kings 3*, but rarely in role-playing games). Church art and inscriptions tied religious authority very closely to power, including at times across technical faith lines: we have records of the Georgian king Demet're engaging with the Mosques of Tbilisi, and Giorgi III having his name inscribed as patron of a Gregorian-Armenian church reconstruction, despite both men being Georgian Orthodox by faith.¹⁶ These actions are

¹⁵ Latham-Sprinkle, John, 'Treason and Sovereignty in the Medieval Caucasus', *Chronos* 3 (2022), 51.

¹⁶ Ibn al-Azraq trans. Minorsky, in Minorsky, V., 'Caucasica in the History of Mayyāfāriqīn', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 13, No. 1 (1949), pp. 27-35; Chitishvili, N.,

antithetical to a simple model of nation-state rule, suggesting that the legitimacy of individual royal figures, rather than the polity in general, needed to be promoted directly to figures outside the polity's majority faith, meeting those groups on their own turf to actively establish personal legitimacy by their actions.

Legitimation could, in the Caucasus, run counter to absolutism. Praise for medieval Bagrationid rulers often emphasised the power, wealth and prestige of the lower tiers of their society: in other words, powerful vassals could be the sign of a powerful ruler, their prestige reflecting highly on one another.¹⁷ Recognition of sovereignty could have significant benefits even where there was little material or manpower exchange, both by displaying the potential for alliance if needed and by impressing upon other vassals that their ruler was capable of gaining such recognition.

The fact that actions and processes of legitimation are often not modelled in computer games or included in their storylines makes it much harder to present a 'medieval' model of the operations of power and the state. Whilst some games do include 'political' elements and bringing factions together in their storylines, these more often rely on creating temporary unity against an exceptional external threat (such as the Civil War truce in *Skyrim*, or the army the Warden builds against the blight in *Dragon Age: Origins*). The very nature of these events as exceptional changes the expected calculus for the actors portrayed: one does not need an effective impression of legitimacy in order to conclude that it would be politically and personally beneficial to not have the world eaten by a dragon. It also might arguably reinforce the perception of political or factional structures as deep-rooted and inherent if the only situation in which they can be overcome or changed is when faced with the threat of literal apocalypse.

Role-playing games, where there is less need than in some strategy games to model factions or political units as

'Haghartsin Monastery' in Eastmond et al, *Crossing Frontiers Project*, at

<https://sites.courtauld.ac.uk/crossingfrontiers/crossing-frontiers/armenia/haghartsin-monastery/>, accessed 12/05/2022.

¹⁷ Met'reveli and Jones, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, trans. Gamq'relidze, Abashidze, and Chant'uria, 242.

cohesive entities, may offer a particularly effective way of engaging with stories about the ways in which medieval political units could function. Viewing rulership through these lenses could change how players see medieval polities in games, provide new ideas and stories for them to explore, and help them question rather than reinforcing assumptions about the inevitability of a single, centralised state structure. It could also provide options for storytelling in games around those structures: finding the appropriate ways to secure - or question - power in such a system might be very different from conventional games where these questions usually involve doing simple tasks to gain people's support or being able to rely on it as the direct result of an accepted state symbol or process.

A less state-driven, less hierarchical view of power in games raises further questions, too - for we are used to the state being a core part of the construction not just of what people can or should do, but also of who people are. Exploring what identities and their importance mean between games and the medieval Caucasus, then, is the next step to which we can turn.

4. IDENTITY AND OPPRESSION

The focus in games is often on identity as a location of distance and violence. Both minority and majority identities in games are often not considered in very significant detail and are heavily reified to produce clearer separations than we see in real-world cultures. Minority identities in fantasy settings are often not merely racialised but speciated, with series such as *The Witcher* and *Dragon Age* having very clear analogies to the ghettoization of Jewish communities in their treatment of non-humans. Even where this is not the case, in-depth explorations of layering and crossover of identities present any identity that cannot be cleanly and simply expressed as a rare, high-tension event, such as Daelan Red Tiger's struggles with his nature as a Half-Orc in *Neverwinter Nights*. This makes a realistic presentation of identity - medieval or modern - one of the casualties of the historical curation process in games. In any real society, many people have local, regional, national and at times international feelings of socio-political identity, besides other intersecting identity characteristics such as faith and gender.

Majority identities in games are often very closely aligned to the polity, creating a system of explicitly ethnic nation-states. *Mount & Blade*, for example, explicitly embodies this trope, with each polity starting with lands and troops that reflect an extremely clearly delineated culture.¹⁸ Fractures of identity within RPG polities tend to be in the form of explicit imperial occupation of regions with their own identities, such as Skyrim, or Ferelden in *Dragon Age* in the years of Orlesian occupation. Sometimes splits are given underlying economic or individual motivations, such as the rebels in *Black Geyser*, who are hinted to hold a distinct regional identity but whose primary motivations are essentially economic and who display no significant cultural variation from the rest of the kingdom.

These two features - heavily ethnic polities and minority groups seen largely as the focus of identity construction through oppression - can create a situation in which the sphere of ethnic identities and tensions are always seen as strictly limited to a dominant state or imperial identity that seeks to cleanse, control or obliterate minority identities. This is a construction familiar to modern audiences, especially in the post-imperial west where colonised or formerly colonised ethnic groups form significant minorities in majority or plurality white former imperial centres or heavily colonised countries. The alienation of minority identities being part of constructing a polity-wide identity was, to be clear, not an unknown phenomenon in the medieval period, as has been persuasively argued in the case of medieval England's Jewish community.¹⁹ It was, however, not an inevitability in the medieval period, or the only way in which ethnic groups or even ethnic tensions could form, then or now.

There are a handful of models commonly used for minority or oppressed ethnic identities in RPGs, and they tend to be those that closely align to experiences that are more widely known or represented in popular culture. One is the ethnic group as ghettoised minority, in particular reflecting historical maltreatment of Jewish communities in Europe: these are minority groups presented as largely urban, with a high degree of focus on their restricted urban environment and trading status. The urban dwarves and elves of the

¹⁸ TaleWorlds Entertainment, *Mount & Blade: Warband*, Windows PC (Paradox Interactive, 2010).

¹⁹ Heng, Geraldine, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018), 55-109.

Witcher setting are explicitly the focus of pogrom violence, the city elves in *Dragon Age* live in ghetto-like "alienage" areas, and the Dunmer of Windhelm in *Skyrim* likewise are confined to certain areas of town and repressed by the proto-ethnonationalist Nord jarl Ulfric Stormcloak. Another model is minorities as imported low-paid or servile labour. This is an experience more reflective of early modern imperialisms in which people were subjected to varying degrees of pressured or forced movement, unfreedom and violence - up to and including the horrors of the slave trade, though also including indenture systems and prison transportation - driven in no small part by the desire of imperial elites to obtain labour for the exploitation of resources in colonised countries. Examples of this in pseudo-medieval games include Windhelm's Argonians who, unlike the aforementioned Dunmer, are not even allowed into the city, and who are all confined to manual dockside labour as part of a wider and explicitly imperial goods trade. The third core model is the minority as an external culture, often with very different technology or customs to the majority, perhaps being less sedentary, and operating effectively outside its jurisdiction and political space altogether. This depiction is based upon long-standing European depictions of 'barbarian' peoples as external to the state structure, even when in reality such cultures were usually deeply entangled with more urbanised or settled neighbours. The more recent experience and portrayals of colonised peoples also feed into these portrayals for modern audiences. Examples of these cultures in games are myriad: the Dalish or the Avvar in *Dragon Age*, the Forsworn in *Skyrim*, the Uthgardt of *Neverwinter Nights*, and arguably even the Svirfneblin gnomes of *Baldur's Gate 2*, living almost literally under the noses of the more powerful Drow city nearby.²⁰ In more modern games, the portrayals of these peoples are rarely explicitly or uncomplicatedly antagonistic, but that does not remove the trail of harm that continues to be done by the frequent misrepresentations of indigenous cultures. Whilst none of these oppressions or systems of cultural interaction can be described as alien to medieval cultures, they are largely familiar to modern audiences through their early modern and modern incarnations. What we see in medieval cultures in diverse regions such as the Caucasus involves a wider range of treatment and negotiation with non-dominant cultures.

²⁰ Bioware/Overhaul Games, *Baldur's Gate 2: Enhanced Edition*, Windows PC (Atari, 2013).

Many medieval polities sat across different linguistic, cultural, and ethnic groups, and to return to our case study, the Bagrationids' realm was no exception. Their titulature makes this very clear, with surviving charters starting by claiming rule over the Kartvelians, Abkhazian, Kakhis, and Rans: their conceptualisation is clearly as a ruler of varied and different peoples, not the ruler of a single abstracted polity.²¹ To an outsider, these people - and indeed the Kipchaks, Ossetians, and Armenians who were part of the Bagrationid polity and armies may all have been seen in that context as Georgians, and we should not always assume that those identifications were in absolute conflict. Shota Rustaveli, the great Georgian poet of the period, identifies himself in his epic *The Knight In Panther Skin* as a Meskhian poet from Rustavi: his placing his regional identity foremost does not make him less Georgian.²² This exposes two ways that these medieval identities work on different models: first, that there is often more layering and overlap of regional identities, especially compared to games where ethnic groups are often wholly speciated. Second, the implications of an identity outside the core need not have always involved a claim different in kind to that made when ruling a majority or core ethnic group, or a claim of ethnic supremacy on the part of a ruler. Instead, the political structure defined and structured itself in part by the identity groups it sought to claim and rule.

We also see, as a result of the Caucasus' internal diversity, a wide array of figures turning up with various forms of mixed identity. Georgian-Armenian families included the prominent Mkhargrdzelis, and the Orbelis, whose family chronicle explicitly notes their use of both Georgian and Armenian names.²³ Identity references can also be situational: the Mkhargrdzelis are explicitly referred to as Armenian in the case of, for example, religious disputes, as these brought their Gregorian-Armenian faith to the forefront of the chroniclers' narrative, whereas this part of their identity may be less prominent in chronicle sections that deal primarily with their military exploits.²⁴ These mixed and diverse identities were not an obvious barrier to

²¹ Enukidze, T., Silogava, V., Shoshashvili, T. (eds.), *ქართული ისტორიული საბუთები IX-XII სს* (Tbilisi, 1984), 78.

²² Rustaveli, *The Man in Panther Skin*, trans. Wardrop, 349.

²³ Orbelian, *History of the State of Sisakan*, trans. Bedrosian, 197.

²⁴ Met'reveli and Jones, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, trans. Gamq'relidze, Abashidze, and Chant'uria, 263.

most sorts of power among medieval Caucasus elites. The reverse may even be true: the powerful military command role of *amirsp'asalar* was held by both the Mkhargrdzeli and Orbeli families at different times in the 12th century, and at one point by a Kipchak, Kubasar.²⁵ Granting these positions to these individuals likely had some benefits for Georgian monarchs, whose realms undoubtedly included significant non-Georgian ethnic groups and non-Orthodox believers who they needed to be able to rule effectively. The state's capacity to impose an ideological position on the wider populace was limited, and mechanisms for allowing power to extend across such identity or ideology-based groups were therefore critical.

In other words, an identity outside the norm could be a route to power through the ability to broker relationships with particular groups. Kubasar's appointment was almost certainly made to ensure that the Kipchaks, a key element in Georgia's military strength, remained on Giorgi III's side during the rebellion of the Orbeli family.²⁶ Some nobles' connections outside the polity could also give them power when it came to questions of diplomacy: because individual approaches rather than a regular 'diplomatic service' or similar were the key to such operations, major questions of state could turn on the question of who had which connections in other courts. We see an example of this when Abulasan, who held the post of Emir of Tbilisi early in Queen Tamar's reign, was able to suggest the match with Tamar's first husband as a result of his connections to the Steppe Kipchak ruler Sevinj.²⁷ These dynamics could potentially be a source of competition within these groups, too - being in the position to become that broker could be valuable to elite families, and so if one were in a position to take the opposing side of a conflict to someone in the same ethnic group currently holding such a key role, the opportunity to gain by replacing them might arise.

We see the importance of brokering relationships, too, with women's power. Whilst women rarely held formal political office in this period, with the notable exception of Tamar, they are seen in politically important roles - Tamar faced

²⁵ Met'reveli and Jones, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, trans. Gamq'relidze, Abashidze, and Chant'uria, 238.

²⁶ Orbelian, *History of the State of Sisakan*, trans. Bedrosian, 199.

²⁷ Met'reveli and Jones, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, trans. Gamq'relidze, Abashidze, and Chant'uria, 243.

down a coup at the start of her reign with two women, Khuashak Tsokali and K'rava, as her negotiators.²⁸ Tamar's aunt, Rusudan, was a diplomat who helped broker a peace between her brother Giorgi III and the Eldiguzid dynasty of Iran.²⁹ These roles may well have been treated as suitable for women because, moving between families and at times polities for marital reasons, they could have had connections and thus an ability to broker deals that was not as open to all of their male counterparts. This was likely especially true in the Caucasus, where the lack of shared religious bonds between allies and enemies alike meant that wider familial and aristocratic principles might have had to play a stronger role in connectivity.

As well as being counter-absolutist, then, the mechanics of personal power in a less state-driven system sometimes demanded a more expansive approach to building that power by reaching towards and claiming authority on behalf of minority groups. This was not in the name of an enlightened liberal inclusivity, but driven by ties of self-interest. As we saw earlier when discussing legitimisation, monarchs actively courted constituencies outside the most common identity among their subjects, and they did so because this was a better strategy for them than trying to build a mono-ethnic state. A monarch whose rule was restricted to their own ethnic group and religion might, in contrast to the ideology of a modern nation-state, have been a weaker monarch, whereas being able to bring diverse elites on board and broker relationships across ethnic and indeed polity borders could be the roots of strength.

Game polities restricting their understanding of ethnicity and other identity factors to their role as sources of direct oppression also restricts their ability to tell stories involving the agency of characters with those identities. The only way a character from these backgrounds can gain influence is often either as a player character, a glaring exception who may well be out to singularly save or better the lot of their people, or as some sort of resistance fighter, influential by their explicit and total opposition to the system and willingness to turn that opposition into a source of threat to the system's leaders. This is not to say that there should be any issues with the portrayal either

²⁸ Met'reveli and Jones, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, trans. Gamq'relidze, Abashidze, and Chant'uria, 241.

²⁹ Met'reveli and Jones, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, trans. Gamq'relidze, Abashidze, and Chant'uria, 234.

of the brutality of oppression systems in fiction or of violent resistance to those oppressions, but rather that these need not and should not be our only mechanisms for understanding identity categories, especially when placed in a medieval society.

In particular, the ability of these games to tell stories of negotiation within oppressed groups, or between those groups and the systems they live in, or to tell stories of resistance through survival and creating alternative spaces, is often restricted by the assumption of a modern, statist level of control over people's lives. There are exceptions - the character of Briala in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, as an elf who is deeply enmeshed in Orlesian politics, to some extent takes on this role. But Briala, like her fellow Orlesian politicians, is largely portrayed negatively, part of a trio of elite figures who treat lives as wholly expendable and manoeuvre brutally for minor court advantage whilst failing to appreciate the much larger threat of Corypheus' forces. Briala's ability to effect change, too, is based on her personal ability and spying networks, rather than more widely on her capacity to interact with the elves of Orlais. Another example would be the tensions between the Uthgardt and Lords' Alliance which are explored a little in *The Wailing Death*, the main campaign of *Neverwinter Nights*. Here, however, the process is not one of negotiation or connection, but of the outsider Uthgardt being trapped by the unfamiliar justice systems of their allies: the player speaks for a accused murderer who cannot speak for himself, giving the Uthgardt no agency at all in the situation.

Reimagining the power dynamics between ethnicity groups along the lines we see in the medieval Caucasus, with brokerage as a route to power and internally dynamic identity groups and rulers more incentivised to reach towards ethnic groups outside their own, could help redress this balance and allow medieval-inspired games to work seriously with stories about identity in a way that does not pre-suppose one of a small number of modernist archetypes for how identity functions in society. In the final part of this paper, we can now turn to look at how some of these sorts of reimaginings might be achieved by game developers.

5. THE MECHANICS OF REIMAGINATION

In the previous sections, we have covered two major strands of how games deal with political societies, and how these relate to the experiences of people in the medieval Caucasus, looking first at power and states and then at oppressions and identities. In this final section of the paper, we can turn back to games in the abstract and imagine how games could best make use of these initial findings.

Interpersonal relationships are one of the most important areas in which games avoid representing medieval societies as we understand them and tend to use modern social structures instead. The assumption of zero-sum state power in games leads to social situations in which the only thing that matters is the top of the hierarchy: unless subordinates are going to actively rebel, they are politically irrelevant or can at best be treated as an advisory input into the ruler's decision-making, rather than, as we have seen, being important conduits for power and information and helping to dictate the range of possible options available to a ruler.

Turning some of these secondary-level interactions into game mechanics, and modelling some of the complexities of characters' relationships with one another as well as with the player character, is still comparatively rare in role-playing games, in which developments of secondary characters' relationships frequently occur only in a pre-set way as a result of the player's direct involvement. Encoding these networks, however, could allow for considerably more flexible social options for players. Rather than a problem of social status or legitimacy having a single solution or a handful of available 'paths', the player could choose from a much larger array of permutations and combinations, with the ultimate goal of brokering their preferred solution. A game like *Crusader Kings 3* has a number of these elements, but the extremely high simulation scale and complexity it offers need not be the only approach here: RPGs, lacking the multi-generational simulation of CK3, can know in advance the full set of potential characters involved, which reduces the relative scale of the problem. Placing the player both as an information broker and as someone who must deal with characters as brokers could improve players' understanding of and ability to engage with medieval-style social situations.

As well as modelling characters' relationships with one another in more complex ways, characters' relationships with their identities can similarly be characterised in a more diverse way. By using tagging systems or network graphs, game mechanics can associate characters with a wider array of identity tags. These could then be changed, emphasised, or de-emphasised between contexts and over time. Finding and connecting characters who have particular attributes or presentations might enable player characters to interact with gamified brokerage roles as a problem-solving element in dynamic quest design. Being able to distinguish variations of character and identity could provide players with a more dynamic sense of who other characters are, which can provide useful information for the problem-solving and social aspects of a game, or even for more conventional mechanics like combat where understanding the culture and presentation around a combat situation could be written to provide players willing to engage with those aspects with an edge.

This could also affect the player's understanding of their own identity. For example, in the *Elder Scrolls* games, characters (who of course have no way of knowing and pronouncing the player's input name for their character) often refer to the player by their race as "Imperial" or "Argonian" or "Bosmer" and so on. This reifies and strengthens the idea of that singular racial marker as being a core part of how everyone in the world sees the player character. Conversely, providing the ability to hold multiple identities or portray (through voice, clothing, or action) multiple identities gives a more nuanced view on what identity is, and when it does and does not matter. To stay with *Skyrim* as an example, a Nord might just be a Nord to a newly arrived Argonian trader, but to another Nord the regional division between the older eastern holds and the newer western ones might come to matter. Identity markers may also situationally change, such that an Argonian who grew up in the Imperial central province of Cyrodiil might be recognised racially by the distinct visual marker of being a semi-aquatic lizard person, but may nonetheless still be considered an Imperial in other circumstances, if using Imperial culture or customary norms or such as being in a position representing the Empire's armies. How characters refer to themselves or one another could, therefore, be used in game narratives both to tell the player how they fit into the game world and how different NPCs might have a different perspective on their place in it.

The largest risk of using the types of systems discussed above from a developer's perspective is an exponentiating quantity of content. Individual items of content may end up being simpler or more generic in order to account for the higher number of options and possibilities - for example, characters phrasing things in ways less unique to the character, because the dialogue line needs to be able to be delivered in a wider array of circumstances. This is a far larger risk for AAA series like *Dragon Age* or *The Elder Scrolls*, because their visual and audio inputs tend to be higher. In particular, any game that is fully voice-acted may struggle to provide the number of different possible dialogue lines needed for this complexity, though it is possible that machine learning and voice replication advances will overcome this barrier for AAA games in the coming years. Smaller studios, conversely, may not have the same levels of voice work in their games, but may lack the writing capacity to provide this diversity while at the same time providing the scale of story and depth of combat systems that are expected characteristics of most RPG products.

Despite these drawbacks, utilising these possibilities is not in any sense a pipe dream. The sheer size of the modern gaming market and continued fascination with medieval topics may create space for medieval games that lean towards playing with social roles and mechanics even if this comes at the expense of simplifying other systems in the design of games. To return to our concept of games as a process of historical curation discussed at the start of this paper, all inclusions and exclusions are choices. Taking medieval inspirations for designing the mechanics of power and society in a game, even if the additional work needed may require a game more focused on those areas, might thus be a valid decision to make. Indeed the success of games such as *Pentiment*, a game set in late medieval Europe that focuses on murder mysteries, choices and character interactions rather than typical RPG staples such as combat, might be a sign of the available possibilities.³⁰

There is little doubt that representing any given feature of a game world in more depth requires more content and therefore more work. Which features of a game world we gamify in depth, however, is a choice. When considering adding depth to medieval and medieval-fantasy games, the tendency

³⁰ Obsidian Entertainment, *Pentiment*, Windows PC (Xbox Game Studios, 2022).

has often been to focus on incorporating visual and aesthetic elements from the medieval period, and to focus on non-player characters as providers of tasks, information, or combat support, rather than on their interactions with one another. These core assumptions of the role-playing game genre need not be permanent and immutable, however, and by focusing on different parts of the historical past than those that have informed some of the conventions of the genre as it stands may open new mechanical paths toward new ludic and storytelling possibilities.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This look at the high medieval Caucasus as a comparison point for games began with a discussion of history in games as a curation process - and suggested that the question of what gets in, and what gets left out, is an important starting point for examining the reception of history in games. By looking at historical polities and people as a comparison point for what we curate into and out of games, we can get a better sense of those choices, and therefore of the possibilities for re-evaluating them. We should not assume that all of the curation choices in a game were made with a great deal of consideration, and indeed replication between games can lead to singular choices becoming more and more embedded in a game genre such as the digital RPG over time unless such a re-evaluation takes place.

We have seen some key instances in this paper of what gets curated out of our imagined pasts, in particular the complexity of medieval identities and the diverse structures of some medieval polities. When we look at the medieval Caucasus and issues within it of identity and power, of freedom and oppression, we see a range of dynamics that are not as immediately familiar to modern audiences and not necessarily reflected in game models of societies that occupy a similar pseudo-historical space. These especially include the overlapping and complex nature of identities held in the medieval Caucasus, the relatively high importance of elite connections and brokerage in shaping the space for actions or policies to be formed, and the importance of such connections in providing routes to power for people with non-dominant ethnic and gender identities.

The simulation of social mechanics may be one way to rectify these issues. Providing parts of a game that require the

player to dynamically engage with the social structures of a court culture and see the impacts of those interactions may provide players with more insight into alternative ways for social structures to function and provide designers with new storytelling options built around those possibilities. This might, additionally, help with finding new ways to present and engage with issues of identity that do not presuppose those identities and their places in society as part of a system that is eternal and immutable.

A process of re-examining the curation decisions in modern games, and bringing in understandings from under-represented cultures such as that of the Caucasus, may have benefits in multiple areas. For popular understandings and imaginings of history, it can help to move us towards medieval worlds that engage with medieval society and not just pseudo-medieval aesthetics, engaging with the *how* and not just the *what* in medieval worlds. Meanwhile, it also shows potential for providing novel ideas and inspirations in game development. The medieval Caucasus may be little represented in our cultures of play - but, precisely for this reason, its use as a starting point for revitalising how we approach such core concepts as power, freedom, and identity in games may have very great potential indeed.

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File #12



Title: Teaching Ethical Decision Taking with Serious Games

Subtitle: Potentials and Restrictions

Author(s): Sonja Gabriel

Digital serious games are increasingly being used to promote civic learning and ethical thinking in today's increasingly interconnected and complex world. These games are designed with the primary purpose of educating or training users rather than mere entertainment. They can provide interactive and interactive environments that encourage players to engage with moral dilemmas and ethical challenges in a safe and controlled setting. In addition, serious games can help to promote critical thinking and decision-making skills as they can present players with complex ethical dilemmas that require careful consideration and analysis. The connection between ethical thinking and digital serious games lies in the potential of these games to foster ethical awareness, facilitate moral reasoning, and enhance ethical decision-making skills among players. Moreover, integrating these games into formal and informal educational settings, as well as organizational training programs, can help disseminate and reinforce civic learning, ethical thinking across various sectors of society. Three selected digital games will be used to show how ethical thinking can be successfully combined with civic learning.

Keywords: serious games, civic learning, ethical thinking, EPIC framework, self-determination theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Citizenship education is a critical element in the development of a democratic society as it prepares individuals to become informed, responsible, and active citizens who can contribute to the well-being of their communities and the broader society (Wintersteiner & Grobbauer, 2014). Moreover, it aims to develop knowledge, skills, and values that enable individuals to participate effectively in public life, uphold democratic principles, respect diversity, and promote social justice. It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and participate in public affairs. This includes knowledge of the political system, the legal system, and the role of government and civil society organizations. It also includes the ability to critically evaluate information and arguments, communicate effectively, and work collaboratively to solve problems and make decisions. Citizenship education also promotes civic values, such as tolerance, respect, and empathy, which are essential for living in a diverse and pluralistic society. It encourages individuals to become active participants in their communities, to engage in volunteer work, and to support causes that promote social justice and human rights. It also fosters a sense of responsibility and commitment to public service, which is essential for maintaining a vibrant and healthy democracy.

Moreover, citizenship education is not limited to formal schooling. It is a lifelong learning process that requires ongoing education and engagement (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2019). It involves participation in civic activities, such as voting, volunteering, and engaging in public discourse as well as learning from everyday experiences, such as participating in community events, reading newspapers and books, and discussing current events with family and friends. Thus, we can state that citizenship education also comprises lifelong learning opportunities that enable individuals to become critical thinkers, effective communicators, and responsible decision-makers.

Apart from developing political knowledge and encouraging political engagement, civics education is also about fostering skills like critical thinking, communication, collaborative skills as well as creativity (also known as the 4 C's) (Redlo, 2021). Finally, another objective is to instill the values of tolerance, respect for diversity, and commitment to social justice, which are essential for

maintaining a healthy democracy. Parts of these objectives can be found in many school curriculums - at least this can be stated for German speaking countries - and can also be seen as a part of lifelong learning.

2. ETHICS, MORALITY AND VALUES

Ethics, morality, and values are three concepts that are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings and implications. Understanding the differences between these concepts is important for developing a clear understanding of the principles and standards that guide human behavior.

Morality refers to the principles or rules of conduct that govern the behavior of individuals or groups (Superson, 2009). It is the system of beliefs, values, and practices that shape human behavior in terms of what is considered right and wrong (Gert & Gert, 2020). Morality is often based on religious, cultural, or philosophical beliefs that define the acceptable standards of conduct for individuals and groups. It provides a framework for evaluating actions and decisions and helps individuals to navigate complex social and moral situations. Morality is often associated with the concepts of ethics and values, but it is a broader and more encompassing concept that covers a wide range of beliefs and practices.

Ethics, on the other hand, is the branch of philosophy that deals with the moral principles that govern the behavior of individuals and groups. It is the study of the nature of morality, including the concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, and duty and obligation (Velasquez et al., 2020). Ethics provides a framework for evaluating actions and decisions in terms of their moral implications. It helps individuals and organizations to identify and prioritize ethical principles and values and to apply them to specific situations. Ethics is concerned with the development of principles and rules that guide behavior in various contexts, such as professional, personal, and social.

And finally, the term values refers to the beliefs and attitudes that individuals or groups hold about what is important or desirable in life. They are the guiding principles that shape human behavior and decision-making

(Mintz, 2018). Values are often deeply rooted in cultural or religious traditions and may be influenced by personal experiences, education, and socialization. Values are subjective and vary from individual to individual and from culture to culture. They provide a framework for evaluating and making decisions in various contexts and help individuals to prioritize their goals and aspirations.

All these three terms are of importance when talking about ethical thinking, whereby ethical thinking refers to the mental processes individuals employ when faced with morally significant situations or dilemmas. It encompasses a broad range of cognitive, emotional, and social factors that shape our understanding of moral values, principles, and norms. One of the primary aspects of ethical thinking is moral reasoning, which involves the cognitive processes by which individuals evaluate and justify moral judgments. Various theoretical frameworks have been proposed to describe the stages and structures of moral reasoning, such as Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Duska & Whelan, 1975), which posits a hierarchical progression of moral understanding, and Gilligan's ethics of care (Edwards, 2009), which emphasizes the role of empathy and relationships in moral decision-making. These theories highlight the complexity and diversity of ethical thinking and underscore the importance of examining the underlying cognitive processes that drive moral judgments. Ethical thinking is also closely related to ethical sensitivity, the ability to recognize and interpret the moral aspects of a given situation. This capacity involves perceiving and understanding the consequences of one's actions, the feelings and perspectives of others, and the moral implications of a decision. Ethical sensitivity enables individuals to discern the presence of ethical issues, even when they are not immediately apparent, and lays the groundwork for engaging in moral reasoning and action.

3. POTENTIAL OF SERIOUS GAMES FOR CIVIC LEARNING AND ETHICAL THINKING

In recent years, serious games¹ have gained significant attention in education and training (Martinez et al., 2022; Sanchez, 2022; Ullah et al., 2022). These games are designed to educate, engage, and motivate players to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes in an immersive and interactive way. Serious games have been used in various domains, such as health, business, and defense, to improve decision-making, problem-solving, and performance (Lie et al., 2022 - 2022; Rumeser & Emsley, 2019). In particular, serious games have shown great potential in promoting active citizenship and civic engagement by training people to become better citizens (Ouariachi et al., 2019; Tapingkae et al., 2020). When using digital games in education contexts, however, teachers and trainers need to think of a framework to guide them through the teaching process. The TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) can be an effective guide. In the context of teaching civic education through digital games, the following parts and their interplay and intersection should be considered by teachers who want to use digital games:

1. Content Knowledge (C) which refers to understanding the subject matter, i.e., civic education. This includes understanding of democratic processes, political structures, citizen's rights, duties and responsibilities, social justice, community engagement, and critical thinking.
2. Pedagogical Knowledge (P) which involves understanding learning theories, learner characteristics, instructional strategies, and assessment methods.
3. Technological Knowledge (T) referring to understanding of the tools and platforms that can be used in teaching and

¹ Serious games are according to Michael and Chen (2011) a type of electronic game that is designed for a primary purpose other than pure entertainment. They combine learning strategies, knowledge, and structures with game elements to teach specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Serious games are intended to be educational applications that combine serious aspects in a non-exhaustive and coherent way.

learning. In this case, the specific technological knowledge involved would be digital games.

With respect to implementing this model in teaching civic education using digital games this means that teachers / trainers need to identify games that reflect civic education content and themes. Second, they have to develop appropriate pedagogical strategies to align with these digital games. This may involve facilitating discussions, debates, and reflection activities based on scenarios within the games. And finally, teachers need to consider how to assess student learning in an ongoing way. This could involve reflections, discussions, and assignments tied to the digital game content, as well as quizzes or tests on key concepts. The key is to identify where the three knowledge domains (content, pedagogy and technology) intersect in meaningful ways. Using digital games as teaching tools offers the possibility of rich, engaging learning experiences that can foster a deeper understanding of civic education.

One of the significant benefits of serious games teaching moral values is that they offer an engaging and interactive learning experience. Serious digital games can captivate players' interest and foster intrinsic motivation, making the learning process enjoyable and engaging. This heightened interest in civics education can lead to increased knowledge retention and a deeper understanding of complex political concepts. Furthermore, the interactive nature of digital games allows for immediate feedback, which can help students recognize their progress and adjust their learning strategies accordingly.

Serious games provide players with an immersive and interactive environment that allows them to experiment with different moral choices and see the consequences of their actions. This can help players to develop a deeper understanding of the consequences of their choices and build empathy towards others. Additionally, serious games can be customized to cater to the needs of different players, making them a highly personalized and effective method of teaching moral values. What is more, serious games teaching moral values can help to promote critical thinking and decision-making skills as they can present players with complex moral dilemmas that require careful consideration and analysis. Players must weigh different options and consequences before making a decision. This can help to develop their ability

to think critically and make informed decisions, which are essential skills in all aspects of life.

At the same time, serious games, however, can be seen as a safe environment for players to explore and experiment with different moral choices without facing real-world consequences. This can help players to develop a better understanding of their own values and beliefs and develop a sense of responsibility towards others. Thus, games can help players to learn from their mistakes and make better decisions in the future. Moreover, they can be designed to be relevant to real-life situations. These games can provide players with scenarios that they are likely to encounter in real life, such as bullying, peer pressure, or ethical dilemmas at work. By presenting players with real-life situations, serious games can help players to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate these situations successfully.

When using games for civic learning, "games foster civic learning when they help players to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions that players then apply to public matters in the world outside the game" (Raphael et al., 2010, pp. 205-206). As (Schrier, 2021) states, games designed and used for learning civics can vary in a great deal and can address real-world knowledge and action, can encourage community and connection among players or foster critical thinking and critical inquiry.

The connection between ethical thinking and digital serious games lies in the potential of these games to foster ethical awareness, facilitate moral reasoning, and enhance ethical decision-making skills among players. Serious games, which are designed with the primary purpose of educating or training users rather than mere entertainment, can provide interactive and immersive environments that encourage players to engage with moral dilemmas and ethical challenges in a safe and controlled setting. Digital serious games can be designed to present players with morally complex situations that require them to recognize and interpret the ethical dimensions involved. By prompting players to consider the consequences of their actions, the perspectives of various stakeholders, and the moral implications of different choices, serious games can enhance ethical sensitivity and raise ethical awareness. Serious games offer opportunities for players to engage in moral reasoning and

decision-making by presenting them with ethical dilemmas that demand critical thinking and reflection.

These games can incorporate various moral frameworks, such as consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics, to challenge players' preconceived notions and encourage them to explore different ethical perspectives. This active engagement in moral reasoning can lead to the development of more nuanced and sophisticated ethical thinking skills. Digital serious games can foster moral imagination by providing players with diverse and often novel scenarios that require creative problem-solving and the consideration of alternative courses of action. By allowing players to experiment with different choices and witness the consequences of their decisions, serious games can encourage the exploration of ethical possibilities and stimulate imaginative thinking in a morally complex context. Through repeated exposure to ethical dilemmas and challenges, serious games can help players develop and refine the skills necessary for ethical thinking and decision-making. Players can practice perspective-taking, empathy, communication, and negotiation skills, which are essential components of ethical thinking and behavior in real-life situations. Games themselves can be considered ethical systems that express values (Sicart, 2009) which makes them a good means of using them in educational contexts as well. Also (Zagal, 2011) states that narrative and gameplay can encourage to reflect and evaluate topics and decisions as well as help players to evaluate and consider different choices or actions to be taken.

4. EPIC FRAMEWORK

When it comes to analyzing games according to their contribution to civic learning, moral, ethics, and values, there are certain frameworks needed. The EPIC (Ethics Practice and Implementation Categorization) Framework (Schrier, 2015, 2021) is a set of seven ethics education goals that help educators choose video games to be used for ethics practice in both classroom and informal learning settings. The framework is derived from classic moral development, learning, and ethical decision-making models, including frameworks and theories. The framework is comprised of seven goals:

1. Enhance ethical awareness: This objective focuses on fostering moral sensitivity and identity, allowing

individuals to comprehend their own ethical beliefs, choices, and actions. Key aspects include understanding one's ethical identity, personal perspectives, and moral stance.

2. Enhance emotional intelligence or general SEL skills: This goal is essential because ethical thinking necessitates the capacity to process emotions and apply them correctly in decision-making and actions. Social and emotional intelligence encompasses recognizing emotions, understanding others' emotions, and managing one's emotions. Those who are more self-aware and able to regulate their emotions may be more conscious of how emotions influence their attitudes, biases, choices, and behaviors.

3. Practice care or empathy-related skills: Empathy and compassion play a crucial role in ethical decision-making. Care, connection, and relationships form the basis of ethical choices. This objective collaborates with others to assist individuals in recognizing, contemplating, caring for, and integrating other people's perspectives and ethical viewpoints.

4. Practice ethical reasoning: This goal requires students to identify, analyze, and assess ethical dilemmas, options, and consequences. People must be capable of navigating ethical situations and challenges. Ethical reasoning involves several skills, such as prioritization, weighing pros and cons, issue evaluation, evidence analysis, bias identification, and interpretation.

5. Practice ethical reflection: This objective pertains to reflection, an essential ability for helping students examine their choices and contemplate the implications of their actions. Through reflection, students reinterpret and reevaluate their assumptions and attitudes, enabling them to better understand and accept their decisions, ultimately transforming their perspectives and actions going forward.

6. Enhance character: This goal involves individuals learning how to treat others respectfully, appreciate all aspects of humanity, society, and the world, and engage in civic life. Character encompasses various elements, including respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, caring, justice, fairness, civic virtue, and citizenship.

7. Cultivate facility with major ethics issues, approaches, and frameworks: This objective involves sharing and developing ethics-related content and fundamental theories, such as the Kantian approach, hedonism, or utilitarianism. While individuals may prefer one specific framework, students should recognize the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches, apply them to situations, and use them in diverse contexts (e.g., justice vs. care approach to

ethics). Additionally, students should articulate, identify, and evaluate key contemporary and historical ethical and humanistic issues, understand their importance, and apply them to future scenarios.

The framework helps educators identify and better incorporate games to be used for ethics practice in both classroom and informal learning settings which will be shown later by some examples.

5. SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a macro-theory of human motivation and personality that was developed by (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2018). SDT posits that humans have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which must be satisfied in order to achieve optimal functioning and well-being. Autonomy hereby refers to the need of feeling in control of one's own behavior and to act in accordance with one's own values and interests. When people feel that they are acting autonomously, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their activities, leading to greater satisfaction and well-being. In contrast, when people feel that their behavior is controlled by external forces, they are more likely to experience negative emotions and decreased motivation. Competence, as a second factor, is explained with the need to feel effective in one's actions and to be able to achieve desired outcomes. When people feel that they are competent in their activities, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged, leading to greater satisfaction and well-being. However, when people feel incompetent or unable to achieve their goals, they are more likely to experience negative emotions and decreased motivation. Finally, relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to others and to have meaningful relationships. When people feel that they are connected to others and have meaningful relationships, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged, leading to greater satisfaction and well-being compared to feeling isolated or disconnected from others which results more likely in negative emotions and decreased motivation. SDT also proposes that there are different types of motivation, ranging from extrinsic motivation (motivation that comes from external rewards or pressures) to intrinsic motivation (motivation that comes from within, such as interest or enjoyment in an activity). SDT posits that intrinsic motivation is the most desirable

type of motivation, as it leads to greater engagement, creativity, and well-being.

SDT can thus also be seen as providing a theoretical framework for understanding how serious games can be designed to foster intrinsic motivation, engagement, and learning. Games that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness are more likely to foster intrinsic motivation and engagement, leading to greater learning and well-being. (R. M. Ryan et al., 2006) researched the relationship between in-game autonomy, relatedness, and competence within computer games and found out that these factors influence enjoyment and well-being and thus also influence if players spend more time within a game. For example, serious games that allow players to make choices and act according to their own values and interests can foster autonomy, while games that provide opportunities for players to develop skills and achieve mastery can foster competence. Games that allow for social interaction and connection with others can foster relatedness. Moreover, games that provide clear goals and objectives that align with the player's values support the feeling of autonomy, whereas games that provide the right amount of feedback and allow for incremental progress strengthen the feeling of competences. Relatedness can be fostered by providing collaboration and social interaction can foster relatedness. Various research projects have proven this relationship and SDT is already partly used when analyzing existing games or designing new (serious) games (Greeff et al., 2017; Proulx et al., 2017; Proulx & Romero, 2016; van der Spek, 2012). As (Krettenauer & Curren, 2020) states, the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness can well be linked to a person's acquisition of morality.

6. GAMES FOR CIVIC LEARNING AND ETHICAL THINKING

The growing interest in using games for civic learning stems from the recognition that traditional educational methods often fall short in addressing the complexities of modern society and engaging the digitally-native generation. Games, by their very nature, can address these gaps by providing dynamic, experiential, and participatory learning environments that foster critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. When playing certain games it is possible "to play with the potential outcomes of their ethical decisions, try on or alter one's identity or affinity, and iterate what if scenarios that they would not

do otherwise" (Schrier & Kinzer, 2009, p. 316). In order to have a closer look at the potential of serious games to foster civic learning and ethical reasoning, three games were chosen and analyzed according to the EPIC framework and self-determination theory. As already mentioned, civic learning is a lifelong process and that is why the three games address different target groups: children, teenagers and young adults and grown-ups.

7. FAIRSIDE STORIES

Fairside Stories (Bigfatphoenix Interactive, 2021) is a serious game (free, for iOS and Android devices) that aims to teach players (9 to 14 year old) about social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies and critical life skills. The game is set in a virtual town where players can interact with different characters, complete quests, and engage in activities that promote SEL competencies. The game mechanics involve players completing quests and challenges that promote SEL competencies such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. The game-play involves navigating the town and interacting with characters, learning about their stories and experiences, and making decisions that promote SEL competencies like for example organizing sleepovers, win soccer games but also winning class president elections. The game is designed to provide multiple endings so that children can explore different choices and their outcome. At the beginning players can see the possible endings they can reach.

The teaching objectives of *Fairside Stories* are to develop players' social and emotional learning competencies, including empathy, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making. The game aims to teach players how to understand and manage their emotions, how to show empathy and compassion for others, and how to make responsible decisions that are in line with their values and goals. The game provides players with autonomy by allowing them to make choices and decisions that impact the development of their character and the overall story. Players can explore the virtual town and engage in activities that promote social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. This allows players to feel in control of their actions and behavior, which is essential for satisfying the need for autonomy. Competence is also supported in *Fairside Stories* by providing players with

challenges and quests that promote SEL competencies. Players must engage in activities that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills - of course on a very basic level. By providing challenges that are not too easy or too difficult, players feel a sense of competence and mastery, which is essential for satisfying the need for competence. Relatedness is also supported in *Fairside Stories* by providing opportunities for players to interact with different characters in the game. The game encourages players to understand the stories and experiences of different characters and to make decisions that promote empathy and compassion. This fosters a sense of connection and empathy, which is essential for satisfying the need for relatedness.

The game also presents the player with a personality depending on the decisions taken in all the levels that have already been played: the friend, the monk, the knight and the rogue. This feature helps children to reflect on their choice and can foster what the EPIC framework calls enhancing ethical awareness. Although most choices that can be taken are clearly to be stated either morally correct or doubtful, the game succeeds in showing the players that you do not always get full points if you choose the 'correct' answer but every decision helps to form the character. The game does not claim a decision to be good or bad but tries to help children to practice ethical reasoning. By including topics like class president elections it is a good example of how civic education can be combined with ethical thinking.

8. QUANDARY

Quandary is a free, web-based serious game developed by the Learning Games Network in 2012 that aims to teach critical thinking and decision-making skills to players. The game is set on a distant planet where players take on the role of the captain of a colony ship, tasked with making decisions that will impact the future of the colony and its inhabitants. The game mechanics involve players making decisions based on different scenarios presented to them. These scenarios involve ethical dilemmas, where players must consider the needs and perspectives of different characters and make decisions that balance the interests of different groups. The game-play involves navigating these scenarios and using critical thinking skills to make informed decisions that will impact the colony's future. The teaching

objectives of *Quandary* are to develop players' critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. The game aims to teach players to consider multiple perspectives and to weigh the consequences of their decisions. It also aims to teach players to recognize bias and to make decisions that are fair and just. Overall, *Quandary* is a well-designed serious game that provides an engaging and interactive experience for players while teaching important skills. The game-play and mechanics are designed to challenge players and encourage them to think critically about the decisions they make. The teaching objectives of the game are aligned with important educational goals and can help players develop important life skills.

The game provides players with autonomy by allowing them to make choices and decisions that impact the colony's future. Players are given the freedom to explore different scenarios and are not forced to make decisions that are predetermined. This allows players to feel in control of their actions and behavior, which is essential for satisfying the need for autonomy. Competence is also supported in *Quandary* by providing players with challenges that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. The game presents complex ethical dilemmas that require players to weigh the interests of different groups and make informed decisions. By providing challenges that are not too easy or too difficult, players feel a sense of competence and mastery, which is essential for satisfying the need for competence. Relatedness is also supported in *Quandary* by providing opportunities for players to interact with other characters in the game. The game encourages players to consider the needs and perspectives of different characters and to make decisions that balance the interests of different groups. This fosters a sense of connection and empathy, which is essential for satisfying the need for relatedness. In addition, the game also incorporates the principles of intrinsic motivation, which is the most desirable type of motivation according to SDT. The game is designed to be engaging, fun, and challenging, which helps to foster intrinsic motivation and leads to greater engagement and learning outcomes.

When having a look at the EPIC-framework, the following points can be seen: *Quandary* is an educational game that challenges players to make ethical decisions by placing them in the role of a leader in a new colony. The game encourages players to develop empathy by presenting them with complex

moral dilemmas, which involve various characters with unique backgrounds and motivations. As players work to find the best solutions for the colony, they must consider the needs and emotions of these characters, fostering empathy for different perspectives and viewpoints. Although the game features diverse characters, their development may be somewhat limited, preventing players from fully engaging with their perspectives. Further exploration of these characters' backgrounds, motivations, and personal stories could improve empathy and perspective-taking by providing more context for their ethical stances. The game offers multiple narrative paths and encourages players to consider different perspectives before making decisions. The game features diverse characters with conflicting opinions, requiring players to listen to their arguments and assess the potential consequences of their decisions from various points of view. By presenting a range of perspectives, *Quandary* promotes critical thinking and encourages players to step outside of their own biases and preconceptions. Despite offering branching narratives and multiple outcomes, the game's overall narrative structure may still feel linear and constrained. The game could benefit from more open-ended gameplay and a wider range of choices, allowing players greater agency in shaping the story and the colony's future. In *Quandary*, players assume the role of a leader responsible for making critical decisions that affect the well-being of their colony. This role allows players to explore their own identity as a decision-maker and ethical thinker. Through the game's branching narratives and dialogue choices, players can experiment with different leadership styles and ethical stances, shaping their in-game identity and reflecting on their real-life values.

Quandary presents ethical dilemmas that are designed to be accessible and engaging for a wide audience, including teenage players. However, this approach may oversimplify complex moral issues, potentially limiting the game's ability to promote deep ethical reasoning and critical thinking. Incorporating more nuanced ethical dilemmas and a broader range of moral considerations could challenge players to engage with the issues on a deeper level. The game may not offer the same level of replayability or depth as other types of games. Expanding the game's narrative, adding new scenarios, or incorporating more complex decision-making mechanics could enhance replayability and keep players engaged over a longer period.

9. CYBERSECURITY ETHICS

Cybersecurity Ethics is a free web-based serious game developed by Chaos Theory Games, released in 2021. The game aims to teach players about cybersecurity ethics and responsible decision-making in the context of cybersecurity. The design is based on five key ethical principles: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability (M. Ryan et al., 2022). Players take on the role of a cybersecurity analyst who must make decisions about how to respond to various cybersecurity incidents. The game presents players with different scenarios, each with its own set of ethical considerations and cybersecurity best practices. The scenarios can range from minor incidents, such as an employee accidentally emailing sensitive information to the wrong recipient, to major incidents, such as a cyber-attack on the company's systems. To navigate these scenarios, players must gather information, evaluate the situation, and make decisions based on ethical considerations and cybersecurity best practices. For example, players may need to consider the interests of different stakeholders, such as the company, its employees, and its customers, and make decisions that protect the interests of all parties involved. Players may also need to consider the potential consequences of their decisions and how they align with ethical principles and cybersecurity best practices. The game provides players with different options for responding to each scenario, each with its own set of advantages and disadvantages. For example, players may choose to immediately report a cybersecurity incident to management, or they may choose to investigate the incident further before taking action. Each decision that players make affects the outcome of the scenario and the development of their character. The game mechanics and objectives are designed to challenge players and encourage them to think critically about their decisions and actions. Through engaging with different cybersecurity scenarios and considering different ethical considerations and cybersecurity best practices, players develop a better understanding of cybersecurity ethics and responsible decision-making in the context of cybersecurity.

The game provides players with autonomy by allowing them to make decisions and engage in activities that promote ethical decision-making and responsible cybersecurity practices. Players have the freedom to choose how they respond to different cybersecurity incidents and are not constrained

by predetermined choices or outcomes. This allows players to feel in control of their actions and behavior, which is essential for satisfying the need for autonomy. Competence is also supported in the game by providing players with challenges and scenarios that require critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. The game presents players with different scenarios that require them to evaluate different ethical considerations and cybersecurity best practices. By providing challenges that are not too easy or too difficult, players feel a sense of competence and mastery, which is essential for satisfying the need for competence. Relatedness is also supported in *Cybersecurity Ethics* by providing opportunities for players to consider the perspectives of different stakeholders and to make decisions that are in the best interests of all parties involved. The game encourages players to consider the interests of different stakeholders and to make decisions that protect the interests of all parties involved. This fosters a sense of connection and empathy, which is essential for satisfying the need for relatedness.

Regarding the EPIC-framework, this game tries to enhance the player's ethical awareness as well as emotional intelligence as the situations given quite often need the player to read and understand moral situations and recognize moral concerns that might compete each other (M. Ryan et al., 2022). The situations presented are rather complex as the different non-playable characters in the game provide different priorities to the ethical principles. In order to make learning possible, a scaffolding approach is used: An AI ethics advisor which is called EthBots supports the player when it comes to regarding particular ethical principles. This support is gradually reduced as the game progresses.

10. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, digital serious games hold significant potential for fostering civic learning and ethical thinking in today's increasingly interconnected and complex world. By providing immersive, interactive, and engaging environments, these games offer unique opportunities for individuals to develop a deeper understanding of civic responsibilities, moral values, and ethical principles. The multidimensional nature of serious games allows them to address various aspects of civic learning and ethical

thinking, including knowledge acquisition, skill development, and attitude formation. Furthermore, digital serious games can promote a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of civic and ethical issues, bridging the gap between theory and practice. By presenting players with realistic and morally complex situations, serious games facilitate ethical awareness, sensitivity, reasoning, and imagination, equipping individuals with the necessary skills to navigate real-world challenges and dilemmas. Additionally, the safe and controlled environment provided by serious games encourages experimentation and reflection, fostering a growth mindset and an appreciation for the nuances of ethical decision-making.

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the potential of serious games to contribute to civic learning and ethical thinking should not be underestimated. By harnessing the power of digital technologies and adopting innovative pedagogical approaches, we can empower individuals to become more responsible, active, and ethical citizens in their communities and beyond. It is crucial, however, that educators, game designers, and policymakers collaborate to ensure that digital serious games are designed and implemented effectively, with a focus on addressing real-world civic and ethical issues. Investments in research and development of digital serious games can lead to the creation of more engaging, relevant, and impactful learning experiences that align with the needs of a diverse and digitally-native generation. Moreover, integrating these games into formal and informal educational settings, as well as organizational training programs, can help to disseminate and reinforce civic learning and ethical thinking across various sectors of society.

Finally, the potential of digital serious games for civic learning and ethical thinking hinges on our collective ability to recognize and embrace their value as transformative educational tools. As shown by the three examples, serious digital games can foster a more informed, ethically-minded, and civically-engaged citizenry, better equipped to address the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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File #13



Title: Freedom and Slavery

Subtitle: Designing Player Experiences in the 18th Century Sierra Leone Estuary

Author(s): Katrina HB Keefer

Bunce Island: Through the Mirror is set during the 18th century in the Sierra Leone estuary at the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade within the region. Developed to bring players into a carefully reconstructed historical past, we have been developing the project to meet multiple audience needs through a process of collaborative co-authorship. For stakeholders within Africa, the conflation of the African continent and the trans-Atlantic slave trade can be grating and a reduction of complex heritages into one major trauma, while for the descendants of that trade, the desire to reconnect with the courage of their ancestors who survived the trade is central. This binary has shaped our process of development and decision making as we build branching narratives and broad story arcs. It explores that process and the ramifications around it, offering a case study into development and scholarly inquiry around freedom within a game's narrative. This paper discusses strategies to allow players a sense of perceived autonomy and decision-making within the game space, facilitating both exploration and narrative. The topic of our game is one which evokes strong emotions and engages with a complex past of oppression and resilience - how we engage with the freedom of our players is the foundation of a dignified representation of a painful history.

Keywords: game development, West Africa, player autonomy, mechanics, authenticity

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper engages with questions of exploration, freedom, immersion, and the open world game. It also considers how the imaginary world intersects with lived historical pasts, particularly painful ones. How can a game developer recreate a nuanced and authentic game world for players to explore which is based on carefully reconstructed histories when that historical past is explicitly one of dehumanization and commodification? This is the central challenge for my development team and myself as we collaboratively design a game which is located in the eighteenth-century Sierra Leone estuary, which was home to one of the slave forts of that period. The tension between the freedom to develop an engaging and immersive world and the responsibility to create a historically authentic and culturally sensitive world lies at the root of this paper. I engage here with theories around how space in games serves immersion and engagement, and how agency similarly drives player investment in a game. The game we are developing is intended to meet the needs of learners worldwide as well as attracting a broader general public, permitting those descended from enslaved Africans to virtually journey to a place which may have seen their ancestors' forced migration, and simultaneously offering a more culturally nuanced and ultimately empowering narrative set on the West African coastline to a public which experiences very little of the complicated histories that defined Africa's past. Embodiment, spatiality, agency, and authenticity therefore drive this development, and this paper explores each in the context of the actual design process.

After design discussions and early feedback from testers who originated in sub-Saharan Africa, my team and I decided to incorporate much more than the trans-Atlantic slave trade alone, because the story for Africa and Africans is too often conceived of as one where the slave trade or trauma is the central theme. It also became increasingly clear as we began to storyboard and conduct archival research that reproducing Bunce Island or the surrounding regions would require a comprehensive overview of every major element of the region. On a purely technical level, this required thorough consideration of extensive materials, sources, trade routes and more. If a digital character was to be recreated with authenticity, what might they be eating? Where did their meal come from? How was it prepared? What sort of eating utensils might they use? What would they be

made from? Where did they come from? This entire approach forced our team and collaborators to rethink every assumption we held around European, African, and Afro-European traders and their network of out-factories. We began to ask questions like in what type of homes these people might live in. Would their homes be made of stone or of wood? What kinds of stone would they have chosen? How might they dress?

These questions, distinctly practical, sparked others, and the close re-reading of traveler accounts began to shed light on new ideas and problems. Anna Maria Falconbridge described orange trees at Bunce Island in the 1790s; were these planted deliberately to address scurvy on board slave ships? Falconbridge describes seeing these trees growing naturally along the shores of the rivers she and her husband traversed in the estuary, indicating that these oranges were a native variety.¹ The team began to see historical accounts in new ways and ask questions which led to re-examinations of the literature as a whole. We included a growing number of scholars in our collaborative work, and their expertise shaped the narrative and nuances in important ways. This approach, as with other steps in our development process, sparked two significant problems: 1) would we be up to the task of building a historical game about slavery, construct an authentic and carefully researched recreation of the historical Sierra Leone estuary and thus an open game world, and 2) how could we make sure to stay true to historical narratives while still preserving a sense of player agency? Both questions engage with a tension between academic research and rigor and developing a gameplay experience. These are the two central questions I will explore within this paper, as both directly feed experience and immersion.

2. BUNCE ISLAND AND THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

Understanding the location within which the game takes place is a crucial first step. The trans-Atlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity which saw approximately 12.5 million enslaved men, women, and children taken from African shores to the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The trade depended upon specific locations from

¹ Anna Maria Falconbridge. *Two Voyages to Sierra Leone During the Years 1791-2-3 In a Series of Letters*. London: Self-Published, 1794. 27, 51.

which these human cargoes were sold which were located throughout West, West-Central, and Central Africa primarily. Protected harbors, sandy lagoons, and other such features were vital to the establishment of this trade, and typically, Atlantic traders would call at such ports to purchase enslaved people brought from far inland by coastal trade networks. It was a nuanced and complicated trade that relied upon relationships of reciprocity between the interior African trade, coastal traders - themselves often Afro-European in descent - and the European Atlantic traders.² Over centuries, close ties developed between European traders and African coastal elites, leading to interconnections between the Atlantic trade world, the Islamic trade networks of the interior, and the coastal space between the two. The key site for this game's narrative is one such port, known as either Bense, Banse, or Bunce Island, in what is today Sierra Leone.

² There is a robust literature on this complex relationship and system. Some key texts include Paul E Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970; David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; Phillip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. Further information including statistics of the trade may be found at the major collaborative digital humanities project *Slave Voyages*, which collates the work of hundreds of specialist scholars. (<https://www.slavevoyages.org/>)

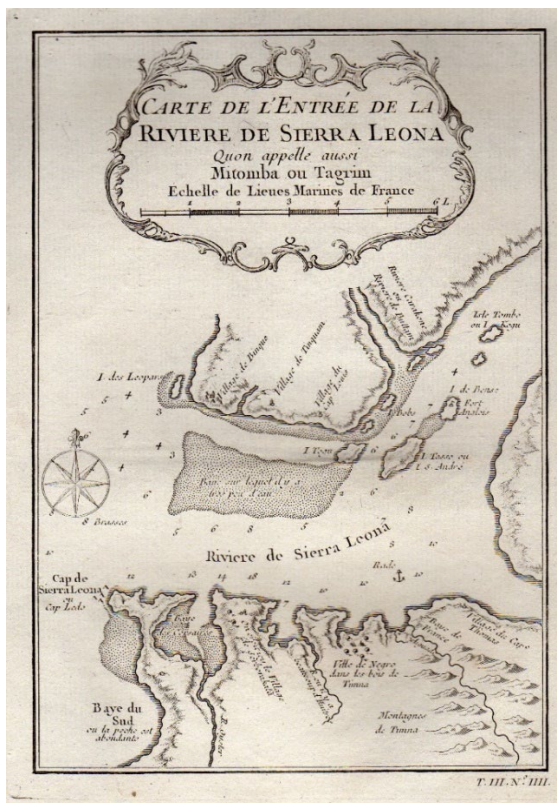


Figure 1. Eighteenth century map of the estuary including Bunce (Bense) island. Jacques Nicholas Bellin c. 1747.

The Freetown peninsula in Sierra Leone is positioned at the mouth of a deep, wide river, the Sierra Leone river, which offers the African coast's deepest natural harbour to shipborne trade. Upriver in the estuary, sheltered just beyond the broad and fertile Tasso Island lies Bunce Island, a tiny, relatively flat island with an elevation of no more than 22 metres (72 feet) above sea level. It is positioned right at the edge of the navigable portion of the river, within the estuary of the Rokel river and the Port Loko waterway, roughly 32 kilometres from Freetown (20 miles). The estuary as a whole represented a complicated and diverse place of trade and cultural exchange beyond the trans-Atlantic slave trade, with villages on most of the larger islands and along the coastline. European traders based at Bunce were positioned to take advantage of these networks while remaining nominally safe from attackers. In truth, the

island offered little safety, and was regularly attacked and often taken by rival trade companies and pirates.

Just 502.9 metres by 106.7 metres (1650 feet by 350 feet), the island is small, which made it attractive to the slave traders intending to build a fort there. Local accounts describe how Tasso was the first site considered for a slave fort, but proved unsuitable due to the breadth of terrain into which an escaped slave could flee. Bunce was therefore deemed a better site and had the advantage of lying just before the point where the river grows too shallow for deep-water vessels to navigate.

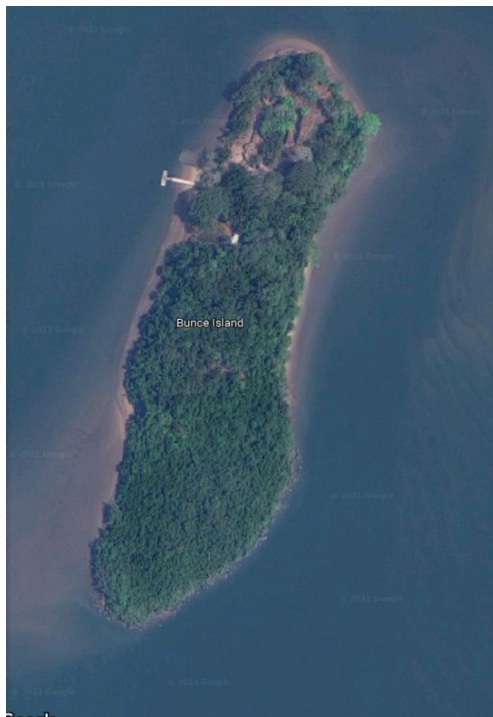


Figure 2. Bunce Island as it appears today

Bunce fort, sometimes called Bunce castle, was built on the northern end of the island, and experienced multiple captures, first by rival companies and nations, and later by pirate forces during the eighteenth century, which necessitated extensive rebuilds. Many of the existent plans of the fort are challenging to interpret and may be more

aspirational than factual in their representation of a completed wall and set of buildings. Bunce experienced many structural modifications over the centuries as it changed hands, was captured, attacked, and eventually transitioned beyond its original slave-trading origins when Sierra Leone grew and flourished beyond its original colonial boundaries. In part, this aspirational aspect was due to the financial situation of the London-based Royal Africa Company (RAC) early on; those responsible for the fort were chronically underfunded and typically owed money, as seen through an extensive correspondence by the chief factor, Robert Plunkett, requesting supplies in the early eighteenth century.³ Those who worked at Bunce were isolated by distance and the time period from close oversight by their company officials. This was not uncommon for the time, as correspondence could take weeks if not months to reach the company headquarters within European metropolises (in this case, London) and instructions much the same in being sent back - assuming neither were intercepted or prevented from reaching their destinations. During the period when Bunce was operated by the RAC, it took an average of 201 days, with a minimum of 59 days, for a letter to reach the London offices and be recorded.⁴

Beyond the European-led trading fort, which is remembered primarily for its role in the slave trade, the estuary more broadly was a place of cross-cultural exchange. Along the Bullom Shore at the northern side of the estuary mouth, there was a metropole for the Bullom people at Yongroo, which later documents describe in detail. The early nineteenth century missionary Gustavus Reinhold Nylander was stationed near Yongroo and provides an early ethnographic account of the seat of power there. Nylander's account in a letter to London from July 19th, 1815 offers a description of the political structure of the Bullom:

Nylander to Pratt July 19, 1815, Yongroo Pomoh

The Bullom country is divided into a great many parts, each of which is governed by a Sukoh. The head of all these Sukohs is Bay the king. At his acceptance of the title and authority of the king of the country he chooses a Nensukoh and a Nengbanah as his assistants in ruling the

³ "Letter of Robert Plunkett to Royal Africa Company" 16 April 1719. T70.6 ff97-98. National Archives, British Library, Kew

⁴. Rönnbäck, "Early Modern Multinational Enterprise," 1152.

country.

All these are respected by the people as kings, wherefore they sometimes call them the first, second and third king. They are stationed in different places yet at such a distance that in two or three days' time they may all meet at the kings place. All the other Sukohs or headmen are accountable to them for any palavers and they report it to the King if there be any great palaver such as murder or witchcraft these must be settled before the king at Yongroo (Nylander to Pratt, 19 July 1815, Yongroo Pomoh, CMS CA1/E5/13, Church Missionary Society Archives)

This later account positions Yongroo as a regional place of significance, where witchcraft and murder trials were heard by the ruler, and where the ruler himself lived and heard from his tributaries. Further upriver from Yongroo was land held by the Temne people, and many settlements in the early period are described by travelers who struck bargains with Temne rulers for the temporary use of land. It is challenging to reconstruct a complete picture of the demographic intersections throughout the estuary due to change over time and little use of the written word to preserve snapshots of the region beyond the accounts of outsiders and travelers.

The demographic picture of the estuary and river is complicated by the relationships between the peoples who arrived in Sierra Leone from the interior, including the now majority Temne and Mende peoples, and the smaller indigenous cultures such as the Limba, Loko and Kuranko. What we see in effect is a complex and varied tapestry of cultures and peoples into which the European travellers and traders sailed and then settled. Those newcomers intermarried with many coastal families, and from those unions arose Afro-European families which grew to dominate the coastal trade networks and serve as middlemen for the European outsiders seeking ingress into the riverine trade. This process began with the Portuguese in the 16th century and continued onward throughout the period of greatest involvement in the Atlantic trade. Also, these traders were not limited to formal agents of chartered royal companies; piracy was extremely common in the estuary, and the Freetown peninsula saw such notable pirates as Bartholomew Roberts (Black Bart) operating in the first decades of the eighteenth century. The increased piratical activity in the area likely resulted from the expiration of the 1698 *Act to Settle the Trade to Africa* in 1712 along with the more universal cause of piracy, the end of the War of Spanish Succession and the Treaty of

Utrecht in 1713.⁵ With the end of the war, many men who were now highly skilled, trained and experienced in naval affairs found themselves without work and in a good position to make their fortunes as pirates. After 1698 Act had expired it was much easier to make a living as a legitimate free trader in Africa; there was no longer any risk of taxation as the English trade to and from Africa became almost completely unregulated.⁶ These factors, combined with the lack of protection by the forces of the monopolistic chartered companies made the west coast of Africa as a whole a hotbed for piratical activity; the Sierra Leone estuary and Bunce Island were hit particularly hard in the late 1710s and early 1720s both by the new free traders (interlopers) and by the pirates. It was not until the *HMS Swallow* defeated Black Bart and captured his crew in early 1722 that the violent pirate threat was quelled, but private traders remained.⁷ To this day memories are preserved among some communities about this period of intense slave-taking, and they are valuable perspectives but lack the specificity of detail to allow for a digital reconstruction of the area. My team was permitted to hear a related a remembered Temne song in February 2023 that was once sung by the newly enslaved in which they desperately offered to fish for, hunt for, or grow food for their enslavers, certain they were captured to kill and eat them. While a powerful memory of this chaotic period of the slave trade, there are no specific names provided by this oral tradition, nor hard factual locations to reconstruct.

3. BUNCE ISLAND: THROUGH THE MIRROR

The initial intention behind *Bunce Island: Through the Mirror* was only to produce a high fidelity immersive digital environment within which learners could freely move, learn about the precolonial upper Guinea coast, its culture, heritage and traditions, and grapple with the undeniable realities and complexities of the slave trade. We developed a basic scenario and storyline to begin with, in which the user would find themselves on the beach at Bunce Island in the present-day, without explanation or rationale, and would need to explore, piquing curiosity and drawing from the genre of so-called sandbox games, which permit a high degree

⁵. Rediker, Marcus. *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 281-82.

⁶. Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt*, 15.

⁷. Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 192.

of user freedom. Over time, we began to construct a more complex narrative based on archival research and after discussion with specialist scholars and early testers. Players would be able to discover the graveyard as it is now for example, reproduced using photogrammetry and Epic's RealityCapture software, which transforms photographs and footage into high fidelity digital models. They could also discover and explore the ruins of the Bunce fort, which were built using the same technique. With the release of Epic Games's MetaHuman Creator, a unique tool which permits users to rapidly generate a fully rigged photorealistic digital human, we expanded our development exponentially. We now had the technology and ability to recreate historical figures, to populate the present, and therefore the past, unlocking the idea of a fully immersive and comprehensive story-driven game.



Figure 3. The reconstructed Bunce Great House

As our development continued, we decided to add a MetaHuman which our modelling team clothed in traditional Temne-coded attire to introduce the player to the game world. Given that the estuary where Bunce Island is located was dominated by Temne peoples and Temne speakers, this decision was intended to situate the character and the player within the cultural space as well as the historical space. The narrative would have players directed by her - in Temne with subtitles of the user's preferred language - to go to the graveyard and acquire mæ-foy. This is a potent liquid made of leaves, used in Temne divination rituals, which we incorporated after consultation with cultural anthropologists and local

community team members familiar with the appropriate rituals.

Upon completing these steps - in effect a tutorial - the player is transported to the 1720s, where they are exposed to the complex network of African and Afro-European traders, pirates, local elites, and Europeans who shaped the region. We developed a storyline based on the account of John Atkins, ship surgeon for the *HMS Swallow*, who described an event concerning an African leader named Tomba from the Rio Nunez who openly opposed the regional slave trade.⁸ From the Atkins account, Tomba was captured in the night by pirates who were working alongside the local slave traders. Ultimately, he was taken and enslaved by the pirate leader John Leadstone, also called Captain Crackers, a former Royal Africa Company trader turned interloper. Leadstone's place of power was at Whiteman's Bay, on the opposite shore to Yongroo, in what is now the city of Freetown. Tomba and an unnamed woman were described as being leaders of an abortive slave revolt aboard the slave vessel *Robert*, captained by a Robert Harding from England. While their attempt was unsuccessful, our team agreed that it represented African resistance, and should be the key central narrative. We decided that the unnamed woman should be the same individual as the Temne narrative guide, who has been reborn and wishes her story to be told. This is consistent with Temne traditions and spirituality, in which an ancestor can be reincarnated within the same lineage.⁹ By following her story, players would build a greater understanding of a complex past. One of the creatives on the team, Wacera Muriuki, our lead narrative designer, did close archival and contextual research and gave her a name: Mayinie, derived from the Baga language, which is a dialect of Temne and connects her to Tomba.¹⁰

⁸ Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 42.

⁹ Rosalind Shaw, personal communication, 2021. Shaw is an anthropologist of Temne oral traditions particularly pertaining to witchcraft, divination, and liminal spirits.

¹⁰ Mouser, "Who and Where Were the Baga?," 338; Lamp, "Naming the Baga," 212.

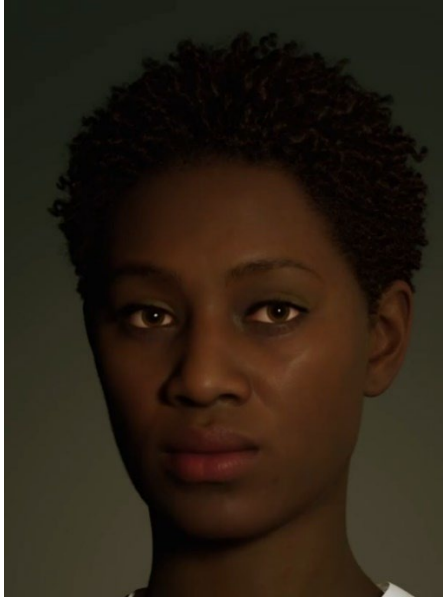


Figure 4. Mayinie after iterative design in MetaHuman

After witnessing the 1720s sequence of events, players are transported through Mayinie's spiritual power to the 1790s, and accompany Anna Maria and Alexander Falconbridge on their trip to Bunce, which was described by Anna Maria Falconbridge in her 1792 memoir. They therefore see how the trade and region has changed, the effects of early abolitionism along the upper Guinea coast, and the hypocrisy that accompanied white paternalism at the time. Mayinie, too, has been reborn following her terrible death in the earlier period, and it now falls upon the player to facilitate the rekindling of her resistance against slavery and her engagement with a Sierra Leonean future.

4. EXPLORATION AND THE OPEN GAME WORLD

From this brief description of the game narrative, it is clear how important place is to the authentic realization of the game, and it is also clear how difficult the challenge is to build the culturally complicated world of the eighteenth century estuary. Something the design team agreed upon early was the importance of allowing the player to explore the estuary with relative freedom, in order to follow the branching narratives we are writing from

archival accounts and in collaboration with Sierra Leonean creatives. We anticipate that this writing process will continue for some time, as our team has committed to ensuring that communities in Sierra Leone approve of our representation of what is their cultural heritage and history. This is time-consuming but an important act of anticolonial narrative collaboration.

As Szolin and Griffiths suggest, a key part of any open world game is the active engagement of the player within their game world environment: crucially, this freedom to explore may also permit players to "explore facets of themselves that may be difficult or impossible to do in the real world."¹¹ There are therefore two contiguous aspects to the exploration which takes place within these imaginary digital landscapes: the internal and the external/digital. There is a robust scholarship around how players identify with their avatars in large social game worlds (or don't), particularly revolving around MMORPGs, but for the purposes of this article, it is the active exploration of a game world and how that feeds into player immersion that is most of interest. Edgar's discussion of roleplaying and avatar immersion is powerful, but his emphasis on the social aspect of this personality construction is telling; while he suggests eloquently that one major driver behind engagement is the digital capacity to present different selves within a digital space - "the transcendental condition of possibility of a meaningful world, and a world that is full of opportunities that are denied to the flesh and blood person" this question of self within the imaginary landscape is peripheral to the landscape which is being discussed here.¹² Blackman discusses the ways in which virtual geography is a central contributor to immersion and player engagement in his study of VR experiences. According to Blackman, his study participants sought a "creative and meditative space" and described immersion as "an expansive kind of embodied engagement that encompasses more than just virtual worlds."¹³ Blackman's work suggests that while the

¹¹ Szolin and Griffiths, "Why Imaginary Worlds? The Role of Self-Exploration within Online Gaming Worlds." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 45 (2022): 1

¹² Edgar, Andrew. "Personal Identity and the Massively Multiplayer Online World." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 58.

¹³ Blackman, Tyler. "Virtual Reality and Videogames: Immersion, Presence, and the Performative Spatiality of 'Being There' in Virtual Worlds." *Social & Cultural Geography* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (2022): 12.

imaginary landscape is the fundamental space within which players explore and play, their own past experiences and sense of self guide that exploration and are crucial to immersion. Michal Mochocki describes the need for embodied experiences in his discussion of 'worldness' within both historical heritage sites and their digital counterparts. He suggests that while heritage sites typically provide an authentic snapshot of a historical moment or place, games may well offer a more extensive sense of 'placeness,' arguing the importance of realism within such a game world. He states that "Together, placeness and worldness make a powerful combination to simulate historical environments and create the immersive potentials"¹⁴

That immersive potential for the purposes of this project and article draws from Denham and Spokes' use of Lefebvre's social decoding triad including conceived space, lived space and perceived space. In their study of *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018), they demonstrate how games "can be (1) fundamentally about space, (2) spaces interconnected with the nonvirtual world and (3) unsettling and confusing spatial experiences."¹⁵ They argue that games exist in a symbiotic relationship with non-virtual space, presenting a complicated digital landscape where the two intersect. Given the painful historical pasts we are recreating in our own game, this approach is germane. A player cannot step onto a digital Bunce Island without feeling the lingering echoes of the real-world trans-Atlantic slave trade, and representing that game space with nuance and respect indeed requires an explicit spatial intersection between history and experience. This issue also grapples with questions of whether real world heritage can be meaningfully embodied within digital spaces, as discussed by Mochocki. He reiterates the five strategic experiential modules (SEMs) described by Schmitt's 1999 model (sense, feel, think, act and relate), and relates how they can connect with digital recreation of place and history, explicitly relying upon a sense of authenticity.¹⁶ He notes that within historical games, ludic involvement provides a meaningful experience

¹⁴ Mochocki, Michael, "Heritage Sites and Video Games: Questions of Authenticity and Immersion." *Games and Culture* 16, no. 8 (2021): 964.

¹⁵ Denham, Jack, and Matthew Spokes. "The Right to the Virtual City: Rural Retreatism in Open-World Video Games." *New Media & Society* 23, no. 6 (2021): 1568.

¹⁶ Bernd Schmitt "Experiential Marketing," *Journal of Marketing Management* 15, 1-3, (1999): 53-67, DOI: 10.1362/026725799784870496

for players which real world sites cannot, while real world sites offer a mediated navigation of place which digital sites struggle with.¹⁷

Meaningfully engaging with a recreated historical space is a very different experience from willingly believing in a fantastic or futuristic alternative world. Questions of historical authenticity, accuracy and meaning all arise, particularly with such a sensitive topic as the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Ensuring that every choice is supported by research also leads to a need for design choices which explicitly support player engagement and embodiment in much the same way as a living museum might. In their discussing digitized heritage sites, Tjostheim and Waterworth use the metaphor of a visually impaired man navigating by use of his cane, noting that the cane becomes in effect a part of his body. He is no longer aware of it but rather of the curb along which he navigates. They suggest that "In the context of telepresence and mediated experiences, the screen or the game console is the cane. The device becomes part of the here-body experience"¹⁸ This concept of telepresence is an important one in terms of designing for players to believe in and willingly engage in an imagined landscape. Again, place and space are key concepts here, with *place* serving as a definition of the experienced *space*. As Mochocki also did, Tjostheim and Waterworth similarly emphasize a need for attention to detail and realism in the digital embodiment of real-world sites. They add the need for digital mediation, however, advising for a guide or a narrator, given the human need to engage with stories of *place* and thus situate themselves within them. Their work was supported by controlled studies of Norwegian participants digitally sightseeing in Los Angeles, and they conclude that digital travel is indeed possible with a sufficiently realistic recreation of a given site.¹⁹

These studies support a number of aspects of this game's development while posing challenges in turn. My team has worked to digitally capture the real-world ruins of Bunce Island both in person and with the assistance of local

¹⁷ Mochocki, Michał. "Heritage Sites and Video Games", 961.

¹⁸ Tjostheim, Ingvar., and John A. Waterworth. *The Psychosocial Reality of Digital Travel: Being in Virtual Places*. (Bern: Springer Nature, 2021), 36.

¹⁹ Tjostheim and Waterworth, *The Psychosocial Reality of Digital Travel*, 120-123.

creatives. The images we have captured are, as a result of processing and RealityCapture, certainly well in line with Tjostheim and Waterworth's emphasis on photorealism. The team travelled to Sierra Leone in February 2023 to collaborate with the wider team, but also to personally experience Bunce Island. While I had been there multiple times, this was my first trip since the pandemic and resultant lockdowns, and my first since beginning the process of design for the game. I was immediately struck by the spatial relationships between buildings and large trees which are unrepresented in any archaeological surveys. This immediate sense of *place* was powerful and necessitated methodological shifts to the original island design. Abdulai Sankoh, who works as a guide at Bunce, noted how visitors, particularly those whose ancestors were taken from Bunce, are encouraged to carve their names into the bases of the huge baobab trees that frame the pathway leading to the fort as well as standing in the main yard between the Great House and the bastion ruins. None of these trees have been recorded in surveys, but they are emblematic of how humans write themselves into the landscape and the geographic *space*. They are living mediators between the historic and the present, and silently record the ways in which memory is shaped when visitors step onto an island which witnessed such human suffering.



Figure 5. Digital baobabs in a digital ruin.

5. AGENCY AND HISTORY

Historical games have an inherent problem when considering a sense of player autonomy. Where digital recreation of place and space require realistic and authentic spatial research, agency requires narrative room to explore choice.²⁰ For immersion purposes, a greater sense that a player's choice is dynamically affecting the game world or story will increase investment for the player. A key element in the intended success for this game is to maximize engagement on a narratological level in order to foster an organic desire to explore and learn and experience. Per Murray's well-known premise that player's agency can be described as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices,"²¹ this posed a clear problem: how can we build a sense in the player that their choices have meaning when the game narrative is taking place in the past with a history that has already happened?

As Bódi notes, Murray's premise introduces the question of meaningfulness into narrative and player action and set the stage for a broad trend in understanding player agency within games and within game studies.²² Choice is, however, the key challenge. Sebastian Domsch eloquently describes this as the core of what defines games, writing that

No other medium provides its users as consistently with nodal situations that involve choice as do video games. All video games are rule-bound systems, and these rules constantly define the range of options that a player has in a specific situation (that is: whether the player has a choice or not, and which choice or choices) as well as the consequences of actualizing each of these options. Choice is what video games are all about, even though the reach of agency is not always as extensive as it might be

²⁰ In the field of game studies, 'agency' also often applies to diversity and representation. While the game's design, development, and characters revolve around theories of this nature and owe a great deal to the work of Shaw, Leonard, Gray, and others, for the purposes of this contribution and its focus on player freedom and historical digital space, a discussion of diversity must wait for another publication.

²¹ Murray, Janet, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. (Simon and Schuster, 1997), 126.

²² Bódi, Bettina. *Videogames and Agency*. (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 16-17.

perceived by the player.²³

Domsch suggests that for game choices to feel as if they possess meaning, they must rely on three guiding principles: they must feel meaningful 1) by being difficult to achieve; 2) by making their relevance ambiguous; and 3) by not providing full gameplay information to the player, and only sometimes providing full gameplay information. By presenting choices with incomplete information, the player cannot apply a mechanistic decision-making process to get the ideal outcome, and thus the choice feels more meaningful. This forces the player to rely on the game's narrative structure and its broader fiction.²⁴ In a game which relies on a fictional cosmology or narrative world, this kind of pressure causes the player to ideally invest more heavily in the structures of that fiction and the rules which govern it. In a game drawing on actual history, however, this can be problematic, particularly when the historical outcomes are known. The semantics of the story world are in effect too well known for us and require a different mediation.

Other developers have approached this problem in a variety of ways - most successful in terms of longevity of franchise would be Ubisoft's ingame conceit concerning the use of genetic DNA travel in their *Assassin's Creed* franchise. In effect, the player is harnessing a future character who is time travelling through a deep dive into their own historical DNA to access the life, memories, and world of an ancestor. There are a number of required suspensions of disbelief to make this framing device successful: certain characters must in effect be unattackable due to their narrative importance, particularly in a game which revolves around assassination and conflict. Historical figures and events must be variable in outcome to bring the invented player character into a prominent role, leading to events such as Cassandra/Alexios playing a central role at Pericles' symposium in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, or the villainization of his historical partner and her eventual fate at the player's hands. In a game where we are striving to reconstruct the past to a rigorous academic standard and with culturally nuanced co-authorship, this kind of reframing of well-known historical figures is problematic. It positions the player as a main character in a history which has already happened, thus removing the actual historical agency of the NPCs with whom

²³ Domsch, Sebastian. *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 112.

²⁴ Domsch, *Storyplaying*, 125.

the player interacts. It also requires great care to prevent a misrepresentation of a historical figure for whom scholarship exists, or an oversimplification of events and moments in time. Bad faith and even good faith players might naturally seek to push the limits of what game mechanics allow, and this runs the risk of blocking player agency or entirely distorting known history. We cannot allow the player to burn down Bunce fort and free all the enslaved, no matter how much we might collectively wish to do so.

Two solutions developed over time as we wrestled with this problem: the first and simplest derived from the notion of history from below and the historical imagination. Saidiya Hartman engaged powerfully with this mode of thought when she invoked myriad objectified and exploited nameless African women who were given the name 'Venus' by those who abused them. The women she wrote about were those who were most historically silenced. She acknowledges this when she writes

One cannot ask, "Who is Venus?" because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.²⁵

Hartman refused to be limited by this paucity of factual data, trumpeting the need instead to retrieve lives without committing further violence. Her unflinching methodology offered my team a solution and a guiding principle around a total refusal to re-enact violence within our own narration. While we have access to registers generated by the Royal Africa Company in 1721 which explicitly name and list personnel working at Bunce fort, including their professions, we ultimately have no other record of them

²⁵ Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: a Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 2-3.

beyond that document.²⁶ These men were provably there, working, and participating in the day-to-day function of the slave fort, but their respective ages, ethnicities, personalities and appearance are entirely speculative. This serves both as a frustration and a liberation from a design standpoint. These named men are solidly situated in their professional capacities but can otherwise offer tremendous flexibility in shaping the broader narrative and potential trajectories for the player, allowing for a sense of autonomy. In effect, while we have a set historical world for well-known characters, for these named men without any significant history, we can develop our own stories with a certain amount of freedom.

We are without the anchor of names and professions when we turn to the women who contemporary sources state each man kept as a bedmate, willing or not - sources do not share anything about them including whether they were free women who chose these men (some did along the coast) or not. They are unnamed, their status and trajectories entirely obscured. We have few sources describing local elites, particularly women, though Anna Maria Falconbridge offers the eyes of an outsider in her 1790s account when she describes some of the wives of the local King, Naimbana, whom she visited.²⁷ We do not even have that for the enslaved individuals held at the fort and the surrounding out-factories. This is where Hartman's approach offers a significant and powerful inspiration. In terms of narrative development, these absences allow considerable freedom in developing engaging stories, but these are not stories which should be written by European descendants. The question of who we should write, and how we should write about them demands a nuanced and ethical approach. There is a responsibility - given that we are historians first and foremost - that the history we are telling is drawn from reliable and culturally appropriate sources. Where there are few if any sources, we must rely on consistency within the known historical sociocultural context, and ultimately we are guided by the need to represent those who were most oppressed and marginalized by the slave trade. If we insist that all characters must be drawn from explicit archival records, we continue the silencing of African women in any reconstruction of the past; but if we are purely inventing

²⁶ Bence Island (Sierra Leone), Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading with Africa and Successors. 1721-1722. T70.362. National Archives, British Library, Kew.

²⁷ Falconbridge, *Two Voyages to Sierra Leone*. 21-35, 73.

a character we are still making a choice to make these unnamed and unknown women into representations of an Africa we are actively deciding to showcase. For this type of work, the narrative perspective of someone whose cultural background is that of the colonizers and the historical oppressors is deeply problematic. In our work for *Bunce*, we are deeply fortunate in this respect, as our lead narrative writer is Kenyan and writes from a cultural background which has experienced colonization. Recognizing her own distance from the culture of the women about whom she is writing, she has additionally chosen to conduct informal interviews with Sierra Leonean creatives to ensure that her developed narrative is authentic and representative of the Sierra Leonean history it embodies.

On a level of game mechanics rather than a narratological level, the team developed a solution intended to allow a present-day character to travel into the past that provided players with meaningful choice, but unlike *Assassin's Creed's* method, our game's player cannot directly impact major events using this system. We gave it a working title of "*See Through Their Eyes*" and it revolves around the concept of influencing events by controlling specific NPCs (both animal and human). Designated human NPCs can only be controlled for a limited duration, and doing so will allow dialog options, but choices which veer from their pre-defined morality will use up more of the time for which the player can control the NPC. For example, the player might wish to control Sam Snash, the surgeon. We have assigned him a set morality and character based upon his profession and the potential outcomes we have mapped for his character: Sam Snash is conflicted, with a sense of a moral compass and a disquiet about his own participation in the slave trade. This draws from actual historical surgeons who left their journals which describe them entering the slave trade to gain experience, but then finding the day-to-day horrors increasingly untenable. The player can select dialogue which leads Snash to his ideal ending: he decides to abandon the trade and return home to England to become a country doctor; or they can allow him to cope with his unhappiness through drink, leading to his worst-case outcome, which is an early death on the coast of West Africa. While following the status quo of his ongoing and continued employment might seem like a safe set of dialog choices, they are in conflict with Snash's hidden coded morality, and this will lead to a shorter period of control for the player. This is a mechanics-based framework but draws from Domsch's suggestion of a veiled gameplay outcome, causing the player to rely on

narrative cues and the historically-driven story world we have developed for semantic meanings.

The result of this mechanic is one which allows players to feel as if their selections have narrative and ingame consequences, while subtly rewarding them for making decisions which lead to positive outcomes for characters. We defined 'positive' here as cessation of engagement with the slave trade or awareness of their own culpability within the broader trade. Taken individually, these choices seemingly only matter to the trajectories of the designated NPCs, but as we have mapped the storyline, each outcome has a ripple effect in terms of how it can change outcomes for named historical characters who cannot be controlled in this fashion. Characters like Black Bart, the chief agent at Bunce, Robert Plunkett, or the abolitionists Alexander Falconbridge and his less enthusiastic young wife Anna Maria are simply too well documented for a player to control while staying true to known history.

But the choice of Snash to quit the trade and fort has the ripple effect of forcing Plunkett to reach out to one of the local pirate leaders, John Leadstone, to source a short term surgeon to serve with him, leading to the documented and complex partnership between the pair. Historical accounts demonstrate that Plunkett and Leadstone were working hand in glove, but there are no explanations and their relationship would have been clandestine by necessity; Leadstone had led efforts to conquer Bunce in the past, was a former Royal Africa Company man who turned to piracy after stealing a thousand iron bars, and Plunkett would have had no comprehensible rationale for aligning with him. Thus, the player's choices serve to provide a plausible explanation for a known historical fact, granting both a feeling of meaningful decisions ingame, and offering one possible reason behind an otherwise inexplicable partnership. If Snash does not leave, this question remains unanswered; we know that Plunkett and Leadstone are in cahoots, but the player will not ever see why unless they pursue this potential outcome.

This mechanic allows the player to feel a sense of immersion, of engagement, and the need for the development team to have mapped out the webwork of potential outcomes which are driven by these types of decisions. Each designated NPC's trajectory will lead to similar fleshing out of potential causes for known historical events or results. We might have

a known historical figure who died according to the archival records (Jon Callow), but his manner of death is never described. This affords us as developers the chance to offer the player a variety of potential sequences which all end in Callow's death, but could also have domino effects depending on which designated NPC influenced events along the way. In this fashion we are building a sense of branching narratives and meaningful player choice, while respecting the historical authenticity we must incorporate to preserve the sense of connection to place and story world.

We also made the creative decision to block worse outcomes for all NPCs than history offers. As a team, we agreed that 'history-as-it was' IS the worst outcome, and all available player choices beyond the default would all be improvements on what is known about the time. We also chose not to allow players to inflict any abuse upon enslaved persons, despite that having been a clear element of the slave trade. While this game aims to represent ideas of slavery and complicity in the trade as authentically as possible, the risk of players acting in bad faith and actively pursuing egregious outcomes was simply not acceptable to us. Therefore, we decided that all abusive acts would take place offscreen and be only witnessed in their outcome; a branding will never be seen by the player, but fresh brands on the bodies of an enslaved person will be proof of the act. We neither wish to minimize the horror of the trade, nor to fetishize it and retraumatize the descendants of the enslaved.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Freedom means many things in the development of a game. Total freedom within any game is anathema; the pleasure of a game in many ways lies in the interrelation between restrictions manifesting and the play which takes place within their framework. In a game such as *Bunce Island: Through the Mirror*, because of the subject matter and the region we are seeking to represent, our freedoms as developers are constrained by the magnitude of the topic. As historians, we owe a duty to reconstruct the game world with as much careful authenticity as we can so that players might safely make assumptions around the accuracy of what they experience. Particularly for players who are seeking a sense of reconnection to a past stolen from their own ancestors, this is a vital aspect of our development - we have a duty as humans to provide the most carefully

constructed space we can for those who wish to digitally step onto an island from which their own ancestors might have been sold. We are further willingly constrained by our own ethics to develop methodologies which allow us to reconstruct historically invisible characters through careful research, community co-authorship and collaboration, and continually reflecting on our world in light of societal need. Women in the archival past, particularly in West Africa, are all but unseen, and perpetuating that silence is unacceptable. Writing on their behalf demands continual reflection and collaborative discussion with our team and with community collaborators. Our ultimate freedom as developers is to create a system of mechanics through which players can feel meaningful connection to a past which has already happened; we are cultivating freedom for our players while preserving the richness of what may be known of the past. Navigating these many meanings of freedom in a game which concerns slavery is no accident, and perhaps speaks to an underlying tension between the freedom to do a thing, and the central question we must ask ourselves concerning why we do it.

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File #14



Title: Nonlinear Pedagogy in Olympic Fencing

Subtitle: Do Video Games offer a new Dimension for its Elaboration?

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Fencing is an Olympic sport that has so far been dominated by linear teaching methods, despite being a sport consisting of dynamic skill performance. Nonlinear pedagogy (NLP) is a holistic teaching approach that offers didactics, which have shown more promise in teaching complex sport skills compared to past approaches of linear pedagogy (LP). Having more diversity in its teaching methods, NLP can cross boundaries and take skill acquisition to different environments of learning within a context of performance, including video games. For the context of fencing, gaming environments offer opportunities for elaborating on NLP teaching in the sport, due to gaming presenting elements that represent actual fencing performance. Creating representative-learning designs and portraying ecological dynamics of constraint manipulation, is the main method of elaborating NLP within new contexts. This paper intends to do that for fencing, by exploring the gaming world and offering a innovative gaming environment, with the potential of teaching fencing skills with representativeness of competitive performance.

Keywords: Nonlinear Pedagogy, Pedagogy of video games, Fencing, VR/AR learning, E-sports

1. INTRODUCTION

How does fencing work in reality? Olympic fencing as we know it, is divided to three disciplines - *foil*, *epee* and *saber*

- where foil and epee are thrusting weapons and saber is a cutting weapon. Due to different rulesets in all three weapons, a separate perspective on each practical implementation needs to be considered. Due to this, this paper will only focus on one of the three disciplines, which is epee.

The task of fencing is to hit the opponent, without getting hit yourself. What separates epee from the other two weapons, is the possibility for both fencers to hit each other at the same time, thus scoring a double hit that rewards a point to both fencers. This provides a tactical perspective to epee, that is not available in foil and saber, since only single hits count in them and are subject to the referee's interpretation, based on the priority of attack in offensive actions and priority of defense in defensive actions. In foil and saber, the one who has according to referee's interpretation higher priority in their actions, will be awarded the hit, regardless if a double hit occurred or not. In epee, the one who scores first, is always rewarded the hit. The timeframe for managing to score a double hit is 1/25 seconds after being hit, which offers a slight moment to score a double. This provides a substantial advantage to the fencer leading a bout, because both double hits and single hits are advantageous for the leading fencer (Barth et al. 2017, p. 290).

Due to the simple nature of epee, it offers most complex solutions to the simple task of hitting without getting hit. Harmenberg et al. (2015) is among the first fencing authors to openly advocating this, for example proposing that even at the highest international level, a fencing bout can be won without a single blade contact. What this means is that traditional fencing literature, which with their many guidelines argue for a lot of blade work (Barth et al. 2017; Vass 2011, Harmenberg et al. 2015), is suddenly not providing all the answers for winning bouts. This offers primary insights into what fencing could be when taken into innovative directions, particularly how it is being taught. Nonlinear pedagogy can take this issue into new dimensions of learning, and with the help of video games even further.

2. WHAT IS NONLINEAR PEDAGOGY?

Fencing is a sport that is mostly being taught through linear teaching methods, by using fixed methods of the past that

offer little room for movement variation. For example, offensive actions are taught to start with an arm extension of the weapon arm and then having the rest of the body to follow (da Silva 1991, pp. 16-20). From a motor learning perspective, this characterizes sequential learning and is typical of traditional and linear approaches to teaching (Chow et al. 2007), meaning that a motor skill is divided into sequences that need to be trained in drill-based manner in order to learn the skill properly. Efforts to measure how motor learning impacts transferability of fencing performance exists (Witkowski et al. 2020), but the way fencing is taught has not been questioned.

Nonlinear pedagogy (NLP), a relatively new pedagogical approach (Chow et al. 2016), has been primarily used to tackle the issues of tradition and question why a sport is being taught the way it is. Körner & Staller (2018) advocate that the reason for this is that in most fields, the assumption is that the problem lies in the system and not the way things are taught in the system. As a result, NLP has recently managed to take the view away from systems and instead question the way things are taught within it to make a change. For the moment, fencing consists of a system where skills are expected to work in a certain way and has to be trained in a certain manner in order to have highest chance of success in competitions. Due to these fixed pedagogical perspectives of the sport, fencing is a suitable field for NLP research, since none has yet been conducted for it.

The fixed methods of current fencing pedagogy strongly follow the principles of linear pedagogy (LP), consisting of the prementioned sequential learning and traditional teaching approaches that utilize drill-based practice (Lindsey et al. 2022; Chow et al. 2007). This means that fencing skills are divided into movement sequences that define the optimal technique of the sport, and each sequence needs to be mastered properly through fixed repetition, before moving on to master more complex movement sequences. However, the representative nature of this practice has been questioned by Harmenberg et al. (2015), since fencing has presented big differences in how it works in practice and how it works in competition. Most fencing literature focuses on how fencing should be taught in training, but not so much in how the trained skills should work in competition. This would imply that the system used in training is currently not replicating the "competitive system". This in

combination with Körner et al. (2018) arguments, would imply that this is an issue of pedagogy and not the system.

Since fencing is mostly taught traditionally with LP, this alone gives rise for the need of NLP research, since none has yet been conducted for the sport. Having the foundation in the dynamical systems theory (DST) (Newell, 1986), NLP acknowledges learners as complex dynamical systems, that spontaneously react according to the task at hand in the learning environment. Learning occurs, when these spontaneous reactions are constrained to more certain ones, which in sport would represent the skills executed by an athlete (Davids et al. 2008). This type of learning is independent and never replicable to another individual, due to the constraints of learning being different for each learner (Birklbauer, 2019). Each individual always learns motor skills through unpredictable patterns in movement repetition, where no movement is ever identical to the other and in repetitive exercises is always learned through "repetition without repetition", (Ranganathan et al. 2020). Therefore, it is of big interest to understand how this unpredictability in movement repetition can be harnessed properly for individual-based motor learning.

For this purpose, Davids et al. (2008) have presented a constraints-led approach (CLA). With the help of CLA, the constraints of the DST - *task, environment and individual* - can be defined in different learning contexts. A constraint is defined as something to be manipulated by either restraining or loosening the degree of freedom (DOF) for an activity (Hodges et al. 2019). In sports, this usually works through creation of exercises.

CLA is one way of applying NLP to practice, which can be done in a plethora of ways with plenty of room for innovation. Holistic approaches to teaching have been advocated for in past NLP approaches (Chow et al. 2016), thus video games can be a way to further elaborate on this. For learning to be representative of the desired context, it needs to be transferable to different environments (Pinder et al. 2011). If video games can offer other learning environments besides physical training for fencing, and the skills learned in them are transferable to competitions, then video games would present a new way of providing representativeness to how fencing should be taught.

3. WHAT CAN VIDEO GAMES OFFER?

To start off, fencing among other sports are “games”, consisting of different levels of performance. These levels of performance, draw direct parallels to the difficulty settings offered in most console games, usually following the typical format of *easy*, *medium* and *hard* (Tremblay et al. 2012). The same way an athlete encounters competitors with increased difficulty, so does a gamer encounter bosses. Due to the similarities of sport and video games, sports are easily transferred into the latter. That is why sports are transferable and result in creating games like FIFA (EA Games, 1995), NHL (EA Games, 1991) and even Mario Power Tennis (Nintendo, 2004). However, even if findings suggest it is possible to improve motor skill learning in sport through representative video games, the attitudes towards this are mostly negative (Barnett et al. 2014). Despite this, e-sports are gaining continuous mainstream attention, both financially and in popularity (Abanazir, 2019). Thus, it would be beneficial for other sports trying to adapt into e-sport settings and the other way around.

Video games is an industry, constantly developing and taking directions to new levels. There is a plethora of genres, ranging from traditional role-playing video games (RPG) to point and click adventures. Due to the diversity of video games, one would expect there to be room for fencing based games as well. There already exist plenty of video game characters who use swords as their main weapons, mostly from RPG:s; *Link* (Legend of Zelda, Nintendo, 1986), *Sephiroth* (Final Fantasy VII, Squaresoft, 1997), *B2* (Nier: Automata, Square Enix, 2017), *Beatrix* (Final Fantasy IX, Squaresoft, 2000), *Eirika* (Fire Emblem: Sacred Stones, Nintendo, 2004) and *Ike* (Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance, Nintendo, 2005). All these characters use swords of varying blade sizes and weights, while presenting different forms of combat during gameplay. That indicates a form of individualization in their combat styles.

Diversity in fighting styles should also be possible in Olympic fencing. It is not allowed to variate weapon length and size in fencing competitions, besides using acknowledged grips and blades sizes. However, by including more variation in sword lengths and sizes during training would offer more opportunities for individual-based style try-outs, and through that self-organization of fencing movements (Chow et al. 2011). This would be a way of offering a perceptual-

motor landscape of affordances, for the fencers to try out different combat styles and thus recognize own affordances for action, promoting a ecological dynamics (ED) approach to learning (Button et al. 2020). As previously mentioned, this would also fall into the domains of elaborating representativeness of fencing skills, by using video games to create yet another domain to try out fencing skills, thus helping in the creation of a representative learning design (RLD) that can also include a gaming environment for successful transferability of fencing skills. Having a defined RLD for any context is crucial for successful transferability of skills to desired contexts of performance (Pinder et al. 2011). In order to include gaming environments to a RLD model solely for fencing, it is necessary to delve both into console gaming and VR/AR reality.

3.1. Console gaming

As previously mentioned, mostly RPG:s offer gameplay opportunities where sword combat is diverse and offers plenty of inspiration of how the peak of sword fighting can look like. Although some movements are inhuman and biomechanically impossible to execute, they still offer insights into how fencing could be taken into new levels from a technical-tactical perspective.

The hack-and-slash game *Devil May Cry 5* (Capcom, 2019) and action RPG *Kingdom Hearts II* (Square Enix, 2005) are examples of this. Both games offer esthetic combat experiences and are enjoyable because of the DOF a player has to execute skills in order to defeat enemies. This in combination with the adjusted difficulty system, can offer plenty of opportunities for replayability and challenge even the most hardcore player. Competitive fencing offers very similar "gaming environments" - a plethora of different fencers to fight, space to try out different fencing skills and with increased difficulty, offer challenge even to the most seasoned fencer.

Representative examples of this are Virgil in *Devil May Cry 5* and Sephiroth in *Kingdom Hearts II*. In both fights, the player is not offered a single moment of rest and must have a state of readiness, closely representing the state of "meta-stability" in sport (Seifert et al. 2013). A player is forced to adapt and can only learn through trial and error by trying and failing many times until solutions start to be apparent and help stabilize player's actions, as

affordances against the bosses in their respective perceptual-motor landscapes (Pacheco et al. 2019; Button et al. 2020).



Figure 1. The space for movement is vast, offering the player plenty of options for trying to defeat Virgil. (<https://guides.gamepressure.com/devil-may-cry-5/guide.asp?ID=49119> [30-03-2023])

Virgil is a tough fight, but this state of readiness is especially present in the Sephiroth fight, due to him having a surprise attack, which he will always do at the beginning of the fight. He will directly rush at Sora, the playable main character of *Kingdom Hearts II*, with a myriad of sword strikes that will instantly kill him (unless a certain ability is active to guard instant death attacks). As a first timer, it is almost impossible to react in time for it, forcing you to die and either give up or try again. This becomes a question of motivation and what is so striking about it, is that the fight won't allow you the option of exploration before first adapting to this specific attack. This can offer analytical aspects to the player even outside the fight, encouraging reflection of the situation and how to be mentally prepared for next time.

This would be defined as an activity of reflective practice (Knowles et al. 2014), where the player needs to analyze past actions to learn and change behavior with hopes of creating improvement. This type of reflection is also a crucial part of competitive fencing (Harmenberg et al. 2015; Barth et al. 2017), where outside fencing bouts fencers are reflecting their own actions in past bouts, either individually or with the coach, to improve their understanding of the game. Individually, this occurs primarily through mental imaging (Annett, 1988; Hodges et al. 2019), where you imagine yourself in the situations you

try to reflect and create an image of the same situation but you are successful. This would draw a direct parallel to how performance and reflection works between fencing and video games both in and out of fights.



Figure 2. Left picture shows Sephiroth's surprise attack, forcing a reaction command to guard. Right picture is an illustration of another type of guard. (<https://www.gamerguides.com/kingdom-hearts-hd-25-remix/guide/kingdom-hearts-ii-final-mix/side-quests/sephiroth> [30-03-2023])

Besides surprise attacks, there are plenty of other combat situations a fencer needs to be prepared for. Both Vergil and Sephiroth are capable of rushing at the player with constant attacking, usually in the form of many slices and thrusts of the sword. The connection this offers to NLP is the trial-and-error principle (Pacheco et al. 2019), meaning that the player is allowed plenty of room to explore and find their own solution to the incoming attacks, promoting something called exploratory learning to stabilize their actions (Chow et al. 2016). For fencing and sports in general, this offers a connection to ecological dynamics and its approaches to learning (Button et al. 2020).

Ecological dynamics, combined with a CLA can offer the constraints necessary for manipulation but also to what degree the manipulation has to be done in order to create a certain behavior. An ecological dynamics approach combined with CLA is what makes nonlinear pedagogy innovative, offering holistic approaches to manipulate constraints to degrees unforeseen before. For example, Körner & Staller (2020) used an ecological dynamics approach to offer innovated teaching for police officers, through online demonstrations and try-outs, due to the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and the resulting lockdown. Fencing teaching can be taken to similar innovations when the constraints and representative environments of learning are elaborated even

further. For that purpose, VR and AR learning are therefore another domain worth of exploration.

3.2. VR & AR gaming

VR and AR reality simulations cultivate another rising field - the metaverse (Narin, 2021). Due to the popularity and the unlimited potentials of the metaverse, it is another environment almost forcing any field to adapt, including video games and fencing. In fact, Mark Zuckerberg (The Verge, 2022) has already created a prototype for teaching fencing in the metaverse through AR. However, as with other efforts trying to adapt sports into the VR/AR metaverse, the problem lies in the lack of representativeness (Sanfilippo et al. 2022), meaning that the current knowledge of constraints and their manipulation are not enough for VR/AR learning to represent those of actual performance. A proposition would be to first start taking a more gaming based approach, then a more sport and performance-based approach. For fencing, this can work by combining the mechanics of Zuckerberg's prototype (The Verge, 2022) with the world of *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011).

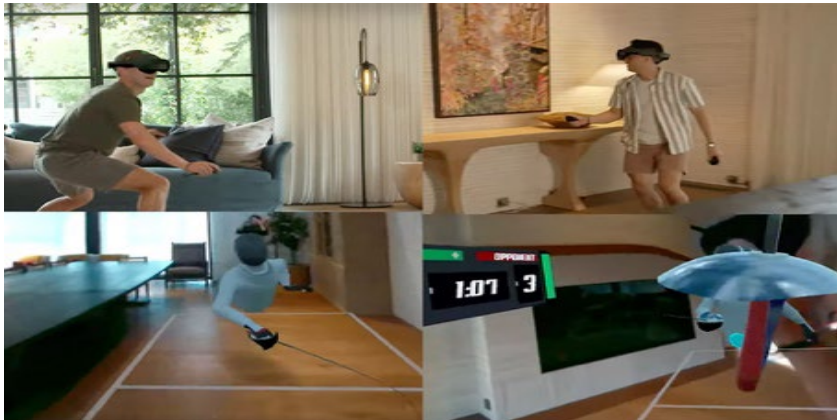


Figure 3: Zuckerberg's AR fencing simulation (2022).
 (<https://www.techeblog.com/mark-zuckerberg-mixed-reality-fencing-quest-pro-vr/> [30-03-2023])



Figure 4: Skyrim first person view with a sword (2011).
 (<https://www.worldbolding.com/home/2017/8/14/skyrim-mondays-part-five-whats-the-deal-with-the-feel-of-combat> [30-03-2023])

Skyrim is an open-world role-playing game brimming with opportunities for exploration. This in combination with Zuckerberg's fencing mechanics (The Verge, 2022) would offer a new possibility for both fencing and gaming. A metaverse world could be created where each enemy would be a representative fencing opponent. This would not only offer gaming challenges representative of actual fencing, but also new chances for engaging gameplay. This would best be offered through a VR/AR game experience using a multi-sensory learning approach (Sanfilippo et al. 2022).

The connection this offers to NLP is once more through a holistic approach to learning through video games, consisting of both active gaming and fencing elements in the metaverse with the multi-sensory learning approach (Chow et al. 2016; Sanfilippo et al. 2022). This framework can be used to create a practical NLP example, to offer an innovative method for training a fencing skill.

4. PRACTICAL EXAMPLE: THE BEAT

By combining the elements of NLP, video games, and fencing, a tentative practical example can be created for teaching the beat action in a representative manner of elite epee

fencing. The intention of the beat is using the sword to beat the opposing blade just enough to move the point away from being pointed at valid target area (Barth et al. 2017, Vass 2011). However, if elite epee fencing is carefully observed, there are many other ways to use a beat in combat. According to principles of skill acquisition, variation and adaptation of skills is key to mastering them (Hodges et al. 2019). Despite not being written down in official literature, there are already some elite fencers using the beat differently, both from a technical and tactical perspective.

Yannick Borel, currently world ranked 2 (FIE World Ranking, 2023), presented a tactical approach with the beat at the Doha Grand Prix fencing tournament in 2019 that is not depicted in any modern fencing literature. He started to beat the blade as hard as he could, intentionally, to create fatigue to the opponents hand (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ssd06tuVnLY> [31-03-2023]). This allowed Borel plenty of chances to hit the opponent with straight arm extensions in combination with the beats. The opponent was unable to keep the weapon up to protect himself, thus offering Borel the affordances of thrusting at the opponent's arm. From an ED and CLA perspective (Woods et al. 2020; Renshaw et al. 2019), Borel manipulated the constraints "equipment" and "endurance" of the opponent's weapon and hand to degree, that caused fatigue for the opponent's weapon arm.

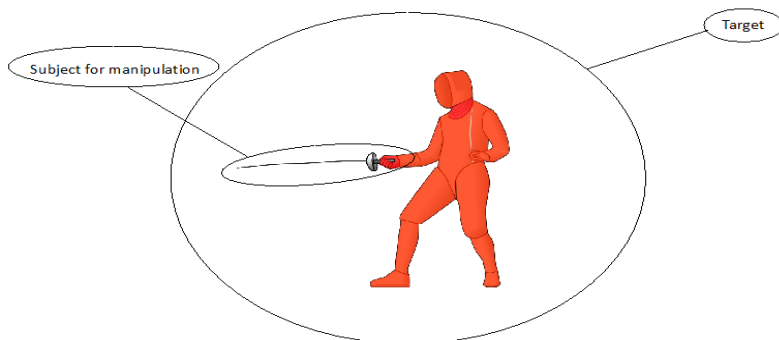


Figure 4: Idea behind this type of beat by Woods et al. 2020, Borel's fight in Doha GP final 2019 and Kietsongrit's method to knock out his MMA opponent.

A similar example has been used in the past, but in mixed-martial arts (MMA) during the 1980s. Changpuek Kietsongrit, a muay thai fighter at his peak, decided to kick the opposing kickboxing fighter's leg repetitively on the same spot, inflicting fatigue and forcing the fighter to collapse after a while (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgYlQg0SFQM> [30-03-2023]). Although not as extreme, this is similar to what happened in the example of Borel's beat.

How is this relatable to video games? A game strongly emphasizing this is *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware, 2019), with the counter and stamina mechanics. The whole game is about managing stamina while trying to reduce the opposing fighter's, with efficient counter-attacking gameplay. This requires a feeling of rhythm and coordination, while trying to manipulate the fatigue of the enemy. This draws a direct parallel to the given fencing example, because if this gameplay could be combined in a Skyrim-based open world with the fencing mechanics of Zuckerberg (The Verge, 2022), closely similar fighting situations could be replicated. How this could be made representative of actual fencing, would be to add vibration features for the VR/AR controllers, that are used as virtual weapons (The Verge, 2022), with increased vibration related to difficulty of the opponent. The vibrations would become harder when your stamina is running out, forcing you to become disarmed in reality. This type of gaming would not only improve the endurance of the fencing hand in this simulated game, but in actual fencing situations as well. Since this has not yet been developed for fencing, this is a suggestion for sport technological development.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has intended to provide a tentative framework for learning fencing through innovative methods, by combining the framework of video games with the framework of NLP. Since teaching methods of fencing has not been questioned in the past, but instead focusing on creating a fixed system for existing fencing actions, this paper argues together with the findings of Körner and Staller (2018), that when systems do not offer proper RLD:s, the issue lies in pedagogy used within the system. Delving into fundamentals of fencing

and NLP revealed that their learning elements could be connected to those of gaming. This offered a framework for reversible transferability of skills between the environments of gaming and fencing. The demands presented by Virgil and Sephiroth (Capcom 2019; Square-Enix 2005) included representative similarities with the demands presented in competitive fencing environments (Harmenberg et al. 2015), suggesting also that a reflective practice approach to elaborate on this connection.

This framework was comparable to the metaverse, the observations of Borel in Doha Grand Prix 2019 and Kietsongrit in MMA, leading to constraints "equipment" and "endurance" being defined for fencing, due to their manipulative nature being proven in restricting and releasing fatigue when the blade is beaten with combined intentions of hitting the arm. This suggests that the beat can be executed differently due to tactical intentions, suggesting it can have other adaptive and variative features. This particular way of practicing the beat can be applied to gaming, when combining the presented mechanics of Sekiro (FromSoftware, 2019), Skyrim (Bethesda Softworks, 2011) and Zuckerberg fencing prototype (The Verge, 2022).

This beating tactic is transferable to both actual competitive fencing environments and the innovated gaming environment, proposing sports technology trying to replicate the latter. It can be concluded that video games through this method can offer a new dimension for elaborating NLP in Olympic fencing. However, it remains uncertain if truly applicable in practice, due to lack of current technology and lack of other empirical studies in multi-sensory learning approaches (Sanfilippo et al. 2022).

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File #15



Title: The Violence of Violence

Subtitle: Reflexive Violence in The Last of Us 2 as Pedagogical Potential

Author(s): Swen Körner, Mario S. Staller

Violence in video games is regularly in the focus of public observation. What is striking here is that the debate is predominantly concerned with potentially negative effects of video game consumption, especially for juveniles. In this paper, we take a different angle. By analyzing Naughty Dog's "The Last of Us 2" (2020), we demonstrate the pedagogical potential of a fixed-narrative game, that forces its players to make use of violence from different perspectives by switching the main characters, thereby creating moments of reflection on the existential meaning of violence. The reflexive reference of violence to itself - the ludonarrative embedding of violence in the game - thus creates the pedagogical potential to reassess the use of violence itself and to re-introduce alternative options for social interaction.

Keywords: The Last of Us 2; Reflexive violence; 2nd Order Observation; Pedagogy of videogames; social systems theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern video games and violence have traditionally been maintaining a close relationship. For certain game genres, such as action games, beat `em ups or ego shooters, the reference to violence is stylistically decisive and the most prominent part of distribution (Lehmann et al., 2008). In public reception, especially within political and educational debates, the stereotype of a gaming industry

that in part glorifies violence is still prevailing (Quandt et al., 2015). Allegedly, the staging of blunt violence in games like *Doom Eternal* (id Software, 2020) or *Grand Theft Auto 5* (Rockstar Games, 2013) is said to increase the disposition to violence, especially among young players, and to have a destructive effect on to their personality development. While from a scientific perspective there is no broad empirical consensus for the sweeping correlation between involvement in video games and an increased propensity to violence (C. A. Anderson et al., 2010; Calvert et al., 2017; Drummond et al., 2020; Hilgard et al., 2017; Kepes et al., 2017; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019), the public and pedagogical discussion in particular seems deadlocked (Psychiatry, 2017; Triggs, 2022).

With reference to *The Last of Us 2* (TLU 2, Naughty Dog, 2020), the paper attempts to counter-intuitively advocate for the *pedagogical potential* of a video game, in which violence plays a key role. TLU 2, we argue, does not merely enact violence. Its game-design centrally incorporates certain constraints that make the game's reference to violence reflexive. At crystallizing moments of the game, violence becomes reflexive in the sense that players are made to reflect on the violence they are forced to use, evoking a cognitive shift from the question of *how* to use towards existential questions of *why*.

With regard to the level of critique on which the very relationship between violence and video games is generally discussed (Psychiatry, 2017; Triggs, 2022), our brief analysis shows that TLU 2 provides the potential to increase the cognitive complexity of pedagogical observation. Ironically, a violence-based video game, of all things, thus is likely to achieve - in an act of violence, so to say - what educational settings routinely aim to fulfill: The transformation of pure experience into a pedagogically valuable personal experience through reflection (Oelkers, 2001) - constrained by game design elements.

2. OUR FRAMEWORK: VIOLENCE AS DEOPTIONALIZED COMMUNICATION

We build our argument for *reflexive violence* as a pedagogical potential on a specific understanding of violence. Being fully aware that there is semantic divergence in the cultural meaning of the phenomena (Bouches & Cooney, 2022) we offer

an account of violence against the backdrop of systems theory, that has been laid out by Baecker (2007). According to an understanding of violence based on social systems theory, the concept is neither physically nor structurally predetermined. Instead, it focusses on the communication of inevitability when attributing to action. When communication as the frame for social interaction can no longer decide on a certain range of attributions, it is deoptionalized Baecker (2007), leaving merely three options to react to it. The first option would be admitting the de-optionalization of communication and giving up: aborting the communication. The second option is repaying like with like and to following-up the communication with the recursion of the inevitable. This would entail using physical force by oneself. The third option would be the re-introduction of options.

3. VIOLENCE IN "THE LAST OF US 2"

Released in June 2020, TLU 2 sold over four million copies in its first three days. Within public debates, *Naughty Dog's* global bestselling action-adventure game has been commented controversially. Like only a few other games in gaming history, TLU 2 as well as its prequel *The Last of Us 1* (TLU 1, Naughty Dog, 2013) gained a lot of praise, which has been documented among others in a Metacritic score of 95 out of 100 (*Metacritic - The Last of Us Part 2*, 2023). At the same time, the game also attracted huge amounts of criticisms, especially for its strong emphasis on and explicit depictions of violence (Kreienbrink, 2020).

In the postapocalyptic future TLU 1 and TLU 2 is set in, violence plays a major role. Due to the outbreak of Cordyceps, a risk-type of fungi infection, the majority of the human population has turned into non-human creatures. As a result, national governing structures have broken down and surviving groups of humanity are trying to survive and build new social orders.

By playing the two female main characters, Elli and Abby, from a third-person perspective, players in TLU 2 not only have to fight infected creatures such as Bloaters, who can effectively be killed by nail-bombs and Molotov-Cocktails. Many times within the gameplay, players encounter an environment in which *homo homini lupus est.*: Humans encounter I as enemies and fight each other. When fighting

against members of paramilitary autocratic organizations like FEDRA or Seraphites for instance, short-knife attacks from behind turn out to be a safe way of prevailing and of in-game progress. Within estimated 30 hours of gameplay, TLU 2 teaches the players to tactically circumvent physical conflicts at some point, too. For instance, when playing Elli at Day 1 in Seattle, there is freedom of choice for passing the school building together with Dina without killing any enemy and to thereby save resources. However, even when the TLU 2's gameplay situationally enforces the circumvention of conflicts and thereby the re-introduction of options, the *potential* of violence is still omnipresent.



Figure 1. Potential of violence (Source: <https://rare-gallery.com/uploads/posts/300863-Ellie-The-Last-of-Us-Part-2-4K.jpg>)

Within the dystopic environment of TLU 2 the de-optionalization of social interaction through the use of violence becomes a key means for survival and the assertion of a particular social order. As such, the effective in-game use of violent options has to be learned and performed. At this point of observation, critical views on video games and on TLU 2 in particular could stop in order to find their confirmation: The Last of Us 2 would then appear as (another) video game that glorifies violence and thus has a dubious influence on its players. However, in our opinion, such an approach would miss the crucial pedagogical potential which is inherent in the structure of the game. This potential goes far beyond players' purely mechanical learning and blunt application of violence. By making the phenomenon

explicit and concrete through game design, TLU 2 is likely to trigger crucial reflections on the meaning of violence while controlling the avatar, offering learning opportunities for violence control in and, perhaps, beyond the game.

4. VIOLENCE OF VIOLENCE

In TLU 2, violence refers back to itself on the horizontal layer of gameplay. The storyline of the apocalyptic action-adventure game runs along a continuous and tight series of conflicts (see Figure 2). In these, violence is used as a solution to existential threats, which in turn is itself perceived as a threat by the other conflict party and results in further applications of violence, followed by further escalations of violence, and so on. The reaction to deoptionalized communication is deoptionalized communication (Baecker, 2007) - a recursion of the inevitable.

The main storyline deals with Interpersonal conflicts between the protagonists, fed by a shared history of violence. In TLU 2, Abby kills Joel in a brutal act of revenge, as retaliation for Joel having killed a Fireflies doctor in TLU 1. The killing itself prevented Elli, who is immune against infection, from dying in the process of a cure against the Cordyceps infection being extracted from her blood plasma. yet, the doctor was Abby's father, as players get to know in TLU 2. After Joel is killed in front of her eyes, Elli seeks for revenge and strives to kill Abby, since in the course of the game's plot line, Joel had become a fatherlike figure to her. In TLU 2, the conflict between Elli and Abby is the central element, producing violence out of violence and thereby de-optionalizing social interaction on a further horizontal layer of the narrative (see Figure 2).

The whole story line of TLU 2 is based around a series of somewhat reasonable violent acts, in which the violence performed by the player reproduces acts of the same type in a recursive manner. In TLU 2, the logic of in-game situations is shaped by violent behavior. When, just to mention one example out of many taken from "Seattle Day 1 (Elli)", Elli removes the lethal threat from her friend Dina, who is encountered by WLF member Jordan, the rescue is embedded in both a history and a future of violent encounters. Shortly

before, Jordan killed Elli's horse, whereas Dina shot Jordans comrade. Right after Elli stabs Jordan from behind, WLF soldiers open fire against Dina and Elli - and the course of violence as de-optionalized communication continues.

However, the forthgoing of violence on the horizontal layer is a constant feature of many modern video-games. When, for instance, playing *Doom Eternal* (id Software, 2020), it's all about performing acts of violence. Story and game mechanics constrain the players to do so. However, when controlling the Doom Slayer in order to rescue humanity against the alien Maykrs' plans to exterminate (which is the story), it's unlikely that players transcendent their operational perspective of using violence (1st order operation) towards in-depth reflections on the meaning of violence (2nd order observation). In *Doom Eternal*, violence occurs solely as functional solution, not as a normative problem to think about. In TLU 2, however, the latter is more than likely. Violence becomes reflexive here in a way, in which the 1st order operative use of violence (*how to use violence?*) leads into 2nd order observation by questioning the use of violence (*why to use violence?*) towards the re-introduction of options for social interaction.

TLU 2 not only deals with violence on a horizontal layer in terms of it being a recurrent topic and means. On a vertical layer through game design, players are forced to experience the consequences of the violence they perform and to revise and reassess their actions (see Figure 2). At this point, TLU 2 unfolds its pedagogical potential by a mechanism we call *reflexive violence*. Violence not only refers to violence on an operative level, it becomes a subject of cognitive observation. More specifically, in TLU 2 players are forced to reflect upon the existential meaning of violence. Elements of game design - coming from the outside and pressing from above, so to speak - create a need to do so. Playing itself is de-optionalized here.

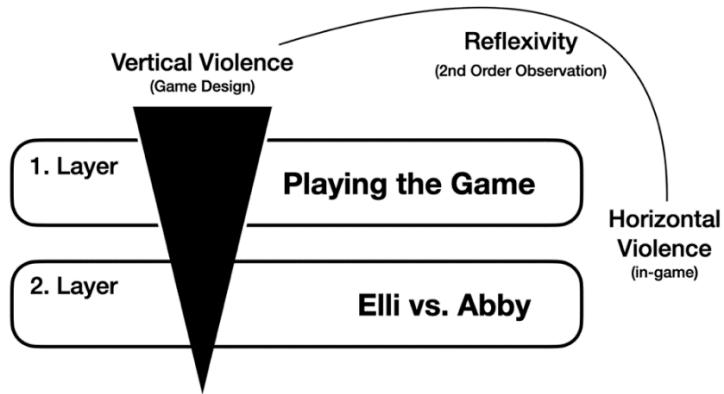


Figure 2. Reflexive violence

For instance, when playing Elli in chapter 3 “Seattle Day 2 (Elli)” we are forced to hit Nora’s face with a pipe repeatedly. Game mechanics constrain players to press the square button and to use the pipe for in-game progress. Through the fixed-narrative structure of the game (K. A. Anderson, 2022), players are constrained to make use of lethal violence exactly this way with no decision power for alternative options. Along with this, players have to shoulder the moral burden of Elli’s violent choice (K. A. Anderson, 2022). They have to look at the outcome of their character’s action, because the game provides the time and features to do so. In said scene, the outcome of violence is shown in high detail, technically realized through the performance of real actors using motion capturing, close-ups and acoustic effects highlighting the brutality of the character’s action.

Considering the time spent on playing Elli’s character, getting to know her personal story and tragedy, TLU 2 can count on strong immersion and player-character-interactivity when it comes to the inevitable killing of Nora. Elli’s actions have become the players’ action. Yet, the realistic representation is likely to decouple the avatars action and the moral foundation players decision-making (see Figure 3), an effect known as ludonarrative dissonance (Schubert, 2021): Players are de-optionalized, they have to do what they morally don’t want to do.



Figure 3. Elli vs. Nora: Moment of dissonance
(Source: Walkthrough, <https://youtu.be/j4fJ0zne7bI>)

Forced to use violence and to de-optionize communication by game design, violence becomes the subject to critical appraisal. In TLU 2, players are constrained

...to experience (narratively), look at (visually), and perform (ludically) acts that are excessively violent and disturbing, only to make them realize the full extent of these actions later, appealing to their empathy. (Schubert 2021, p. 49f.)

Especially empathy as a mode of sympathetic concern enables the valuable shift from the operational use of violence towards second order observation. Empathy is known to provide the potential to orient humans “away from violence and towards cooperation and altruism” (Pinker, 2012) (p. 13). Within social interaction empathy is a key means for the (re-)introduction of options beyond violence (Vecchi et al., 2019).

TLU 2 makes use of a powerful and rare to find game design element, that fosters empathy. After an estimated play time of 11 hours, TLU 2 forces players to switch character from Elli to Abby. After playing the protagonist, players are now *playing the enemy*, experiencing the world in Abby’s eyes. Seeing her father die by the hands of Joel. Getting to know her wants and needs and motives for 304ctionn – and gathering

a special understanding of this very character. In a later scene, as Abby, players are forced to fight their former character, Elli. This is one of TLU 2's crystallizing moments. Assuming a strong identification and sympathetic concern with their former character, players are likely to experience a cognitive dissonance, where they had to do what they do not want to do.

In this state, a powerful pedagogical moment can be assumed, in which acting and experiencing violence as means of de-optionalized social interaction led to valuable reflection and reassessments of the meaning of violence. Due to story and game mechanics players are likely to empathize with their former character, Elli. Later in the game, when the character is switched again to Elli, the same applies to Abby. As players know her story and motives, empathy with their former character Abby is more than likely.

Mainly because of the ubiquity of violence in TLU 2, the forced change of perspective perhaps presents the most powerful game design element. As it is evident for real world conflict management, walking in the shoes of the other respectively seeing the world through their eyes is the most effective tool for reducing escalation and violent outcomes (Boxer et al., 2021; Vecchi et al., 2019). In TLU 2, a 2nd order observation of violence as the standard means of gameplay is achieved at the latest by the element of 'playing the enemy'. Moreover, the pre-designed change of perspective when 'playing the enemy' also blurs the rigid distinction between perpetrators and victims. Both roles can be attributed to Elli and Abby. It is Abby who seeks Elli's life in the Cassandra theater scene, in which she encounters Elli with the original goal to kill her - but at the same time we know that this is out of Abby's traumatic experience as a victim. Conversely, Elli (and with her the player) slips into the role of the perpetrator in TLU 2's final battle against Abby. But again, Elli's own story of victimization is the crucial prerequisite and explanation to her violent behavior. By drawing attention to the personal stories behind the violence and describing violence as an effect of social interaction, rather than as a sudden phenomenon of evil character, TLU 2 moves on par with contemporary research on violence (Collins, 2019; Tillyer, 2022; Terrill & Zimmerman, 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

Elements of TLU 2's game design not only shape the process of learning how to successfully play the game, in particular by using means of violence, thereby de-optionalizing social interaction. Moreover, in TLU 2 players are constrained to shift from their operational perspective using violence (*how to use violence?*) towards a 2nd order observation of violence questioning their own use (*why to use violence?*). This change in reference on violence is mainly supported by realistic representations of violence and its concomitants, moments of strong and morally disrupted player-character-interactivity, and foremost through empathy caused by the element of 'playing the enemy'.

The reflexive reference of violence to itself provides affordances to reflect the personal and social complexity behind *in-game violence* towards adequate alternative options. As supported by recent empirical data (K. A. Anderson, 2022), at the very intersection of TLU 2 player's in-game experience of violence, learning opportunities on the meaning and understanding of interpersonal violence open up, which subsequently resists its serene and obtuse forthcoming in the gameplay itself - and perhaps beyond. In any case, TLU 2's reflexive account on violence comes along with the potential to increase the cognitive complexity of critical debates regarding the relationship between violence and modern video games. In the analytic lens of social systems theory and with regard to the critical issue of interpersonal violence, TLU 2 provides the remarkable potential of *re-optionalization through de-optionalization*. In this vein, TLU 2 as a violent video game becomes a fruitful subject to a pedagogy of violent videogames.

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File #16



Title: All Work and No Play

Subtitle: Economic Alienation and Design imposed
Bleed in Neo Cab

Author(s): F. S. Schönberg

This paper will discuss some of the challenges that video game depictions of oppression face. Using Chance Agency's 2019 indie game Neo Cab as a case study, this paper will then propose a somewhat novel, game design-based approach to portraying systemic oppression. This approach, borrowing from Annika Waern's prior work, will be dubbed 'Imposed Bleed'.

Keywords: Bleed, Immersion, Postcolonial Studies, Narrative Design, Serious Games

1. CHAINS FOR THEE, AND NOT FOR ME

Even outside the industry's continuously questionable labor practices, video-games are no strangers to depictions of systemic oppression.¹

Such depictions of oppression and marginalization range from the accidental (which will not be touched upon in this paper) to the thematically deliberate. They cover both highly fantastical scenarios (such as *Morrowind*'s practices of slavery, perpetuated by blue skinned elves against lizard- and cat-people), as well as scenarios that are barely

¹ In the interest of academic precision, when this paper speaks about 'systemic oppression', it will align itself with the definition given by Susanne Liedauer (2021).

fictionalized (such as acts of police brutality motivated by racial prejudice in *Life is Strange 2*.)

In a substantial majority of such cases however, the depictions of systemic oppression are contained (almost) entirely within the narrative and aesthetic aspects of the games (as opposed to the formal aspects²), creating a significant distance between the diegetic oppression and the player.

This distance commonly manifests in one of two ways. In some cases, diegetic systems of oppression are depicted in full, but simply bypass the player avatar. Though the avatar may belong to one or more of the subaltern identities, they and they alone are totally (or at least mostly) exempt from the pressures and repercussions of this systemic injustice. Popular examples of this kind of pattern include games like *Skyrim* (where the Stormcloaks, one of the warring factions, may be racist to the point of parody, but will nevertheless accept player avatars of any of the playable races with open arms) or *Fallout: New Vegas* (where Caesar's Legion may be so misogynist that they treat women exclusively as slaves, but will still accept a female presenting player avatar leading them to battle). In both of these cases though, at least some lip service is paid to the incongruence.

One of the clearest examples in recent game history can be found in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. In one of the later chapters of the game's story, female player avatar Cassandra³ can attend the Olympic games. The misogyny of antique Greece is on full display here. One of the side quests in the area revolves around a woman that is to be executed for disguising herself as a man to be able to watch the games, as women are not permitted in the audience - in the words of one of the NPCs involved in the quest: "Exactly that - her crime is that she is a woman." The player may or may not decide to come to the unfortunate's aid, but either way the quest itself makes it all the more apparent that Cassandra's presence, not just as a heavily armed tourist, but as a

² That is, the elements constituting gameplay and design, cf Fernández-Vara 2015, 117ff.

³ While the player technically has their choice of avatar, it must be noted that later entries in the series confirm Cassandra as the canonical protagonist of the story of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*.

participant of one of the Olympic competitions, is never so much as questioned, let alone infringed upon.

The other way that games frequently create distance between the player and diegetic systemic oppression is by telling rather than showing. It is not uncommon that a player avatar is ostensibly affected by systemic injustices - but these effects never reach far enough to influence or limit player's actions or decisions.

This frequently happens, in particular with player avatars that ostensibly live in poverty. *Dragon Age II's* Hawke, as far as the narrative tells the player, spends the entire first act of the game as an impoverished refugee, living in a low town slum, hustling from dangerous job to dangerous job to survive, and even selling themselves in what is effectively a year of indentured servitude to buy their family a way to safety. *Cyberpunk 2077's* protagonist V begins the game all but penniless, living in a rundown mega block, driving a junk car, and one of the first, mandatory story quests settle them with what is effectively a substantial medical debt.

But these pressures never infringe upon the player. Players are told that their avatars have money troubles that put them under serious pressure to act, but on the gameplay level no such compulsion exists. Neither Hawke nor V ever need to eat throughout their respective stories. Rent is never due. Squalid living conditions provide all the same mechanical home base benefits that the most expensive mansion or loft do, no such function is ever gated behind wealth in either game. Neither is access, as both characters can go where they please right from the start, regardless of their alleged social status. The year of indentured work that Hawke has to do as either a smuggler or a mercenary is resolved within the space of a fade to black. V's medical debt never accrues interest or comes knocking to collect - in fact repaying it at all is entirely optional and mechanically rewarded with experience and access to a new vendor. In both games, money is not the matter of survival that the narrative claims it is. On the level of formal elements, it exists solely as currency for the advancement of the character's combat potential, in line with traditional role-playing game character advancement.

But the same goes for forms of marginalization that are not tied into well-established gameplay loops. Geralt of Rivia,

player avatar of *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, is himself a mutant. One of the first areas he crosses is in the midst of events that evoke images of pogroms or witch hunts against anyone and anything non-human. But while non-humans like him are driven from the settlements, thrown in dungeons or burned at the stake by a leering mob, Geralt is free to traverse the land as he pleases. He will be threatened by the witch-hunters, but the only way to actually come in conflict with them is if the player chooses to engage with this conflict. In a similar vein, to stay with an example already touched upon, the unjust persecution, imprisonment and institutionalized abuse of mages is a major theme of *Dragon Age II* and one of the narrative's core conflicts. Mothers hide their mage children; free mages are universally desperate fugitives and there is a literal underground railroad to help mages escape from imprisonment. Hawke, if they are a mage, is frequently reminded that they must be hiding, or else be hunted down. But once again, on the level of formal elements, that simply is not true. Hawke can rain magical fire down on people in broad daylight in the middle of town, and while they will be threatened for it, no tangible consequence ever manifests for the player.

What these patterns have in common is the distance they create between the player and the diegetic systems of injustice and oppression they portray - a distance that leaves these video-games in a situation not unlike that of a novel or film, where any affect these injustices may develop relies on the player's empathy, whether for non-player characters or for their own avatars. This empathy is arguably even more difficult to develop if the gameplay, untouched by the aforementioned systems, serves as an active distraction.

But games, as this paper means to propose, have another, more direct, more effective and more affective way of portraying structural injustice.

2. "NOW I SEE THIS CLEARLY. THERE NEVER HAS BEEN A CHOICE FOR ME."⁴

Enter *Neo Cab*.

⁴ Travis Bickle, *Taxi Driver*.

In Chance Agency's 2019 indie game, the player takes control of Lina. She is a gig worker in a perilous freelance employment contract with an Uber-esque taxi app in a cyberpunk city where this profession has all but been replaced by self-driving cars. As such, Lina is economically subaltern.⁵

In her 2019 book 'Hustle and Gig - Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy', Alexandra J. Ravenelle outlines three major factors that constitute the systemic pressures on modern day gig workers:

- gig workers generally subsist on sub-living standard wages, which are further undercut by a significant number of hidden costs that workers incur simply to be able to fulfill their jobs, as they have to supply and maintain their own work materials.

- gig workers generally face a great deal of uncertainty, as they forego most traditional forms of worker protections and guarantees in favor of an economic model that has them rely on any number of factors that are outside of their control (such as changing app policies or algorithms, fluctuating customer demand or legal status and more).

- subsequently, gig workers have to endure a significant strain on their mental and emotional well-being, borne both from this uncertainty and from the ever increasing demands of a lifestyle where work hours frequently go well beyond the traditional 9 to 5.

The core gameplay loop in *Neo Cab* revolves around picking out passengers in the eponymous NeoCab app (a quasi diegetic in game interface), and then chatting with those passengers for the duration of the trip.

At first glance, this gameplay loop appears at odds with the narrative. In the very first night of the game, Lina's best friend (and only contact in the new city) Savy goes missing, apparently in peril, and there are leads to be followed up

⁵ The concept of the 'subaltern' is here used as per Spivak (1988) and this paper will return to discussing it further on.

on. But Lina is not at liberty to pursue her missing friend. Lina must work to sustain herself.

In detail, then, the gameplay loop of *Neo Cab*, arguably almost a distraction pulling away from the main story, rests on three major, interconnected pillars that inform and affect one another: Money, user ratings, and Lina's mood and mental health. The player has a limited amount of time each in-game night to balance all three factors against one another, if they wish to succeed at the game.

The first pillar, money, acquired by completing fares, is quintessential to be able to continue playing the game. Each distance traversed, whether it is for a fare, a story event or to a charging station or rest stop, consumes fuel that must be paid for. Failure to keep the car's fuel cell adequately charged results in an expensive towing fee, as well as a loss of the fare and permanent loss of the customer, if the cab runs out of fuel mid trip. The player then must maintain at least enough income to keep their vehicle running through the story events, or they are unable to make any narrative progress at all. Additionally, Lina is effectively homeless and at the end of each night needs to pay for shelter. Most of the options for shelter are somewhat remote (potentially consuming more fuel to reach) and so cheap and rundown or sparse, they leave Lina wracked with nightmares (adversely affecting her mood). Accommodation that will not cause such umbrage is so expensive that, together with fuel costs, Lina is bleeding money even when she works all night (rather than pursuing the main story) and reaches her already ambitious shift goals. The only true bit of luxury that Lina can hope to achieve during the game, a night's stay in a luxury hotel, is so expensive that it cannot be earned through labor, even for a single night. The only ways to spend a (single) night there without risking bankruptcy and debt, are to either engage in a crime of opportunity, or to be lucky enough to benefit from an NPC's charity.

User-Ratings represent a permanent sword of Damocles over the player's head. Right from the start, the game makes it clear that if ever a driver falls below a four out of five star rating for a length of time, they are kicked off the app, which would sever Lina's sole income stream. Even without that imminent threat of a game over, certain more lucrative passengers are gated behind a high enough rating average. Each passenger posts their evaluation as soon as

they have reached their destination. What that rating is depends on how satisfied the passenger is with the conversation on the drive. In part, navigating these conversations requires the player to ascertain what the passenger wants to hear, but that task is complicated by Lina's mood. Many of the passengers are inconsiderate, rude or outright abusive, which understandably sours Lina's emotional state.

This emotional state, visually represented and communicated to the player by a 'feel grid' in the menu and helpful neon mood-lighting during play, must be maintained to some extent by standing her ground on certain issues or pushing back against the more abusive passengers, even at the risk of lower ratings. For the more Lina's mental state becomes worn down, the less she is able to keep up politeness. As her mood sours, increasingly more and more dialogue options become locked out or get replaced with angry or combative dialogue choices. Thus, the worse Lina's mood, the harder it becomes to navigate the dialogues favorably, the harder maintaining good ratings becomes, thus once again threatening Lina's livelihood.

Without ever touching upon the diegetic game world, the game's narrative themes or its main story, it is still unmistakably visible that Lina is trapped in a cycle - never earning enough to escape a nightly rut of subsisting, barely breaking even, bearing abuse with a forced smile, carefully planning routes and finances to eke out enough shreds of free time to be able to pursue the narrative, looking for her missing friend.

But more importantly - *the player* is trapped in that very same rut.

In most video-games, the concerns of player and player avatar diverge considerably. A player guiding a *Call of Duty* protagonist through a high intensity firefight may be worried about the formal repercussions of a failure state, but they face their digital enemies' bullets without fear of death or injury. And a player that is guiding *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II's* Private Ramirez to defend Burgertown, Washington D.C., from Russian paratroopers probably will not be too concerned with the 'fate of the free world'. Now, to an extent this is a deliberate

exaggeration - intense spatial presence experiences⁶ are certainly possible, but they remain rare - in part arguably because of the distance that this paper's previous section laments.

In *Neo Cab* on the other hand, Lina's concerns and those of the player are aligned much more closely. They have very similar things to worry about, they feel the same setbacks. When a friendly but seemingly tech-illiterate former convict leaves a one-star rating, mercilessly lowering the average user rating down toward the dreaded game over threshold, this setback is shared between avatar and player. The anxiety of wondering if the remaining fuel will be enough to finish a fare and limp to the charging station is shared between Lina and the player.

In other words, it will be argued here that within the safety of this digital simulation, as their concerns are aligned with those of the avatar, the player is not just seeing or hearing about the economic oppression faced by low-income gig workers: They are *experiencing* it.

And none of this requires any particular or heightened buy-in from the player's side. They need not identify with Lina to any meaningful extent, nor do they need to be particularly immersed in the world of *Neo Cab* or feel particular empathy for their avatar.

In her 2011 essay 'I am in love with someone that doesn't exist', Annika Waern used the term 'bleed' to describe the transfer of emotion from avatar to player, contingent on a number of factors. But while such bleed may or may not occur when playing *Neo Cab*, to an extent the game can forego the avatar entirely, and induce what this paper will call 'imposed bleed': player emotion induced by the pressures of gameplay. Therein lies narratological potential that goes beyond simply achieving ludonarrative harmony.⁷ Concurrently to relatively conventionally told stories, big (Savy's disappearance and the surrounding conspiracy) and small (the many little side stories of the passengers), the gameplay,

⁶ Cf. Wirth (2007).

⁷ Indeed in the case study at hand, with deliberate friction between the (narrative) draw to look for Savy and the demands of the gameplay, the question of ludonarrative harmony might even be debatable in *Neo Cab*'s case.

the formal elements of *Neo Cab* tell a story all of their own.

The aforementioned alignment of the concerns of player and avatar occurs almost entirely within these formal elements, with the gameplay cycles poised to simulate the oppression that the avatar is subject to. Not ancillary, not as a backdrop, dressing or theme, but front and center, the chains of (in this case economic) oppression are imposed on the choices and actions that the player undertakes during play. The diegetic systems of oppression flow into, inform, and shape the systems of gameplay. The player subsequently needs to buy into the experience no further than simply to want to play the game at all.⁸ As long as they want to progress the game and avoid failure, they are exposed to this 'imposed bleed'.

The player's exact emotional responses to these tacit simulations of the stresses of a particular form of economic oppression are their own. But the stresses themselves, the uncertainty, the mental burden, the difficulty to eke out free time, and the challenges of the cost of work materials and subsistence eating up the paycheck - they all align with how Alexandria Ravenelle describes comparable experiences manifesting outside the game world.

Additionally, this imposed bleed makes it far easier for the player to recognize the injustices encountered as systemic (once again following Liedauer's definition, in particular the "simultaneous expression" (2021)). Lina's poverty is not up to individual choices, not hers and not those of the player that controls her. Escaping the vicious cycle of scraping by from gig to gig is not a matter of making the right choices, playing optimally, or completing enough missions and leveling up enough. Even the most skilled or careful player cannot thrive in *Neo Cab*. No amount of perfect five-star ratings or maximized route efficiency is going to buy Lina multiple nights in comfortable accommodation, never mind a way out of poverty.

The rules won't allow it - that is both the systemic economic injustice of the diegetic world and the game rules that enshrine it. Both are on full display for the player to

⁸ Cf. Bernard Suits' 'lusory attitude' concept, (Suits 1978).

chafe and struggle against. There is no escaping it through individual excellence, there is no bootstrap to pull on.

The game is, quite literally, rigged from the start.

3. PROCEDURAL SUBALTERN RHETORIC

Gayatri Spivak once asked the loaded question: "Can the Subaltern speak?"⁹ In a field as consolidated and rife with abuse as the video game industry, the concerns about power and control in discourse and in the production and publishing of media that Spivak raised remain distressingly relevant. However, this paper will follow an interpretation which also reads Spivak's essay as a consideration of the limitations of existing media.

Now, *Neo Cab* is a small game, and its systems and especially graphic presentation are in many ways rudimentary. Still, the analysis provided in this paper suggests that the method of game design that can be observed in *Neo Cab*, which attempts to use its formal elements to align the concerns and worries of player and avatar as closely as possible, is a form of procedural rhetoric¹⁰ - a form of procedural rhetoric that seems uniquely poised to communicate subaltern experience and the systemic circumstances that often underlie the subaltern marginalization. For that matter, it is a type of rhetoric that, while far from common in larger productions, can be found across a number of other games and systemic issues - from the admittedly obscure *Trans* and its heart rate mechanics, to even analogue games like *Bluebeard's Bride* or *The Emperor's Orchard*.

Still, however tacitly explored it may be so far, there appears to be a lot of narratological potential in this approach: the potential, if not to give a voice to the subaltern, then at least to give a glimpse of what oppression feels like to the many that have yet to sympathize.

⁹ Spivak 1988.

¹⁰ Cf. Bogost 2010.

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¹¹ At time of writing, no English version of this Japanese game is available for purchase.

File #17



Title: Let's Play for a Better Future

Subtitle: Exploring the Potential of future-oriented Learning with Games to foster Freedom, Democracy, and Tolerance

Author(s): Stephanie Wössner

Digital devices have become increasingly popular in schools, but their potential when it comes to the transformation of learning appears to be mostly untapped. Teachers continue to prepare "lessons" and implement them instead of letting Gen Z and Gen Alpha become agents of their own learning. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this education system focused on teaching needs to be replaced by an environment which fosters future-oriented learning in order to make sure humanity will overcome the many challenges it faces.

Future-oriented learning requires us to reconsider everything we take for granted. Therefore, it is time to leave the familiar paths and come up with ideas on how we can support learners in learning the things they will need for their future as responsible European citizens in the digital age and provide them with the skills that will enable them to shape their (and our) future.

Game-based learning is of particular interest in this context because learning opportunities can easily be designed using games. It is of utmost importance that learners actively create and share content in cooperation with their peers.

After a brief look at the current state of education, this paper will discuss how future-oriented and game-based learning approaches can help prepare learners for their life's mission, i.e. building the future as members of an international community. This will be illustrated by three

concrete examples: designing a sustainable future with Minetest, making sure democracy will prevail by approaching This War of Mine from different angles, and experiencing gender and diversity with the Sims 4.

Keywords: game-based learning, democracy, future, future-oriented learning

1. EDUCATION CAUGHT BETWEEN THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND AN EXPONENTIAL FUTURE

Our current education system is based on the social structure of the Industrial Age and focuses primarily on the acquisition of knowledge that can be tested in standardized exams. This emphasis on academic excellence may even be considered a relic of a much more distant past: the Enlightenment (Robinson & RSA, 2010). Although the curricula of all sixteen German federal states highlight the importance of competency-based learning, assessment policies and procedures still focus mostly on the transfer of knowledge, and so do, therefore, teachers. In practice, this means that surface learning (content, information) has a much more prominent role than deep learning (transfer of knowledge, application), even though learning experts like John Hattie argue that deep learning should outweigh surface learning by far (UQx LEARNx Team Of Contributors, 2019). This is especially true in the context of a global community that is undergoing rapid changes in the age of digital transformation and that is not only struggling with a lot of contemporary problems but also facing an exponential future: We have been living with a pandemic for several years, we have frequent encounters with the effects of climate change, and we have a war on our doorstep. This war is about much more than one country's freedom, it's a war about the democratic values that unite us.

It will be up to late Generation Z and Generation Alpha¹ to deal with all these challenges we haven't managed to overcome yet - and with all the challenges the future has in store

¹ According to the Pew Research Center, members of Gen(eration) Z were born between 1997 and 2012, which implies that Gen(eration) Alpha refers to the age cohort born since 2012 (Dimock, 2022).

for us but that we can't even imagine yet. This is why we need to prepare the young generation for the future, so they will have agency and be able to shape the future in the best possible way, and so that, ultimately, democracy and tolerance will prevail. For all these recent events have shown us repeatedly that not being prepared for the future does not only lead to surprise, but often to paralysis. However, neither teaching to the test nor focusing on existing knowledge will prepare them for these challenges - otherwise we would already have overcome them. Therefore, rather than sticking to teaching, we need to turn towards future-oriented learning to deal with a complex (VUCA), sometimes even chaotic (BANI) world (Theil, 2021) and learners must be allowed to take responsibility for their learning so they can not only understand the world but learn how to shape the future in a responsible and sustainable way.

2. VUCA, BANI, WHAT?!

The concept of the VUCA world was developed by the US Army War College in the late 1980s, more than 30 years ago, as an attempt to describe the world after the collapse of the USSR, i.e., the end of the Cold War, and the resulting challenges. The acronym stands for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

However, simply describing the world's challenges is no longer enough. More than three decades later, digitalization has changed the world dramatically and has led to a fundamental cultural change, i.e., the digital transformation, that is at least as drastic as the one triggered by industrialization. The complexity of the world is still a fact, but it is no longer enough to merely describe the challenges and do experiments to overcome them. Unlike industrialization, which people had to cope with primarily on a local level, digitalization has given people a means to communicate their thoughts and opinions on a global level, e.g., via social media. As a result, humanity has moved closer together. Thus, the impact of these challenges that are due to the digital transformation can now be heard and felt everywhere, and even though we continue to live in a complex VUCA world, its impact on the individual is omnipresent and has made many people feel like they live in chaos. This second, more personal dimension of the VUCA world has added chaos to the equation and is referred to as

the BANI world: it is brittle, people are anxious, it is non-linear, i.e., cause and effect are no longer tangible, and for many people the world has become incomprehensible. It should be noted that different cultures deal differently with these effects of cultural change, as can be seen in a comparison between Europe and Asia (Ito, 2018). There are different approaches to overcoming the paralysis that has a firm grip on many people, but they can all be summarized under the term future skills.

While in the VUCA world it was still enough to solve problems experimentally in pilot studies to find the best solution and then implement it, in a BANI world and in the face of an exponential future it is necessary to act as quickly as possible. However, this ability to act must be learned by making it an everyday practice and by realizing that there are no mistakes, just learning opportunities. To achieve this, learners must be allowed to take responsibility for their learning and acquire many competencies that require an open mindset. RAAT is an acronym summarizing some of the most important future skills that can lead the way to dealing with the effects of complexity on the individual. RAAT stands for resilience, attention (i.e., mindfulness), adaptation (i.e., flexibility), and transparency. These are the skills Gen Z and Gen Alpha need to acquire to be well prepared for the future.

Table 1: VUCA, BANI, and RAAT

Challenge	Impact on the individual	Solution
V = volatile	B = brittle	R = resilience
U = uncertain	A = anxious	A = attention
C = complex	N = non-linear	A = adaptation
A = ambiguous	I = incomprehensible	T = transparency
> changes since the Cold War	> symptoms in a global world	> future skills

3. FUTURE-ORIENTED LEARNING

In recent years, the term "contemporary education" has often been used with reference to the 4Cs (Communication, Collaboration, Creativity, Critical Thinking) in order to describe the ideal education in the 21st century (The Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015). However, particularly the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that the ideal the notion of contemporary education is based on, i.e., to realign learning with the changed social reality, has reached a dead end. This can be seen, among other things, when having a closer look at the DigitalPakt Schule², a German initiative that aims at providing schools with money for digitalization, but which turned out to be a missed opportunity because it focuses too much on equipment and too little on a changed learning culture (Wössner, 2022a). Even before that, however, there were indicators that the notion of contemporary education had taken a wrong turn: for years, we have been flooded with training sessions for contemporary education like "The iPad in the English Classroom", which seem to imply that contemporary education is much more about technology than about society. Moreover, in the past five years or so, the definition of what is considered contemporary learning has been greatly reduced to certain aspects, primarily the use of digital devices and the 4Cs in a learning setting that is very much determined and assessed by a teacher, and, therefore, no longer synonymous with what it might have been according to the original ideal. This is why we should reevaluate the use of the term "contemporary education" and, following a 2012 New Zealand study (Bolstad et al., 2012), replace it with the notion of future-oriented learning.

According to the researchers from New Zealand, the term "21st century learning"³, coined at the end of the 20th century, was already problematic in 2012, as it tended to describe current practices but was not (or rather no longer) visionary and oriented towards the future. In 2012, they nevertheless used the term "future-oriented learning" or "future learning" as a synonym for "contemporary education", as the term was already established in academia at that time. However, they emphasized that, for them, the term represented an evolving collection of new ideas, beliefs,

² <https://www.digitalpaktschule.de/>

³ This term is used interchangeably with "contemporary education" in the educational community.

knowledge, theories, and practices. Specifically, they saw "future-oriented learning" as combining a new understanding of knowledge with new insights about learning with the ultimate goal to deconstruct the existing system. They identified the following basic principles of this new system: personalized learning, a new understanding of equity, diversity and inclusivity, a focus on competencies, a new understanding of the roles of learners and teachers, lifelong learning, establishing a collaboration between schools and the community. New technologies and collaborative practices were mentioned as secondary areas of interest. The ultimate goal was to integrate the lessons learned into the system and develop it so that New Zealand's learners would be able to participate in and shape their personal, as well as national and global futures.

Future-oriented learning still takes into account the 4Cs of learning but adds to them other equally important elements, such as character and citizenship (cf. 6Cs of Deep Learning (Fullan & Scott, 2014)), as well as future skills (Fidler & Williams, 2016). At the same time, in a world where peace can no longer be taken for granted and where the global community has to deal with the challenges of the present and the future together, foreign languages are becoming more and more important. Despite the fact that quite a number of amazing AI applications have been released since 2022, e.g., *ChatGPT* (OpenAI, 2022), and that this may lead people to believe that we no longer need to learn foreign languages to communicate, it will still take a long time until any machine learning algorithm may understand and be able to translate cultural nuances and mentalities. However, learning a foreign language is not an end in itself, it needs to happen in an authentic environment where you need to speak the language for a specific purpose that goes beyond being evaluated for it.

Although not everyone will share these thoughts on this new old notion of future-oriented learning because we have been talking about contemporary education for a while now, it actually doesn't go far enough: if we want to change the system, we need to use many other new words, such as learning group (instead of class), learning environment (instead of classroom), learner (instead of student), and learning facilitator or partner (instead of teacher). For traditional terminology comes with a lot of preconceived notions and historical baggage and will make change difficult or even impossible (Wössner, 2022b).

Despite all this, future-oriented learning is not an end in itself, either. Shaping the future also requires everyone to think about sustainable development and acquire many more skills, like future and problem-solving skills. For our ultimate goal as citizens of the world is to have agency in the future, so current and future problems can be solved by the global community. This is in accordance with the OECD Learning 2030 framework, which highlights the importance of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that are used in a learning context to develop competencies with the ultimate goal to have agency in the future. (OECD, 2018).

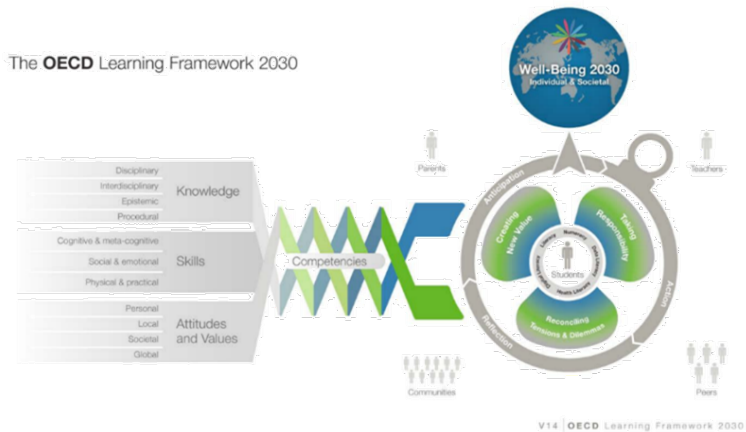


Figure 3: The OECD Learning Framework 2030 (Source: OECD, 2018, p. 4)

This experiential learning, communication and collaboration space can take many forms and may include, among others, design and futures thinking practices, questions of sustainable development, extended reality, virtual worlds, gaming, and game-based learning. They can encourage a paradigm shift in which the former teacher becomes both a facilitator by designing learning opportunities and a learner in their own right. Designing learning opportunities has always been part of being an educator, so while the tools may change, both mindset and part of the required skills remain intact (Rober, 2018). Moreover, playing has always been part of human nature (Huizinga, 1987), so it should be easy for any educator to reclaim the heritage they may have lost sight of during their teacher training.

4. GAME-BASED LEARNING

In her book *Reality is Broken*, Jane McGonigal identified four important traits that define games (McGonigal, 2011, pp. 26):

- goals, which “provide players with a sense of purpose”
- rules, which “unleash creativity and foster strategic thinking”
- a feedback system, which “serves as a promise to the players that the goal is definitely achievable, and [...] provides motivation to keep playing”
- voluntary participation

In other words, “a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (Suits & Hurka, 2005, p. 159). More recent games often have a contextualizing story but being embedded in a narrative is not a prerequisite for a game.

Games have always been an integral part of human nature (Huizinga, 1987), which is why they should definitely be part of learning. Following the Hook model (Eyal, 2014), when a player is incentivized to start playing a game (for example through a compelling narrative), they will want to overcome obstacles presented to them. If they play a good game, all four defining traits of games will be present, they will learn from their mistakes and receive a meaningful reward which will encourage them to go on playing. This reward is linked to the notions of self-determination⁴ and self-efficacy (Deci & Ryan, 2008). As they keep playing, they will choose more challenging tasks and will soon enter in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Szöllösi, 2010), which goes hand in hand with a profound happiness. This feeling is due to dopamine, a neurotransmitter that is released when the brain expects a reward (van der Linden et

⁴ Self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan is a psychological framework that suggests human motivation and personal development are driven by an individual's innate needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

al., 2021), and to self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience (Luthans et al., 2007).

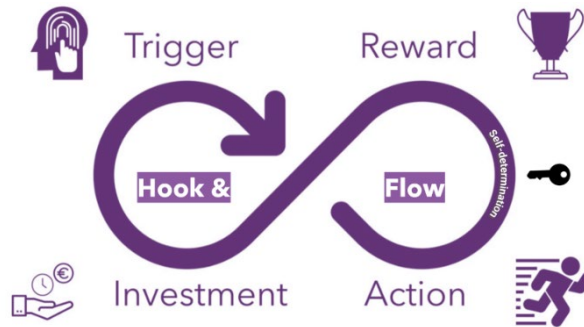


Figure 4 The Hook-Model (Source: Fabian Karg | CC BY-SA-NC 4.0 | Icons: Noun Project, adapted by Stephanie Wössner)

While good games and the traditional education system seem to share a great deal of those qualities of good games which lead to intrinsic motivation, a closer look reveals that in theory, this may well be the case, but in practice, it isn't. In school we encourage young people to face a challenge, we give them a grade as a reward and - in a perfect world - this reward would motivate them to go on learning. However, we do not live in this perfect world: In a game, the rules make sense to the player (often because there is an underlying narrative that explains the system), challenges are set by the player and the reward they receive is of personal value. Most importantly, the player is allowed freedom to choose the way to overcome the challenge they chose to tackle and to fail as many times as they need to learn how to succeed. In school, on the other hand, the challenges are set by a teacher, the rules are set by the system and may not make sense because they lack a contextualizing narrative, and feedback is of social nature. Unlike in a good game, there is no self-determination involved and learners are continuously punished for their mistakes. This basically sets up young people for failure because their attention is redirected on their own failings instead of celebrating their talents. This also explains why parents often have to practically force their children to study and fight to get them away from the latest computer game.

Games are not only an integral part of the lives of late Gen Z and Gen Alpha (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2022, pp. 49) but the competencies acquired by gamers in what is mostly considered a leisure time activity can be quite valuable in many respects (Bediou et al., 2018; Mitterer & Steiner, 2020). They can be of cognitive, social, personal, and sensomotoric nature, and can also contribute to digital literacy (Donau-Universität Krems, 2018). These skills have not only been proven to have “real”⁵ life consequences (McGonigal, 2011; Katski, 2017) but they are increasingly desirable for employers (Molloy, 2019). Moreover, games have even helped solve scientific puzzles more than a decade ago (Uehlecke, 2010) and have advanced the development of artificial intelligence tremendously (Luzgin, 2019). Even the fact that games can change the world is nothing new if we take into account organizations like Games for Change (<https://www.gamesforchange.org>).

Game-based learning refers to using - very often popular - games for learning and integrating them into the learning process. It’s not necessarily linked to gamification⁶ or educational games⁷. It also doesn’t necessarily refer to the use of digital games, as can be seen with the Quest2Learn school in New York (Tekinbas et al., 2010). However, in this paper, the term “game-based learning” is used to refer to digital game-based learning.

Game-based learning focuses on the acquisition of competencies. Factual knowledge will very likely be acquired as well during gameplay, but it isn’t the goal of the game. Unlike gamification and educational games, which often reward players with points that they can accumulate to compare themselves to others or see some kind of progress, game-based learning is rooted in the belief that overcoming a challenge deliberately taken on by the player will make them happy and motivate them to go on playing, thus becoming increasingly competent. Moreover, games are designed in a way to allow the player to learn from their mistakes instead

⁵ quotation marks are deliberately used because experiences in a virtual world are also real (Chalmers, 2022)

⁶ “the use of video game elements in non-gaming systems to improve user experience and user engagement” (Deterding et al., 2011)

⁷ Games designed for learning, often also called “serious games” (for an in-depth analysis of elements of serious games cf. Bedwell et al., 2012)

of punishing them like the current education system with its assessment culture does.

5. VIRTUAL WORLDS AND LEARNING

Virtual worlds, i.e., computer-simulated environments (Bartle, 2003), have been around for a long time. First references predate computers and go back to Roman Times (Biocca & Levy, 1995, pp. 6-8). In the 20th century, the cinematographer Morton Heilig played around with the idea of a *Sensorama*, a theatrical experience involving all senses (Norman, n.d.). Video games like *Maze War* (Lebling, 1986; Damer, 2004) and MUDs and MUSHes from the 1970s can be considered virtual worlds as well (Mitchell, 1995), even though the 1986 Commodore 64 game *Habitat* (Lucasfilm Games, 1986) is credited to be the first online virtual world (Rossney, 1996). Most people probably think of *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) as the first mainstream virtual world, or of games like *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) or *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2015). So virtual worlds have very often been synonymous with video games.

According to James Paul Gee, learning design and video game design are very similar. He came up with a list of principles that show how learning can be encouraged by games (cf. Table 2). It is very interesting to see how many of these principles match the general idea behind the OECD Learning 2030 framework, too (OECD, 2018).

Table 2. Learning principles by James Paul Gee (Gee, 2007 pp. 23)

Empowering learners	Learning
• co-design	• learners need to feel like active agents
• customize	• learners learn differently
• identity	• learners need to be committed
• manipulation & distributed knowledge	• learners feel like they have agency; immersion & interaction > feeling of presence

Problem-solving	Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • well-ordered problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need scaffolding and apply what they have learned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pleasantly frustrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need challenges they want and are able to overcome; they must neither be bored nor overwhelmed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cycles of expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need time to practice in order to be able to integrate previously acquired knowledge / skills with new knowledge/skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information "on demand" and "just in time" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need access to certain information when they can use it or feel like they need it to solve a problem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fish tanks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need to start with simplified system that become more and more complex
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sandboxes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need to be allowed to fail and feel safe taking risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills as strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need to apply their skills and knowledge to accomplish a certain goal
Understanding	Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • system thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need to see the big picture and understand how what they do is meaningful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meaning as action image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners need experiences they can link to their learning

All these learning principles can be found in different forms and with variations in priority in the following three examples.

6. DESIGNING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE WITH *MINETEST*

The Open-Source game engine *Minetest* (Minetest team, 2010) offers an infinite number of possibilities to collaboratively build virtual worlds. It allows for future-oriented game-based learning adventures that check all the boxes when it comes to preparing the younger generations for

their task of building the future. Especially when such an adventure is embedded in a story, *Minetest* is a very good example of game-based learning and enables the sustainable transformation of learning by proposing scenarios that encourage collaborative problem-solving.

One such learning adventure is a workshop Fabian Karg and I designed and implemented for the Goethe Institute in Pune, India. The goal of the project *We build the world the way we like it* was for a group of teenagers to build a sustainable world as part of a game-based learning scenario and to document the world they built with screencasts in German. This was supposed to help them practice German, acquire media literacy and future skills, as well as allow them to train the 6Cs of deep learning (communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, character, and citizenship). Since the participants were still beginners in German (CEFR level A1+), the workshop itself was conducted in English.

This virtual workshop took place on two weekends in June 2022. There was a Padlet (a virtual bulletin board) for support that everyone could access. Between sessions, the participants were allowed to continue building their sustainable world on their own. This was built into the story.

At the beginning of the first session, the participants were introduced to *Minetest* and to the story. In order to connect the *Minetest* game world, the story and the physical world so that the immersive experience would be maximized, they were introduced to our avatars, the rocket pilots, who resemble us physically. Following this introduction, the participants discussed in their groups what their new world could look like. They focused on the sustainable development goals zero hunger, clean water and sanitation, clean energy, sustainable cities and communities (United Nations, 2015).

Within a few hours, the participants built a sustainable world on the island we had created for them. In the third session, the groups began to prepare their screencasts to present the areas they had built. These videos were part of the narrative because the pilots of the space rocket were to bring them to the families of their German friends in order to convince them to join them on their mission to create a better future together. Finally, on the last day of the workshop, the videos were recorded and a voice-over

in German was added. A simple look at the video (<https://youtu.be/nMWxZE7Zozk>) shows how much thought and effort the participants of the workshop put into designing their sustainable new community and how well this prepared them to take responsibility for the future.



Figure 3. Screenshot

For more information on the narrative and more pictures, please go to <https://www.petiteprof79.eu/nachhaltige-entwicklung-der-zukunft-wir-bauen-uns-die-welt-wie-sie-uns-gefaellt/> or read Wössner (2023).

Another noteworthy initiative utilizing Minetest to cultivate future skills is the "Zukunftsnächte" project, translated as "Future Nights," sponsored by the Bavarian State Center for Political Education Work (Bayrische Landeszentrale für politische Bildungsarbeit). This project encourages adolescents to address local issues by designing solutions on a Minetest server (Schneider & Nominacher, 2023).

If you want to implement such a learning adventure for educational purposes without having to host your own server and without having to compromise personal information of minors by using Minecraft instead, you can use the GDPR compliant server dashboard BLOCKALOT (www.blockalot.de), which was developed by the Landesmedienzentrum Baden-Württemberg in cooperation with several developers. The platform represents an interface between Minetest and future-oriented learning adventures and offers teachers and

educational staff the possibility to create and manage learning spaces themselves without technical hurdles. In addition to the technical infrastructure, a wide range of support and pedagogical resources is available to users. The goal of the project is to build a network that, as a community of practice, will establish game-based learning with Minetest as a serious alternative for traditional teaching.

7. MAKING SURE DEMOCRACY WILL PREVAIL WITH *THIS WAR OF MINE*

This War of Mine (11 Bit Studios, 2014) is a game about the effects of war on the people. It's a game that teaches you very quickly that there are no morally right actions in times of war because someone always suffers. In the game, you have to make decisions and live with their consequences. It can therefore be classified as a persuasive game.

From a pedagogical point of view, you cannot play this game with everyone. You really need to know the learners you are using it with and adapt your approach to them so they will not be traumatized by the experience. However, even if not everyone may play the game, some learners could be journalists or observers who watch others play and learn about their reasons for acting a certain way and the impact their decisions have on them. This still has everyone participate but from a distance, with less impact on their personalities.

There are quite a number of approaches to the game, but all will eventually have the same outcome: players will realize that war is not an option, and it will help them shape the future in a way that hopefully will prevent future wars.

This War of Mine as a source of inspiration

Since the game was inspired by the Bosnian War, it can serve as a starting point for a closer examination of this specific war. For example, after playing the game, documents or reports from the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague can supplement the experiences from the game in order to learn more about the background and to be able to transfer the knowledge gained to the current war in Ukraine or even potential future wars. Likewise, general discussions on war

can follow with the goal of drawing lessons from the past for the future. This could culminate in a final mock trial that Vladimir Putin will one day have to face. This encourages learners to change their perspective. In this context, individual topics that may be relevant to specific subject areas can also be singled out and explored in more detail. In *This War of Mine*, this could be the relationship between Muslims and Jews in Sarajevo.

Since this game is on the "reading" list for high school seniors of age in Poland, on a meta level, the question of whether or not wars and a war game should be part of this canon can be discussed. The question of whether a commercial game is the right medium for this exploration of a very important topic can also be addressed.

Finally, gaming can also be a creative starting point for media production. This can take very different forms, e.g., players can keep an audio or video diary while playing, they can use storytelling techniques, or produce artifacts from the game related to one of the game characters to make the experience more tangible and to reflect on it.

An Analysis of *This War of Mine*

In artistic and linguistic subjects, general questions about the aesthetic or narrative representation of the events in the game and its effect on the player can be analyzed. Furthermore, media-critical questions can be discussed, e.g., why there is no tutorial in the game or how games or media in general can affect people and whether such an examination of very serious topics should be seen positively or negatively in an education setting. This could also be followed by an analysis of how - especially social - media are used in the current war in Ukraine.

The game can also be played several times in groups with different strategies to compare the effects of the actions on the story and the player. In this case, questions of game design, e.g., "Why did the game developers make certain decisions?", "Could there have been alternatives to make the effects less dire or more lasting?", and reception, e.g. "How does the story change?", "What impact does this have on the player?", can be addressed.

Finally, references to game research can be made: how can *This War of Mine* be classified? What is persuasive game design and how does this particular game fit into this concept? What about the gaming culture around the game, e.g., the existing wiki, gaming communities, reviews, and research?

Creative Gaming based on *This War of Mine*

If you want to focus on agency in the future, creative gaming offers an ideal way to translate a prior analysis and engagement with various issues into virtual spaces for action: for example, on a meta-level, virtual spaces can be designed against the Ukraine war or wars in general. They can potentially even be linked to concrete actions on social media, such as an Instagram campaign that transfers the issue to the learners' immediate environment or even the international community. The more agency learners feel in the process, the more lasting the impact of the learning process will be with regard to agency in the future.

Another possibility is that a city destroyed by war, e.g., a city in Bosnia or Ukraine, is rebuilt in a virtual world. In this scenario, not only architectural and financial issues need to be considered, but it is also important to discuss how to preserve the culture associated with the destroyed places. This involves research to understand city plans and the history of the country, as well as a variety of other aspects. Concerns regarding sustainability and protection from future attacks must also be included in these considerations. Such a task-based learning adventure can be contextualized by a narrative to make the two-fold game experience more immersive and to give the learners back hope that they can actually change the world if they rebuild destroyed places and work to ensure that there are no more wars.

Game Design based on *This War of Mine*

If you would like to further explore the topic less in terms of content and more in terms of game theory and creativity, you can follow up with a project in which an alternate reality game for younger learners is created. For instance, they could be immersed in a simulation in which they find themselves in a war situation and report from their perspective under a specific hashtag on how their daily

lives play out in this scenario and how they relate to the events that unfold over the duration of the game period. Or they may be called upon to respond to events unfolding in another country to find solutions for children and families stranded there.

Alternate reality games combine fictional events with experiences in the physical world with the help of different media - for example, letters, blogs, artifacts, newspaper articles. This type of game is often used in marketing. However, there are also relevant and impressive examples by Jane McGonigal, who in 2008 and 2010 designed two alternate reality games called *Superstruct* (McGonigal, 2008) and *Urgent Evoke* (McGonigal, 2010), which brought together several thousand players in a simulation involving, among other things, an airborne virus. Reportedly, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, participants in this game were far better prepared for dealing with the situation at hand than people who never expected a virus to massively change their lives overnight.

8. EXPERIENCING GENDER AND DIVERSITY WITH *THE SIMS 4*

The Sims 4 (Maxis, 2014) is a very popular simulation game, which has just become free to play. It can be used with learners who are 12 years old and older to make them more tolerant. The goal of the game is keeping your Sims happy.

Diversity has always been important in the Sims franchise: same-sex relationships were already allowed in the first part (Maxis, 2000), although it wasn't until 2004 that civil partnerships became possible in *The Sims 2* (Maxis, 2004). Same-sex marriage and adoption in same-sex relationships were introduced in *The Sims 3* (Maxis, 2009). This was followed, in 2016, by an update in which it was possible for the first time to cross gender boundaries by creating Sims whose appearance, walking style, voice tone, and clothing were no longer associated with a certain gender (Schabel, 2016). This ensured that transgender individuals, among others, could feel represented. However, other forms of diversity in the base game only became a reality in recent years in *The Sims 4* and at the suggestion of the community. For instance, a petition (Wheeler, 2021) resulted in a pronoun option being introduced in May 2022. Gender options followed in the same year as a result of another petition (Wynne, 2021). Finally, another major update came out on

July 28, 2022, which allows for differentiation between gender and sexual orientation (Jones, 2022). Moreover, there are modifications that can be added to the game, such as the gender dysphoria mod (Curious, 2022).

The suggested project is intended to encourage people to make their own experiences with gender diversity and different sexual orientations. Learners design their Sims to adopt different gender identities and have different sexual orientations. They reflect on and document these experiences illustrated by videos or photos on Instagram under the hashtags #genderexperience #sims4diversitychallenge. Using a fake account created just for the game is encouraged to allow for anonymity and foster openness, but also to protect the players' identities and their personal data.

Overall, learners should be guided as little as possible so that they can make their own individual choices in shaping their experiences. Also, for pedagogical reasons, learners should refrain from being forced to reveal the name of their avatar(s). This would possibly lead to their not trying out certain options or combinations of options out of fear of being ridiculed. This is because the topics addressed can represent a delicate and very personal issue, particularly at this age. At the same time, all learners should have the opportunity to experiment as they wish.

At the beginning of the project, one or more Sims are created. Learners should be encouraged to choose roles and identities that are potentially atypical for them. They then introduce their Sim(s) in a first Instagram post by including the characteristics they chose.

While continuing to play the game, they are encouraged to seek experiences corresponding to their persona and to document observations and emotional responses. This means, for example, that the Sims do things that specifically relate to their gender and/or sexual orientation. This could be a transgender Sim visiting the restroom of the gender they identify with. If the Sim reacts in a negative way to certain experiences, efforts should be made to help them enjoy life again. If necessary, the group can design an observation sheet beforehand or discuss what they will be paying attention to. This may include describing the situation, how the Sim reacted to it (emotional reaction from the Sim's point of view) and why (attempt to explain), and how the

player felt about it (perceiving their own emotional response) and why (self-reflection). In addition, screenshots or screencasts should also be included in the documentation.

After each game session or at certain intervals, the players create Instagram posts about their experiences based on their notes and their screenshots or screencasts. This is done from the perspective of the Sims and under their names.

Periodically, learners explore and interact with Instagram posts posted with the hashtags they have used themselves. These interactions are based on their own points of view and give them an opportunity to practice both empathy and engagement with different identities and points of view.

9. CONCLUSION

To effectively address the complex challenges presented to the 21st-century educational system, this paper proposes a transformative solution which revolves around a paradigmatic shift. This involves strategically utilizing games as an innovative pedagogical approach to promote a sustainable future, fortify democratic principles, and cultivate tolerance within society. Through this novel approach, the educational system can help mitigate the societal distress caused by various factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change repercussions, and threats to democracy, thus fostering a resilient society. Several pertinent examples of games as highlighted in this paper, further elucidate their potential to serve as powerful agents of positive societal change.

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SECTION III

HOW PEOPLE ARE OPPRESSED THROUGH
GAMES, OR IN THE WORLD OF GAMING

File #18



Title: Escaping the Vicious Circle in Women's CS:GO Scene

Subtitle: Tournament Economy and Professional Requirements

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Since 2003, the primary goal of women-only Counter Strike tournaments has been to encourage more women to play competitively. And yet, 20 years later, this goal has not been achieved, despite the efforts of all involved parties. Esports are still perceived as entertainment primarily for young men by most industry stakeholders, and the number of women playing competitively is still relatively small. This paper questions the reasons behind underrepresentation of women in the esports landscape. Our research demonstrates that women are facing a variety of barriers preventing them from integration into the gaming community, thereby drastically reducing the opportunities of professionalization that are available to them. These barriers include unequal treatment and lack of emotional support; internal struggle and community requirements; toxicity of the gaming community; limited competitive opportunities; distorted media representation; insufficient financial means. The study is based on 13 interviews with professional female players specializing in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) from 5 countries and the quantitative analysis of prize pool data. The paper concludes with recommendations for overcoming these barriers, drawn from the interviews with players and experts. In particular, so-called 'safe spaces', the potential of mixed teams and improvement of training conditions are discussed.

Keywords: esports, gender equity, female gaming, CS:GO

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, we concentrate on gender representation in the game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Hidden Path Entertainment & Valve, 2012), which is traditionally masculine-coded (Voorhees & Orlando, 2018). Together with its older versions, *CS:GO* is still one of the most popular esports title in the world. In the last few years, we have observed unprecedented growth of the esports industry in general, as well as increased interest in competitive gaming (Ahn et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2020). At the same time, representation of women in the gaming space has remained comparatively low; one may even suggest that being a woman in a male-dominated field has been burdened with additional challenges (Brehm, 2013; Chan, 2008; Coavoux, 2019; Cote, 2020; Gray, 2014; Kruthika, 2020; Madden et al., 2021; Paaßen et al., 2017; Ratan et al., 2015; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Tomkinson & Harper, 2015). Despite thorough documentation of such challenges by researchers and game journalists, underrepresentation of women in the competitive gaming environment remains out of sight of corporate policies in gaming companies and esports organizations, which rarely go beyond motivational posts on social media e.g. to celebrate International Women's Day.

The historical perspective reveals possibilities for more equal representation: women in *CS:GO* have just as long a history as *Counter Strike* in general (see e.g. Carpenter, 2019; Sveningsson, 2012; Zaremba, 2012). First women's *Counter-Strike* tournaments with monetary prize pools started to pop up as early as at the beginning of the 2000s. They were traditionally held as a part of major international esports events such as *DreamHack*. When the esports disciplines and scenes were still newborn, the level of skills appeared to be not that different between men and women; still, it was decided to create special women-only events in order to encourage women to compete within a safe space. Tournaments' prize pools, however, were different for men (general) and all-women events. The prize pool of the Electronic Sports World Cup, for instance, one of the first world championships where women's and men's teams had their own competitions, for men, reached \$100,000, whereas, for women competing on a separate scene, it consisted of \$6,000 (*Esports Earnings*, 2012). This disproportion remained in the following years and is best observed within the Copenhagen Games Tournaments that were taking place in 2013–2019. The overall prizes collected by men's *CS:GO* squads during this

series were more than \$394,000 while women teams made \$103,730 (ibid.).

The community traditionally describes this difference in prize pools in terms of skill differentials, thereby justifying it: allegedly, women don't play as well as men (Sveningsson, 2012; Siuttila & Havaste, 2019), therefore the prize pools they compete for are lower proportionately to the difference in skill. One may find this argument difficult to argue with, given the impossibility of measurement, or even unambiguous definition, of individual professionalism and skills in a multiplayer competitive team game. As it is well known amongst players themselves, in-team communication and synergy must be taken into account, as well as the skills of the opposing team.

Due largely to unwelcoming public reception, all-female teams rarely compete with all-male teams in public, and when they do, they usually demonstrate lower results. However, if one looks at the average scores of female and male players who competed in roughly equivalent tournaments, it becomes much more difficult to justify the difference between prize pools. According to in-game statistics, professional female players are only 7% behind professional male players in terms of skill-related metrics (see e.g. Brandstrup, 2022; Williams, 2022), and women at large.

If it is not for the difference in in-game skills, then what are the reasons for the pay gap in esports? In search for an answer, we looked at this question from three dimensions:

Q1: How exactly are different groups of players represented in the esports ecosystem?

Q2: Which economic factors contribute to diminishing opportunities of professionalization that are available to women in esports?

Q3: What is the value of female gamers in the attention economy of the esports industry?

2. THE ECONOMY OF ESPORTS

The economy of esports is an attention-based economy: the value in it is derived from commodification of its spectators. In her study of platform economies of attention in media, Merja Myllylahti defines attention as "a scarce and fluid commodity which carries monetary value; is based on individual user interaction which can be harvested, measured, and exchanged for revenue on a platform, on a news site, or an online site" (Myllylahti, 2018, p. 568). Myllylahti highlights three dimensions of profiling attention in media: it is scarce and fluid, it can be measured, and it can be monetized. Social media represent the most technologically advanced sector of attention economy, and esports stand out as a specific field with its own field-specific microeconomy shaped by culture-specific relations of power.

The ecosystem of esports **is** centered around major international tournaments and leagues, rather than particular technological platforms. The core processes of value creation also take place at tournaments: "the value of an esports game is only fully realized when it is played in tournament contexts" (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p. 1453). In this ecosystem, leagues and tournaments are "entities that provide the infrastructure, promotion, and organization for professional players or streamers to compete in a structured esports environment" (Ahn et al., 2020). *ESL* (formerly known as *Electronic Sports League*) may be one of the largest and the oldest actors of such kind, especially on the *CS:GO* scene. At the same time, the economy of esports includes individuals who successfully monetize their personal brands at the same scene, such as game streamers. Due to many actors of various scale (described in detail in Johnson & Woodcock, 2021), the infrastructure of esports is hybrid and fragmented, but its main value flows follow digital content consumption, in other words, paying attention to said content.

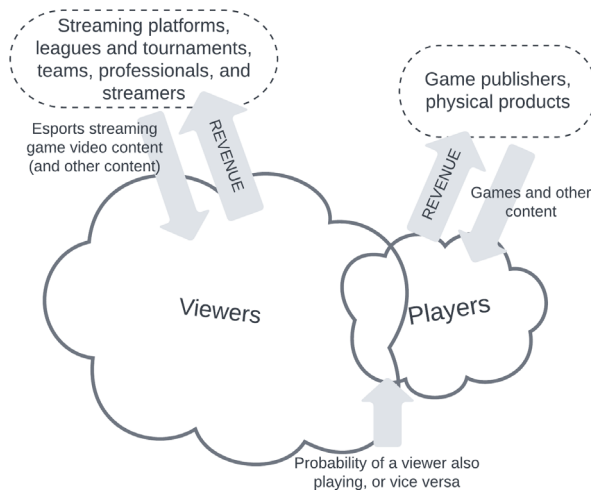


Figure 1. Esports economy value flows model, adapted from Ahn et al. (2020)

In order to capture, measure and monetize attention of esports spectators, the material infrastructure of esports relies on several platforms, such as specialized esports streaming platforms (most importantly, Twitch), general purpose streaming platforms such as YouTube, and even more traditional TV broadcasting in its latest digitized forms. In order to sustain itself, the economy of esports utilizes many different forms of partnerships with advertisers and other interested parties, from traditional physical merchandise and banner ads and product placements, to metaverse and NFT offerings.

One notable form of partnership is influencer marketing, enabled by turning professional esports players into 'microcelebrities'.

In terms of broader marketing studies, Bettina Cornwall and Helen Katz define an influencer as "a persona (related to a person, group of people, or organization) that possesses greater than average potential to sway others in terms of thoughts, attitudes and behaviors due to attributes of their communication frequency, persuasiveness, social network or other characteristics" (Cornwell & Katz, 2020, p. 7). In the

context of esports, teams, individual players, and streamers "showcase, use, or otherwise promote the sponsored product, encouraging their audience to purchase this good and imitate their particular style" (Ahn et al., 2020), for which they receive monetary compensation according to the conditions of their partnership deals. These conditions are individually tailored and rarely disclosed, which is different from algorithmic advertising on more technologically advanced, but also more centralized, social media platforms.

As an affective economy, the economy of esports is often driven by 'star power' and unique personas. Famous esports players become celebrities in their own right, which results in more lucrative deals with advertisers. *CS:GO* in particular offers many cases of such partnerships: a detailed analysis of one such case of the (male) *CS:GO* star *summit1g* from the marketing perspective is provided in Cornwall and Katz (Cornwell & Katz, 2020, pp. 32-33). This 'star power' is earned by exceptionally high performance in championships, which are the arenas for spectators to gather. The competitive nature of esports provides the grounds for economic valuation of top players: they deserve substantial financial compensation because of their extraordinary gaming skills. This is how meritocracy in esports is established; it is inspirational for many and enriching for the selected few. The question of fair valuation, though, brings back the concerns regarding fairness of relationship between skill, popularity, and economic compensation, which is most obviously unfair in the case of minorities and disadvantaged populations, such as women in competitive *CS:GO*. Their skills are almost never matched with equal popularity and, consequently, economic gains, in the established economy of attention. This corresponds to the deficiencies in meritocratic valuation found in society in general, especially in the USA (Reynolds & Xian, 2014). Moreover, Emilio Castilla and Stephan Bernard demonstrate that "hidden risks behind the adoption of ostensibly meritocratic practices" include exacerbation of gender and racial disparities in organizations (Castilla & Bernard, 2010). This can also be said about esports organizations.

To reiterate, streaming serves as the main channel of advertising sponsored content, and esports themselves, to the public. It offers unique forms of individual and collective participation in a spectacular event. In our

case, *CS:GO* appeared to be particularly enjoyable for streaming and watching, which contributed to its success as an esports title (Witkowski, 2019). At the same time, streaming places additional expectations on female players, who often find themselves either sexualized or tokenized (see e.g. Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). If we look at a typical case of a male *CS:GO* celebrity player and the variety of deals and sponsorships that he can enjoy, we may notice several aspects of such deals that too often limit access of female players to the opportunity of sponsorship. Most importantly, a professional male gamer represents a rather broad demographic profile to advertisers: "His persona is 'adult-rated' but that of a normal guy who likes to game" (Cornwell & Katz, 2020, p. 33). Due to this mass appeal, the *CS:GO* player *summitlg* has stroked deals with such big brands as "Monster energy drinks, Corsair gaming peripherals and hardware, Audio-Technica headphones, and CyberPower computers for gaming" (Cornwell & Katz, 2020, p. 32). At the same time, in the eyes of these brands, a female gamer who has achieved a comparable level of skill would represent a niche audience which would provide only a fraction of public attention that *summitlg* enjoys. The number of fans who want to imitate the style of a female pro gamer would also be lower, and they would more likely be interested in different products and brands. Such partnerships are possible and mutually beneficial, and they constitute a crucial part of esports economies in the disciplines and local scenes that attract more women (or, to be precise, do not push them away to the same extent).

3. DATA AND FINDINGS

The scope of the project is concentrated on the female *CS:GO* competitive scene. Firstly, *Counter-Strike* is one of the most popular competitive esports disciplines: the scene is constantly active and the player base continues to grow. Women are visible in the *CS:GO* scene and sometimes compete on par with men players, and regarding all mentioned above, some of the most heated debates on women's representation in esports revolves around the women's *CS:GO* scene. Compared to other esports titles there were a number of all-women tournaments held for the past 20 years, and when the ESL Impact League with the unprecedented prize pool of \$500,000 was announced, the number of women rosters in *CS:GO* has increased. Besides *Valorant* by Riot Games, which came up in 2020, *CS:GO* is probably the title where women professional players have the largest footprint.

This study has been conducted in partnership with EX CORP., a Cyprus-based company developing technological solutions in the competitive gaming market specialising in CS:GO. Together we explored experiences of female professional gamers, in order to find the best way to support them on the path of their chosen career. For this purpose, we conducted a series of 13 focused semi-structured interviews with female professional players and ex-professional players from Brazil, Canada, Russia, Ukraine and the US. We also talked with male esports analysts and women who work in esports but had not considered taking a professional esports athlete path, in order to be informed about the full range of opinions on the subject matter. The initial results regarding gender-specific societal barriers and obstacles have been presented in the earlier article (Balakina et al., 2022). This paper presents a more general perspective, specifically on economic aspects of women's participation in the CS:GO esports scene, and integrates it with the additional information obtained from experts and quantitative data.

Semi-structured interviews all went along the same guide that covered a variety of questions, from the beginning, peak and sometimes end of a professional career, to such questions as the first contract and/or salary and later sources of income, especially in comparison to the scene in general. Coming back to our research questions for this particular paper - in one form or another, they were also included in the interview guides that we have used.

Finally, we analyzed the prize pool data from the prize earnings calculations resource esportsearnings.com (*Esports Earnings*, 2012). The results of this quantitative analysis complement our qualitative findings, as presented below. The data was obtained from the website at the end of 2021 and manually labeled according to the assumed gender of players based on their in-game names and other information from open sources. This is how we obtained information about 13,716 CS:GO players who have won any prize money in competitions from the beginning of their history known to the database contributors to May 19, 2021, when the data was collected. Only 359 of them are women, which means that women represent only 2.6% of all such players. Even though the *Esports Earnings* resource is not a completely accurate source of data, since it is moderated by the community, which makes it likely to lack data on some tournaments and players, - in the absence of other sources, we deem the data on the

resource as sufficiently representative and complete. According to the data from 2016 NewZoo research, the distribution of players in CS:GO was roughly 78% men and 22% women (U.S., Germany, France, U.K.), which has changed to 78% men, 20% women and 2% gender non-conforming people in 2022 (Pilipovic, 2022). These findings lead us to the first observation: the share of girls and women within the gaming space who make just any monetary income from playing CS:GO may be up to 10 times smaller than the supposed share of casual female CS:GO players. While it is understandable that CS:GO does not have mass appeal for female audiences, the relatively small community of dedicated female players has up to 10x chances to make playing CS:GO their profession than male players.

Furthermore, it is possible to compare female and male players' earnings by the relative level of the player's earnings. As it can be seen from *Figure 2*, half of the entire distribution of female players (approximately 180 data points) lies in the range between \$2,54 and \$2299.8, while half of the male players distribution (more than 6,500 data points) lies between \$0,32 and \$1000. That means that the remaining 6,500 male players earned between \$1001 and \$1908781, and the rest of women players (also approximately 180 individuals) has earned sums ranging from \$6000 to \$53431,5 per year. The gap between total earnings is even higher: according to the available data, women players earned \$1 292 817,13 in total, while men players earned 86 times more, \$111 695 309,8.

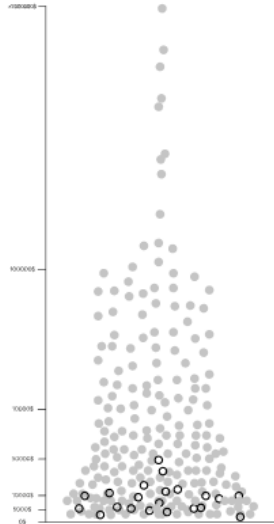


Figure 2. Distribution of earnings for male (grey dots) and female (white dots) players, according to *Esports Earnings*

4. THE CONTEXT: FEMALE-ONLY TOURNAMENTS

Female-only CS:GO tournaments have been held since at least the early 2000s (see e.g. Carpenter, 2019). They were initially organized to help female gamers compete while remaining in their comfort zone. The goal was to foster self-confidence in women gamers, and support them financially while practicing to overcome the skill gap. Initially, these tournaments served as a starting ground where women could gain competitive skills without the added pressure from the gaming community, with the goal to eventually compete on par with men. Five major leagues and tournaments have been in the center of the female CS:GO ecosystem, although their roles, impact, and underlying power relationships have changed significantly after 2020.

ESL Impact League. The league has been formed as a part of #GGFORALL campaign (ESL, 2022). This series of tournaments includes online tournaments that go on throughout the year (Cash Cups played on ESEA platform) as well as local LAN tournaments. The overall prize pool is set at \$500,000 per year-long season.

World Electronic Sports Games (WESG) Female was introduced in 2017 as a part of the main WESG event owned by the Chinese company Alibaba Sports (*World Electronic Sports Games*, 2019). This female tournament was known for its relatively large prize funds—WESG 2017 Female—which amounted to \$170,000. However, it was discontinued after 2019 due to the pandemic.

DreamHack Showdown incorporated a series of female *CS:GO* tournaments held in 2019 and 2020. This may have been the most well-known female tournament due to its integration with the major event DreamHack Open and its big prize fund, which amounted to \$100,000 in 2019 (*DreamHack Showdown*, 2019).

Intel Challenge. Last held in 2019; the prize fund stood at \$50,000 (ESL, 2019).

Copenhagen Games Female. Last held in 2019; the largest prize pool amounted to \$30,000 (EGW, 2019).

A number of female-only competitions of a smaller scale were held by the Ambush Esport, a Danish semi-pro esports organisation that hosted male and female *CS:GO* events. As of 2023, Ambush has been acquired by Preasy (Preasy, 2023). At the same time, the GIRLGAMER Esports Festival, the event dedicated entirely to women in esports, continues to hold *CS:GO* tournaments (*GIRLGAMER Esports Festival*, 2023). Speaking of South America, there are two regional leagues: Gamers Club Liga Femenina and Grrrls League. Compared to the scenes in North America and Europe, the *CS:GO* scene in Brazil continues to grow, most importantly, in terms of the audience of *CS:GO* events in Latin America. In addition to female-only tournaments, women's squads regularly participate in tournaments that are open to all, which are held on ESEA and FACEIT. This is in line with the circuit of value circulation in attention economies and esports in particular: increase in viewers, some of whom also convert to players, results in revenue growth for all interested parties (see *Figure 1*).

With all that said, it is unsurprising that, according to our interviews, female professional *CS:GO* players are primarily motivated by achievements and self-actualization, rather than monetary incentives, which are rare and insufficient.

These are ambitions, the desire to be the first. That is what gathered people in the team. Desire of recognition, not money. [Participant 4]

These ambitions encourage female players to concentrate on their esports career for a long enough time to achieve certain success on the scene, even when playing CS:GO does not pay off monetarily. However, in a longer-term perspective, the lack of earnings becomes a demotivating factor that contributes to the decision to leave professional gaming or career change, as well as the overall burnout.

At the beginning of the career, when you just start playing, you never think of how much you're going to earn. That's how it was in my case. I can't speak for those who do this now, but when I started playing I didn't care at all. And the prize money... I was in it for the prestige, how high I climb, how many tournaments I could win - I thought about these things only. ... Female CS has never had any serious prize money, you earn peanuts there. It wasn't the money that drove me to play, I was driven by the idea. I played because I wanted to, because I hadn't fulfilled my dream yet. At one point, later, I did start playing for money, because there was no other way to make a living. [Participant 3]

As a result, women players can't concentrate exclusively on gaming and thus are unable to acquire skills necessary for succeeding in esports as fast as their male counterparts. Almost all of our participants named the economic factor as the most important, or, at least, mentioned the glaring discrepancy between men and women in everything related to contracts, partnerships, and earnings.

Most male pros can quit university and dedicate themselves to their gaming career, while females can not afford this. Women can't do this because they can't make a living by playing. They need a job, a salary, because gaming yields no liveable income. [Participant 12]

5. CONSTANT STRUGGLE AND LIMITED COMPETITIVE OPPORTUNITIES

Our interviews with game experts and professional female players have all pointed at the severe lack of earning opportunities for women gamers in particular (with somewhat mild exception of Brazil). Despite some progress in some

particular sectors, the names of female professional *CS:GO* players are still hardly noticeable at tournaments with the largest prize pools. Beyond the 'big five' listed above - of which many tournaments have been discontinued as for now - smaller and semi-professional female-only tournaments rarely brings the team more than \$1,000. Given that even such small tournaments are scarce and irregular, female esports professionals have a hard time staying focused on their gaming career and practicing.

In North America, we have barely anything. There's been one lan, two lans in the... in like all of my career, that I know of. One of them was ESWC Montreal in like 2014 or 15 or something. And then the other one was a charity game. And it was just one show match. And then we've had nothing in North America, no tournaments, no lans, nothing. When COVID hit, DreamHack actually gave us a DreamHack Showdown Summer and Winter. <...> I think, if there were more opportunities in North America, you would probably see more North American women playing, you'd probably see more tournaments. And we've had like two or three, maybe four teams tops, in North America ever. [Participant 6]

Another problem that came up in almost all interviews was stagnation of the women's scene in general. The interviews were taken throughout 2021, and their mood was affected by the pandemic, but the problem pertained in the following years, which can be seen from the subsection above.

Yes, certainly, one day they will close the gap. Eventually... and maybe never. Maybe in 10 years Counter-Strike will die and no one will care about it. A new game might come that everyone will have to learn to play from scratch. Then perhaps there will be no need for this division between men and women. Now they are just at different levels. It's not realistic for women, they just won't survive. If you remove it now, they just won't make it at the pro level, no way. [Participant 3]

In the meantime, several leading female teams have gained enough experience and recognition to consistently win at major tournaments. Even though there was a number of initiatives for less experienced and semi-professional teams, such as ESL Impact, most tournaments are dominated by the same teams or the same players, even despite temporal growth in the number of female teams.

There is no variety. It is the same teams all the time, yes. And women, I remember, 50 or 35 teams registered at

DreamHack Showdown. Well, in general, this number is very small, although for us (women) that's a lot. Well, the numbers, the results are the same all the time, very consistent. ... When LAN tournaments were still possible, some things could vary, but now during the lockdown, it's all stale I think. ... Right now everything is very stable. [Participant 5]

Due to societal barriers already described in previous research (Balakina et al., 2022; Darvin et al., 2020; Madden et al., 2021; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Witkowski, 2018), only a limited number of women players even try to compete in mixed-gender tournaments, as there are not enough women-only tournaments to make a living. Still, perceived lack of skill, often due to relatively less practice, prevents women from realizing their full potential in mixed teams. The attitude to mixed teams among our interviewees was also mixed: some highlighted the importance of training together with men, and playing against men, while others stressed that is still crucial for women to have an opportunity to compete with each other only.

Why try to stick your nose in male esports if over so many years no one has managed to defeat even any of the weak male squads, even a tier 3 team? Why go there if you can do something among yourselves. It would result in some activity and the skill level could still improve due to the increased activity of female players. It's just a mechanism waiting to be kickstarted. You play more, you gain confidence and experience. You come up with new stuff after playing a new time. You grow as a player. [Participant 8]

In general, female players agree that it is vital for women to integrate into the *CS:GO* scene, but now they are not ready to compete with men or even join mixed teams. Furthermore, their chances are limited by decrease in the number of women-only tournaments, which initial goal has been to encourage women players to compete with men players on general terms. This ecosystem of uneven opportunities suggests that female players are valued less than male players in the esports economy of attention.

6. QUALITY OF ATTENTION AND VALUE OF PLAYERS

In the meantime, the esports community keeps doubting that female-only tournaments are necessary. Efforts to introduce female players into the male-dominated environment that

began a few ago largely failed: instead of genuinely supporting women, they tried to exploit the image of a 'girl gamer' in the geek-masculine environment.

One particularly telling illustration of the distorted media representation of women in esports can be found in the 2008 MTV reality-show *Play Us*. It followed an all-female CS 1.6 team *Les Seules* who competed in mainstream, mixed-gender tournaments. Throughout its 10 episodes shot in different world cities (NYC, London, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong etc.), team members engaged in many different activities completely unrelated to esports, walking down the red carpet and skydiving instead of training to compete (Carpenter, 2019). Thus, like in traditional competitive sports during its early stages, women are assigned a secondary, almost 'decorative' role (N. Taylor et al., 2009). An even more radical illustration of this would be the legendary 2009 CS 1.6 match between *Virtus.pro* and *forZe*, to which strippers were invited to make it harder for the men to win by 'distracting' them from the game' (trinixy.ru, 2009).

On the other hand, female players are not always entirely excluded from the competitive context, but their inclusion is strictly circumscribed and limited to their gender and external appearance (Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018).

Most guys, when they see a girl, instantly conclude that she plays badly. Even if she's actually a good player, it's not enough for guys. If a guy and a girl of an equal skill make a mistake in-game, it's okay for the guy, it happens, but in case with the girl, she would do it "because she's a girl", and not because even top tier players sometimes make mistakes. Youtube has lots of fail montages from female tournaments. Why point it out specifically, if any tournament has tons of mistakes. [Participant 10]

Similarly, online discussions of women's participation in competitive gaming are always either ironic, or aggressively sexualized. Gender and appearance remain the most important evaluation criteria of women players' performance (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018), along with the a priori assumption that she is 'just not good enough' (Fousek Křobová & Švelch, 2023; Siuttila & Havaste, 2019). In reality, the myth of men being superior to women in terms of skill and gaming performance by their birthright has already been debunked on multiple occasions (Ratan et al., 2015; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018; Shen et al., 2016).

I remember I used to play with this one stack with guys on a regular basis. And I played really well. I had good games, many good games with them. I was one of the best in terms of frags and by many other parameters. We spent a lot of time together, we were friends. I asked one guy: "Would you play with me on the same team?" He said no. I asked why, and he said: "I don't want to play in a team with girls at all". I mean, that was his answer. [Participant 5]

The critique towards the group victimized by stereotypes also affects their self-confidence negatively. This low opinion of females' gaming performance has a negative impact on their confidence and, consequently reduces their chances of disproving the stereotype according to which "women play worse" (Shen et al., 2016).

I am a good female player, I can call myself that, but I still got called terrible names, they seemed determined to do it. And, of course, the more negative stuff you hear, the worse you perform. And you can't do anything with it, it's a vicious circle - you overthink about not making mistakes and you play worse and worse. As a result, you're missing every shot, you get outmatched by a glock, and naturally... others get more incentives to shit on you. [Participant 5]

These prejudices significantly limit women's opportunities for active participation in the gaming scene. On the one hand, men believe that women are incompetent in all things gaming, while women avoid gaming communities because of the latter's hostility. As a result, women's access to gaming communities is very limited, which, in turn, severely limits their opportunities to acquire and hone in-game skills (M. C. Taylor, 2008).

Another reason is that, as I believe, it's hard to imagine that a male team could pay attention to the female scene and view women as teammates, even potentially assess them as equal members of their squad. [Participant 11]

Over time, this pattern results in the lack of role models and success stories that could appeal to women and young girls and make them more confident in their abilities and skills required to succeed in the geek-masculine environment (Good et al., 2010). On the one hand, the lack of visible women esports players strengthens men's confidence that there are only a few competent female players. On the other hand, not being able to see appealing role models, women and young girls willing to join the gaming community can't refer

to other women's success and ask them for support (Nooney, 2013).

If you constantly promote a female team in the media, show their daily routine, show them playing.. It helps other females play, it promotes investment from different organizations. If a team wins an international competition and everyone follows it, it's a boost to the game's visibility, as well as for that of the brand sponsoring it. [Participant 11]

Many of our interviews also suggest that the media play an outsized role in constructing the images of successful women. The amount of news devoted to women in esports media is very low, and the attention that is paid to such news is colored as sexual or shadenfreude, especially when coming from male viewers. As a result, a vicious circle emerges: the community does not know about women players, the media catering to the community are not interested in creating more content about women, which, in turn, reinforces the lack of interest on the part of the community.

We as news editors rarely covered anything on this topic because, first of all, there isn't much to cover, secondly, because it's not a very interesting topic. I could put together a piece of news on a female pro, but I know nobody would read it, you get way more clicks, views, reads if you write about something popular, that's obvious. If you're taking some unpopular topics you must be ready in advance to have a small number of views, that will prevent you from meeting your KPI and so on. [Participant 2]

At the same time we played on a similar level and there was no mention of us, even when we won WESG, because no one knew us or something.. It's like we don't exist, and no one is interested in covering the scene. [Participant 8]

I guess from an outsider's perspective, when you look for some materials on women in esports, for work, you have very few of them. There are some English sources, but it feels like it's a thing in its own, for hardcore fans of it. <...> It seems like there are some dedicated sites that have this sort of content, but you have to work really hard to find them. [Participant 2]

Besides the limited amount of information about women in esports, its form is also problematic. As one of our interviewees suggests:

What do the media love to write about? Mostly about women being worse than men (laughs), or some tournaments being held. We have very few tournaments, so the topics like "why women play worse than men do and why women are so helpless in the game" - sort of plays the leading role. Well, yeah, when there is something to write about, they do it, when there is not - what should they write about?.. [Participant 5]

On the one hand, when women are portrayed as 'fighters for feminism', their achievements are described in connection with 'feminine' attributes: for example, these women's 'beauty' is strongly emphasized. On the other hand, the media use gender differences strategically, in order to represent women in a way that is more appealing to the audience: that is, by emphasizing their 'masculine' traits. As a result, even when the discourse aims at changing the gender order, women remain under pressure of gender expectations (Kivijärvi & Sintonen, 2021).

The media ask more questions, show more interest towards the male scene. Female scene gets less interest, and it's expressed differently. There is a question that I think they should stop asking, and yet they always do: "How does it feel, being a woman in esports?" I hate it more than anything! We should get new questions, change the mindset of the media, ask something else, but not this question. I think there is a difference in how the media cover it (the two scenes). [Participant 12]

But when there was this post about me becoming a team manager... I think there was an announcement on one of the Russian esports sites, and my first picture was in a swimsuit. Even though, if you open my Instagram, you'll have to look for a single picture of me in a swimsuit, which was taken about a year and a half back. But they took this picture out of all other pictures and put it first. Of course, visualisation works: you open the article and you already have this attitude towards girls [Participant 13]

7. POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

The ecosystem of esports is expected to self-regulate by providing economic opportunities to players according to their level of skill. However, fairness of meritocracy has been actively debated in recent years (Castilla & Bernard, 2010; Reynolds & Xian, 2014; Siuttila & Havaste, 2019), as we have shown above. In the case of esports, the quantitative evidence discussed earlier in this section makes it clear

that an entire group of players does not have a place it deserves in a multi-billion industry for no good reason. Similar situations exist in many other fields, such as the IT industry, STEM research, and others (e.g. Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010).

During interviews, we have asked women pro-gamers a few projective questions, such as: «What would you do for women's support if you had all the money in the world?». Particular suggestions were different, but all of them can be grouped into several categories:

- Providing necessary tools - organization of educational resources and services free and accessible to every woman in competitive gaming developed in two directions:
 - (A) Mentoring and psychological support;
 - (B) Educational opportunities for developing in-game skills.
- Building infrastructure - support for women's teams at a level not different from that of men's teams in terms of infrastructure and opportunities provided to ensure equal access to resources (equipment, salary payments, etc.).
- Tournament organization - organization of regular (yearly, monthly) all-women tournaments and leagues throughout the esports season, in which consistency is more important than the amount of the prize.
- Sufficient media coverage - provision of media support for women's tournaments, including regular broadcasts of matches and publication of materials about women players in the context of their professional activities.

When analyzing the responses, we also found that there is no consistency in the opinions of female players about what is required in order to take the female scene to a new level. On the one hand, this tells us that the implementation of a whole range of measures and actions in different directions

is required. On the other hand, we understand that barriers and priorities are different for each of the female players. As we see it, the most problematic thing is that none of the informants spoke about the need for collaborative actions when dealing with the issue and the joint efforts of the industry's stakeholders.

We also asked informants to name initiatives aimed at supporting women in the industry. The only projects that have been named are the *ESL Impact campaign* (#GGFORALL) mentioned earlier, *AnyKey* and *SheIs* (closed), as well as several community groups (no specific names) on Facebook, Discord, vkontakte and Steam.

We suggest that if we were talking to female players who are at earlier stages of the career trajectory or with women who occupy positions in other areas of the gaming industry, it is likely that the variability of answers and the number of initiatives mentioned would be different. However, despite this assumption, and along with this, the existence of relatively well-known programs to support women in esports, the inability of the respondents to name or recall examples of such programs suggests that it is possible that current projects and initiatives do not reach their audience.

We also attempted to analyze a wide range of initiatives dedicated to the promotion of women's ability to be a part of the competitive gaming space, such as *Women in Games International (WIGI)*, *Women in Games*, *The GameHERs*, *DotaValkyries* and others. We believe that to truly succeed in terms of achieving a long-standing goal of empowering women in esports and helping them reach places on top of the tournament tables, it is vital to deal with the following issues.

- (1) Lack of integration and connectedness between the projects in the sphere;
- (2) Lack of time consistency within one project;
- (3) Absence of thoroughly described goals and results;
- (4) Lack of visibility of the efforts (despite a few initiatives launched by the game publishers) due to both an internal intention (in order to keep the attempts within the

safe space) and lack of interest from the outside of the women's community.

Of course, it does not mean that we criticize these great and valuable projects just for the sake of criticism. Most crucially, we need a healthy esports ecosystem, in which "there are enough players potentially interested in viewing play at the highest levels and aspiring to those levels themselves" (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021, p. 1458). We believe that this state of things can only be achieved through joint action, sharing the results of one project, whether it succeeds or not, and a constant dialogue with all parties involved. In such a manner, we can find a convergence point of interest on which to focus in the future - whether these will be tournaments, educational resources, psychological support groups, sponsorship of women's squads, or something completely different.

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File #19



Title: Taking it Public

Subtitle: Walking the fine Ethical Line of Game Regulation

Author(s): Nils Bühler

Like other media, digital games are regulated, banned, monitored and rated by authorities around the world. The question is, however, how far such measures can go before they might be considered instruments of oppression, even when they intent to protect minors, provide public safety, or enforce personal rights. Taking Germany as a case study, this paper aims to reinvigorate the debate on game regulation by discussing the fine ethical line of game regulation from a position where the sentiment of general aggression-inducing effects of digital games has given way to more nuanced views. The current game regulation landscape in the EU is shortly explored in order to argue why Germany is a valuable case study, to then discuss the legitimacy and ethicality of its regulation. Finally, the paper discusses ethical considerations that result from postmodernist perspectives on game regulation and proposes ideas for future exploration.

Keywords: game regulation, censorship, ethics, political philosophy

1. INTRODUCTION

Like other media, digital games are regulated, banned, monitored and rated by authorities around the world. The question is, however, how far such measures can go before they might be considered instruments of oppression, even when they intent to protect minors, provide public safety,

or enforce personal rights. This question has been a hot topic in censorship and surveillance studies for centuries. But with the advent of digital games some 40 years ago, the question was raised anew. Reading about a murder or watching a gruesome film was considered bad enough by some – but acting out illegal or undesirable behaviour in a game seemed to have an even more serious quality.¹ Because they required the player to be active, games seemed more persuasive, more dangerous, and therefore, in many people's eyes, should be under stricter control than less interactive media. Digital games are no longer under this general suspicion, and the moral panic of the early days of digital gaming has subsided. However, many laws from that era are still in place.

This paper aims to reinvigorate the debate on game regulation by discussing the fine ethical line of game regulation from a position where the sentiment of general aggression-inducing effects of digital games has given way to more nuanced views. It is hoped that game regulation can now be debated with a breath of fresh air, focusing not so much on alleged causal relationships between game and player, but on the actual political dimensions of games and play. The paper first takes a cursory look at the current landscape of game regulation in Europe, in order to get an idea of how the ethics of game regulation are approached today and to argue that Germany is a valuable case study for the topic at hand. The second chapter explores this case study to discuss the difference between the ethics and the legitimacy of game regulation, also taking into account the implications of calling these measures 'censorship'. Lastly, the paper identifies ethical challenges that result from postmodernist perspectives on game regulation, and finally suggests ideas for further investigation.

2. CURRENT GAME REGULATION IN THE EU WITH A FOCUS ON GERMANY

Game regulation in the EU has largely been privatised. Although in some regions the courts can ban games or at

¹ That interactive media are more persuasive or are more likely to alter behaviour has been theorised by many (cf. Carnagey and Anderson 2004). However, as Adrienne Shaw has aptly shown, there is no deterministic relationship between a medium and its effect but a rather contingent one that is highly dependent on cultural context (Shaw 2017).

least restrict their distribution, the main means of regulating games remain in the hands of the industry itself. Since 2003, the *Pan-European Game Information* (PEGI) has been issuing labels for console and computer games in 39 countries within and outside the European Union.² In some areas, a PEGI rating is mandatory for market access, such as in the Netherlands and some parts of Austria.³ However, most of Europe has a liberal approach to game regulation. There, the PEGI labels are merely recommendations, a form of 'soft' governance that relies on self-regulation by users or their parents. Systems like PEGI promise a win-win-win situation: users are free to make their own media choices while receiving moral guidance; publishers are not censored by the state but set their own standards; and the state does not have to take a moral stand. In countries where a PEGI rating is mandatory, the principle of subsidiarity also allows the state to claim moral responsibility without being involved in the process of moral judgement.

In many respects, Germany is a less liberal outlier when it comes to the regulation of games (and other media) in the EU. The Criminal Code is quite strict and allows for a ban on a game; instead of PEGI, the *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle* (USK; 'Self-regulation of the Entertainment Software Industry') provides binding age ratings; and for cases that are not quite of interest to the courts, but are considered too harmful to simply be sold freely, there is the *Prüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien* (PjM; 'Review Board for Youth Corrupting Publications') at the *Bundeszentrale für Kinder- und Jugendmedienschutz* (BZKJ; 'Federal Centre for the Protection of Minors in the Media'), which maintains an 'index' of media prohibited for all minors. All three measures are backed by heavy fines and

² The countries that adopt the PEGI system are "Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine and the United Kingdom" (PEGI n.d.a).

³ In the Netherlands, § 240a of the criminal code prohibits the sale of media to people under the age of 16 if they are considered to be harmful to this audience. A label is therefore effectively binding, and PEGI provides legally accepted labels (see Kijkwijzer, n.d.). In the Austrian states of Vienna and Kärnten, a PEGI label is mandatory for games in order to be sold (see Bundesregierung, 2023)

even imprisonment (§§ 86, 130, 130a, 131, 184, 184a, 184b, 184c StGB; §§ 27 f. JuSchG). The basic principle is that games are generally prohibited for minors with the reservation of permission ('Jugendverbot mit Erlaubnisvorbehalt').

This rather complicated status quo is the result of a series of hesitant reforms of the law for the protection of minors and the insistence of legislators and authorities on disproved hypotheses of media effects (cf. e.g., Husemann 2022; Portz 2013). This makes Germany a rich source of case studies for pondering how and whether the regulation of games can find an ethical basis. Between the courts, the BZKJ and the USK, there are three different approaches to the regulation of games in Germany: a judicial, an authoritarian and a (more or less) liberal one.

To release a game in Germany, a publisher must first submit it to the USK for classification.⁴ The USK is structured very similarly to PEGI, with both rating games through a review process by panels of experts. The panels deliberate in private and issue (1) an age rating (USK: 0, 6, 12, 16 and 18; PEGI: 3, 7, 12, 16 and 18) and (2) warnings for certain types of content considered to be problematic, such as depictions of violence, drug use, gambling, discrimination, strong language and sex (USK n.d.b; PEGI n.d.b). If a game is deemed to be unsuitable for all groups aged under 18, it does not receive an age rating and is referred to the BZKJ, where a committee of representatives from the federal states, youth protection organisations, the creative industry, education, and religion decide whether the game is to be regarded as a threat to the healthy development of children. If this is the case, the game is either 'indexed', which means that its advertising is banned in addition to the distribution restrictions mentioned above, or it is referred to a court. In the latter case, the game may be banned and confiscated on the basis of the Criminal Code if it is deemed to pose a serious threat to minors, the federal government or one of the federal states, i.e. if it contains propaganda against the constitution,

⁴ Since 2021, websites must also display an age rating (§ 12 JuSchG), but only if a rating already exists. This includes ratings by the International Age Rating Coalition (IARC), which cooperates with the USK (USK n.d.a). The online market is therefore handled somewhat liberally, but is gradually being controlled more strictly.

incitement to sedition, incitement to criminal acts, brutal depictions of violence or certain pornographic depictions (§§ 86, 130, 130a, 131 or 184, 184a, 184b, 184c StGB). The BZKJ and the courts can also be invoked independently of this step-by-step process.

This three-tiered structure of game regulation is a legacy of the 1950s, when the conservative government cracked down on 'pulp and filth' literature – at the time mainly western novels, comics and soft pornography – to protect the younger generation from its supposedly immoral influence (cf. Bühler 2022). The idea was to create three types of literature: (1) 'free', decent literature of reputable authorship and content; (2) youth-corrupting literature, accessible only to adults; and finally (3) indecent literature, banned by the courts and confiscated by the police.⁵ The three tiers were quickly extended to film and later to any form of publication. The 'free' tier is further controlled by self-regulation organisations such as the USK for most media, literature still being the unregulated exception.

3. LEGITIMATE DOES NOT MEAN ETHICAL: GERMANY AS A CASE STUDY

The status quo in Germany was established in a deeply moralistic era.⁶ It has been re-legitimised by a series of youth protection reforms that have made only minor changes and have mostly been the result of moralistic outcries rather than modernisation initiatives. This is particularly true of digital games. In 1985, a new law for the protection of minors was introduced in Germany, which banished arcade machines to gambling halls, regardless of their content, thus limiting their legal use to adults.⁷ Following school shootings in 2003 and 2008, the laws underwent two major revisions, which tightened the regulation of digital games.⁸

⁵ The criminal code encompassed more offences in these days than it does now, mostly pertaining sexual morality. E.g., depictions of homosexuality were outlawed.

⁶ Adenauer's ruling CDU party cultivated close ties to the Cologne bishopric (Mölich 2018), which also exerted considerable influence on media policy (cf. Bühler 2022).

⁷ JÖSchNG from 25 February 1985 (BGBl. Teil 1 1985, 425-430). This law is still in place, although somewhat attenuated (§13 JuSchG).

⁸ Age ratings became obligatory through the reformed JuSchG of 23 July 2002 (BGBl. Teil 1 2002, 2730-2739), which came into effect

Even the most recent amendment to youth protection law in 2021 merely tweaked the existing laws to respond to criticism on a very practical level. The biggest change it brought was to put online distributors on an equal footing with their offline counterparts by requiring them to clearly display age ratings on their products.⁹

As the means of protecting minors in Germany are quite extensive, they are often criticised as censorship. The term is somewhat problematic, as 'censorship' is hardly distinguishable from other forms of media control on an analytical level. It "does not describe a category of conduct, but rather attaches an operative conclusion (ascribes) to a category created on other grounds" (Schauer 1998, 160). While some may see the USK labels as a mere means of protecting minors and the BZKJ as a censorship authority, others may see both - or neither - as institutions of oppression. It is a matter of moral perspective that determines whether media regulation is censorship or not, a fact illustrated by the parliamentary debates on youth protection law, where proponents of a draft law avoid the term while opponents use it (cf. Buchloh 2002; Bühler 2022), the reason being that censorship is generally prohibited by the German constitution.¹⁰

The term censorship can thus be seen as a marker of moral undesirability. It indicates what level of media control is deemed to go too far, on a spectrum that ranges from publishers, websites or librarians selecting texts for distribution, to independent rating agencies, teachers or parenting guides suggesting at what age a medium is suitable for a child, to authorities restricting the use of a medium to protect the rights of the vulnerable. Nevertheless, debates around the protection of minors - and other forms of media control - often seek to operationalise a supposedly objective, rather than normative, argument for and against instances of media control. This cements divisions in the

in 2003, and so-called killer games ('Killerspiele') were banned through an addition to § 18 JuSchG on 24 June 2008 (BGBl. Teil 1 2008, 1075).

⁹ JuSchG from 9 April 2021 (BGBl. Teil 1 2021, 742-749).

¹⁰ In legal terminology, 'censorship' only applies to review processes by state authorities before the release of a publication, which is why legally, there is actually no censorship in Germany. This differentiation, however, neither reflects the ethical implications of media control nor the common use of the word.

debate and naturalises certainties rather than responding to changing and differing attitudes and knowledge. The controversy is usually about whether a form of control is censorship (and thus whether it is immoral), not to what extent and by whom a form of communication should be controlled. Censorship is seen as something absolute, a yes-or-no question, not something debatable.

Meanwhile, morality has lost its absoluteness. When the basic principles of the current system of media control were introduced in Germany in the 1950s, the ultramontane social ethics of the post-war period still provided a fairly stable point of reference for legislation and jurisprudence. The German constitution is a secular one, but it was drafted at a time of crisis for secular moral concepts, which allowed moral conservatism to exert considerable influence. In his seminal introduction to Christian social ethics, Arno Anzenbacher claims that this system of moral rules and its proponents laid the very foundations of the German constitution (1998, 150). This claim is certainly debatable, but the self-confidence of Christian social ethics in relation to the early post-war period has a very real historical basis (Mölich 2018). Since then, the moral compass provided by Christian eschatology, briefly revived in the early Bonn Republic, has faded in importance, and been challenged by other points of moral reference through sexual, social, and technological revolutions. Even the concept of morality as a guarantor of community and ethics itself has been challenged by postmodern theory.

This puts German media regulation in a precarious position. It is legitimate in the sense that it is lawful and based on a repeated democratic mandate; at the same time, its legitimacy depends on the immorality of the medium to be controlled, and this immorality - according to postmodern thought - is contingent. Lacking a central guarantor of morality, media control can only be based on the moral compass of those who decide individual cases. The extent of this contingency became clear when the BZKJ's predecessor, the BPjS, placed an edition of *Josephine Mutzenbacher* on the index in 1984. The novel follows the life of a prostitute in Vienna, beginning with her childhood, when she is subjected to prostitution and sexual abuse. The BPjS argued that the novel contained child pornography because it presented the abuse in a positive light. Backed by the *Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels* ('German Publishers and Booksellers Association'), the book's publisher,

Rowohlt, challenged this assessment all the way to Germany's highest court, arguing that *Josephine Mutzenbacher* is a work of art, as it authentically depicts Viennese dialect and way of life around 1900, and has a rich history of literary reception. The court demanded that the BPjS re-evaluate the book, taking into account its status as a work of art (Barsch 1996). Although the BPjS ultimately upheld its original ruling, the Mutzenbacher case aptly illustrates the ambivalence of the ethics of media control: even the immorality of child pornography can be contested in some cases.

The conflict over how to regulate digital games with violent content from the mid-1980s to the early 2010s featured similarly conflicting assessments. On the one hand, the games were seen as inciting violence and militarism; on the other, players saw them as harmless pastimes and expressions of youth counterculture. Both positions had their arguments, based on legal principles (protection of minors vs. freedom of expression) as well as on scientific evidence, which was as ambivalent as opinion, mostly because it ignored or failed to adequately control for the cultural influence on media effects in its experiments (cf. Shaw 2017; Otto 2008). In the 1980s and 1990s, regulation mostly followed the deterministic understanding of computer game effects. In 2002, the *Counter-Strike* fan community succeeded in keeping the game out of the 'index' and thus legal for sale to minors, thanks to a successful petition led by the gaming magazine *Gamestar* (cf. Husemann 2022, 42-43; BPjM 2002).¹¹ What followed was a tug-of-war between the two positions on media effects, which eventually led to the legal status quo outlined in the previous chapter.

¹¹ The file on this proceeding (BPjM 2002) shows how complicated a negotiation between the two positions in the discourse are. The BPjM (the former BPjS) argued that *Counter-Strike* is indeed to be considered a game that could harm its players - an assessment necessary to not compromise their former rulings on games that similarly featured depictions of violence. *Counter-Strike* was different, they argued further, because it first and foremost is a game of coordination - a concession to the passionate defence of the game's fans. The BPjM thus reached a compromise, but not without demanding that youth protection law be amended to allow for a more differentiated regulation of video games.

4. ISSUES IN THE SEARCH FOR ETHICAL MODELS OF GAME REGULATION

There is no ideal way to deal with the ambivalence in this debate. Media regulation would have to take into account the fact that media effects depend on cultural context, which is hardly achievable. It is simply not possible for a court or an authority such as the BZKJ to determine cultural context, because this would mean undertaking the impossible task of resolving contingency. This begs the question of what basis is left for media regulation if it lacks an objective means of determining the effects of a medium. This concluding chapter provides a cursory overview of the ethical challenges related to this question and proposes initial approaches to possible solutions for future exploration.

A compelling but misguided idea is to stop regulating altogether. Discourse is always governed by rules, both overt and covert, as Michel Foucault's discourse theory has shown. The absence of overt rules by state, moral or even private authority does not mean that there are no rules at all. Ideally, a society should be able to regulate its discourses - especially its political discourses - without the need for sanctions. However, this would presuppose equal positioning within the discourse of all participants, which sounds utopian but is in effect the premise of dystopian homogenisation. It is not surprising that after billionaire Elon Musk imposed his 'free speech absolutism' on Twitter in late 2022, the microblogging service experienced an extensive surge in hate speech (Barrie 2022; Benton et al. 2022). Excluding other voices through vilification justifies one's own voice and - by invoking an imagination of a better community against the one being hated - creates a homogeneous discourse in which speech is 'free' only for those who conform to the standard. Similar mechanisms are at work in other media, be it the formation of news monopolies in unregulated markets, or (to return to games) gaming cultures that foster misogyny, racism, or other hate speech, as well as bullying, verbal abuse, and even physical violence in cases of doxxing.

The 'is it censorship' debate does not lead to better or less oppressed discourse; it simply misses the more pressing political question of how to shape media cultures through democratic processes. In a liberal democracy, the goal should be to allow fair, open, and diverse discourse. It is,

in other words, a question of balancing subjective and objective liberty, where subjective liberty refers to the individual's freedom from government interference, and objective liberty refers to the certainties and goals shared by the community (Böckenförde 1992, 44-46). Both are products of historical processes and often do not coincide. A focus on one of these extremes leads to the law of the jungle or authoritarian homogenisation. Whether a form of game regulation is ethically sound is therefore neither objectively nor subjectively determinable.

The current processes of game regulation can indeed be understood as attempts to dealing with this dilemma. The law or the rules set and enforced by a private regulatory body provide a framework of values, and the court or board members provide their subjective perspective. Both objective and subjective liberties are accounted for. However, the requirements for membership of gaming regulatory bodies render these approaches problematic. The authorities appoint representatives from government bodies, expert groups such as education and psychology, the creative industries, and moral authorities such as churches. If a case goes to court, similar experts might be called upon, although this is not always the case. The idea in both processes is that the experts offer a pluralistic perspective. However, if neither the ethics nor the effects of a game can be objectively determined without taking into account the ever-changing contexts of the game, even the most pluralistic panel will not be able to come to a definitive, apolitical conclusion.¹²

It is, of course, because of the ever-changing contexts of play that the current approach to game regulation is doomed to miss its goal. No matter how finely media effects research calibrates its methods, no matter how many different voices are included in a rating board - how games are perceived by their users and what harm a game causes will always vary considerably from one use to the next. Indeed, game ratings provide further context for play and can lead to the so-called forbidden fruit effect, whereby a game rated as unsuitable for a particular age group becomes more attractive to that same age group (Stix 2009). Of course, none of this is new. Even in the early days of game regulation in the 1980s, media effects researchers were

¹² Also, the plurality of game regulation boards is not be mistaken for representation. Appointment is mostly based on modern institutions of power: state, science, and church. This creates a tendency for rather conservative rulings.

aware of the limitations of their science.¹³ Nevertheless, the regulation of games continues its modernist foundations.

What would have to change in the regulation of games in order to take account of the achievements of postmodernism, while at the same time avoiding the perspectivist position of abolishing regulation altogether? Two factors are crucial. Firstly, a new game regulation would have to shift its focus from the determination of effects to a deliberation of the boundaries of acceptable play, thus putting the problem itself on the table rather than its contingent symptoms. Secondly, this deliberation should be more flexible, based not on a belief in a single, absolute reality of play, but on an acceptance of the multiple, practical realities that play communities produce. This also means that regulation can no longer be concerned only with the games themselves.

The practical implications of such a shift are rather complex. What is certain is that the tendency to centralise and homogenise game regulation fails to recognise the realities of gaming. Regulation would need to take place at a community level to take this into account. This may be the biggest problem in tackling gaming regulation. Bigotry and radicalisation are not a feature of 'the gaming community' as a whole. A consequential mistake of the past has been to make this generalisation. Many gaming communities still react defensively to reports of game-related radicalisation and bigotry because of this mistake. Unfortunately, the self-victimisation that follows this reaction thwarts attempts to address actual pressing issues.

The challenge is to get communities to make the fight against hate and aggression their own. Games are still often seen as something apolitical, an innocuous pastime, 'just' entertainment. As Gamergate has made abundantly clear, this way of thinking presupposes privilege; a game is only apolitical if it confirms one's worldview. Paradoxically, this attitude leads to games that are quite politically

¹³ Media effects research was in crisis in the 1980s after it gained public attention, bearing the question if it could provide the certainty regarding new media that the public desired (Maletzke 1982). As early as 1987, Irene Herzberg showed in a comprehensive literature review that game effects research featured heavy biases both towards overstating or downplaying their findings (Herzberg 1987).

charged, such as World War II games that falsely portray the Wehrmacht as just another army that had nothing to do with the Holocaust, in order to avoid exposing players to such serious issues as genocide (Pfister 2018). Publishers often cite customer expectations as a reason for a game's indifference to the 'political' dimensions of the issues at play, leading to the reinforcement of prejudice and historical misrepresentation and thus paradoxically rendering it quite political. One role of game regulation should be to address these issues from within the community, a function that is fortunately already often performed by game journalism and reviews.

The greater part of the challenge, however, is to address toxic and bigoted behaviour within the wider framework of gaming practices. It cannot be the aim of this paper to overturn these issues, and it must content itself with raising questions that need to be addressed elsewhere. The difficulties raised here are similar to those currently discussed in political philosophy: How can democratic processes produce more diverse and fairer decision-making while ensuring public trust? How can decision-making bodies be constituted to better represent the views of their constituents? The question now is whether the reformist solutions proposed under the rubric of radical democracy might be applicable to the problem at hand. Gaming communities may even be fertile testing grounds for such concepts.

The aim of any reform should be to bring the question of the ethics of game and play into public debate, rather than leaving it to common sense in its opaque *modus operandi*. For this project to be successful, the case cannot be that gaming and game regulation are two hermetically separated processes. In this respect, future research needs to address the question of what constitutes a gaming community in order to enable a form of self-governance that allows for an open negotiation between the subjective liberties of individual community members and more objective liberties that ensure fairness, diversity, and respect for others.

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File #20



**Title: A short Story of the last seven Years of
Oppressive Mechanisms for Women in Game Development
Culture**

Subtitle: -

Author(s): Ricarda Goetz-Preisner

Starting with the infamous #gamergate in 2015, public discourse focused on the oppressive mechanisms in game development companies, especially those faced by women and people of color. Several global examples of game development companies and their gender issues that became known, harden the impression, that being a woman in the gaming sector is still met with challenges. From the French company *Ubisoft* to the Austrian *Moon Studios*, allegations of racism and sexism are omnipresent in the sector. This paper shows different examples of scandals surrounding gaming companies and gives some possible explanations for these negative headlines. It will furthermore shed some light on the toxic environment that rules the culture of game development.

Keywords: Gamergate, Oppression, Gaming Culture, Sexism, Game Development

1. EQUAL TREATMENT IN GAME COMPANIES

Starting with the infamous #Gamergate in 2014/2015, different voices and information have become public knowledge about the oppressive mechanisms in game development companies, especially women and people of color face.

In short because #Gamergate ended in a rather long odyssey both game scholars and journalists still engage in -

#Gamergate started with a false accusation of an ex-partner that his ex-girlfriend indie-game developer Zoe Quinn would only get good coverage for her games because she allegedly had indecent relations with journalists. This led to the doxing of her data, and threats of violence to her and other women in the gaming industry, driving some to cancel events, flee their homes, or seek police protection. At the same time, it also sparked women to speak on behalf of Quinn. Numerous women and allies in the gaming industry came to her defense (Chess & Shaw 2015). Chess and Shaw (2015) argue that because *Gamergate* was highly analyzed by academics, the industry's known problem with diversity issues became scrutinized. With that some academics were hoping that this was signaling the beginning of the end for the industry's dominant masculine identity (Neiborg & Foxman 2018). The gaming industry itself then became under the radar for its toxic work culture.

This was 2015. There was hope that with the light *Gamergate* shed on the conditions women work in the gaming industry, these circumstances might change. Friman states, that during the past few years, gender has become a "hot topic in digital gaming" (2015, p.1). Various gender issues such as hate campaigns towards feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian, the discrimination of women game developers, starting as mentioned with Quinn and the exclusion of female players from certain e-sports tournaments have received a great deal of attention in both game and mainstream media, as well as academia (cf. ibd.).

However, in the following years, more information about the hardship women face in the still male-dominated sector of game development became known. To cover all the following allegations, lawsuits, and developments of the sector can fit into a book of its own, so there will be some examples presented, that can be seen as symptomatic of the oppressive mechanisms women are facing as game developers. As these examples show companies on a global scale, it might be possible to assume, that the toxic culture that apparently defines game development firms, cannot solely be attributed to one country or company, but is rather common practice.

In 2018 the gaming website *Kotaku* investigated the giant of US game developers *Riot Games* - that developed, for example, the very successful game *League of Legends* (2009) - over their gender-based harassment case (Dean 2019). The lawsuit began in November 2018 when two women made allegations,

"that they were routinely subjected to sexual harassment and gender discrimination" (ibid.). Hundreds of employees joined the protest in support of the plantains. In the end, and as part of the settlement of the lawsuit, *Riot Games* agreed to pay out at least \$10 million to approximately 1000 women that worked at the company in the last five years. The lawsuit laid out allegations that the company fostered a:

"`men-first` `bro culture`, where harassment and inappropriate behavior such as `crotch-grabbing, phantom humping, and sending unsolicited and unwelcome pictures of male genitalia`and managers circulating a `hot girl list`, ranking female employees by attractiveness, went unchecked." (Dean 2019)

According to Dean (2019) when asked about the settlement, a *Riot Games* spokesperson stated:

"We're pleased to have a proposed settlement to fully resolve the class action lawsuit. The settlement is another important step forward, and demonstrates our commitment to living up to our values and to making Riot an inclusive environment for the industry's best talent."

Riot Games have been in the spotlight several times for mistreating their female employees. In 2018 *Kotaku* spoke to 28 current and former employees, most spoke anonymously because they feared for their future careers in the gaming industry, or they were concerned that *League of Legends'* passionate fanbase would retaliate against them for speaking out (D'Anastasio 2018). Many of those sources told that women were treated unfairly, and that the company's culture puts female employees at a disadvantage. Other current employees, speaking on the record, disputed that account, with some top female employees telling *Kotaku* they had not personally experienced gender discrimination at *Riot* (ibd.).

Another company, famous for rather colorful games that have a widespread fan base around girls and boys such as *Rayman* (1995) or *Assassin's Creed* (2007), the French company *Ubisoft*, made headlines in 2020 for misogynist bullying and sexual harassment (cf. Gach 2021). Current and former *Ubisoft* workers even formed the group *ABetterUbisoft* trying to change how the industry and the company itself deals with reports of misconduct and calling for a shift in the game production culture (ibd.). The same company has already dealt with several complaints about harassment, sexual predation, and misogynist bullying in the past -

particularly its Toronto and Montreal studios. That has led to the resignation of some senior figures, and urgent statements from its CEO Yves Guillemot promising swift retribution for offenders and a transformation of the company culture (McDonald 2020). Guillemot stated on the company's blog that they have "engaged in a company-wide effort to listen, learn and build a roadmap for a better Ubisoft for all" (Ubisoft 2021). Allegations however still stand that the company did next to nothing when complaints were put forward. Even though *Ubisoft* promised swift retribution for offenders and a transformation of the company culture, little has been done (cf. Gach 2021).

2020 was also the year a variety of different stories published on Twitter gave examples of the hardship women still face in the industry by being pressured into sex, being belittled or gaslit by their male superiors and colleagues (cf. McDonald 2020). Richards (2020) collected the stories women in and around the game production sphere published under a Twitter megathread, in which especially Alex Kennedy, UK game designer and founder of *Failbetter Games* is mentioned multiple times. At the time, Kennedy responded to these allegations by saying they were "nonsense" and that he did not engage in any kind of abuse, telling his side of the events (Kennedy 2019). 2021 Kennedy, now co-founder of a small game production company *Weather Factory*, responded again to the allegations put forward against him by saying in an open letter, that: "Our cancellation, bluntly, was an intentional attack on us by a larger competitor. (...) Failbetter Games." To this day, no lawsuits were taken against him or against his alleged victims for slander. As it also occurred numerous around the *metoo* movement, word against word stands publicly. Nonetheless the *Twitter* megathread also shows that various women mention no person in detail, but tell of their overall experiences being "uncomfortable", "used", or in an "abusive" work environment when being involved in game development (cf. Richards 2020).

And finally, rather recently in 2022, an Austrian game production studio -*Moon Studio* - which has produced the games of *Ori and the Blind Forest* as well as *Ori and the Will of the Wisps 2015*, was called out for its oppressive culture by multiple workers. According to VentureBeat (Takahashi 2022), the founders Thomas Mahler and Gennadiy Korol propagated an environment where casual racism, sexism, and bullying were on the agenda.

Moon developers told GamesBeat (ibid.) that they found the studio's culture oppressive. They alleged that the leaders used calls for an open and honest workplace as a pretense for abuse. The founders criticized the work of employees in public chats and were stingy with praise. Many employees were discontent with what they perceived as inappropriate behavior by the founders. As an example, Takahashi (2022) reports that Mahler and Korol regularly made offensive comments such as: "Tyler is the only person who is aware of my devious plans to kill the Jews by making them work to death through game development", Mahler 'joked' in a company chat for everybody to read.

After these allegations Mahler and Korol sent GamesBeat a response:

"We don't believe the experiences suggested by your questions are representative of the more than 80 Moon Studios team members who are thriving and doing great work every day – nor do we believe they are representative of the experiences of former members of our team. In fact, we are very proud of our history of making people happy, advancing their careers, and contributing to their financial success.

(...)

Finally, we appreciate the irony that we – an Austrian and an Israeli Jew – started this multicultural enterprise. We view each other as brothers. And, like brothers, we sometimes argue and frequently tease each other. We have made jokes at our own expense about the differences in our backgrounds – and there may have been times that our teasing of each other has come off as insensitive and may have made others feel uncomfortable (Takahashi 2022).

While the culture was allegedly oppressive, no lawsuits have been filed. However there were some tangible results, may they be beneficial for players of the game or not, because *Microsoft* and *Moon Studio* evidently ended their partnership. Microsoft has not yet responded to a request for comment to GamesBeat (ibid.).

It seems given these examples, that even game companies that create beloved and diverse games, played by a multitude of people around the world have oppressive work environments and mechanisms that make it difficult for especially women

and especially people of color working in a still white and male-dominated sector.

2. THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN GAME DEVELOPMENT

The question remains why these work environments seem to be a rather hostile place for women to work in. One of the reasons according to several scholars (e.g. Johnson 2014, Tompkins & Martins 2021) and different voices from the industry is, that, to this day, women are underrepresented in the gaming industry. Even as it is established that women are important game consumers and therefore their participation and interests seem to be of more importance, in 2018 women still made up only around 20% within the gaming industry (Hahn 2018). *International Game Developers Association's* (IGDA) annual diversity report shows an increase in women and non-binary people working in the industry, in 2021, 62% of game producers identify as male, 30% as female and 8% as non-binary, genderfluid, genderqueer and 5% as transgender (IGDA 2022, p.13). The underrepresentation of women changes slowly but is still one of the reasons workplace cultures are male dominated. The IGDA itself speaks of a long history of "boy's club and frat house mentality" in game studios: "Many attach the contemporary phrase 'toxic masculinity' to game workplaces and the game community" (ibid., p.8). The IGDA sees a rise in sensibility about diversity issues within the gaming industry, not only due to Gamergate but also *Black Lives Matter* and the *MeToo* movement, as well as the "recent spate of sexual harassment allegations in high profile game studios":

These [movements] have propelled the discourse of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) and focused attention on workplace practices. With reports of discrimination, sexism, and harassment in the headlines, the game industry's ability to handle a diverse workforce is a pressing issue with implications for the recruitment, retention, and well-being of employees (IGDA 2022, p. 8).

Despite some games being perceived as attractive to girls as well as boys (Cassell & Jenkins 1999, p.9) game scholars agree to a certain point that the gaming industry is still designing games primarily for (white) adolescent men (cf. Jenkins & Cassell 2008, p.14). Women are consistently seen as a secondary market for games (ibid.). Additionally, due

to the underrepresentation of women in the gaming industry, especially in decision making processes, it is not surprising that many game companies nurture company cultures that cater to toxic masculine mannerisms. As Johnson concluded in his studies: "masculine discourse is the only (and thus natural) way game projects are conceived, constructed, and completed" in game studios (2014, p. 581). The studio culture draws on a set of rules typically associated with masculinity and the "real gamer", as supposedly, male game designers are trapped in familiar patterns from their own world of experience (Tompkins & Martins 2021). When women are perceived to lack that "real" gamer capital, it may encourage workplace discrimination or harassment (ibd., p.5)

The assumption furthermore persists, that most digital games "are still predominantly made by men (and usually white men at that) for like-minded boys and men" (Dovey & Kennedy, p.36). In that regard, most developers in the IGDA study identify as white (78%), whereas half of the respondents worked in the US (39%) or Canada (12%), followed by 35% who worked in Europe (including the UK) and 6% who worked in Oceania (mostly Australia) (IGDA 2022, p. 11).

3. IS THERE A FUTURE FOR WOMEN IN GAME DEVELOPMENT?

The few examples of negative voices speaking about the culture in game studios show that being a woman in the game development culture is more often than not met with sexism, harassment, and sexual predation.

Emily Greer, CEO of Double Loop Games and the Independent Game Developers Association's vice-chair sums it up rather fittingly:

"Games is a passion industry that people are eager to join, so companies can easily replace employees ... it's also drawing the majority of workers out of a core gaming culture that very much sees itself as a boys' club, which affects the game industry culture, which affects the gaming culture in a reinforcing loop." (McDonald 2020)

Workplace sexism is not unique to video games - if we look at challenges women face in tech, or film, or politics, or media - but the gaming sphere has earned its own place when it comes to misogyny and sexism. However, girls and women

will not stop playing games and participating in game production processes. Next to that, movements like the mentioned #gamerGate, #metoo or #womentingames keep on raising awareness of the changes the industry still has to go through and probably will go through in the future.

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Ori and the Will of the Wisps (2020). Windows, Xbox One, Xbox Series, Nintendo Switch. Developer: Moon Studio: Vienna, Thomas Mahler. Publisher: Xbox Game Studios

Rayman (first published 1995). All game platforms. Ubisoft: Montreal

File #21



Title: A Certain Kind of 'Freedom'

Subtitle: The In-Between-State of Game Studies in Germany

Author(s): Rudolf Inderst

Digital game studies in Germany have not yet fully matured into an independent academic discipline. This unique liminal state is intricately connected to its level of institutionalization within the tertiary education landscape. Presently, digital game studies have carved a niche in two main domains: They have emerged as an interdisciplinary area of interest within established academic fields such as literature, film, or media studies. Additionally, they have been integrated into practical programs offered by private institutions and universities of applied sciences, with curricula focused on game design, game engineering, and game development.

Consequently, this situation presents a unique form of 'academic freedom': a realm that encourages research and scholarship with minimal restrictions on course development and delivery. However, it also poses significant challenges for career progression due to the lack of a solid institutional foundation.

Keywords: Game Studies, Game Research, Institutionalization, Germany, Career Challenges

1. SETTING THE STAGE - NEW YORK 2017

2017 marked the 20th anniversary for two important game studies publications: Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* and Janet Murray's *Hamlet*

on the *Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Though important works by Brian Sutton-Smith, Roger Callois, Johan Huizinga or Bernard Suits and others predate Aarseth and Murray's books, these two publications can easily be read and understood as seeds for game studies as a potential discipline. To reflect on this milestone, the NYU Game Center invited Ian Bogost, Mary Flanagan and Janet Murray in order to discuss the first 20 years in the study of games as a focused discipline as part of the Center's lecture series. Due to problems with his flight, Ian Bogost could not make it on time; therefore Flanagan and Murray - together with moderator John Sharp - started their review; the whole event had been scheduled within a time slot of 90 minutes and - finally - after around 70 minutes Bogost also showed up and almost instantly turned the stage into his show. It is not only his performance though that makes this panel worth watching: The following quote here underlines Bogost's sceptical view upon the academic breakthrough power of game studies as an own established discipline.

Well, I mean, it's a lovely dream to imagine, that you can have this sort of thriving global community of tens of thousands of people studying games. (New York Game Center, 2017)

And Bogost did not stop there. Asked for a definition of the field, he came up with rather biting remarks that game studies have to be seen as a) a job creation scheme for academics who love to play video games or b) an odd entanglement of North America Studies and the Scandinavia welfare state or c) the last failed attempt of humanities to establish a new subfield (New York Game Center, 2017). It's a speculative conclusion from my side but it seemed like the ludo-savvy audience in New York had some very disenchanting moments on that evening. Ian Bogost had also reminded them that - aside from any form game research - it were difficult enough to place serious conversations about video games in media outlets.

Over half a decade later, it's time to take a closer look at the situation in Germany. This paper will firstly describe the early - or formative - phase of German digital Game Studies exemplified by two researcher biographies and their publications. This will be followed up by insights into two research associations in Germany in order to gain a deeper understanding of the degree or level of organization. Secondly, this paper will portrait the field of game studies as an interdisciplinary one; here also the issue of private

research will play a role. Finally, this paper aims to provide an overview of game studies' 'new (maybe interim) homes': practice-oriented private or university of applied science programs offering course content in game design, game engineering or game development.

2. THE EARLY YEARS - THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF GAME STUDIES IN GERMANY

Not only historians or political scientists are familiar with the following question that comes up quite frequently - in particular when speaking in public or to general interest media outlets as experts: Who's the actual 'driver' of history? Are we talking about structures? Or are we talking about single men and women? And what about the so-called 'right moment in time' (Ohnesorge & Gu, 2021)?

[But] History isn't a slave to some predetermined idea either, playing out exactly as some Higher Power had once ordained. It's the messy sum outcome of millions and millions of people's incentives, desires, biases, and actions. (Book, 2021)

This is obviously a complex that cannot be cleared right now within this paper, but it is relevant to take a look at two exemplary protagonists within early German digital game research - perhaps they - among others like Natascha Adamosky or Karin Wenz - can be even understood as 'founding figures'. One could argue that it due to their very early publication contributions within the field. Claus Pias is the author of *Computer Spiel Welten*. This publication was released in 2000. Today, he is a professor for History and Epistemology of Media at the Institute for Culture and Aesthetics of Digital Media at Leuphana University Lueneburg. In his book, Pias tried to find an answer to a (not so) simple question: Why do digital games exist in the first place?

Computer games (as we know them) came unasked for and cannot be taken for granted, if only for this one simple reason. But what peculiar date and place brought such completely heterogeneous appliances, bodies and symbolisms together to form (long-prepared and yet sudden) this totally new kind of game? What type of knowledge is it that cuts across technologies, institutions and machines striving to shape today's games? (Diaphanes, 2022)

Now, while I mentioned that 1997 can be understood as a key year within the field of game studies, the same could be said about the year 2000 in Germany. Not only did Claus Pias publish his thoughts and arguments, but also Britta Neitzel. Currently, she is a lecturer at the University of Düsseldorf and her dissertation, *Gespiele Geschichte. Struktur- und prozessanalytische Untersuchungen der Narrativität von Videospiele*, has been released 22 years ago. In 2021, she gave a remote talk with the title *Game Studies als Berufsfeld? Erfahrungen aus der Praxis* (Neitzel, 2021) where she not only mentioned that in her publication not even once the term 'game studies' is appearing. She adds - more as a sidenote - that while Claus Pias' work stops with the game *Pong*, her work is actually starting with it.

Regarding the small number of researchers within the field of game studies at the beginning of the 20th century in Germany, it would be an artificial attempt to try to separate peoples from structures. "Disciplinary culture is formed through sharing stories, images and associations" (Woodhouse, 2013) and these associations are part of the structures I now want to talk about. Again, I have chosen two of them in order to deepen the understanding on a national and an international level. Let's start with the AG Games. It was founded in 2000 and is part of the Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaften (GfM). It aims to bring together German Game Studies scholars and researchers and does focus upon theoretical, empirical and terminological questions of Game Studies. Its current state can be described as rather active; for instance, the AG recently refreshed its website, and it also plays a strong Discord and Twitter game.

When it comes to game studies associations though, on an international level, one organization comes into mind: Founded in 2003, DiGRA is the international association for academics and professionals who do research on digital games, play and broader game culture. It hopes to encourage high-quality research on games and does it best to foster collaboration as well as dissemination of work by its members (DiGRA, 2012). Now, there is also a D-A-CH chapter which aims to include Game Studies Scholars and researchers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland and focuses upon the creation of an infrastructure to support conferences, joint research and publications. The current condition of the chapter can be described as reasonably unremarkable. Individual personalities from the field of game research

appear from time to time, but there is basically no talk of a united or explicitly organized appearance. There is no dedicated web presence and the social media activities in the sense of scientific communication are - apart from Twitter - rather quiet.

I would also like to briefly mention the "Arbeitskreis Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele". This working group understands itself as

the central point of contact in the German-speaking world for researchers, teachers and other interested parties who work at the intersection of history, history didactics, game studies, cultural studies and political science. The goal and motivation of the working group is to give research on digital games a more prominent place in academia and society. (AKGWDS, 2022)

This specific group and its work output is a good example for the status quo of interdisciplinary research and approaches within German game studies I will talk about in the next chapter. When it comes to publications, frequently an academic discipline has some form of leading journal; this is the usually the one with highest reputation. Here, too, the question of a German-language equivalent arises. Agreeing on a leading journal is at the same time also a sign of finding identity as well as creating identity for a possible discipline. For the field of game studies, this would be gamestudies.org, founded in 2001. As already indicated, a personal as well as institutional entanglement can also be seen here. Those 'leading figures' who are closely associated with the founding of DiGRA appear again and again around the publication - either as authors or on the editorial side.

But how should the situation in Germany be assessed? Such an early foundation of an online journal tailored to digital gaming culture did not take place. And even today, some 20 years later, game researchers sometimes argue strenuously about which German-language journal is the leading one. Not infrequently, the name *Paidia* (founded in 2011 and located in Munich, Germany) comes up since they have a high publication density, special issues also went into secondary use as part of book publications, and last but not least, their tenth anniversary issue referred to digital game studies in Germany in general.

3. INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND SELF-EXPLOITATION

Gundolf Freyermuth is a German-American professor for media studies and author. He is co-founder since 2010, together with Prof. Björn Bartholdy, of the Cologne Game Lab at the Technical University of Cologne in Germany. He is also the author of a book from 2015 called *Games. Game Design. Game Studies. An Introduction* (it is also worth mentioning that this actually is one of the few German speaking books in the field that has been fully translated), where he puts down a very interesting observation. Freyermuth sees the establishment and development of Game Studies as an academic discipline taking shape through the processes of sedimentation, exaptation and adaptation. As Desponia Feleki argues in her book review, Freyermuth puts his focus on the game designer as a starting point.:

Emphasis is placed on game designers' different roles as they do not work towards the representation of a storyline but facilitate storytelling procedures with the aim of gameplay. [...] great importance lies in the contribution of game designers towards the establishment of a separate academic Game Studies discipline. (Feleki, 2017)

Following Freyermuth, these game design theory approaches are the first category of sedimentation. In the second one, exaptation, we are talking about approaches from social sciences and humanities, their research agendas, and their methods (Freyermuth, 2015, pp. 203-221). In my opinion, this is, where we predominantly are still standing in Germany. Additionally, Digital game studies are, to borrow a once heard term from Jochen Koubek - professor for digital media at the University of Bayreuth - a 'Mittelbau-Thema' (a research and teaching topic for academic mid-level faculties). Almost 15 years ago, back in 2009, game scholar Frans Mäyrä stated in his article *Getting into the Game: Doing Multi-Disciplinary Game Studies* that there have been certain benefits from such an interdisciplinary approach:

The results and understanding we have been able to reach regarding digital games' ways of existing, of different kinds of players, their experiences, and the social and cultural structures that surround games and play would not have been possible without theoretical and methodological influences, as well as lessons derived from earlier studies originating in the humanities, social sciences, design research, and software engineering, just to name a few. (Mäyrä, 2009, p. 10)

At the same time, he was asking for the buildup of own identity. And while one could argue that this particular identity indeed has been built up within the Scandinavian power houses of game research in Denmark (for instance IT University of Copenhagen) and Finland (for example Tampere University), the situation is somewhat different - as in more loosely organized - in Germany. If you are interested in digital game studies in Germany, Austria and Switzerland you therefore enjoy a certain kind of 'freedom'. You will find few restrictions in regard to institutions, memberships, curricula, methods or research questions. On the other hand, you will also come across few sources for funding. Given a pronounced interest in digital game research but without a funded or non-permanent work relation within an academic institution or affiliation, it is not unlikely to make use of the aforementioned certain kind of freedom to start as a private researcher which can lead to exceptional results as well. On the other hand, this career path respectively decision can also lead to self-exploitation - this is the case, for example, when doctoral students do their doctorates externally. Not infrequently, this form of 'employment' results in a stressful double burden (Woolston, 2019, p. 403).

4. GAME STUDIES AND THEIR INTERIM HOME

So far, I have argued, digital games studies in Germany have not yet entered the state of independent academic discipline. This specific 'in-between' condition is related to its degree of institutionalization within the landscape of tertiary education. Digital game studies have been parked in two fields mainly. They are an interdisciplinary field of interest for other academic disciplines such as literary, film or media studies. Also, they have become part of practice-oriented private or university of applied science programs. These programs offer course content in game design, game engineering or game development.

There are several academic institutions and market participants in Germany that offer curricula focusing upon 'the ludic' in different forms and shapes. There are for instance these B.A. and B. Sc. programs: 'Game Design & Development' (Hochschule Macromedia), 'Game Design' (MEDIADDESIGN Hochschule), and 'Game Design & Management' (Hochschule Fresenius) or 'Game Art and Design' (HBK - Hochschule der bildenden Künste Essen), 'Game-Produktion und

Management' (Hochschule Neu-Ulm) and 'Digitale Medien und Spiele' (Hochschule Trier). Digital game studies are frequently a part of this education - sometimes they are taught under labels such as "game research" or some form of "critical game analysis". I was unable to find any survey in my research that addressed how important students felt this part of their studies was. However, it should also be mentioned here that master's programs are also offered - very sporadically. For example, the University of Bayreuth offers a degree program in 'Computerspielwissenschaften'. Likewise, a master's program in Game Studies can be completed in Krems or Klagenfurt Austria.

To my knowledge, there is no structured Ph.D program for Game Studies in Germany and if you hope to crown your research and teaching path with your very own game research professorship, the air is getting really thin.

5. CONCLUSION

In November 2022, the 16th Vienna Games Conference FROG - Future and Reality of Gaming 2022 accepted submissions which addressed the relation of 'Freedom | Oppression | Games & Play' and invited game scholars, creators, educators, and other professionals worldwide to talk about this complex and fruitful relationship. In summary, it can be said that this article shows how differently the concept of freedom can be interpreted and filled with content. In the case of Game Studies in Germany we are talking mainly about the freedom 'to' or positive liberty. Yet, we also have seen that the personal research and teaching interest can turn into a rocky path full of vague challenges as the degree of institutionalization of the research field in Germany cannot yet be described as consolidated. At this point, it's speculative whether this will change in the foreseeable future.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is member of AG Games, DiGRA, and Arbeitskreis Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele. He also is teaching Game Studies at IU International University.

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File #22



Title: Democracy or "Tyranny by Morons"?

Subtitle: Oppression through exploiting the Undereducated

Author(s): Hossein Mohammadzade, Atefe Najjar Mansoor

Oppression is not always direct or explicit. For instance, oppression by economic means and oppression by or through the majority are two strong forms of oppression. Rather than being openly taken away by one political power, people's freedoms can either be made unaffordable and unimaginable through market policies or be taken away indirectly by creating an oppressive, undereducated majority incapable of dialogue even in the same socio-economic class. Moreover, gameworlds are capable of promoting oppression, criticizing it, or providing freedoms that cannot be experienced in the physical world - at least not without consequences. For example, two major videogames, *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Grand Theft Auto V*, give the player various freedoms - which has clearly made them popular - and make implicit and explicit references to the aforementioned forms of oppression, certain neoliberal values, popular beliefs, and contemporary forms of democracy. Therefore, through a close reading of the two games, we try to see if and how these games criticize or promote each of these concepts. We also try to see if these games have their own way of oppressing the player. In addition, such an analysis can help discuss the relationship between ideology, oppression, and freedom in a democracy under neoliberal policies and capitalism, and highlight how such a system might have the potential to provide the means for oppression by economic policies and majorities - contrary to the popular "democracy versus oppression" dichotomy.

Keywords: Oppression, Freedom, Democracy, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, *Grand Theft Auto V*

1. INTRODUCTION

Videogames can be politically charged whether they have a "serious" exterior or not. Currently, an important global political theme is the relationship between ideology, oppression, freedom, and democracy - which can also be reflected in games. For instance, two videogames that are arguably involved in the political discourse on the aforementioned concepts are *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Grand Theft Auto V*.

Grand Theft Auto IV (GTA IV) is an open-world action game developed by Rockstar North and Rockstar Toronto (2008) in which the player-character, Niko Bellic, moves from an Eastern European country to the United States to escape his past and pursue the American Dream as advertised to him by his cousin's lies about his own success in America. He arrives in Liberty City - a city existing inside the gameworld - and gets involved in criminal activities. *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V)* is also an open-world action game developed by Rockstar North (2013). The player can, in most parts of the game, choose to play as either of the three main characters - Franklin Clinton, Michael De Santa (formerly Michael Townley), and Trevor Philips - who try to climb the economic and social ladder through criminal activities, including heists, while also dealing with corrupt government agents and, naturally, other criminals.

Other than having a direct or explicit form, oppression can also be indirect - for instance, through economic structures or by an undereducated majority easily controlled through the media by the government or other interest groups. Such forms of oppression can even be stronger and last longer than its direct forms. Moreover, videogames can have the potential to both promote and fight oppression. Gameworlds can criticize oppressors or even provide simulational freedoms which are usually unaffordable in physical reality, mainly due to their consequences. The two aforementioned games offer the player freedoms which probably account for a large portion of their popularity. However, freedom is not the only thing that these games are about; they also deal with indirect oppression. Through a close reading of the games and an analysis of the instances where they make references to certain neoliberal, capitalist values and policies, popular opinions or beliefs, and different contemporary forms of democracy, we try to see the relationship between these two videogames and indirect

oppression. In other words, we try to examine whether and how they promote or criticize it. We also try to see if they have their own means of oppression as well. Moreover, we argue that while there is a popular "democracy versus oppression" dichotomy, things are not always that simple, and the analyses in this paper can also help discuss the relationship between ideology, oppression, and freedom in a democracy under neoliberal policies and capitalism, and discuss how even democratic systems might - contrary to popular beliefs - be capable of providing the instruments of oppression in the form of economic policies and oppression by undereducated majorities. For these purposes, first we need to discuss the meaning of oppression, its manifestations, and its consequences in this paper, in order to clarify exactly what forms of oppression we refer to when we discuss the relationship between oppression and the two *GTA* games.

Furthermore, while some parts of the discussed games might seem to be "just made for fun," game studies have already moved past such arguably oversimplifying ways of looking at games (see, for instance, Aarseth, 1997), so we see no need to emphasize the "seriousness" of games at this point. In other branches of cultural studies, even works formally categorized as comedies receive the critical attention they deserve, let alone works which include some satirical or sarcastic aspects. In literary criticism, there is a long history or tradition of scrutinizing satire (see, for instance, Greenblatt & Abrams, 2006). Actually, satire provides a chance for its creators - especially those under oppression - to criticize without being held accountable (LeBoeuf, 2007). It can also have an ironic structure making the readers despise the narrator or the speaker, such as Swift's (1792/2006) "A Modest Proposal," and mean quite the opposite of what they are saying. Having said that, although most of the sarcasm and criticism in these games is clearly directed at certain ideological concepts, in this paper, we do not necessarily put an emphasis on the direction at which the irony or joke is pointed in all instances because such an approach would imply the assumption of a single true meaning for the text, and would give priority to the intended meaning of the writers which all readers must supposedly try to find - reflecting approaches which are long outdated and which criticism has long outgrown. Instead of asking whether a statement or scene is there to actually criticize a concept or to satirically mock the critics of that same concept, we put the emphasis on what led to that concept being mentioned in the game at all in the first place.

2. INDIRECT OPPRESSION

Two strong forms of indirect oppression are oppression by economic instruments and oppression by the majority. Oppression by economic means has always been a strong form of oppression. Economic oppression has been considered important, whether it was Marx (1867/1976) who associated oppression with the economy and discussed how certain economic systems led to exploitation and oppression, or Friedman (1962/2002) who, despite having a social Darwinist notion of freedom, noted that economic relations played a major role in achieving freedom. Instead of one political power overtly taking people's freedoms away, market policies are capable of making these freedoms unaffordable or even unimaginable. In addition, oppression by or through the majority is another strong form of oppression. An oppressive, undereducated majority, incapable of dialogue even in the same socio-economic class, is capable of taking away people's freedoms without the direct intervention of any specific political powers.

Unlike indirect oppression, direct oppression usually evokes reaction. For example, when in the US, the law directly bans abortion, a lot of people rightfully react or even protest against oppressive policies to defend women's rights (The New York Times, 2022); or when a young person or a child is killed in Iran, a lot of people rightfully protest (Parent et al., 2022). However, indirect oppression, especially economic oppression potentially leading to exclusion, seldom evokes a proper response. For instance, when college fees are discussed, we can see people argue on social media that "nothing is free" and that, if the older generation had to pay for it, there is no reason why new generations should have a different fate. They also raise the question: "Who would pay in order to make it free?" Here, we should point out that we did not cite specific users' comments in this paper because we did not intend to endorse or single out any users, but many such debates can easily be found on social media. The argument that nothing is free is a false one. First of all, many natural resources are free and even when the extraction fees are deducted, the net profit is still enormous, and wealth is actually being produced; otherwise, governments and corporations would not do it. Second, there is a valid argument that every citizen in a country should have a share in every single resource. Third, some free services are an investment in the nation, not a waste of resources. In an economy that finds a reason to rob people

every few years, then blames it on crises such as pandemics (see, for instance, Cathey & Parkinson, 2020) or bear markets, wrong policies oppress people because they cannot access what they need to survive or grow. If a person cannot access education they are already oppressed. As a consequence, they stay undereducated thus prone to brainwashing and further oppression. As a consequence of the aforementioned arguments against free education, sometimes the situation in a "developed" democratic country gets even worse than that of an underdeveloped or developing country where at least top universities or colleges are free for everyone - such as Iran where education must be accessible to and facilitated for everyone according to the country's constitution (UN Women, n.d.), and where almost all of the highest-ranking universities are public universities which offer free education at all levels (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.).

3. DIRECT DEMOCRACY, REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY, AND MINORITY RIGHTS

In *GTA V*, a character advocating the legalization of marijuana describes the current form of democracy as "tyranny by morons." Even if we see it as ironic, could there still be some truth to it?

Under neoliberal, capitalist systems with social Darwinist values, people are told that if they are not rich, it is because they are unfit and unworthy. In such an economic system, no money means no quality education. Low-quality schools can kill people's curiosity. In such a system, people need to work very hard just to survive, so they have little time to educate themselves. Consequently, they remain undereducated, almost incapable of critical or creative thinking, and mostly under the influence of the media. Moreover, in their attempts to fulfill their fantasies, they face a social Darwinism that accuses them of being stupid if they work hard but are not rich, with the motto "work smarter, not harder," possibly even with a loaded donkey meme attached to it. Such humiliation is another side of economic oppression. This very accusation undermines the role of society, opposes its very definition (as a body meant to protect everyone and help everyone grow), and reduces it into merely a collection of ever-competing individuals following the "survival of the fittest" rule. The majority in such a society with so much inequality would

most probably consist of undereducated, so-called "under-achievers," who do not have the necessary skills to analyze economic, social, and political situations, and therefore are exploited by a few so-called successful individuals. In many cases, the majority has even had its natural curiosity or questioning instinct oppressed or silenced at a very early age by an ineffective or oppressive education system, by cultural values and traditions, or in other words, by ideology. It is also naïve to believe in a good human nature or essence and hope for desirable outcomes in democracies. A blind faith in common sense, or the ordinary people's judgement as a result of some natural intelligence or instinct, has perhaps been appropriate only for 18th-century English poetry, and probably nothing else. Imagine people voting in an uneducated primitive clan; who in their right mind would appreciate the result of, for instance, a referendum in such a community? People need to be educated to act or choose rationally; it is not instinctive.

Moreover, on the different forms of democracy, Lewis (2013) said that there has been a debate on whether it is direct democracy or representative democracy which is better for minority rights. In any case, we ask: Are all minorities really recognized? If so, how and when? And if we believe a representative democracy is better, it is still the majority that chooses the representatives. If some candidates are disqualified by the State, it eventually leads to engineered elections. If we have free elections with "undereducated masses," we suffer under a tyranny by the majority. This reminds us of Tocqueville's (1835/2012) concept of tyranny of the majority, and his remarks about American democracy. He asked when someone faces an injustice, who should they talk to when virtually every authority is elected by the majority, and public opinion is also synonymous with the majority; so, they should either submit or run. Then he asked if that is in fact tyranny with a façade of freedom. We argue that without fighting economic oppression, and without education, which can be fully available only after the reform or abolition of a cut-throat capitalism, any form of democracy turns into a tyranny of the majority - a majority which can itself be easily influenced by the media. Then, even a disguised dictatorship or oligarchy can hide behind the so-called "will of the majority," exercising soft oppression through populism and silencing its opposition, like when a villain in a zombie apocalypse leads a large herd of zombies toward a settlement of humans, thus outnumbering them.

4. NEOLIBERAL LIBERTY AND THE ILLUSION OF FREEDOM

When politicians in a capitalist system talk about freedom, especially when they use the word "liberty," they mean neoliberal social Darwinian "liberty," which is mainly the freedom to accumulate wealth by oppressing others, which only replaces monarchs with rich modern-era lords at best. Polanyi (1947), writing about the 19th-century economy, said that rather than having incomes be determined by a person's status, their status was determined by how much money they made, which also applies to our current economic system. Moreover, even about the much advertised "free market" under capitalism, Jameson (1991) said that there is not really a free market because the market is usually not directly related to the concepts of choice and freedom. He said that while we might select among some products, we do not really choose them, but the choices have already been made for us.

Further, people are free to have it all if they can afford it. In a so-called free capitalist democracy, people are supposedly free, for instance, to sunbathe, to drink liquor, to have various kinds of relationships, but they will not always be able to afford it all, especially considering the low wages or salaries in many cases. They see the image of an attractive person, or a quality life on a big billboard on their way back home after a long day at work, and they objectify the person they see on the billboard, and set those images as their goals. Then, they work even harder to get them, which they most likely never will, and even if they do, the advertisements will again sell them yet another image. This goes on until they are seen as merely a burden due to old age or an illness. The American Dream has also been a popular myth to further exploit human resources, and then oppress them even more when they are stuck in a blind alley and have nowhere else to go. Interestingly, in *GTA IV*, an article on the in-game Internet says, "Long-term healthcare can put a tremendous strain on finances," which reminds us that America might be the land of opportunity but only until people get sick. In addition, when Roman, Niko's cousin, asks him if he likes America, he says it is all about advertising, and the opportunities are not real because people get in debt for those opportunities and become a slave for the rest of their lives. Moreover, the description of the game on the publisher's website explicitly states that Liberty City is a nightmare for the people who do not have money or status (Rockstar Games, n.d.).

5. FEATURING AND PROMOTING OPPRESSION

In both games - as in any game - there are freedoms and restrictions. Therefore, by acknowledging both the deterministic features which restrict the players and the freedoms or choices that they are offered, compatibilism best describes such games in terms of meaningful choices (Surber, 2014). Despite the many freedoms the player can experience in both games, there are a lot of things the player cannot do in the cities, so there are a lot of restrictions as well. There are also some other areas the games do not explore. However, indirect oppression is featured and implicitly promoted in both games, which is mainly evident in three areas: nudity and sexuality, violence, and neoliberalism - all of which will be discussed here, thus showing that the games are themselves oppressed and in turn oppress their players.

5.1. Nudity and Sexuality

While the *Grand Theft Auto* series has already been under pressure by the public at least in part for its sexual content (De Vane & Squire, 2008), both games avoid certain levels or forms of nudity. Moreover, although the game has already been categorized as only suitable for adults, sexual acts are not really shown, probably because the developers would not benefit from being labeled as "pornographic." The absence of such scenes or features cannot be due to graphic design or technological limitations because the game can compete with its peers in terms of detailed graphics, some of which do include such scenes. For instance, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015) certainly includes more nudity and sexual scenes.

Another relevant aspect is that sexual curse words (which are found in abundance in both of the games discussed) can also lead to or perpetuate sexual oppression: Although it might seem liberating, at first, to be able to use explicit language - especially sexually charged curse words - because it breaks a cultural taboo, and despite the popular attempt to see swearing as just a reaction against linguistic oppression, the acts depicted in such expressions have had the potential to make virtually all sexual acts seem offensive. Even if one argues that the words are insults because they threaten people to nonconsensual acts or rape, there are still two problems here: First, when using a curse word becomes automatic and people use it or hear it without

really thinking about the etymology of the expression, or where it came from and why, it does not necessarily remind the audience of nonconsensual sexual acts as the reason why the expression is an insult. For instance, when someone says "fuck it," it is more probable that the audience considers "fucking it" synonymous with rendering something useless and throwing it away, thus associating the sexually charged term with devaluating something rather than picturing someone raping "it." Second, some curse words are not associated with nonconsensual sexual acts in the first place, such as when someone is called a "cunt," "dick," or "cocksucker" in either of the two games. Therefore, we argue that this kind of swearing can associate any kind of even consensual sex with insult and humiliation in people's minds. As a consequence, people become more conservative about sex. They might see people's sexual acts as dishonoring. Moreover, swearing presupposes that what is being described is naturally an unpleasant experience. For instance, while swearing, people say "eat dirt" because it would be disgusting to do so. In addition, Farquharson et al. (2020) wrote that because menstruation blood was considered disgusting in the traditional Jamaican society, it found its way into swear words. They explained that women were not even allowed to wash or dry their clothes during the period along with men's clothes. Therefore, we argue that those who use terms associated with human genitalia as an insult - as mentioned earlier - probably consider genitalia inherently disgusting at some level, and by passing on this attitude to the next generation or to others, they further establish such feelings of disgust toward certain body parts, hence toward sexuality in general. Consequently, such forms of swearing can also further establish taboos and promote the belief in the irredeemable unpleasantness of the things described while swearing. However, this is not just the games' problem but a cultural issue.

5.2. Violence

Another aspect of identifying hidden oppression would be an analysis of the degree of violence which is supposedly considered tolerable. Killing and torture seem to have been okay while designing *GTA V*, but dismembering bodies, it appears, would have meant crossing some red line, despite the fact that the player can dismember characters in *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), for instance. Yet, in *GTA V*, no matter how hard the player-character's dog bites a body part, no matter how many times they shoot it, or how much they damage it, it will just not get cut off.

Furthermore, an oppressive economic system also has a public shaming process. People might attack games on social media, or a mob might attack the game developers or marketers and make the sales drop. Therefore, much of the self-censorship could be a result of economic oppression. Kerr (2006) pointed out that *GTA* shows "a key tension in the cultural industries between the need to maximize sales globally and the need to conform to, or be seen to conform to, local distribution, social and moral systems." If more violence is not shown, we argue, it is probably not due to the moral or ethical boundaries of the developers, because otherwise we would not see torture in *GTA V* in detail when it forces the player to torture someone in order to complete a main-story mission as Trevor. Featuring the option to dismember non-playable characters (NPCs) while exploring the open gameworld would neither make it obligatory nor would it need such detailed animations as we see in the mission. Therefore, as virtual or simulational gameworlds meant to be only accessible to adults, not allowing the players to commit certain forms of violence or sexual acts - which already exist in our physical reality and are shown in other types of media or genres - seems to have been a strategy to avoid being criticized. Here, it should be clarified that this paper is not a call for more violent or sexually explicit games; instead, it is merely a statement of the fact that even if it is given more attractive names such as "control," certain voices, tastes, and designs are, in fact, oppressed, and not by factual necessities but by dominant, louder opinions - again reminding us of the tyranny of the majority. We argue that it is not merely the violent or sexual act itself but how it is depicted, its consequences, and the logic around it that matter the most. Over the years, people have attacked videogames. For instance, then-senator Hillary Clinton (2005) claimed that violent games made children violent (Tassi, 2016), and then-president Donald Trump blamed videogames as one of the causes of school shootings (Ducharme, 2018). There have even been lawsuits against them. For instance, there was a lawsuit against *Grand Theft Auto* blaming it for a teenager murdering three people (Leung, 2005).

5.3. Neoliberalism

Moreover, both gameworlds can be considered neoliberal utopias, and it is here considered as another aspect of featuring oppression in the games as we have already discussed the relationship between neoliberalism and oppression. What Barrett (2006) wrote about *Grand Theft*

Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar North, 2004) also applies in some way to both *GTA IV* and *GTA V*. He said the game gave the player "the opportunity to act out popular-culture fantasies of middle-class youths," and he also explained that "there is a sense of the public sphere as a site of danger and a withdrawal from any commitment to political or collective social agency that runs throughout the game." He also noted that some aspects of the game support neoliberal policies, and pointed out the absence of many aspects of a democratic public state in the gameworld, except for disciplinary forces such as the military or the police. He said the state could not offer protection or assistance against oppression. Is it not a neoliberal dream to reduce the State to a police station? Warnke (2012) has argued that the ideological basis of *GTA IV* is neoliberalism. Yet, we argue that both games also challenge it.

6. OPPOSING AND CRITICIZING OPPRESSION

Both games also oppose oppression by criticizing some political means of oppression, such as wars, or by criticizing capitalism, which is the ultimate liberal and neoliberal economic system, and - at least currently - the main instrument of economic oppression. For instance, in a dialogue in *GTA IV*, the player-character, Niko, says, "War is where the young and stupid are tricked by the old and bitter into killing each other." In another part, he says, "Capitalism is a dirty business." The Radio announcement in *GTA IV*, which says "United we stand, together we fall," also parodies a popular motto in the United States which says: "United we stand, divided we fall." It also mocks nationalist values which often promote a unity fetish possibly leading to a totalitarian system that is intolerant of different minorities and tries to homogenize the whole population. In addition, Public Liberty Radio mocks the troubled healthcare system in the United States, which has turned mostly into an industry which is only after profit. In a parodic manner, radio shows in the game refer to many other issues as well, such as racism and gender discrimination, all of which end in oppression. An in-game TV program on the history of "Liberty City," which is an obvious parody of the history of the United States, says the city was founded on the idea of "getting rich off of other people's work." It also mocks consumerism by mentioning long lines of people waiting for the new i-Fruit phone to come out, which clearly refers to iPhones and their buyers. It also says that the American Revolution began because Americans did not want to pay taxes

and wanted to let the market decide it all; poor people would die, and rich people would win. It is now also clear that "Liberty" City might have the word "liberty" in it as a reference to neoliberal values. Pichlmair (2008) wrote that Liberty City is the opposite of the American Dream. However, we argue that it is in fact a critique of the American Dream, trying to expose its truth. He also argued that the various car brands show class differences. Therefore, we argue that the liberty to drive any car the player wants in both games is the virtual fulfilment of the fantasy of subverting class structures. The freedom to crash the cars with almost no serious consequences can also liberate the players and offer them an escape from their daily stress behind the wheels. In *GTA V*, Michael, one of the three playable characters, says, "Go to college. Then you can rip people off and get paid for it. It's called capitalism," which is an example of explicit social criticism in the game. Moreover, a show on the Radio says, "You shouldn't pay taxes, someone else should;" a character referred to as Princess, says she spends tax payers' money on servants licking her shoes; on the Radio we can also hear a host saying that taxes are unconstitutional, and that universities should be shut down to save taxpayers' dollars; on the street, the player can randomly hear characters say "Goddamn socialists. I don't need government healthcare for my kids. I homeschool them; I'll home hospital them" - all of which clearly use irony to criticize the dominant negative attitudes toward welfare states in America.

7. A CRITIQUE OF POPULAR CULTURE AND MASS MEDIA

Popular culture and mass media are often mocked or parodied as either stupid or mere brainwashing machines working in favor of a few. For instance, in a show on a channel called Public Liberty Radio in *GTA IV*, the host says, "Some people say... I mean our producers..." which shows how media reflect the opinions of the people who control them. On the radio, people also give strange medical advice and say strange things about medical conditions and how to treat them. A PLR host also mocks some common beliefs which glorify certain "holy" sites by saying that the statue of a woman, who in her previous life helped save a civilization and was worshipped as a god, was covered in pigeon shit, which brings to mind popular images of golden domes and shrines, and in some way ridicules some superstitions or religious myths, and demystifies the popular image of beautiful birds flying around a dome or a shrine as if worshipping it. In *GTA V*,

medical cocaine is discussed on the radio. This also refers to how sometimes misinformation is spread by the media. There is also a program on the radio that says, "Weazel News: confirming your prejudices," which clearly mocks the conservative and traditional nature of mass media in general. Criticizing mass media and popular culture can be considered another way in which the games fight oppression, because these media have the potential to make the "undereducated masses" more regressive.

8. CONCLUSION

Having discussed how *GTA IV* and *GTA V* have been influenced by the political, social, and economic aspects of the culture in which they were developed, and how they can in turn have their own cultural impact, we can say that these games both promote and oppose oppression at the same time. We also argued that democracy and oppression are not inherently opposites, and democracy does not naturally lead to freedom on its own. In fact, democracy cannot function properly without education, and education only becomes fully available by fighting economic oppression because, if left unchecked, economic oppression can create a form of oppression enforced through the majority - or a tyranny of an undereducated majority. Therefore, oversimplified political advertisements that promote democracy as simply a system which autonomously brings about positive change regardless of the circumstances, usually do not have the best interests of people at heart. Rather, they seem to be an instrument of modern colonialism and exploitation, which needs further research in order to be thoroughly discussed. Finally, we should emphasize that game studies can certainly benefit from broader theoretical and political discussions on oppression along with game analysis in their quest to fight oppression. Further research is also needed to fully establish a line between preserving or promoting oppression and respecting cultural differences, and to help find a way to fight oppression not just locally, but globally as well. Unfortunately, oppression is currently often tolerated in the name of "democracy," "control," "sovereignty," or "respect for cultural diversity," but it is also possible that there might be political parties benefiting from certain kinds of oppression in certain regions, such as the Middle East where politicians stay in power through direct and indirect oppression, and which has basically turned into a human farm producing cheap workers: Children are fed, vaccinated, and educated (at least in many cases) in their

homelands, but are then driven away from their homes as (young) adults, ready to do any kind of work as a refugee, just to escape crippling oppression, thus ridding the oppressive regimes of their dissidents while at the same time providing cheap workforce for the global supporters of those regimes as merely another resource they can exploit as modern colonists, while constantly bringing war to the Middle East for decades, all in the name of bringing democracy - or a fetishized version of it that is advertised as synonymous with all kinds of freedom and prosperity, which we tried to desacralize in this paper - to the region, which - based on the discussions presented here on the nature of democracy itself even in the "developed West" - would not necessarily make a difference worth the sacrifices or human casualties at this point (considering the circumstances) even if the promises were true, which we can be absolutely sure they are not, by simply taking a look at the fate of a country such as Afghanistan. Moreover, while there often seem to be some foreign reactions to oppression in a country, such as imposing sanctions - which can actually worsen the problems of an oppressed nation by further isolating its population, just like when guests finally leave a house which has abusive parents and leave them all alone with the children to do with them as they please - oppression can never survive and thrive in complete isolation, without some sort of direct or indirect global support.

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File #23



Title: Video Games and the New Apartheid

Subtitle: Algorithmic Toyi-toyi; Press "T" to Toyi-toyi; Theorizing vernacular game design frameworks from the virtual margins

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This paper applies Sizwe Mpofu Walsh's theory on "The New Apartheid"; combines Lindsay Grace's Critical Game Design concepts with Miguel Sicart's literature on Political Games, to discourse on the digital embodiment of the marginalized people in video game design; and to propose or formalize what I shall term "algorithmic toyi-toyi" and "Press 'T' to Toyitoyi" as resistance-based game mechanic(s) design framework from the oppressed. Toyi-toyi is a procedural interchange of song; dance; and resistance slogans performed in South Africa's political protests. Such performances convey participatory and liberatory forms of expression which I argue, should not only find algorithmic interpretation as techne (through game mechanics/ systems design or in Ian Bogost's Procedural rhetoric) but also in using games as a catalyst in the struggle against the New Apartheid (The perpetual privatization of apartheid in social engineering); and in using games for promoting dialogue and freedom.

Keywords: Videogames, New Apartheid, Toyi-toyi, black techne, emancipatory design

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent years has seen a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on videogames and game studies in relation to the complex themes of oppression and freedom (*see for example*

Anna Everett; 2014; and Kishonna Gray, 2014). At the core of these debates is the thinking around race; identity; gender; diversity; pedagogy (see Hanli Geysler, 2018); postcolonialism (Mukherjee, 2017); gaming cultures; intersectionality (Gray, 2018) and game design dimensions.

As a way of further promoting these dialogues, this paper offers firstly, a contemporary political studies perspective; coupled with further disciplinary inquiry from Computer Game Studies; Cultural Studies; Social Sciences; and Intersectional Studies as a way of providing analysis of the social; economic factors affecting marginalized and racialized game creators in South Africa. It is specifically a way of unsettling the invisibilized existing hierarchies; oppressive mechanisms, and power plays in the local gaming culture.

This is achieved through placing in conversation, readings of Sizwe Mporfu Walsh's reflections on post-apartheid South Africa (which he redefines as "The New Apartheid") alongside the converging videogames scholarship from Miguel Sicart; Kishonna Gray; and Lindsay Grace.

This analysis helps us ask these questions: How can the videogames community, in conjunction with its intellectual capital and economic potential move us beyond the existing socio-political and socio-economic predicament? Can new strategies of resistance and survival be found in videogame creation, that reshape our democratic vision -thus promoting social cohesion?

Without trying to be clever or proposing solutionist methodologies, this paper journeys the reader towards an epistemological project that is still under development or an epistemology '*born out of struggle*' (De Sousa Santos, 2021). In calling for an epistemological transformation De Sousa Santos (ibid) implores us to identify and denounce the *abyssal line*; to disrupt the dominant/ Eurocentric ways of knowing and the coloniality of knowledge production (as power) thereby (re)discovering new horizons regarding the cultural and epistemological diversity of the world. Fuelling this decolonial knowledge making process, he proposes that "*a recognition of the copresence of different ways of knowing and the need to study the affinities, divergences, complementaries, and contradictions, among them in order to maximize the effectiveness of the struggles of resistance against oppression.*" (ibid, P 8).

Phillip Penix Tadsen (2019) successfully appropriates this line of thought towards games, reminding us of the necessity of the decolonial approach to game studies that should ask "what kinds of games can be produced, who can produce these games and what purposes can they fulfil." (2019: 8). This matters significantly because it speaks directly to the embodiment of the marginalized or subaltern people in videogames. How we think about the bodies of marginalized folks in the space of video game creation is central to this paper, as the following paragraphs will show.

Much literature is in evidence to suggest the scarcity of engaged scholarship valorizing the marginalized and oppressed people's experiences and aspirations in the global videogames industry. Lindsay Grace's *Black Game Studies* (Grace, 2021) attests to this reality in his powerful introduction to his book:

"It is unnecessary to state that the work of Black game makers is under (sic) under-researched. It is a statement so plainly obvious that it need not be said at all." (2021: 15)

Grace here reflects on the under-representation of blacks in the global games industry value chain and a lack of black executives in the space and thereby reiterating Kishonna Gray's remark that "Games and gaming culture not only reflect entrenched inequality and lived male/white privilege but serve as an important instrument in the reproduction of hegemony." (Gray, 2014, 10).

Seen from a South African game developer; entrepreneur; and educator who has experienced both apartheid and post-apartheid democratic state, it is clear that much work needs to be done to engage; reverse; and eradicate such structural disenfranchisement, which Mpofu Walsh rearticulates as *the new apartheid* -especially given the economic promises of the digital technocultural industry(ies). Such work will be exhaustive and will requires more commitment than this paper can afford.

Secondly, this paper partly provides a semi-autobiographical account of the authors' industry experience to individuate the often ignored; muted (Everett, 2014) and gaslighted experiential knowledges (Khunou; Phaswana; et al, 2018) of the marginalized games industry practitioners (Grace, 2021;

Gray, 2019) in South Africa. This line of reflection resonates deeply with Anita Sarkeesian's foreword in Kishonna Gray's book *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* who confesses that:

It too often falls to marginalized folks to undertake the exhaustive labour of illustrating and proving our own oppression to those who oppress us, to convince them that our experiences, which are significantly different from the experiences of those with privilege, are real and impactful in ways to which they might be blind. (qf Gray, 2020, 8).

It is hoped here that academicising my story of struggle; resilience; self-actualization; and survival may inspire new perspectives in this growing industry, and to encourage a new generation of marginalized scholars and games industry practitioners to adapt or develop new strategies of succeeding in the sector. By so doing, the author envisages not only to unsettle the deep seated, unmentioned racist (Gray, 2020), white supremacist patriarchal hegemony prevalent in the games sector (Everett, 2014; Gray, 2020), but to provide a context from which an emancipatory dialogue may emerge.

Lastly, In theorizing game design frameworks from the virtual margins, this paper proposes 'Algorithmic Toyi toyi' - as an interpretation of black techne. This is drawn from a close reframing of Lindsay Grace's 'Poetics of Game Design-Rhetoric and Independent Game' (Grace, 2011), complemented by Miguel Sicart's Political Play (Sicart, 2015).

2. VIDEO GAMES; POST-APARTHEID (OR) THE NEW APARTHEID

The formalization of computer game studies in 2001 (Aarseth, 2001, online) happened in South Africa's post-apartheid period. This is an era characterized by, inter alia, a multitude of constitutional; social; economic; and political reforms. An epoch where new national and social identities were formed despite the disturbing reality of limited economic transformation.

Given that poverty and economic inequality had persisted, and continues to thwart the majority of black South Africans, it can be understood here that videogames or computer games have always been a luxury for many of its 'always already

marginalized citizens. On the other hand, technological developments, particularly in computing including (and access to) digital games were not, and continue not to favor the historically oppressed majority population. This sad reality often compounds and sustains the outdated simplistic debates and narratives associating games with immaturity; sociopathology; and violence. However, the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel rests in us challenging these myopic views against the backdrop of the new apartheid.

The persistence of these interconnected social and economic injustices; coupled with their systemic; constitutional; and structural protection, form part of the central thesis in Sizwe Mpofu Walsh's latest book *The New Apartheid* (Mpofu-Walsh, 2021) which says "Apartheid did not die: It was privatized". Capturing people's disenchantment with the post-1994 democratic project in South Africa, he explores the various continuous patterns of racialized injustice and inequality in modern South Africa -that confirm the privatization of apartheid as a social engineering exercise.

Expanding on the technologically mediated oppressions such as coded bias; algorithmic oppression; and various mechanisms of predatory technologism Mpofu-Walsh's work complements the African American voices in Social Sciences and Technology such as Ruha Benjamin's *Race after Technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim Code* (2019) and *Captivating Technology: Race; Carceral technoscience & Liberatory imagination* (2019); Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression: How search engines reinforce racism* (2018); Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the surveillance of blackness* (2019).

This paper attempts to pursue similar arguments, but from a Game Studies perspective, to even pushing it towards analogy that says "Apartheid did not die. It was gamified."

The exhaustive nature of such research may not completely fit into this paper -but at least a starting point towards such direction must be seen in the writing of this essay.

For us to speak about the new apartheid, it is useful to place into context what 'apartheid' and 'post-apartheid' in relation to videogames and gaming cultures is. A history of gaming cultures with a particular focus on cultural

identities and lived experiences of black South Africans during and after apartheid needs to be recorded. This can help inform us of the task ahead -that of thinking about games; game design; gaming technology; black techne; and gaming business from the viewpoint of the racialized and marginalized majority in South Africa. I believe here, the opening move should be an understanding of black corporeality in gaming cultures.

At this point. I will start with my first encounter with racist design in games. How I developed critical evaluation skills about games from an early age.

3. BLACK SKIN, WHITE FISTS

When I first played Streetfighter, around 1991/1992 it was around the so called "the last days of apartheid". As an eleven year old I'd often ask myself, why is it that in the opening animation the white man punches a black man? I asked myself this question repeatedly, and found that I struggled to enjoy the game because of this racist design.

Additionally, political unrest and violence against black bodies was commonplace. Black people were always shot; beaten; arrested; humiliated; and killed in great numbers everyday. So the extension of this violence against black bodies to entertainment in TV; movies; literature; magazines; and finally into video games was unsettling. Thus as we discuss the Future and Reality of Gaming in this conference I think about such visual representation and design, as well as the underlying praxis in game design.

"The emergence of locally developed games brings new voices to the medium, meaning that the narratives of games created by developers in Africa are of increasing interest, although research on this subject is sparse. Indeed, the existence of small independent gaming studios provides a new opportunity for developers to create games that reflect local cultural preferences and provide content tailored to users that would not likely produced be by "global" games developers." (Penix-Tadsen, 2019: 11)

The above quote demonstrates the promise of videogames around the continent, including South Africa. Read from a different perspective, it means Africans need to present

their cultural heritage into this growing ludic techno-cultural practice. For South Africa, this means reorganizing structures which enable production; financing; innovation; playing; teaching; and commercializing videogames. I invite the reader here to share this hope and optimism with me.

The *new apartheid*, as a reinterpretation of the *negotiated settlement* needs to form part of the new epistemological framework in which games and play; as well as playful technologism must be adapted into the discourses around the Fourth Industrial Revolution. For this initiative to succeed we need to critically re-examine South Africa's past as well as challenge every attempt to coopt; dominate or corrupt this struggle. Given that the *new apartheid* currently reproduces newer and technologically mediated forms of invisibilized domination and polarities, I confidently counsel that we revisit the *nationbuilding* concept with fresh eyes. Through eyes that consider the generational wellbeing of our society. This is where we can think constructively of videogames as part of emancipatory/participatory practices.

In 2021, I was invited to be a Steering Committee member for the launch of Games For Change -Africa Chapter. It was a great honour considering that I have always admired the work this organization has conducted globally in pursuit of using games as a framework to drive inclusion and social change. More importantly, I was honoured because I was invited by the people I respect in the industry. Among many other tasks, I was part of organizing strategy; topics to discuss; as well as panelists for a 'diversity & inclusion' talk/webinar. Unsurprisingly, the international colleagues (who are mostly white) that I spoke to regarding the panel were quick and unapologetic in telling me not to include them in an "All white" panel.

The instant assumption that the panel will be 'all white' revealed a lot about the unsaid; unsayable; and hidden forms of racialized domination in the SA videogames industry.

Reporting back to the Steering Committee I noticed that the white colleagues were finding this discovery mortifying and therefore trying by all means to hide or fight this embarrassment. As a result, the Steering Committee persistently requested me to submit the names of those speakers so that they can have a private 'chat' with them. I flatly refused to comply to this request.

For me, the task at hand was beyond fighting embarrassment, but finding accommodating tactics to initiate what I called "Incoko" (Dialogue in IsiXhosa language) around the often *underplayed* and hidden forms of racialized domination in the SA videogames industry. Instead of asking "Who is the oppressor?" I thought it is appropriate for everybody to assume that the scene is already racialized, therefore any genuine discussion must root from there, as opposed to the dichotomous shaming and defense strategies that prevail in most settings. This to me is inspired by Boaventura de Sousa Santos's transformative critical tenor that "*We don't need alternatives; we need rather alternative thinking of alternatives*" (2018, viii). That we've been asking same questions, and subsequently proposing redundant and irrelevant solutions for years, hence a need to change the questions we are asking. However, the team's approach was different. From there on my engagements with the group deteriorated gradually. I noticed a discomfoting sense of *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018); condescension; and invisibilized power plays in the ensuing emails. My understanding of 'marginality' (hooks; 1989) somewhat empowered me to navigate such a contested space. I had felt my voice being taken instead of being given, but through a spirit of resilience and courage I had managed to negotiate my personhood and intellectual integrity in such a space.

These discoveries; amongst other industry experiences had me pondering about the various ideas posited in this paper.

At the base of these ideas is the '*new apartheid*' concept; and how black bodies are perceived in the local and global games industry. The fact that apartheid has survived and become omnipresent in the democratic life of South Africa means newer and inclusive strategies need to be employed in order to continue resistance against updated apartheid and to even promote dialogue.

For games scholars such as Miguel Sicart, digital games fulfil an even much significant role in shaping/ reshaping the society we inhabit or even aspire to live in. In support of these assertions I propose to offer two of his arguments testing what he calls the "sensationalist" approaches to game ethics that help "transcend the theoretical and cultural parameters in which we have situated play; games; and all ludic forms, when it comes to their morality" (2021: 22, qf V Rapti and E Gordon, Eds). The first argument concerns violence in videogames -and I'm using it partly

because it's one of the easiest and silliest arguments an uninformed or 'ludo-illiterate' reader may pursue. I also use this one to challenge the reader's perception of technologically mediated racialized violence towards black bodies in media such as videogames and how these scenarios relate to real life lived experiences of the marginalized people. In 'Towards an Ethics of Homo Ludens' (Ibid), Sicart presents this compelling argument:

Videogames cannot be isolated from the culture that creates them, and trying to answer this ethical issue by looking exclusively at what the player does in one of these games will only give us a partial, limited, narrow-scope answer. So let me try to approach this question from a different angle: the problem of violent videogames is not the problem of violent videogames. *Violent videogames are a symptom of a culture obsessed with violence (My emphasis)*. And their negative effects are not so much training players to kill, which they don't, but forcing the creative stewardship of homo ludens to the limited spectrum of relating to others through the metaphors of dominance, violence, death, and conquer. Violent videogames are an act of violence on our ethical standing as homo ludens. (ibid, P 32).

In this essay, Sicart DOES NOT justify violence in videogames, nor does he condone violent behavior. Instead he engages the reader on the problematic of violence as a politico-cultural byproduct, or as a way of asserting dominance on the Othered and marginalized. As a South African, I identify with this violence in digital games; game design and in real life, more importantly how this violence that is inflicted "in those in the margins is everpresent, without remorse." (Ibid). Sicart then finishes this argument by reminding us about what this violence in videogames says about us.

In the second argument regarding play and games; and their relative societal impact, Sicart (2015) discusses the relationship between play and politics. When connecting play and political action as instruments of critical thinking - discursively labelling it "Political Play" or "Playing of The Oppressed" he provides this view:

Political play takes place when a plaything harnesses the expressive; creative; appropriative; and subversive capacities of play and uses them for political expression (*My emphasis*). Political play is the interplay of form,

appropriation, and context, or how politics is expressed and enacted through play in a fluid motion." (in *Play Matters*, qf *Participatory Republics: Play and the Political*, 2015).

The two premises I have just presented from Sicart may be well illustrated in the design experience or the experience design I encountered whilst teaching Game Design at Wits University. In 2018 I developed a 2D platformer/ shooter game prototype inspired by the life of Winnie Mandela. In the iterations of the game you as a player confront and get into combat with various apartheid forces, whilst managing parenting and political leadership in a time of uncertainty. It was not the backlash and censorship that I received from South African institutions that stopped me from completing this game. But a startling realization of the depth of fear (from many members of my society, both black and white) -a fear that the game may incite racial violence at scale. For me as a creator and educator it was merely an exercise in portraying how we can use the medium of games to memorialize and pay tribute to our struggle icon. However the reading from various circles was different. This was a few years after the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall countrywide violent student protests. I had rather re-learnt of rainbowism and censorship, from then, as part of the *new apartheid*. Rainbowism or "rainbow nationalism" (Gqola: 2001, qf Slade 2015) is described as an '*unintentional*' act of "invoking the rainbow nation as means of silencing dissenting voices with regards to the status quo in the country...[...] and with regards to race and apartheid past" (Slade; 2015: 3). The concept of the rainbow nation; censorship; and creative expression in relation to videogame development will require a further critical inquiry. And it is quite useful that this work gets done.

Throwing this reflection back into game design, we need to glance at Lindsay Grace's writings on Critical Game Design. In reflecting how we think about taboo subjects and uncomfortable topics (such as apartheid South Africa; and the various social discrepancies), Grace (2014) advises us to turn to what he refers to as "Discomfort Design". He challenges us to think critically about socially prohibited subjects and *taboo design* in a manner that can influence newer game mechanics. Importantly, he reminds us that:

Taboo gameplay exposes that which we may not want to discuss. Taboo game experiences are more than just uncomfortable situations, they are opportunities in rhetoric. They

punctuate an experience and offer opportunities for thoughtful reflection on social values (ibid).

I hope so far I have managed to convince the reader of the promise of videogames tackling even the most uncomfortable of socio-political topics, and trusting that the dear reader will find this reflection worthy of further scholarly attention. That we have come a bit close to answering the research question "How can the videogames community, in conjunction with its intellectual capital and economic potential move us beyond the existing socio-political and socio-economic predicament?"

4. PLAY; BLACK MARGINALITY; AND RESISTANCE

In isiXhosa language there is an idiom which says "*Akudlalwa na nawe? Utheni ungumntwan' omlungu?*" Simply translated it says or asks "Can't one play with you? What are you a white man's child?" The idiom/ phrase, on one hand, conveys an understanding of racial difference; and a racialized conception of play -characterized by apartheid era's everyday lived experiences. Simply put, it says black children were not allowed to play with white children, because of apartheid's separatist socialization and segregationist social engineering.

On the other hand, "*Akudlalwa na nawe? Utheni ungumntwan' omlungu?*" is often said to someone who has a poor sense of humour; grumpy; or aloof. The saying, in this context cuts to cultural and ontological dissonance experienced by racialized and marginalized children and peoples. It somewhat reminds us that racism is taught or passed on to children from younger ages. If play is a way of understanding the world (Sicart, 2015) then we can say this idiom captures the spirit of resistance and marginality based on participatory play or oppositional play. It may also be rephrased as part of what Miguel Sicart refer to as "The Playing of the Oppressed". (ibid).

I instantly think of this idiom whenever I meet some liberal white folks at Game Festivals and Conferences and other events, who would innocently ask me "*Lulu, why are black gamers and students students always group themselves together at these events?*" Needless to say, these events are 'usually' organized by the established (white) multinational companies and big (white) local brands. The speakers have

always been white males, until recently. That is not to say there is no inter-racial and multicultural tolerance and mingling, but somehow this demonstrates hidden/ unspoken discourses on race and class in the post apartheid state as well as what bell hooks refer to as '*marginality as a site of resistance*' (hooks, 1989) and even traces of *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018). Given the frequency of this one particular question over the years, I have to start by admitting here that I never had a coherent answer to this question, perhaps because I struggled to articulate the shared understanding of black marginality to white liberals.

Also perhaps because my interactions with whiteness in almost every area of my professional life has always been positive and less challenging -perhaps because of my affable nature.

I argue in this instance, that black corporeality and marginality are some of the areas that deserve serious investigation, especially when we try to reimagine social justice; diversity and inclusion in game production; game jams; business; and various gaming related events.

This is partly because of the increasing social polarization (based on the new apartheid) which may limit the understanding of social cohesion and nation building which South Africa's aspires to. If games and gaming culture reflect "*entrenched inequality and lived male/white privilege*" (Gray, 2014) and "*serve as an important instrument in the reproduction of hegemony.*" (ibid) then discourses around Otherness and marginality in the industry must gain equal focus -so that marginalized gamers and developers may not be perceived as a deviance (ibid, 20). Video games and gaming cultures, for the marginalized South African blacks, must move beyond an act of social-political; economic and epistemological transgression, to a way of seeing and theorising culture towards that "revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible. " (hooks, 1989).

5. PRESS T TO TOYI-TOYI

Moving the discourse from Social and Political Dimensions to Game Design, I then propose an ethos based on the

understanding of black marginality and protest cultures in South Africa, which I call "Press T to Toyitoyi".

Toyitoyi is a procedural interchange of song; dance; and resistance slogans performed in South Africa's political protests. Such performances convey participatory and liberatory forms of expression which I argue, should not only find algorithmic interpretation as techne (through game mechanics/ systems design or in Ian Bogost's Procedural rhetoric) but also in using games as a catalyst in the struggle against the New Apartheid.

According to Lisa Nevitt (Cape Town magazine, online) and various online sources, Toyitoyi dates back to the Mau Mau people in Kenya, who rose against the English colonialists (ibid). It then spread across the continent through military camps of exiled freedom fighters; and finally reached Zimbabwe and South Africa's ordinary citizens.

During this pivotal time many African countries were assisting one another in solidarity against colonialism. Using music and dance to communicate a strong message, unite people on the ground, and motivate them to keep pushing forward (Thomson 2018, online) proved an effective approach by black South Africans to reject the oppressive apartheid regime with non-violent protests -"which to this day stands out as a powerful resistance against the status quo at protests and gatherings around the country." (ibid).

Andrew Thomson, in this quoted essay, not only endorse Toyitoyi as a powerful protest strategy; he also recognizes its powerful reinvigoration; and weaponization into war songs and war dance:

"We didn't have guns. We didn't have tear gas. We didn't have all the sophisticated modern technology for war... for us, toyitoyi was like a weapon of war," (Vincent Vena, cf, Amandla! the documentary film).

Indeed it did become a weapon of war, as its recorded militarization and warlike character, which the dance adopted at later stages, "instilled fear into the various apartheid-era security forces trying to quell any unrest" (Thomson 2018, online) and the broader enemy.

The efficiency of Toyi-toyi is also recorded from one of apartheid regime's former national head of riot police, Adrian de la Rosa, who confesses:

"I can tell you that most of the riot police and soldiers who had to contain those illegal marches were shit-scared of the chanting blacks confronting them. But they had to stand their guard. Here was an unarmed mob instilling fear just by their toyi-toyi!" (de la Rosa, cf. Amandla).

So, as this paper argues, if dance, music, and slogan-chanting proved effective as some sort of techne, wouldn't it be appropriate to apply it to the design of digital games? And what is black techne? Or what would black techne look like if gamified?

Black techno-cultural syncretisms; Black technophilia; and research into Black techne has been gaining momentum in the past decade or so. Reginold Royston sees this as a "progressive notion of technology that embraces a distinctive Black/ African social shaping of the world" (Royston, 2022, online). An innovative strategy which he sees, and I affirm, "*elides the dualism between tech-making and spiritual strivings*" (ibid).

Much of this theorization and ethos hold titles such as "Afrofuturism" (Everett, 2009) or "Soulcraft" (Royston, 2022) and valorizes embodied knowledges (Daniel, 2005. qt from Royston, 2022) from marginalized or racialized minorities. It is an ethos that holds and affirms the importance of inclusive technologies as "*technologies that take into consideration the sociocultural diversity of users and contexts of use*" (Winchester III, 2019).

At this stage the reader must allow me to take this theorization in its broadest sense and apply it to game design. If in gaming or game design, as Lindsay Grace observes, exists a "wilderness outside the space of traditional game design" (Grace, 2011) where there are many possibilities, then this frontier, with its space of undiscovered processes or gameplay mechanisms beyond our dreams (ibid) must be unearthed -including game design frameworks from marginalized communities. In "Critical Gameplay -Design Techniques and Case Studies" (Grace, 2012, in Schrier & Gibson. Eds) Grace quotes Ste Curran's keynote

at International Game Developer's Association (IGDA) Global Game Jam, stating that:

"Gaming is this giant creative space, surrounded by a frontier, and beyond that frontier there are so many countries left to explore" (ibid).

We can add *Toyi-toyi* here as one of possible game mechanics that we can invent as a design framework for protest games or games projecting resistance and political activism. Even if there is a body of games that have been produced over the years, depicting similar themes, such as *Revolution:1979* (Inkstories, 2016); *Call of Duty: Cold War* (Activision, 2020); *Svoboda 1945: Liberation*; *Dot's Home* (Rise Home Stories, 2021); and more, there needs to be an intentional attempt at depicting South Africa-ness in game design that speaks directly to political play or oppositional play. *Toyi-toyi*, as argued in this paper, is one of those methodologies.

Here we can witness that the *grammars of action* found in computation may be useful in the study and development of videogames bent on offering new, untested; unconventional; critical; political; and counter-hegemonic interventions on game design.

In 2016, a small startup called WeStudio Games produced a game called "ANC Apocalypse" (WeStudio Games, 2016). The game, a local zombie apocalypse offering, depicted former president Jacob Zuma, as a giant zombie boss which a player must shoot. It was the first time for me to see a political parody game, and the fact that it was created by youth aged between eighteen and twenty years of age taught me something about critical game design as well as political play (Sicart, 2015). WeStudio Games were not pioneering somekind of avant garde game design methodology, but spicing up existing game mechanics and popular genres with local characters, albeit political, and defined a new category of local games.

As much as this work is not currently available online or in other platforms, these developers have started a revolution in game design that will, in years to come populate many areas of thinking about games; freedom; oppression; representation; and games pedagogy. This is an example of a reinterpretation, a re-imagining of a technological trajectory demonstrating Black cultural ethos, through the gamification of local politics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing about apartheid or even the mention of it is such a difficult concept for many South Africans. Myself included. I can say I keep learning from my predecessors in the academy a language to speak constructively; with conviction; and owning my experience and intellectual integrity in this space.

I dedicate this piece to my late mother, Nomfundo Mohapi; my aunt Nosiseko Dlakavu, who at my youngest age taught me to stand up for what I believe in, even if it means standing alone. I also dedicate this piece to my son, Lebohang. I know that one day you will make games, boy. Dude loves you always.

My life partner Sibabalwe aka "Siba" (I love you so much babes) joked that she does not want me crediting her in this piece. But guess what, if it was not for her, I would not have finished this paper, as small as it is. Thank you Sthandwa sam "MaMiya; Sbewu; Gwanini; Mja; Salakulandelwa; Ngoma" (These are her clan names). :)

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File #24



Title: Is there a Rise of Totalitarian Propaganda in Russian Game Culture?

Subtitle: -

Author(s): Nikita Stulikov

While it is common for an authoritarian state to depoliticise its citizens, a totalitarian one actively involves them in its political life through ideology. The paper highlights a totalitarian twist in Russian politics with examples from the Russian game industry and culture. First, a national game engine project emerged with economic sanctions against Russia, indicating the state's interest in game-specific advantages. Second, several controversial game projects, developed with the government's financial support, reinforce the anti-Western narrative. Third, game cultural content is used to convince the community of players to participate in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Fourth, a new homophobic law censors game content and oppresses the player community. All things considered; it can be argued that there is a totalitarian trend in Russian game culture. The government seems interested in the potential of games and play for oppression; it uses computer games as a media for anti-Western propaganda; it uses game cultural content for militaristic agitation and oppresses the minorities of the Russian player community.

Keywords: Russian game culture, digital games, totalitarianism, propaganda, oppression

1. INTRODUCTION

Through a brief description of some notable cases, this paper approaches the issue of a totalitarian twist in Russian

game culture. It may be particularly compelling for the game researchers' community, considering that games can be suitable for examining oppressive mechanisms. It may be significant to describe the symptoms of this totalitarian shift, which have become notably crucial in light of the recent strengthening of right-wing radicals in liberal democracies.

It is common for authoritarian states to depoliticise their citizens and to make people less involved or interested in political and social changes. That was the model of Putin's regime in Russia for many years. For the last twenty years, the country has had significant economic growth and a weak institute of democracy. And, as the institutes of democracy were ineffective, people did not engage in the state's politics. Many refused to vote or protest. At the same time, people were falling under the Russian government's propaganda, which has gained more power over time.

Unlike an authoritarian state, a totalitarian one actively involves citizens in the country's political life through ideology. Nowadays, the Russian propaganda media have established an unprecedented level of power. However, until recently, computer games have not been used for this purpose.

Nowadays, Putin's government has begun to instrumentalise computer games as one more militaristic and oppressive propaganda medium. I will perform a descriptive analysis of four cases to support this claim. To do this, I rely upon a particular conceptualisation of totalitarianism.

The idea that a totalitarian state involves people in politics through an ideology can be found in the works of Arendt (1973), Lukács (1969) and others. But I find it more remarkable to approach the question of totalitarianism from the perspective of Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* (1991). In this book, Levinas claims that the totality is war because there is no place for *the Other*. He conceptualises the Other as something different or alternative to the order of things which the totality of war offers. The Other helps to transcend from totality to infinity. From the perspective of infinity, everything has an end. Even war or totalitarianism does. And in the end, there is peace.

This framework will be especially relevant to the last case in this paper, as it will be about queerness and its

acknowledged otherness. First, I will discuss the case of the national game engine as it is the vaguest one. Then I will highlight several controversial game projects that reinforce the anti-Western narrative. Consequently, I will consider some game cultural content that convinces players to participate in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

2. RUSSIAN GAME ENGINE

In Russia, there is no national game engine sophisticated enough to make AAA game projects. A discussion about the Russian national game engine started in May 2022. It was three months after Russia invaded Ukraine. *Epic Games* stopped commerce in Russia in March. Since then, it is also impossible to do financial operations with Russian payment methods in *Unity*. Some were afraid that *Unity* and *Epic* would completely abandon the country.

Therefore, the *Presidential Administration of Russia* held a meeting with game developers and discussed a national substitution (Korolev, 2022a). It seems to be a part of the "import substitution" trend, which has emerged in all industrial spheres since the economic sanctions against Russia were announced. Many saw this as a potential for national business. However, the *Russian Ministry of Digital Development* refused to allocate money for the project's development in August 2022 (Korolev, 2022b). Some said that the engine would cost up to 48 million euros. But recently, there was news that an anonymous private investor wanted to put his money into the engine (Murray, 2022).

Although the proposed project was rejected, the case indicates the state's interest in specific advantages of games and play. The following case will demonstrate more precisely that the Russian government wishes to use computer games as a propaganda medium.

3. GAMES AS A PROPAGANDA

3.1. *Smuta*

In June 2022, a game called *Smuta* (Syberia Nova, 2025) was announced at Saint Petersburg's forum organised by the *Institute of Internet Development (IDD)*, established by the

Presidential Administration of Russia. *Smuta* is an action RPG with a historical setting in the XVII century. At this time, Lithuania and Poland intervened in Russia. The game *Smuta* takes place during the Polish-Russian War which followed (Granger, 2022). In the context of the war in Ukraine and European sanctions against Russia, it might seem that the government wants to support the *Smuta* project to make computer games another medium for anti-Western propaganda. This project can also be considered part of the 'import substitution' trend.

The game company *Cyberia Limited*, which develops *Smuta*, received a 4 million euro grant from the *IDD* (i.e. from the *Presidential Administration*). Then there was a scandal, as the company's website shut down right after receiving the grant (Tayga.info, 2022). But the developers seemed to have rehabilitated themselves, as they launched a new website with a press-pack of more recent game content (*Syberia Nova*, 2022). They promise to release the game in 2024 (Abrosimov, 2022).

3.2. *Sparta*

Later, in September 2022, the *IID* announced several other curious projects. For instance, one has a setting in 1820 when France invaded Russia during the Napoleonic wars. But it was *Sparta* (Lipsar Studio, TBA) that caught the most attention. It is a tactical RPG about contractors from a private military group. 1,5 million euros were allocated for its development (Korolev, 2022c).

One of the sources from the *Presidential Administration* says that the government has become interested in those recent projects because they "create a positive view of Russian soldiers". Notwithstanding, the *IID* said they do not wish to popularise private military contracting (ibid). The next case will demonstrate that the Russian government does popularise contracting by using cultural content of games.

4. GAME CONTENT FOR AGITATION

4.1. *Wagner* Group Promotion

In September 2022, Russian private military company *Wagner* released a promotion ('Свиноpez', 2022) that uses synth-wave

aesthetics (admittedly associated with computer game culture) to convince fans to join, which, in essence, means joining the war in Ukraine. The promotion is a music video which glorifies members of the *Wagner* group, encourages them to murder the Ukrainians, and threatens and humiliates them with homophobic hate speech.

Private military companies are forbidden in Russia. But unofficially, this one is under Putin's control, as it belongs to his associate – Evgeny Prigozhin. He has become one of the most significant figures in Russian politics amid the war (Yapparova, 2022).

4.2. *Essence Military* and *LIBERTY*

Trap music videos made by the *Essence Military* (2019) and *LIBERTY* (2020) online communities are similar examples of game cultural content being used as an oppressive mechanism. For instance, in one video (*LIBERTY*, 2022) are photos of Russian soldiers in Ukraine whose faces are hidden behind masks from the *Hotline Miami* video game (Dennaton Games, 2012). This game is quite popular in Russia and has undoubtedly influenced the synth-wave aesthetics movement.

Essence Military and *LIBERTY* are communities in the Russian social network VKontakte. They post many other war-supporting materials on synth-wave and video game aesthetics. These people seem to be enthusiasts and war fans. In March 2023, *Essence Military* had 41 thousand, and *LIBERTY* only had 11 thousand subscribers. This is not a large number for the VKontakte social network. However, those communities could have financial support from the government since it usually supports pro-war initiatives and is deeply concerned with internet communities.

Those and previous cases demonstrate that the Russian government and military enthusiasts use game cultural content and game-specific advantages for anti-Western propaganda, militaristic agitation, and hate speech. They instrumentalise games to oppress and manipulate the Russian player community. The last case is an example of government oppression towards one of the most vulnerable parts of it.

5. QUEER GAME CENSORSHIP

In November 2022, the Russian government passed a new law against 'LGBT propaganda,' widely criticized as homophobic. As a result, several popular computer games are threatened to be banned in Russia (Meduza, 2022a). Among them are *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software, 2009), *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009), *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), *Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game* (Interplay Productions, 1997), *Apex Legends* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019), *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), *The Sims 3* (Maxis Redwood Shores, 2009) and others. This list will probably be complemented with new titles. For instance, *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) is not presented there yet. However, this title may be considered a classic example of a game with queer characters.

A homophobic campaign started in Russia in 2013. Then there was a law against "the propaganda of non-traditional relations" among the underage (Elder, 2013). The law has unclear wording, as it is unclear what "propaganda" means. The new law covers all ages. One can be fined 6,5 thousand euros just for telling their adult friend about queer people. And therefore, the government has even more opportunities to repress whomever it wants to due to the unclear wording of the law (Sauer, 2022).

The issue of queer rights is at the forefront of the Russian totalitarian tendency. Admittedly, the rights of minorities are a litmus test of human rights in any society since minority rights protection guarantees all personal rights protection. The queer case is critical when addressing Levinas's "totality of war" concept. There is no place for the Other in a totalitarian, militaristic society. To argue, one speaker in the Russian State Duma compared the law against 'LGBT propaganda' with a "victory on a battlefield" (Meduza, 2022b). In this way, the government erases the Other (the queers) from video game culture by censoring its content. And then, it tries to fill the gap with propaganda materials such as the anti-Western *Smuta*, the militaristic *Sparta*, private military company promotions, etc.

Apparently, the law was passed to withdraw people's attention from a defeat in the war. The government wants to raise a moral panic. At the same time, the law dehumanises queers like the Russian state propaganda dehumanises the

Ukrainians during the war. As State Duma speaker Oleg Nilov said about queers: "All these demonic manifestations contradict our traditional values. Anything that demonstrates it should be illegal. We must protect our society" (Bashlykova, 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, there might be a totalitarian twist in Russian game culture. The government seems to be interested in the potential of games and play for oppression (as with the national game engine project); it can use computer games as a medium for anti-Western and militaristic propaganda (as with *Smuta* and *Sparta* game projects); the government and war enthusiasts already use game cultural content as an oppressive mechanism to gain ideological power over the community of Russian players (as with Wagner promotion); and the government censors game content and oppresses the community of players and its minorities. By ideologizing game culture, the government actively involves citizens in the country's political life which characterises a totalitarian state. It erases *the Other* by constructing external (West) and internal (queers) enemies with game content. In this way, it instrumentalises games as one more militaristic and oppressive propaganda medium.

The totalitarian trend is likely to persist and have an increasingly extreme impact on the Russian player community. A recent shocking evidence of this tendency came in November 2022, when Russia's Federal Security Service killed three live-action role-players who played the Ukrainian game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (GSC Game World, 2007). They had specific attributes, such as emblems of fictional parties, which aroused suspicion (The Moscow Times, 2022).

Ultimately, I may extrapolate the totalitarian tendency from game culture to Russian culture in general. For instance, the law against 'LGBT propaganda' also affects literature, cinema, and other cultural media. For this reason, totalitarian propaganda in game culture constitutes a multifaceted totalitarian trend in Russia. This particular aspect is noticeable because the government did not pay attention to the game industry, but recently, and especially since the invasion of Ukraine, started to invest more resources into it. That industry is comparatively developed and therefore of huge interest to the government which is

now in need of more instruments for oppressing and mobilising its citizens.

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