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ToDiGRA

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Special Issue: British DiGRA

Paolo Ruffino, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, & Garry Crawford (Editors)

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Introduction to British DiGRA issue

Paolo Ruffino, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, & Garry Crawford (Editors)

This special issue of ToDiGRA collects some of the best articles presented at the British DiGRA conference which took place at The University of Salford at MediaCityUK in May 2017. For this issue we invited the authors of the full papers presented at the conference to submit a revised document. The manuscripts were then sent to a group of selected peer-reviewers, three for each submission. The reviewers, experts in the field of study of the assigned papers, provided their feedback and evaluation. The five accepted papers were then sent back to their authors who implemented the required changes and re-submitted their final work. Each one of the articles in this issue is the result of a process of research and revision that took almost one year of work from the time of their original presentation at the 2017 British DiGRA conference. In order to remove any perception of impropriety, José Zagal (currently Editor-In-Chief of this journal), was not involved in

the selection of articles, the peer review process, nor the decision to ultimately accept or reject the selected articles from this special issue.

This issue is emblematic of the diversity and broad-spectrum of the academic work discussed at the conference. In order to contextualize this collection, the special issue begins with a brief history of British Digital Games Studies by the conference organisers, Garry Crawford, Esther-MacCallum-Stewart, and Paolo Ruffino. This paper provides a short and potted recent history of digital games research in Great Britain, starting in 2001. The authors start this narrative here, as this was not only the year Aarseth (2001) marked as 'year one' for 'computer game research', but it was also the year of the first major international digital games research conference on British soil, and the first time a major research grant was awarded by a UK funding council to undertake digital games research. British digital games studies played a significant role in the early foundations and direction of early digital game research by hosting a number of key international events, research clusters, and publishing some of the key and defining textbooks in this emerging field. Moreover, it is our argument here that British digital games research continues to punch far above its weight as the location of major collaborations, clusters, events, and as the location of authors publishing work that is pushing debate forward into important new areas, and in particular, significantly adding to debates around the social, cultural, and political content of contemporary digital gaming.

Chris Bateman and Jose Zagal (in 'Game Design Lineages: Minecraft's Inventory') analyse the inventory system in *Minecraft*, and use it a case study to introduce their notion of game design lineages. The authors argue that game design is composed of heterogenous practices, not always mapped by design documents, and not limited to the rules and conventions of a genre. These are design elements that mutate and evolve from game to game, and are largely modified by the uses and interpretations of their players. Designers, the authors observe, are also players, and the influences they receive while playing games are translated in their design practice. The inventory system in *Minecraft*

is an example of how design solutions in tabletop role-playing games, while not explicit referenced by the developer, are re-purposed. Studying the lineages of game design elements is not just a way of appreciating the complexity of games as systems, but also their continuous communication with other socio-cultural phenomena and texts.

Carina Assunção (in 'Is Pokémon GO Feminist? An Actor-Network Theory Analysis') looks at the alternate reality game *Pokémon GO* and evaluates how embodiment and kinaesthetic awareness play a role in the representation of gender within the game. The author draws on Actor-Network Theory, and interrogates the flatness of the network, the 'blank state' from where networks are drawn and imagined. The game *Pokémon GO*, while presenting itself as a neutral mapping of the urban landscape which ignores divisions of class and gender, reinforces the social barriers that women face when moving in public contexts, and when playing video games. The game appears to draw on the cyberutopia of a world without gender divisions, but by ignoring their existence it ends up emphasizing their presence. Niantic's game becomes a paradigmatic example of how networks (and mapping) are never neutral practices. Bodies are always present, even more when they are eliminated from our view and reduced to material and immaterial nodes to be flattened on a digital screen.

Feng Zhu (in 'Computer Gameplay and the Aesthetic Practices of the Self: Game Studies and the Late Work of Michel Foucault') investigates the production of subjectivities in the process of playing video games, looking at *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* as a case study. His analysis draws on Foucault's notions of power and discourse and how they participate in the production of the self. Zhu argues that, when playing games, we can experience an aesthetic transformation of the self, which might deviate from the dominant subjectivities. At the same time, we might also indurate in those subjectivities demanded by current practices of governmentality. Ultimately his paper complicates our notions on the effects of games on their players by introducing a Foucauldian analysis of discourse as a key principle to understand how habits of play, across

different texts with similar game dynamics, could bring about specific subjectivities. The drive to level-up and self-improve, typical of RPG games such as *Oblivion*, could become instrumental to the production of a neoliberal subject.

Joanna Cuttell (in 'Traumatic, Spectacular Prologues: AAA Players as Ethical Witnesses') looks at the opening scenes of the major recent productions of the video game industry, and analyses the traumatic effect they set in the initial moments of the game. The initial trauma of the protagonist is a common trope in most AAA titles (such as *The Last of Us, Deus Ex: Human Revolution, Dishonored, Mass Effect*, and many others). Drawing on theories on spectacle (Guy Debord) and the photographic image (John Berger), the author offers an auto-ethnography of how these initial experiences were resolved while playing the games. The player is immediately put in a situation where a traumatic experience needs to be reconciled. While traumas in cinema and photography might create a sense of impotence in the viewer, video games have the unique narrative and affective potential of offering a resolution to the player in the act of beating the game and its challenges.

Last but not least, Sonia Fizek (in *Interpassivity and the Joy of Delegated Play in Idle Games*) offers a critical overview of a border line example of digital game. Idle games are based on an initial input by the player, and then continue playing themselves even when the screen is turned off. Examples include *A Dark Room*, analysed by Fizek in the paper, *Everything*'s self-playing mode, and Ian Cheng's artistic experiments. These are game environments that keep playing themselves via algorithms, and are supposed to be experienced as external viewers, with only occasional interventions by their players. Idle games question the basic notions of interactivity and agency, seen here as no longer necessary in the definition of a ludic text. These games are made to play themselves, and the pleasure of understanding and being challenged by a digital game is designated to the game, rather than the player. The player almost completely disappears, and must not even necessarily enjoy the game while it unfolds. Fizek draws on the notion of interpassivity

(Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek) to disentangle the apparent paradox that these games pose to players and scholars.

1.

British Digital Game Studies

Garry Crawford, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, & Paolo Ruffino

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a short and potted recent history of digital games research in Great Britain. We begin this story in 2001. Though a substantial amount of research and writing on digital games has been taking place in Britain since at least the 1980s, for us the turn of the new millennium marks a logical starting point of our recent history. Not only was this the year that Aarseth (2001) marked as 'year one' for 'computer game research', it was also the year that the first major international conference on digital games took place in the UK (in Bristol), and the first time a major British government grant was awarded to undertake

research on digital gaming. The paper then charts the significant role Britain played in hosting major early international gatherings of (now leading) games researchers, such as those in Bristol and also Manchester. As well as the important crop of early British-authored (text) books that helped shape the direction of this new and emerging discipline. What we then see is a significant growth in British digital games studies focused on a number of key events, research clusters, and publications, and the development of a particular framing of digital games within a wider social, cultural and political context. It is this, we would suggest, that has given British digital game studies its particular flavour and also its important global role in pushing forward research, theory, and key debates.

KEYWORDS

British, Digital Games, DiGRA, Game Studies, History.

BRITISH DIGITAL GAME STUDIES

We begin this story in 2001. As with all stories, there is a great deal that happened before our story begins. Many British academics and academics working in Britain (which is not always the same thing) were thinking about, and in some cases researching and writing about, video games long before 2001. Certainly, Surman (2007 p.279) argues that 'some of the earliest, and at the time, most comprehensive work on video games emerged from the humanities departments of British universities in the mid-to-late 1980s. But 2001 seems a good place for us to start, for several reasons. First, this was the year that Espen Aarseth now famously declared as 'year-one' of 'computer game studies', hence, it seems fitting to outline where British digital game scholarship was at, and how this developed from this starting point drawn by Aarseth. Second, 2001 was the year David Buckingham of the London University Institute of Education won the first major grant from a UK research council to research digital games. Buckingham subsequently appointed Diane Carr

to head up this project, and soon after they were joined by Andrew Burn. This team were at the forefront of combining different approaches, theories and methodologies, such as drawing on social and educational psychology, and film and literary theory, which allowed them to advance understanding of both the structural and mediated culture of digital games (Surman 2007); and it was this collaboration that would lead to the publication of numerous key texts including the important book by Carr et al (2006) *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*. Third, this was also the year of the first significant gathering of digital game studies scholars on British soil, at the *Game Cultures Conference* at the Watershed in Bristol, organised by Helen Kennedy and Jonathan Dovey from the University of the West of England (UWE) (The Play Research Group, online). Papers from this important conference were later published in a special edition of the journal, *Game Studies* in 2002, edited by Jonathan Dovey, and delegates at this event included both local and international scholars such as Espen Aarseth, Frans Mäyrä, Henry Jenkins, Jesper Juul, James Newman, Celia Pearce and TL Taylor. In particular, Jonathan Dovey recalls this conference as the first time there was a head-to-head discussion on British soil between leading proponents of both the ludology and narratology approaches to games research; an ongoing debate that would shape the direction and nature of game studies for many years to come.

The Bristol *Game Cultures Conference* would lead to a number of other symposiums organised by the Play Research Group at UWE, including *Power Up* in 2003, *Playful Subjects* in 2005, and *PSii on Games and Technology* in 2006 and 2007. Also, most notably, this 2001 conference laid the foundations of what would lead to the publication of Helen Kennedy and Jonathan Dovey's important book, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media* in 2006. However, before all of this, the second series of major conferences in the UK, organised by Jason Rutter, were to take place in the North of England, initially Manchester. The first of these conferences was the *Playing with The Future: Development and Directions in Computer Gaming* held in Manchester in April 2002. This conference attracted what was probably, at that point, the biggest and

most significant gathering of leading academics in this newly developing field, which included (amongst others) Chris Bateman, Mia Consalvo, Diane Carr, Marinka Copier, Garry Crawford, Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jesper Juul, Aphra Kerr, Julian Kücklich, and Tanya Krzywinska, plus several representatives from the games industry such as Jason Della Rocca and Michael Rawlinson. This conference was also significant as it was here that informal discussions of the forming of an international association for digital games research began.

As with the Bristol conference, the Manchester meeting was the start of a series of conferences, when Jason Rutter in partnership with a number of local hosts used research council funding to hold a series of game focused symposiums around the UK over the following two years. Also, as with the Bristol conference, the Manchester event led to the publication of a key text in digital games studies; Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce's 2006 edited collection, *Understanding Digital Games*. This book, as with the conference before it, gathered together some of the leading names in British and international digital games studies, and, along with Carr et al. and Kennedy and Dovey's books of the same year, provided important foundational textbooks for the emerging study of digital games. Over a decade later, these books are still in common use in many undergraduate courses the world over. Similarly, other important books published by British scholars around this time include, amongst others, Barry Atkins' (2003) *More than a Game*, James Newman's (2004) *Videogames*, Tanya Krzywinska and Geoff King's two books, *Screenplay: cinema/videogames/interfaces* (2002) and *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: videogame forms and contexts* (2006), and Valerie Walkerdine's (2007) *Children, Gender, Video Games*; books that have left a lasting impression on the shape of contemporary digital games studies and helped solidify the position of British academics as being at the forefront of defining key directions in this emerging discipline.

In his analysis of key texts from British scholars in this period, Marcus Leaning (2012) notes that the topics being discussed in these volumes

included, unsurprisingly for the time, aspects of ludology and narratology, but also evident is a considerable focus on players, gamer culture, the game industry, and representation. Hence, as well as contributing to the existing key debates of the time, British digital game studies (if such a thing exists) was notably also pushing forward debate into the areas of social, cultural and political aspects of gaming. As Surman (2007 p.279) wrote of Dovey and Kennedy's 2006 book 'eschewing the polemical and purist approaches of the first wave of scholarship in and around game cultures, Dovey and Kennedy elect to take a passionate-yet-moderate line that pragmatically negotiates a hybrid field of critical methodologies entirely appropriate to the eccentric and multifarious culture of games'. Similarly, Surman (2007 p.280) highlights that King and Krzywinska (2002) 'go beyond Ludology and its discontents, and disciplinary wrangles, to tackle some of the most pressing questions in this most recent wave of games analysis [such as] "Social, Cultural and Political" dimensions'.

It was also in 2006 that Tanya Krzywinska became the second President of the newly-formed Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), which had been founded a few years earlier in 2003. This was a post she held until 2009, and then in 2010 two other leading British scholars, Helen Kennedy and Esther MacCallum-Stewart, became DiGRA's new President and Vice-President respectively. Between 2005 and 2010, John Salisbury, Siobhan Thomas and Diane Carr formed the London Games Research Group, and hosted a series of informal research and discussion seminars. These meetings focused primarily on core debates within the British scholarly community, such as representation, methodological practice, and diversity. Sessions provided participants with an opportunity to present and discuss their work, and several key contributions emerged from these workshops, including those by Paolo Ruffino and William Huber.

Between 2008 and 2012 the *Under the Mask* annual conference series was organised at the University of Bedfordshire by Allison Gazzard, Gavin Stewart and Steven Conway. The *Under the Mask* series was

notable, as it was here that several national and international scholars presented their work, often for the first time, including Ashley Brown, Steven Conway, Astrid Ensslin, Jessica Enevold, Sonia Fizek, Nicolle Lamerichs, Daniel Golding, Charlotte Hagstrom and Adrienne Shaw. Over the years, this conference has showcased the vanguard of British (and international) digital game studies, with keynotes by leading scholars, including Diane Carr, Garry Crawford, Tanya Kryzwinska, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Jason Rutter. A direct result of the *Under the Mask* series was the publication of *Game Love: Playing with Affection* (2014), edited by Jessica Enevold and Esther MacCallum-Stewart; a collection that joined the growing body of international research on gender, sex and sexuality in games.

In 2009 the annual DiGRA conference came to the UK for the first time, as Brunel University hosted the *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory* conference. Organised by Barry Atkins, Tanya Kryzwinska and Helen Kennedy, this event included keynotes by Richard Bartle and Ian Bogost. Women in Games hosted a popular stream at the event, with a keynote by Kaye Elling, and at this conference we also saw one of the first discussions on games perseveration. This discussion, and the success of the Nottingham GameCity festival (run annually since 2006), helped contribute to the setting up of the National Video Game Arcade in Nottingham in 2015, which continues to be an important international archive and resource.

The 2010s continued to see British digital game studies punching well above its weight in terms of its contribution to international debates and the continuing development of this field and area of research. Some key books published by British digital games scholars in this decade include, but are in no way limited to, James Newman's (2004) *Playing with Videogames*, Helen Thornham's (2011) *Ethnographies of the Videogame*, Graeme Kirkpatrick's (2011) *Aesthetic Theory and The Video Game*, Garry Crawford's (2012) *Video Gamers*, Esther MacCallum-Stewart's (2014) *Online Games, Social Narratives*, and Seth Giddings' (2016) *Gameworlds: Virtual Media and Children's Everyday Play*. If Marcus

Leaning was to repeat his content analysis of contemporary British digital games studies books, he would undoubtedly find an increased focus on the social, cultural, and political debates surrounding digital games that he noted in earlier publications. Though the topics covered by British digital games studies scholars are diverse, if there is an identity to this body of work, it is probably its contribution to expanding the parameters of research beyond a focus on defining and analysing game structures and content, to include considerations of the wider social context and culture of gaming.

In 2014 Tanya Kryzwinska brought the editorship of the journal, *Games and Culture,* to the UK. Also in this year, a British chapter of DiGRA was (re)launched at the University of the West of England at a day-long conference entitled *Pervasive Provocations: The State of Games in the UK.* This conference was followed by the formation of an advisory board for the British chapter of DiGRA led by Ashley Brown and Esther MacCallum-Stewart, which was initially named DiGRA UK; a name it retained until this changed to The British Digital Research Association (BDiGRA) in 2017.

In 2016 the inaugural class of DiGRA Distinguished Scholars included the British academics Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Tanya Kryzwinska. Also in this year, the annual DiGRA conference returned to the UK, to the University of Abertay, Scotland. This conference was organised by William Huber, Staffan Bjork and Casey O'Donnell. The conference also partnered with the Dare Protoplay festival, which showcased emerging talent in the games industry. This was the first joint event with DiGRA's sister FDG (Foundations of Digital Games) conference. In Scotland the GameThink series at the University of Glasgow, organised by Matthew Barr, ran between 2015 and 2017 and provided an 'unconference' space for discussions and the exchange of ideas (University of Glasgow 2015). Although a Scottish chapter of DiGRA had existed previously, the decision to revive the British chapter melded these groups back together.

2017 then saw the first annual conference of the British DiGRA chapter, hosted at the University of Salford at their MediaCityUK campus, organised by Garry Crawford, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Paolo Ruffino, and attended by over 110 delegates. This conference again included leading international names in the field, such as Chris Bateman, Aphra Kerr, Kristine Jørgensen, Jesper Juul and José P. Zagal. At the conference, a formal meeting of the British DiGRA chapter was held, nominations for the Board were collected (with online votes included), and the chapter voted to change its name to British DiGRA; in line with the naming conventions of other international chapters and national learned associations. Board members formed a social media team and a working party to examine the placement of games studies within the UK's Research Education Framework, as well as committing to plans to host an annual conference from this point onwards.

Hence, in 2018 we find British digital game studies in rude health. British scholars continue to produce a large number of very important books and papers, which are continuing to shape and push forward research into digital games, and Britain continues to host major international journals and conferences, which bring together the world's leading researchers. Also, it has to be acknowledged that British scholars and those working at British universities have, over previous decades, massively contributed to the development of digital games more generally, such as Alexander 'Sandy' Douglas' version of *OXO* (or 'noughts and crosses') (1952), and Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle's *MUD* (1978), to name but two early and significant contributions. Digital games would in no way be what they are today without British academics and universities. However, the history of Britain's hugely influential role in the wider development of digital games and its industry is a much larger discussion, and far beyond the scope of this short paper. What we have attempted to do here is map out just some of the key contributions British scholars have made to the international development of the study of digital games. In particular, we would suggest, if British digital game studies can be said to have contributed significantly to any one area of this developing field, it is probably most

notably in the study of the wider social, cultural and political context of digital games; however, it must be noted that the scope and impact of British digital game studies undoubtedly goes far beyond this. It is important to note however, that this is just one (very limited) version of this history. It is how we (the authors) recall events, and how those we have asked to contribute similarly have recalled these events. This history is far from complete or comprehensive. Much of importance has been left out, due to limitations of space, or simply failing memories. We readily accept there is much more and many others of importance that we could have included. But it was not our intention to provide a definitive history, but rather to spark both memories and debates. If you recall things differently, or feel we have made major oversights or misinterpreted events, please do let us know. If British digital game studies is anything, it is a very broad church, which welcomes diverse opinions and debates; so please, join in.

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2.

Game Design Lineages

Minecraft's Inventory

Chris Bateman & José P. Zagal

ABSTRACT

Game design is conditioned by the practice, both formal and informal, of drawing from previous designs as a source of knowledge and inspiration. Innovation in game design is thus often the result of old ideas recombined in novel ways. We propose the concept of the game design lineage as a framework for tracing, analyzing, understanding and explaining the historical significance of specific design elements in games. In addition to game design elements, a design lineage should consider a game's socio-cultural context, including the design and player practices of its creators, and the relationship between these and the prevailing player practices of the time. We contrast this with approaches

that consider individual games as their unit of analysis – e.g. comparing different games with each other and establishing connections between them *without* considering the historical context of their player practices. We feel this approach, while insightful for understanding changes between games that are superficially similar, risks implying a strict Linnaean-style inheritance pattern (inheritance by genre), and thus struggles to account for games with a diversity of design elements that originate elsewhere. We argue that the flow of influences in game design is typically fluid and heterogeneous, and not constrained by genre. Key to this concept of a game design lineage is the role of player practices; i.e. how players receive, perceive and interact with games, and the ways these have shaped the ideas that are then implemented. We illustrate the game design lineage approach with an analysis of *Minecraft*'s inventory system, tracing its different elements across multiple games, genres, designers, and player practices.

Keywords

Game design lineage, player practice, RPG, Minecraft, D&D, Dungeon Master

INTRODUCTION

How can we articulate the knowledge of game designers? One well-established method has been to identify and abstract important design ideas, disentangle them from any specific game, and formulate them as a concept or schemata. The underlying assumption is that an abstract idea is more easily communicated and also more readily usable by others who can instantiate that concept in their games. These are approaches that tend to deconstruct games into their constituent elements e.g. as patterns (Björk & Holopainen 2005), unit operations (Bogost 2006), or ludemes (Parlett 2015).

It can be productive to decompose otherwise complex systems into constituent components as a means of analysis. However, there are

dangers in treating any such decomposed element as merely a building block or tool in the design toolbox. These approaches often isolate game design elements from the social, cultural, technological and other contexts in which they reside. This makes it harder to understand why certain elements may have been used, why they might have been popular, who they might have been popular with, and more besides.

Consider the use of passwords in 8-bit videogames, for example. Outside of the context of the arcade, which favored short, intense play experiences in order to facilitate coin drops, games on early home computers, or consoles such as the NES, began to offer larger worlds and thus longer play experiences. Players of these games needed to record their progress so that they weren't always starting from scratch. They needed a 'save game', but the hardware was not yet able to easily support this option. A design solution was developed that was hardware independent: the password. Upon completing a portion of a game, an alphanumeric password would be presented to the player that allowed them to start the game from that point when the password was entered during a later play session.

We argue that it is not possible to fully understand this design element without also considering the *context* in which it was developed. Technology to store player data was prohibitively expensive at the time (the economic context encouraged this interim solution), player perceptions and interests were drawn towards more involved game experiences that required many hours to complete (the design trend towards longer games made 'banking' progress necessary to maintain an acceptable player experience), and inputting alphanumeric codes in a game was a familiar player practice due to the existence of 'cheat codes' that were used to alter the way a game executed (the solution was similar to a practice that players accepted and were familiar with).

The combinations of design elements that constitute games are constrained and shaped in specific ways that go beyond their construction as systems. Human and cultural influences serve important

roles in elucidating practical elements of design, and these are especially important when *reconstructing* the historical circumstances behind a design.

The challenge of trying to understand a design element through its historical context is not novel and has been tackled across design-related disciplines in a variety of ways. Keller et al. (2006) describe how industrial designers collect materials they use for reference, while Brown discusses competitive reviews in web design as a method that helps designers "find out how other people solved the same design problems" (Brown 2011 p. 255). Similarly, Clark and Pause (2012) argue for the importance of developing theory with which to design architecture through the analysis of precedents. In fact, the knowledge acquired from studying precedents is useful across a range of design tasks (Eilouti 2009) and is often captured via design cases (e.g. Lawson 2014; Boling 2010).

In the context of game studies and game design, we feel that little work has been done to explore how best to provide a rich and deep insight such that game design knowledge can be understood, communicated and possibly used without losing the essential relationships required to make sense of the games in question. We offer the notion of the *game design lineage* as a means to partially address this challenge by contextualizing game systems within the player practices that provided both the environment that guided their implementation, and the background of understanding against which the game was encountered by its original players.

A *game design lineage* is a rich description of the networks of connections between common designed elements (in keeping with the notion of decomposing into coherent units or patterns) that is situated within an understanding of the context that conditioned the original design decisions that led to them, understood in terms of player practices (Bateman 2016a, 2016b). This perspective is important, not only in terms of more accurately investigating the historical connectivity of games and

their designs, but also because insights from the past remain useful in the future, and can explain problems that are currently misunderstood or taken for granted.

GAME DESIGN LINEAGES

Game designer, Raph Koster, argued that "the evolution of the modern video game can largely be explained in terms of topology. Each generation of game can be described by a relatively minute alteration of the play space." Furthermore, he claimed that "when we design games, we often start with a previous game and change just one element in it." (Koster 2004 pp. 78–9) He notes that we can use this to understand relations between games and how to group them (Koster 2014). For instance, a game with the same rules, but differences in presentation can be called a 'reskin', changing a rule however leads to a 'variant'. We call a collection of variants a 'family'. And, if the family becomes large enough, we end up with a 'genre'. As a game designer, Koster is concerned with the design of new games, and his perspective offers a heuristic for game design innovation. Juul built on this idea by organizing 'matching tile' games chronologically by year of release and connecting them with directional arrows that indicated the possibility of inspiration or the probable perception by players that this was the case (Juul 2008). So, an arrow from *Puzz Loop* (1998) to *Zuma* (2004) meant that the latter was probably inspired by the former or that players would likely perceive that to be the case.

Suominen (2016) argues that these approaches are genealogical in that they seem beholden to biology and evolution: a game is presented as a root or source, and from it, like branches on a tree. Thus, we can reveal connections between games, influences, "and sources of inspiration of game designers." (Suominen 2016)

This biological metaphor, while at times productive, can be misleading. When designing games, it is more often the case that elements of multiple games (and other media) serve as inspiration rather than a single

earlier game. Few games have a singular 'ancestor' from which they descend (sequels are perhaps the clearest exception). Designers pick and choose from the buffet of options they are aware of. Following the biological analogy, game design is akin to selecting genes from the different genomes that are known, and, from these disparate genes, assembling a new creation. With apologies to Mary Shelley, games are like Frankenstinian, assembled from a mish-mash of parts and inspirations.

Our concern with genealogical approaches is that they prioritize the game as the unit of analysis. However, many of the historical and design influences in games have resulted from design elements having been borrowed from other games, oftentimes outside of genre conventions. Genealogies and other genre-based taxonomies are ill-equipped to provide insights into how first-person shooter games such as *Battlefield 4*'s (EA DICE, 2013) progression system was influenced by tabletop role-playing games (Zagal & Altizer 2014) or how quick-time events made their way from laser-disc games like *Dragon's Lair* (Cinematronics 1983) to 21st century third-person action games such as the *God of War* series (e.g. SCE Santa Monica Studio 2005), first-person shooter games such as the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series (e.g. Infinity Ward 2009), and sports games like *FIFA 2010 World Cup South Africa* (EA Canada 2010).

This genealogical concern also applies to videogames with significant configuration options, and games that are treated by their developers as a service (with frequent updates and changes) rather than a product (e.g. Duncan 2016). Consider the customization options allowed in the multiplayer games of *Halo 2* (Bungie 2004): arguably, these different modes could be studied as variants (Cheung & Huang 2012). Similarly, the game of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) that was played when it was released has changed significantly, in terms of its game design, compared to what is played today. How can we best articulate what happens to these games in different players' hands and over time?

Our answer to these challenges is the *game design lineage*. We present this as a research method that entails both historical research and careful game analysis. Since this is a first attempt at a game design lineage, it should not be taken as prescriptive of method but indicative – our goal is to show how to draw together the decompositional method of considering game elements that are a part of a game (rather than whole games) with the compositional method of positioning games within genres and genealogies. We focus on three contexts: (1) the *player practices* within which the game was both designed and first played; (2) the *material constraints* (both technological and economic) affecting the game; and (3) the *creator vision*, that synthesized these in a particular manner.

The method of constructing game design lineages, we propose, should not be taken to present definitive histories, if indeed such a thing is possible. While establishing causal relationships is beneficial to a design lineage, it should not be taken as a goal of the method. The purpose of a design lineage is not to *prove* that one situation led to a later situation, but to *illuminate* the latter situation in the light of the earlier ones that either hypothetically, anecdotally or evidentially provides a relevant context. In this regard, they resemble 'thick descriptions' of game design from anthropology i.e. descriptions that explain not just a behavior but also the context of that behavior such that even someone not belonging to the relevant culture can understand it (Geertz 1973).

Player Practices

Player practices are the habits that players have learned from playing games:

> "…a 'player practice' is anything that a player has learned to do consistently. This includes, for instance, using the right stick on a controller to move the camera object, pressing a button to jump, smashing boxes to look for power-ups, and imagining that moving an animated 'doll' in a depicted space entails 'entering' the implied fictional world." (Bateman, 2016a)

It is precisely because player practices are habits – and community habits at that – that they are important to constructing a historical perspective on the design of specific games. Constructing a game design lineage necessarily means taking into account what player assumptions might have been and how they may have shaped the incorporation of specific design elements. In tracking interface practices for example, it is possible to draw partial conclusions from default control schemes as to the prevailing player practices within a particular development culture, or player community (Gkikas et al. 2007).

Player practices can be identified by observation or interrogation of players. When neither is available the design of games can be examined to produce hypothetical player practice claims. In this regard, we see no bar to individual players drawing on their own anecdotal experiences as evidence, although anecdotal observations of multiple players ought to be given more weight than purely personal observations.

It is important to recognize that player practices are not automatically reproduced. Designers often draw from existing player practices (e.g. the use of the right control stick of a joypad to control a camera object), while also actively subverting prevailing practices to innovate or meet their own play needs (e.g. *Halo*'s abandonment of a multiple weapon inventory for a two-weapon system with streamlined controls and new design choices).

Below are a few questions that can guide the exploration of the player practices context:

- How was this design element related to contemporaneous player practices?
- In what ways was this design element familiar to players?
- How does the design element address a problem related to player practices?
- How was this design element received by players?

Material Constraints

The technological affordances and limitations that existed when a design element was developed constitute a major part of the material constraints working upon any particular game. This includes the platform (i.e. the hardware and software frameworks that support other programs) and other relevant technologies, e.g. display equipment, input devices, and internet connectivity. Commercial considerations also form an important aspect of the material constraints. For example, the design of arcade games was conditioned by the material constraint of its business model, namely individual coin drops, a situation revolutionized by *Gauntlet* (Atari Games 1985), which accepted multiple coin drops in a single game – an early example of the 'microtransaction' business model.

Bogost and Montfort's platform studies (2007) are salient examples of considering the relationship, including mutual influences, that the underlying hardware and software can have with games and their designed elements. Their book on the Atari 2600 demonstrates how technological constraints can influence and affect game design (Montfort & Bogost 2009). It is important to consider both the constraints and affordances – what a given technology makes possible – since new technologies (both hardware, e.g. graphics chips, and software, e.g. game engines) have created novel avenues for design and discovery.

Questions for exploring the material constraints of design elements:

- How did this design element make use of existing technologies or tools?

- In what ways does the underlying technology support the design element?

- What technologies were necessary and how common were they?

- What commercial considerations affected the choices behind this design?

Creator Vision

Examining this context requires an understanding of how a creator takes their existing habits, practices, and 'materials', and alters them in some way to create something new: their context, in other words. This may include exploring, when known, what games they might have played or been influenced by. It may also be necessary to consider other games produced by the same individual or studio. Since design practices are habits, the culture of design practice at specific companies become important. Thus Bethesda's commitment to drawing from the practices and experiences of tabletop role-playing games (Ramsay 2012) becomes part of the background of understanding for any of their computer role-playing games in a way that is less significant for, say, Square-Enix, which has no such vision. Similarly, we can learn about the creators' context by examining game design and development artifacts beyond the games, including the code, comments within the code (Sample 2013), game design documents, manuals and more besides.

Questions for exploring the context of creator vision:

- What games might the creator know and have been influenced by?

- What tendencies do the creators demonstrate through prior or subsequent work?

- What do we know about the developer's design process or creative vision?

- What design trends were in vogue when this design element was developed?

CHALLENGES IN CONSTRUCTING GAME DESIGN LINEAGES

Because this research method can never be exhaustively complete, it presents substantial challenges. The main risk is the creation of deterministic narratives that are overly simplistic and reductionist. All

explanatory narratives run this risk. Since one of the purposes of a game design lineage is to identify connections between design elements spanning games and time, there is danger in believing that because a connection exists, such influence was inevitable (rather than merely fortuitous).

There are also practical challenges. The three distinct contexts articulated above will, in practice, interrelate in various ways that may not be easy to disentangle. For instance, game creators often have their own player practices that influence their work and will deviate in various ways from the community practices, particularly when developers have access to cutting-edge technology. Creator vision and material constraints combine to shape player practices, just as player practices shape visions and drive the development of new technologies, providing new material constraints.

Consider the example of *Quake*'s control schemes (id Software 1996). This is the point of origin for the mouselook control mechanism that led to the two-handed FPS control scheme, but it occurs only as an *option* in this game. Its standard control scheme uses arrow keys for movement, a player practice that was well established in the dungeon crawl games that descended from *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR 1974), of which *Dungeon Master* (FTL 1987) is a prominent example. Earlier id games such as *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992) and *DOOM* (id Software 1993) had conserved the player practice of using cursor keys for navigation, and were in effect dungeon crawlers in all but setting and pace. Notably, id's earlier *Catacomb 3-D* (id Software 1991) is expressly a dungeon crawler. In this example, a player practice associated with one style of game (arrow key controls with dungeon crawlers) develops into a new player practice associated with a different kind of game (mouselook with FPS games) with influence from material constraints (a new game engine) and creator vision (the faster paced gun play of the FPS).

Since it is hard to know beforehand what role a particular context may have had in shaping a game design element, this approach may seem

daunting. It is also possible that important information may not have been known or available, and there are also frequent inconsistencies, even amongst those that were directly involved in the development of a feature or idea. This means that, in creating a game design lineage, it is often necessary to make assumptions based on incomplete or inexistent information when demonstrating the provenance of a certain game design element is strictly limited by the available sources.

We argue that, challenges notwithstanding, this is a fruitful method. It is also increasingly easier to access the information required for this kind of work. We have seen a rise of literature on videogames, both new and old. Strategy guides often include designer's commentary, game designers are more vocal in the media now than ever before, player communities exist online in easily accessible places, streaming and media sharing offer insights into how players play etc. Game reviews are also a source – they illustrate player practices prevalent at the time of a game's release and highlight connections between games and their creators that might not otherwise be known (Zagal et al. 2009).

The remainder of the paper is concerned with providing an illustrative case study before concluding with a reflection on future directions for this kind of work.

CASE STUDY: MINECRAFT'S INVENTORY

Figure 1: Minecraft Inventory System

Minecraft is arguably one of the most successful videogames of the 21st century. Its trajectory from a small independent game to a worldwide phenomenon earned its creators numerous industry accolades and significant financial success (Duncan 2011). In terms of its design, *Minecraft* was not significantly innovative – having been, in fact, described as a clone of an earlier game (*Infiniminer*) by its creator Markus "Notch" Persson (Goldberg & Larsson 2015). That being said, *Minecraft* was significant in the way it utilized, recombined and reimagined game design elements from earlier games.

In the following game design lineage we will discuss and analyze *Minecraft*'s inventory system (Figure 1). What can immediately be seen are (1) a grid inventory, (2) a set of armor slots and an image of how they look upon the character, (3) a crafting area, and (4) a quickbar. We draw attention to the way that every single element of *Minecraft*'s inventory descends directly from a lineage of videogames rooted at its base in the original tabletop role-playing game (RPG), *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), the player practices of which are not overtly on display within *Minecraft*, but which can be shown to condition its design through the games that descended from its influence.

Grid Inventories and the Paper Doll

The grid inventory, prominent in *Minecraft* and the backbone of game inventories for years now, is part of a series of player practices that owe their origins to the influential *Dungeon Master* (FTL 1987). In all grid inventories, equipment is represented by a tile (often, but not exclusively square) showing an icon of the relevant item, and items are equipped by dragging these icons into the relevant spaces surrounding a figure representing the character. Items that are carried but not equipped are stored in rectangular blocks of empty squares. Every aspect of this design originates with *Dungeon Master*, which made a conscious break from the linear text inventories of earlier computer RPGs (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Inventory System in Dungeon Master

Dungeon Master came about through the co-operation of two designers who were intimately embedded in the player practices of tabletop role-playing games and their early computer descendants – Doug Bell and Andy Jaros. SirTech's *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech 1980) had been their direct inspiration; they wanted to make a dungeon crawl in that vein, and set to work on what was then called Crystal Dragon. However, they didn't have the funds to complete the project alone (McFerran 2006). They ended up partnering with Wayne Holder, husband of fantasy and horror novelist Nancy Holder. The combination of a pair of designers rooted in the player practices of role playing games, a professional writer, and a business-savvy company owner was to prove immensely productive.

The core vision guiding the project was providing the player with a powerful sense of immersive presence. Jimmy Maher (2015), in a summary of the circumstances behind the game, characterizes their goal as "an embodied CRPG experience", and quotes Nancy Holder as asking: "How do you go from being a player to being 'in' a game?" Bell and Jaros, as game designers caught up in the well-established player practices of *Wizardry* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, were repeatedly challenged by the Holders to push past the usual assumptions. As Wayne

Holder later remarked, "At the time, most RPGs were adaptations of board games" and their ambition was to transcend this (Meston & Arnold 1994 p. 131). Nancy Holder's experience as a horror writer informed the experiential design, while Wayne Holder's outsider perspective on role-playing helped remake the menu systems to bring them up to the standards then coming together in Graphical User Interfaces at the dawn of the WIMP (Windows/Icons/Menus/Pointer) era (Kovacs 1988).

Thus the creators' vision for *Dungeon Master* involved breaking down the sense of separation between the world and the character sheet, which earlier games in this lineage had inherited from *D&D*. In *Dungeon Master* (named in reference to its tabletop progenitor), the player can find a sword on the floor of the rendered three-dimensional dungeon, move their pointer (styled as a hand) and grasp it, delivering it into slots in the grid inventory (Wayne Holder's WIMP-inspired innovation) or into the 'paper doll' slots representing each character's personal equipment. The widespread deployment of both these practices descend from this game, and they are conserved from this point, as Holder himself remarks (Meston & Arnold 1994 p. 132): "We expected to be imitated… but it was amazing how many things we did that got completely borrowed." Indeed, comparing a screenshot of *Minecraft*'s grid inventory with that of *Dungeon Master*'s, the key difference is that *Minecraft*'s appears shoddier in terms of presentation values.

Crafting and Multi-Celled Inventories

The process of manipulating game items in certain combinations to create new items has come to be termed 'crafting'. *Minecraft*'s inventory screen has a box specifically for this purpose. Crafting formed no significant part of *Dungeons & Dragons* player practices until the 3rd edition in 2000, and none of the notable early computer RPGs descending from it feature this concept. The means of creating magical items that tabletop *D&D* offered has had next to no influence, and while there are earlier examples of item-combinations such as *Ultima IV*'s spell creation system (Garriott 1985) or *Finders Keepers* (Jones

1985), it appears to be *Diablo II* (Blizzard North 2002) that largely establishes the design element and player practice of crafting through the introduction of the Horadric Cube, a secondary grid inventory of 3×4 spaces that includes a button to transmute its contents into a new magical item (Figure 3). This provided a means for players to create endgame items beyond waiting for them to drop, and although its function was considered fairly arcane at the time, it was nonetheless a central part of many players' experiences of this game.

Figure 3 Diablo II's Horadric Cube (crafting system interface)

That the crafting box in *Minecraft* resembles that of the Horadric Cube is not coincidental: *Diablo* (Blizzard North 1996) and *Diablo II* were so commercially successful that it is these games (and the *Elder Scrolls* series, discussed below), that anchor the conservation of player practices

in Western-style computer role-playing games from this point onward. The Japanese CRPG lineage, which also traces its heritage back to *D&D* via *The Black Onyx* (Rogers 1984) and *Wizardry* before it, would tell a different story, but one that does not bear on the game design lineage of *Minecraft*'s inventory.

The original *Diablo* is one of the games that synthesize influences from both tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons,* and its computer game inheritors. Co-creators Erich and Max Schaefer had played in the kind of mindless dungeon bash style of *D&D* that was common (but by no means universal) in the early days of the hobby:

"We wanted to do an RPG how we'd played Dungeons & Dragons as kids: hit monsters and gain loot. Our mission was that we wanted the minimum amount of time between when you started the game up to when you were clubbing a skeleton." (Edge 2010)

Indirect influences came in via the other co-creator, David Breivik, who had played *Moria* (Koeneke & Todd 1983) and *Angband* (Cutler & Astrand 1990), two early roguelike games descended ultimately from the unimaginatively titled *dnd* (Whisenhunt & Wood 1975) on the PLATO educational computer network, work on which began the same year that tabletop *D&D* appeared.
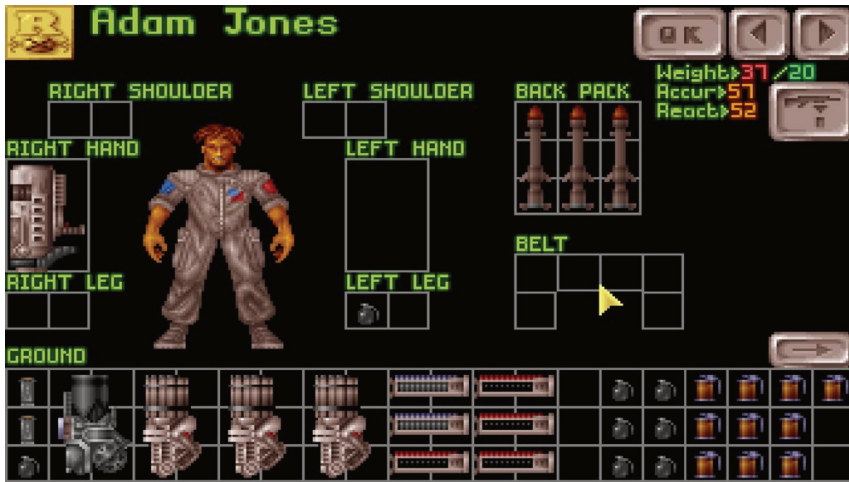
Figure 4 UFO Enemy Unknown

The inventory in *Diablo* has another key point of influence, however, namely Julian Gollop's *X-Com: UFO Defense* (Gollop 1994), originally entitled *UFO: Enemy Unknown*. The influence here was in the idea of modifying the original grid inventory concept, which allocated one square to an item, by having items take up multiple spaces (Figure 4). In *Diablo*'s inventory screen, weapons take up between three and six spaces in the grid, in various configurations, a design element and player practice established by and descending from *X-Com*, which all three of the *Diablo* creators mentioned above point to as their inspiration for the interface design (Edge 2010, Pitts 2006).

The multi-cell grid inventory, created by Gollop for *X-Com*, descends from a line of games the British programmer developed for 8-bit home computers. From the age of 14, Gollop was playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and the strategy boardgames of Avalon Hill that had inspired it (Retro Gamer 2014). Gollop was influenced by the design of strategic boardgames, as can be seen with *Rebelstar Raiders* (Gollop 1984) and its sequels, although it is only with *Laser Squad* (Target Games 1988) that he began to combine *D&D*-style differential characters – and thus inventories – with the player practices he had developed across his

Rebelstar games, the last of which had been released earlier in the same year. The multi-cell grid inventory arguably has its origin at the tabletop, since *Battlecars* (Chalk & Livingstone 1983), which Gollop adapted into a videogame, used a similar system, and this boardgame descended directly from Steve Jackson's classic tabletop autoduellist wargame *Car Wars* (Jackson 1981), for which allocating weaponry to the limited spaces available in the chassis was a major aspect of its play.

Another of Jackson's games, *GURPS* (Jackson 1986), serves as a more direct connection between crafting practices in videogames and their tabletop predecessors. While *Diablo II* appears to be the game with the most direct influence on *Minecraft*'s crafting, it is important to recognize that the *Elder Scrolls* series is another contributor to the player practices that sustain crafting in games. Bethesda were deeply involved with the narrative practices of tabletop role-playing, and were far more interested in role play than the simple kill-and-level rule play that inspired *Diablo*. It is *Daggerfall* (Bethesda 1996) that marks the point that Bethesda's influences change from *D&D* to later tabletop role-playing systems, particularly *GURPS* (Gamespy 2001 as archived at RPGCodex.net).

A striking aspect of the inventory screen in *Daggerfall* is its division into categories like Weapons & Armour, Magic Items, Clothing & Misc, and Ingredients. As noted below, this was a common aspect of *Dungeons & Dragons* character sheets, but it hadn't been used much in computer RPGs. The influence of tabletop practices is also felt in Bethesda's crafting systems. *Arena* (Bethesda 1994) had a spell creation system that was a modular version of D&D's fixed-definition spells. *Daggerfall*, on the other hand, has a more detailed spell and weapon enchantment system, where players choose from a set of effects then modify casting cost and purchase price by altering chance of effect, duration, or magnitude. This draws very clearly from the GURPS concepts of Advantages and Disadvantages that would go on to influence *Fallout* (Interplay 1997).

Tabletop RPGs hadn't had a motive to include crafting systems, but the emphasis on volumes of loot earned in computer RPGs (a product, in part, of much faster-paced play) created a need to find other things to do with items other than just sell them. For *Daggerfall*, the system that most resembles future crafting practices is the Potion Maker. Certain items in the game were characterized as Ingredients and could be combined in a Mixing Cauldron, accessed from Temples or the Assassins' Guild. Mixing could be done freely, or recipes (acquired as treasure drops) could be used to operate the Mixing Cauldron automatically.

Although the Mixing Cauldron's scope is narrower than *Diablo II*'s Horadric Cube, both develop the same design element: one where the inventory is neither a source of equipment for immediate use (as in *D&D*), or simply fodder for sale (e.g. most pre-90's CRPGs), but a set of active elements that can be combined in different patterns to get other equipment. Material constraints are relevant here, since these player practices made no sense at the tabletop, where complex look-up tables would be required. On computers, however, the availability of automated game systems kicked off experimentation with crafting as soon as there was sufficient memory space for such luxuries.

Quickbars

One final element of *Minecraft*'s inventory remains unaccounted for: the bar at the bottom that allows rapid access to the contents of the inventory. This is an inventory practice that makes no sense at the tabletop, yet it will hardly be a surprise at this point to demonstrate that it too descends from a lineage tracing its departure point to *D&D*. Here, the pivotal game is *EverQuest* (SOE 1999), which is the first of the 3D 'graphical MUDs' – later known as a Massively Multiplayer Role-playing Game (MMORPG).

The earliest MUDs, such as the ground-breaking *MUD1* (Trubshaw & Bartle 1978) were much more exercises in world building and community play than adaptations of *D&D*, although Bartle notes that he

had played the game (Bartle 2016). It is the LP MUDs (Pensjö 1989) and especially the DikuMUDs (Hammer et al. 1990), originating in Sweden and Denmark respectively, that saw in the MUDs the opportunity to (yet again) adapt *D&D* for computer form (Aarseth 1997 pp. 142–61), repeating what had happened back in 1974 on the PLATO educational network. From its first publication through to the early 1990s, wherever there was an opportunity to adapt the various player practices of *D&D* into a computerized form, it was taken.

The inventory systems of all these early online games remain resolutely in the style of the early text adventures, and thus in the form of *D&D*: a list of words. A text command 'inventory', often available as just 'i', would list all the items that the player was carrying as a simple linear list. Each item was specified in the design of the game, either as a unique object (in most adventure games) or as a class to be instanced (in computer RPGs and MUDs). As long as these games were represented in text, there was no possibility of it being otherwise.

The graphical interface of the MMORPG is the material constraint that gives rise to the quickbar. However, tracing the practices of MMOs, or indeed any game that is run as a service, requires significantly greater effort than investigating games released as products. Game-as-services means constant changes and updates, and this makes archaeology difficult to adequately perform. Nonetheless, we know of an early (perhaps the first) form of the hotbar in the original *EverQuest*. The player was able to customize its contents by placing different actions (at this point primarily described in words e.g. "Melee Attack") onto the bar, where it could be quickly clicked with the mouse, or activated with a hotkey. The name 'hotbar' is a reference to the concept of a 'hotkey', which has its origin in the graphical interfaces of computer operating systems. It appears to be *EverQuest*'s early competitor, *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001), which coins the term 'quickbar' (styled in *Minecraft*'s case as a 'quick-bar'), and as with all games of this style, the design varies radically throughout its life. The functionality, however, remained parallel to the equivalent practices of *EverQuest*.

CRPGs were already moving towards this kind of customizable inventory practice, as the available hardware resources increased and games took advantage of this to add more functionality. The action bar at the bottom of the screen in the officially licensed *D&D* computer RPG *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1998) functions as a proto-quickbar, even though inventory items are a small part of the space allocated for it. Similarly, *Diablo II* offers a quickbar-like system that is presented as being part of the fictional world of the game by linking its functionality to belt items. Each belt provides the capacity to access potions, with different belts having varying capacities. However, by *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment 2012), this experiment had merged with the main lineage of quickbar practices that had blossomed in the MMORPGs.

There is another potential link between the quickbar and MUDs worth considering. MUD players often found that there were actions (or clusters of actions) that they needed to perform frequently, and swiftly hit upon a solution via running additional software in parallel to the MUD that supported macros. A macro was a script of text actions coupled to a key press to trigger it, typically (but not exclusively) the function keys (F1-F12), which were ideally suited for such purposes. Later MUD client software began to build in these macro systems automatically, because the player practices had become dependent upon the macro concept for smooth play. Note also that it was the players who added this element to the MUDs, with no involvement from the game developers.

Because the developers of *EverQuest* were MUD players (Bartle 2003), they appear to have been drawn to providing customizable interface elements like the hotbar, thus accelerating the development of what would become called the quickbar: they were (on this reading) a graphical substitute for macros, a customizable element that could tailor to the individual player's practices. MUDs required more actions, in part because they brought together multiple players, which necessitated communication and performance which were irrelevant in a single player

game. MMORPGs inherited this requirement, and developed the quickbar practices to deal with it. Here, in this final element of Minecraft's inventory design, is a clear example of why examining the history of games as player practices can reveal aspects that are invisible if they are examined solely as artefacts, since it is only through the actions of the players that the practices of games are sustained.

The Origins of Game Inventories

For almost twenty years after its original release, TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons* was the wellspring from which many of the player practices and design elements of computer role-playing games were established and conserved. *D&D* had many influences from the tabletop scene preceding it, not least of which were the wargames of Charles S. Robert's Avalon Hill, but the sheer degree to which the *D&D* rules were distributed throughout the US (primarily via college players) – both by purchase and through unlicensed copies – made this the definitive version of tabletop RPG player practices that were conserved by the computer variants. All the way through the 70s and 80s, *D&D* was feeding its player practices directly or indirectly into computer games, as with the example above of the influence of early dungeon crawlers on the development of the FPS lineage.

In terms of inventories, *Dungeons & Dragons* effectively invents them (although it did not coin this term) or rather, acquires this practice from early non-commercial tabletop role-playing games, and then becomes the locus of the conservation of player practices by being so widely distributed. The key to the inventory is the character sheet, which collected together all manner of fields (Name, Class, Attributes, Alignment and so forth) including a list of all items possessed – the prototype of the inventory. *D&D*'s original 1974 edition did not have a pre-designed character sheet, and players recorded all the text and numbers required to specify their characters without an established template. However, experimentation in home-printed character sheets soon appeared, such as the one created by Bob Rupport in 1975 (Peterson

2013). TSR only established an official printed character record sheet in 1977. These early examples demonstrate that tabletop RPG inventories in the early days were quite frequently multiple written lists: Rupport's version divides the inventory into sections named Weapons/Armour, Magic Equipment, and Other Equipment, while TSR's official version provided separate boxes for Magic Items and Normal Items, stressing the importance of Magic Items (acquired as treasure) to character advancement, both in the tabletop game and in its immediate successors.

When early computer role-playing games took up these practices, there was little sense in maintaining the distinct segments, with *Daggerfall* a rare exception. It was the material qualities of paper and pencils, and the requirements for manual maintenance of lists in this form that had made separate boxes useful. The material constraints of computer games, however, all but dictated a single inventory system accessed with a unified control mechanism – as can be seen with *Wizardry* and *The Bard's Tale* (Interplay 1985).

In *The Bard's Tale*, each character in the party is allowed eight items in their inventory – a number that facilitated selecting items using a single press of the number keys (the material constraint that informed this design). Equipped items were marked with an asterisk, and although an image of party members is shown, the choices of items do not change that appearance (as they do in *Minecraft*). Despite being five years older, *Wizardry's* inventory is almost identical, the one difference being the use of a question mark to indicate items that had not been identified, a player practice invented by *D&D* but largely maintained only in *Rogue* (Toy & Wichman 1980) and its descendants.

Michael Cranford, the game designer and programmer at Interplay who was responsible for almost every aspect of *The Bard's Tale* except its art, was not only playing *Dungeons & Dragons* at the tabletop (frequently as Dungeon Master,) but also playing a great deal of *Wizardry* (Crooked Bee 2013). Just as with Bell and Jaros' *Dungeon Master*, Cranford wanted to create a 'Wizardry Killer', and with *The Bard's Tale* achieved

a streamlined perfection of the player practices of that earlier game, as well as bringing in a few of the new player practices TSR had added in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax 1978), such as changing classes – itself a contribution from the player community.

Recognizing *Dungeons & Dragons'* role in initiating inventory design elements underlines the importance of considering player practices for game design lineages. The tabletop role-playing game had radically different material constraints to early computer games, and it was the desire to preserve the already established player practices that made the inventory systems for *Wizardry* and *The Bard's Tale* what they were – and the desire to transcend what had gone before which made *Dungeon Master* such an influential title.

The design of every game is conditioned by the conservation of player practices, which sustains those practices that are effective in satisfying the visceral or imaginative needs of players. Every example here serves to elucidate this point, and to show how games are never isolated objects: they are always embedded in the manifold of player practices responsible for their creation, and which they then contribute to maintaining.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The player is the heart of the game, and game design conserves player practices because designers are also players. We can trace lineages of design elements and their intimately related player practices, not because successful games are rare exceptions that borrow their practices from earlier games, but because games that borrow the majority of their practices from earlier games are best positioned to be successful – especially if they bring something new to the table in the process. Notch may not have played tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *The Bard's Tale*, or *Dungeon Master*, or *X-Com*, or *EverQuest*, but the inventory practices of *Minecraft* nonetheless inherit the successful variations that these games introduced upon a bedrock of established player practices.

Understanding games and game design by examining player practices and constructing game design lineages does not entail any dramatic sea-change to the way games are made or studied, it merely involves foregrounding what is all too commonly dismissed: games are connected by historical lineages sustained by common player practices, which is to say, things the player learns to do consistently. The game designer, a player themselves, recreates the player practices learned from other games, as well as expanding and intentionally subverting them through the application of new creative visions, conditioned in part by the affordances offered by new material constraints. Even when a game designer thinks they are pulling together isolatable atomic elements of a game design, they may simply be ignoring the practices those elements belong to, and which are required to make sense of them. The game design lineage method invites both researchers and game designers to reconsider the role of history and culture in understanding games.

Not only do game design lineages represent a new research tool for understanding the history of games and the practices of game design, they potentially have significant relevance for commercial game development. Certain games succeeded commercially while others did not: the reasons for this are not always (perhaps, not ever) entirely reducible to the design decisions or the quality of implementation. Sometimes the prevailing player practices created difficulties within the marketplace because a certain game did not align with player expectations, while other games with apparently conservative designs (i.e. designs that did not innovate) enjoyed commercial success *despite* the frequent claims by players that they preferred originality (e.g. Schmalz 2015). We leave open the question of how these aspects of commercial success could be researched, or even whether definitive answers are available to researchers. Nonetheless, the preceding discussion makes a case for the influence of player practices and game design lineages upon the commercial success of *Minecraft* that, at the very least, offers a new perspective that commercial game designers and game studies scholars may want to seriously consider.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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3.

Is Pokémon GO Feminist?

An Actor-Network Theory Analysis

Carina Assuncao

ABSTRACT

The Pokémon franchise has been targeted and has been successful with males and females (Tobin, 2004). In it, cute-looking creatures with superpowers fight each other for the fame and glory of their masters (the players). The franchise includes a plethora of entertainment media. This essay will focus on the recent release, *Pokémon GO*. This particular game and its location-based technology will be analysed using cyberfeminism and actor-network theory to explore the play space as a context for kinaesthetic awareness and embodiment. The cyberfeminism herein exploited is that of "the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender" (Haraway, 2000, p. 292). Actor-network theory, a strong

methodological tradition in science and technology studies, sees actors and the networks they create as completely 'flat' and non-hierarchical. ANT has been criticised for its lack of concern with politics and gender (Lagesen, 2012) but, in combination with a feminist lens, ANT has the potential to uncover issues that other approaches in game studies cannot. This original framework can help game studies scholars to see gameplay processes in a new light by following the many actors involved in game design and use.

Keywords

Pokémon, actor-network theory, feminism, gender, location-based game, augmented reality

INTRODUCTION

Pokémon GO (Niantic, 2016) is a location-based, augmented reality online game for smartphones. Based on the narrative of the original Pokémon games (Game Freak, 1996), it puts the player in the shoes of a Pokémon master whose goal is to explore the gameworld to collect Pokémon (creatures with special fighting powers), train them, and take them to 'gyms' to battle against other masters' Pokémon. In *Pokémon GO*, the gameworld overlaps with the physical one due to its location-based features. Using GPS, the game draws a map similar to the player's current location, adding to it 'pokéstops' where the player is encouraged to go in order to collect game items which aid game progress. These locations can be monuments, local landmarks, or businesses and other sites of local interest.

Pokémon GO, however, was not the first location-based, augmented reality game. *Ingress* (2012), Niantic's debut title, paved the way with similar mechanics, and was also successful, reaching 20 million downloads across Android and iOS (Webster, 2017). Designing a game based on the Pokémon franchise, though, changed that figure into 750 million.

Pokémon GO, thus, having been a huge success since release, attracted both praise and criticism. Mainly, the location-based feature created worries that players would be lured into dangerous places or situations[1234]. Some of those situations were hoaxes, but some were not; the developer did fail to predict such problems related to the play space.

Dangerous gameplay or not, hordes of gamers got out of the stereotypical basement and took it to the parks and landmarks around the world to catch imaginary "pocket monsters". Thus, understanding the intersection of gender and spatiality becomes timely. To do this, a new theoretical framework is presented herein, borrowing from science and technology studies. Some important critical thinking was published on social media by academics (Velloso & Carter, 2016a; Velloso & Carter, 2016b; Phillips, 2016), but *Pokémon GO* has not been addressed as a feminist study of technology.

Cyberfeminism is mainly concerned with the cyberworld (Consalvo, 2002), however, *Pokémon G*O juxtaposes this with the physical world. Thus, where cyberfeminism lacks the appropriate tools to analyse physicality, I therefore adopt actor-network theory (ANT), a methodology that allows us to 'follow the actors' (literally in this case), analysing links among the network created by the artefact (the game).

This paper argues that ANT can be useful to game studies to uncover these unusual relationships between human and nonhuman actors. Additionally, when combined with a feminist theory, it can overcome its most damaging critique – a flat ontology that ignores gender and power dynamics.

1. http://www.smh.com.au/technology/smartphone-apps/pokemon-gos-unexpected-side-effect-injuries-20160710-gq2squ.html
2. https://www.kotaku.com.au/2016/07/pokemon-go-trainers-please-dont-wander-into-the-police-station/
3. https://www.theverge.com/2016/7/8/12132746/pokemon-go-teen-discovers-dead-body-wyoming
4. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/10/pokemon-go-armed-robbers-dead-body

The game will thus be discussed along with implications for the gendered gameplay experiences, and embodiment through the views of cyberfeminism, while adopting the actor-network theory method. The paper will thus enrich the games studies field by using an original framework to analyse a popular mobile game, looking at its cyberworld (user interface, game screen) and its translation into the physical world (location-based features).

INTRODUCTION TO ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

Technology studies, as a discipline, is inherently multidisciplinary. It includes works from anthropology, history, science and politics. In its very definition, however, technology studies are concerned with the social, historical and political context in which technologies are developed and used.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has been controversial and, curiously, its name has been criticised by one of its strongest proponents, Bruno Latour (2005). Rather than a theory, he proposes that ANT is a methodology; a way of doing sociological research. The main requirements for doing research with ANT are: to take a neutral stance regarding the many actors involved in the phenomenon (human or otherwise), avoid biased views as to what is true or false, right or wrong, and start off from a theoretical tabula rasa (Dudhwala, 2015). The most controversial aspect of ANT is its 'flat ontology', which abolishes the macro/micro level of actors, thus attributing equal agency to all, whether human or not. This includes ignoring gender dynamics and power relations among those actors.

Thus, it would seem like attributing sentience to non-human actors such as videogames, albeit temporarily, could prove useful in the videogame development phase. During the playtesting phase, utilising the ANT method would allow developers to foresee potential hazards in gameplay. Let's now take a look at a feminist theory that would complement this exercise.

INTRODUCTION TO CYBERFEMINISM

Cyberfeminism was a movement in the 1990s which had its origins in the academic discipline of technology studies, when feminists reacted to their technophobe predecessors (Kennedy, 2000). It was a reaction to notions that technologies belonged to a masculine culture; e.g. the microwave oven was first marketed as a brown good (such as televisions or audio equipment), for men (Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993; Consalvo, 2002) because it was a new technology and men would be 'naturally' suited to understand and use it. This, of course, ignored the domestic sphere where women were tasked with food preparation responsibilities. Soon after, microwaves started being marketed as white goods, along with other kitchen accessories and food preparation tools.

With the advent of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), feminist scholar Sadie Plant (1997) was inspired by the possibilities she saw in cyberspace, which seemed to abolish traditional gender roles, liberating women's bodies and identities as passive and nurturing creatures. Ironically, Plant was criticised for essentialism, seeing cyberspace as the perfect environment for women to thrive in, because of its femininity, expressiveness, and sociability (Lagesen, 2008).

Cyberfeminism, however, cannot be defined by the views of one author only, and many different views (and generations of feminists) have contributed under this concept (Wildling, 1998). As mentioned above, one of the first authors to write about cyberfeminism (Plant, 1997) was criticised for defending an essentialist view of women. Critics maintained that the only way to confront the gender divide in technology was to call all women to use it, especially ICTs and the cyberspace (Daniels, 2009). 'All girls need modems' was a motto of this group, who were, in turn, criticised for presuming all women could afford them. Following this, a younger and technology savvy group of writers turned their cyberfeminist efforts to encourage women to be more active in the technology industry instead of mere users (Consalvo, 2002).

Standing somewhere in between, some cyberfeminists believe that encouraging women to use technologies (digital ones) and the cyberspace in general, will improve diversity in its development (Cherny & Weise, 1996). Unfortunately, this does not seem to have improved women's standing in certain technological industries (such as videogame development) in the past few years (D'Anastasio, 2015; Duggan, 2015; Clercq, 2016; Sinclair, 2016). Others, however, acknowledge that equity in numbers is not the most important aspect of change. Wajcman (2004), for instance, defends a more political and action-oriented approach, rather than mere interaction with technology.

Given that cyberfeminism was primarily concerned with the cyberworld, this paper will map Sadie Plant's views about democratisation onto *Pokémon GO*'s gameplay. Additionally, the later perspectives will help us analyse how female gamers are interacting with the game and its play space.

Having described the theoretical framework and methodology to use, this paper will now proceed to analyse the gameplay implications of *Pokémon GO*. First, it will look at the game through the cyberfeminist lens and then combine it with ANT to ponder on gameplay procedures, looking at controversies that happened when the game was released last year.

CYBERFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF POKEMON GO

The marketing of Pokémon may be described as gender-neutral or ambiguous. Indeed, the franchise (videogames, anime and trading card game) has been seen to attract both boys and girls from a very young age. The most gendered aspects of the Pokémon world include the human characters and the cute creatures that the player needs to collect. They are described as monsters, but physically look adorable and inspire caring and nurturing actions (Allison, 2004). On the other hand, they are fiercely strong and their role in the game (besides being collected) is to fight each other. This inclusion of both gendered aspects (nurturing

and fighting) may explain the franchise's immense success throughout generations; its first release was in 1996. It was not marketed to a particular gender, which is a smart move that can potentially double sales (Tobin, 2004).

Referring back to the cyberfeminist lens that encourages women to actively participate in the development of technologies and not just use them passively *(Daniels, 2009)*, one could point out that Pokémon has been a success among people of all genders despite having been developed by a male and, as with most of the videogames industry, a male dominated team *(Crunchbase, 2017)*. Even though it is true that the gender gap in the videogames industry is still large *(Maggs, 2017)*, it is also true that many titles are now embracing diversity of representation and experiences. The sheer number of female gamers (41%, according to the Entertainment Software Association, 2017) shows that (predominantly male) game developers can still appeal to female gamers' interests. A fascinating example is the first-person shooter, Overwatch (Blizzard, 2016), which was praised for the interesting female playable characters which attracted double the usual number of female gamers for that specific genre *(Au, 2017)*.

Gender representation

Even though the original author of Pokémon is a male, the franchise always targeted children of both genders *(Tobin, 2004)*. Indeed, though the game's protagonist is Ash, a boy, there have always been female characters in the various videogames, albeit some non-playable until the release of Pokémon Crystal in 2001 *(Bulbapedia, 2017; Hernandez, 2016; Quiescence, 2014)*. Besides, although the Pokémon have ambiguous gender markers, the game aptly deals with gender by creating complete separate species to give them gender. In the case of Pokémon GO's first release, the only gendered creatures are 'Nidoran ♂' and 'Nidoran ♀'. In the main games' series, the creatures have three options, female, male or unknown; this is mainly to support the breeding game

mechanics (Bulbapedia, 2016). Pokémon GO eventually got an update seven months after the release to reflect this and started showing a gender for each creature caught in-game.

Thinking more specifically about 'cyberfeminist utopia', it should be pointed out that Pokémon GO enjoys gender-fluid characters. The leaders of the three teams a player can choose to join at the start of the game *are very androgynous (F*igure 1) [5]. Furthermore, the game asks the player to "choose a style" rather than gender or sex, which has been praised as a great achievement for gender-fluid representation in games (Rose, 2016). Nonetheless, the interface only has two options, which, regardless of gender-neutral clothing, are still easily identifiable as male and female, reinforcing binaries found in gender stereotypes. The change of language adopted seems to have been the result of a petition by fans, and also the impact of a very popular game – The Sims 4 (Electronic Arts, 2014) – having added a gender-fluid option to its avatar creation process (Rose, 2016).

5. Fanart credit to Mistiqarts, https://mistiqarts.deviantart.com/art/Pokemon-GO-team-leaders-626240654 reproduced with permission.

Figure 1: Team leaders in Pokémon GO

While the fans seem to be happy that Pokémon GO developers heard their pleas not to force them to identify as a certain gender (Denham, 2016), it remains that the body of the avatar is visible most of the time during exploration of the map. This underpins embodiment into something that non-binary, third gender, agender or those who disagree with the binary gender system, may not be comfortable with, because they do not feel represented. Avatar embodiment has been thoroughly discussed in games studies literature, and has been said to be inevitably linked to gender identities and performances *(Crowe & Watts, 2014; Todd, 2012).*

A central argument of cyberfeminism was to embrace new technologies to destroy the gendered barriers that allowed microwave ovens to first be marketed to men, and then be a success among women. Pokémon GO shows that, even though it was a success among both, it still can neglect sections of the population. Evidence of non-binary individuals using videogames to try and feel represented has been increasing exponentially

(Detey, 2017; Morse-Noland, 2017), though very little of it has had scholarly attention, focusing mostly on sexualities rather than gender identities *(Shaw, 2015)*.

In addition, there is no diversity of bodies within the spectrum available. The avatars (as well as the team leader characters) follow a prototype of bodily fitness which, although matching the gameplay activity portrayed and necessary to progress the game (walking around), it demarcates a slim, attractive ideal of beauty standards perpetuated by the beauty industry *(Stone, 2017)*. On one hand, when choosing a female avatar there is no option to wear a plain tracksuit, which would fit the type of activity. All the clothes available are very tight fitting, which may look and feel uncomfortable for those with different body types than what the game avatars have. This sportswear style, specifically over-the-knee socks, is hyper feminine, and thus a clear gender marker. On the other hand, the male avatar has no choice of skirts, playsuit or sexy socks, as his female counterpart does. In Fallout 4 (Bethesta, 2015), any character can wear whatever piece of clothing available, irrespective of their gender. The male avatar in Pokémon GO is athletic and muscular. Although this analysis focuses on gendered representation, let us not forget disabled individuals who still participate in Pokémon GO by moving themselves by any other means necessary (e.g. wheelchair, crutches, public transport).

Pokémon GO: cyberfeminist utopia?

*N*ot allowing customization into a more androgynous look (or simply a gender-fluid option such as The Sims 4 allows) does not liberate individuals from the binaries lived in the stereotype-enforcing cis-gender world, something for which Sadie Plant's cyberfeminism strives for. Another aspect cyberfeminism aimed for was democratization of the cyberworld through liberation from our physical bodies. This was based on the anonymity allowed by the internet, the genderless utopia Plant talked about *(1997)*. Even though Pokémon GO definitely allows for

anonymity (one has to register to use the game through an email address, but no real name policy is put in place), the nature of gameplay forces the player to step outdoors. This overlay between reality and cyberworld obliterates the anonymity curtain. The game forces the player to step outside and embody the 'trainer' (name given to the player inside the gameworld), walking around in their own skin, with the possibility of being spotted by other players. Indeed, the movement required of players, i.e. to swipe their finger on the smartphone's screen, is easily spotted, in addition to the bright colours on the screen. Given the game's success since its release in July 2016, it can be quite easy for non-players to identify others playing, either in groups or by themselves. This has had an impact in gameplay experience for players and also non-players, who could notice groups of players crowding near Pokéstops and in-game Gyms *(Oakley, 2016)*.

Player visibility can also be correlated to the number of hours played. Although there is no hard data about the amount of time players spend in Pokémon GO, one can deduce that women play just as much as men, given that they account for nearly 40% of players *(Dogtiev, 2017)*. One interesting paradox, however, is in Pokémon GO's genre (mobile, and thus casual) and its theme/content being part of geek culture, which is associated with hardcore (male) gamers. Games developed for smartphones are usually, implicitly, 'casual games', e.g. Candy Crush Saga (King, 2012), and this genre has been historically associated with female gamers, because they demand low investment of time and skill (Bogost, 2007; Juul, 2010). This myth has, however, been debunked, as it has been found that casual gamers can spend just as much time playing as hardcore ones (Lewis & Griffiths, 2011), and there are just as many men as women who play casual games *(Jenson & Castell, 2015)*. This also echoes the notions early cyberfeminism tried to confront; that women are less capable of engaging with technology; this has also been debunked in massively multiplayer online games research *(Shen, Ratan, Cai, & Leavitt, 2016)*. Besides, at one point this summer, there were more female Pokémon GO players than male ones (Mac, 2016).

Indeed, the game's outdoorsy features encourage recognition and interaction among players in the offline world, which may encourage female gamers to meet and form bonds. This may, in fact, be Pokémon GO's biggest achievement for female gamers. It has been shown that women refrain from identifying as gamers, usually due to the strength of the male gamer stereotype, and for their own perception as being part of a minority amongst gamers (Assunção, 2016; Beavis & Charles, 2007; Consalvo, 2012; Duggan, 2015). Knowing other female gamers has been mentioned as an important step in accepting and assuming a gamer identity.

Even though the game can be considered gender-neutral because it has been a success among both genders, this does not completely illustrate the original cyberfeminist's dream of a genderless world (Haraway, 2000). As mentioned, the gender binary system is well entrenched while players choose their "style" (gendered avatars). Even though styles do not come with prescribed actions (e.g. first versions of The Sims did not allow male avatars to become pregnant), the game mechanic requiring players to step outdoors and walk increases kinaesthetic awareness, ensuring embodiment and immersion in the game (Peters, 2016). Although this is a typical feature of many popular videogames, the third-person view encourages identification with the visible avatar. This means that the discomfort of using an avatar that does not represent oneself, and playing this game outdoors, may be exacerbated by the forced embodiment with the constantly-visible avatar. Curiously, Shaw (2015) in a series of interviews with minorities who are under-represented in videogames, found that many enjoy playing those games where they do not identify with playable characters.

Avatar identification

One potential benefit of enhanced kinaesthetic awareness is the aforementioned identification and interaction with other players. One anecdotal example is a potential learning process that can happen when

one player notices another using different gestures on the smartphone's touchscreen to better catch a certain Pokémon. Again, this is a very important aspect for female gamers; given that they rarely identify as gamers, hindering their interaction with others, it has been often cited that their main introduction to games are male friends, partners, or family members (Butt, 2016; Shaw, 2011). As with other aspects of life (careers, education, entertainment), having similar role models is essential to choosing a path.

Myths such as those abovementioned, women do not belong near technology, and they should not be playing videogames, can thus be discredited if female gamers are more visible, and Pokémon GO does just that. Thus, if women are able to see others playing a game and enjoying it, it might be easier to literally 'come out' as gamers and be liberated of traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

This analysis has helped us understand Pokémon GO in a feminist light, concerning individuals' roles in technology development and use. It allowed us to see how gender in the game was thought through development, and how it can be experienced by players.

On one hand, we have Sadie Plant's view that the very characteristics of the cyberworld welcome women for their femininity, will swiftly fit in. On the other hand, later cyberfeminists were concerned with women's place in game development, technologies' narratives and outcomes. It can thus be said that Pokemon GO has some feminist aspects instilled in gameplay and user interface, but some problems remained unresolved. By analysing Pokémon GO through this lens, this paper uncovered the issues lying beneath the shiny colours of the game, and potential future research avenues in the intersection of non-binary representation, location-based games, and gamer communities.

The above cyberfeminist analysis of the game is incomplete because it is too narrowly focused on the micro-level analysis of the gaming experience, focusing on the cyberworld i.e. game interface. ANT will aid

this analysis by looking at the location-based implications of Pokémon GO's gameplay, while, at the same time, aggregating the conclusions from the cyberfeminist analysis.

ANT ANALYSIS OF POKEMON GO

Because ANT attributes agency to all actors in the same network (human or otherwise), it is a useful exercise in games studies, given that the artefact itself is seen as having agency, thus making its players perform certain actions. This would not be doable with a purely feminist approach to technology because it would ignore the game's strategy to replicate and spread its play space.

ANT as a methodology allows us to take a neutral stance towards an artefact and the networks it creates, ignoring power dynamics. The disregard of gender issues by ANT has been criticised by feminist scholars in technology studies (Quinlan, 2012). Indeed, because ANT treats all actors equally, it ignores power relations that, for example, erase women's achievements in STEM disciplines because of the difficulties presented in joining those careers where they weren't always allowed (Casper & Clarke, 1998; Lagesen, 2012). Because ANT researchers start from a 'blank slate', they do not take into account existing frameworks in which actors act the way they do. Attributing it all to their own agency ignores the social construction of their own identities and thus, the context in which they were built and their performances practiced. For instance, while it is true that the game's agency acts to encourage interaction between local businesses and gamers, it also overlooks women's interest in playing the game, allowing for their identification as gamers. Although identification with peers who share the same values and hobbies can increase self-esteem (Beavis & Charles, 2007; Shaw, 2011; Consalvo, 2012), it can also harm them by exposing them as gamers. Indeed, the game ignores the barriers women face when engaging in this type of activity (gaming), which is widely known to provoke harassment in online games (Fox & Tang, 2014; Fox & Tang, 2016). Given *Pokémon GO*'s location-based gameplay, this can

have a whole new set of implications for female gamers, the intersection of gaming-based toxic behaviour with the physical world where they are already victims of harassment, and worse (Flores, 2016).

There are many actors involved in *Pokémon GO*; the game; the game developers; the players; the non-players; 'gamers' who do not play *Pokémon GO*; the street businesses; Pokémon fans; social media; and others. Each one of these comprise, by themselves, their own network, in which *Pokémon GO* has entered and established itself as an obligatory point of passage. The example provided by Latour in his study of Pasteur's efforts to translate his discoveries about anthrax disease (1983) explains this very clearly. Before Pasteur's agency in actively joining the different interest groups (farmers and microbes), there was no link between them. The same has happened with the game mechanics provoking *interessement* between the game (and its players) and local businesses; e.g. cafés or shops that the game determined would be a pokéstop, or a gym, both very important for the game's progress. This increased the foot traffic around these places which, in turn, may have increased sales as people tend to stick around these locations while playing[6]. This has been shown by the overwhelming response Niantic (the game developer) got from businesses requesting that their locations be made into pokéstops and gyms. The following paragraph will explain how the location-based feature creates networks of *interessement*.

The game translates the physical world into a gameworld. Beyond the mobility of smartphone games that can be played anywhere and at any time, if there is a network signal, *Pokémon GO* juxtaposes and converts one into the other due to this augmented reality technology. Although it is optional to overlap the camera functionality with the virtual creatures in the game while trying to catch Pokémon (**F**igure 2), the game still draws a map representative of the player's position. Images such as these flooded the internet as players found the feature fun to use. This worked as a marketing tool (word-of-mouth), and invoked interest from

6. https://www.inc.com/walter-chen/pok-mon-go-is-driving-insane-amounts-of-sales-at-small-local-businesses-here-s-h.html

individuals who were not previously Pokémon fans. Some have pointed out that this is actually unnecessary, since it does not affect gameplay (Carter, 2016).
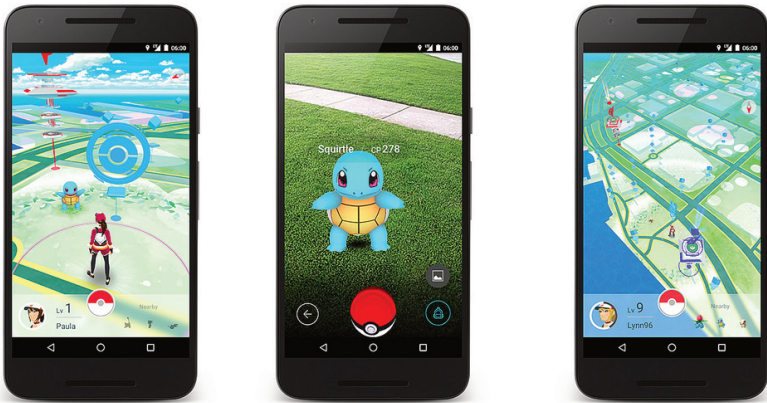
Figure 2: Pokémon GO screenshot on social media

Social media had a big impact on the game's reach, especially due to the abovementioned depictions of gameplay, which were replicated in memetic form. Social media and memes have been described as having agency when it comes to spreading information and replicating cultural phenomena (Richards, 2002). Memes, like genes, want to replicate; social media thrives on word-of-mouth and memes, evidenced by the 'trending topics' constantly visible in the ever-popular Facebook and Twitter spheres (Kairam, et al., 2013). Through the ANT lens, one can assume that social media and memes as structures definitely have some credit in the game's success and how it was socially constructed as a meme itself. Because of its innovative features, it attracted new populations (such as non-gamers and those who were not Pokémon fans). Like *Farmville* (Zynga, 2009) engaged an unprecedented number of female players (Shaw, 2011), *Pokémon GO* (and the many networks it created) replicated itself, spreading its powerful will to replicate.

Controversies

The developers failed to predict that the nature of gameplay rendered the game space, or play space, completely open-plan. The translation process rendered the activity of play almost impossible to limit physically or temporally. Another casual, simple, and readily-available game has had similar impacts and been impacted on by player-actors. *Flappy Bird* (Nguyen, 2013), also hugely successful, was taken off digital stores by its own creator a few months after release because its players became too addicted. The game's mechanics produced too much frustration (it was very hard to beat), and thus Nguyen, the indie developer, took it down because he could not manage the fame and negativity of the frustrated players (Kushner, 2014).

Similar negativity has surrounded *Pokémon GO* for its abovementioned availability. Firstly, the translation from the physical space into play space takes players to a time before videogames existed, when children played more outside (Fullerton, et al., 2007), which should not count as a negative thing. Indeed, one of the ironic outcomes of its success is that the game takes players outdoors, something which has been videogames' main criticism ever since they became popular as stationary virtual worlds on home PCs and consoles. However, this seems to have been a double-edged sword, for its far-reaching (Earthly) gameworld means that there are no off-limit areas. Unlike traditional digital games, where maps are finite, *Pokémon GO* players reportedly entered dangerous areas, private property, found corpses, and were victims of various accidents due to lack of attention while playing[789]. At least one blog was created specifically to document depictions of gameplay at funerals.

Similarities between ANT and the performativity of gender (Butler, 1990) cannot be ignored. In a paper exploring ANT's potential to study

7. http://www.syracuse.com/us-news/index.ssf/2016/07/
   pokemon_go_dangerous_every_crime_accident_death_shooting_linked_to_game.html#0
8. http://pokemongodeathtracker.com/
9. http://pokemonatfunerals.tumblr.com/

gender, Lagesen (2012) highlights how certain artefacts interrupt or complement a translation by introducing themselves in women's networks where gender is being performed. Women and men have the same agency in their performances of gender; both want to reinforce their gender identities in order to belong to the larger group, obtaining both status (the better performance, the better status) and certainty (confirming their own gender identity). Actors are thus genderless, for gender is a social construct. Actors acknowledge gender as they perform it. Artefacts are socially constructed, and thus reflect some gendered aspects of their developers; e.g. the I-methodology used in videogame design, which means most developers are male and create games for themselves (Oudshoorn, et al., 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2013). Even though Pokémon's mastermind is male, it appeals to young children of all genders.

ANT may not have been intentionally developed to be feminist, but it has the potential to be, as it allows for an equal analysis of all actors and the relationships among them. It eliminates inequalities and biases as a methodology, which seems to be highly appropriate for qualitative studies, where researchers come closer to their object of study. By ignoring the difficulties female gamers may have in identifying themselves as gamers, one can find how they are connecting to the network created around *Pokémon GO*. Ignoring the social construction of mobile games as casual, easy games, which are usually preferred by women, one can clearly see they are played by all genders in much the same way. Media outlets still try to reinforce the idea that mobile games are meant to "kill time", which in itself reinforces the notion that videogames are not a worthwhile endeavor. For instance, in a web article that cites a statistical study showing that *Pokémon GO* players consist of more males than females, the author asks, "Does it mean men have more spare time to kill on the game than women do?" (Dogtiev, 2017)

CONCLUSION

The present essay described *Pokémon GO*, a location-based, augmented reality mobile game with a 20-year old franchise history and a huge following. The game's gendered implications were discussed in relation to the cyber, and the physical world.

From a cyberfeminist perspective, the argument can be made that *Pokémon GO* has some feminist concerns for inclusivity and equality. It was found to have some desirable elements that deconstruct gendered practices. For instance, the game employs gender-inclusive language by allowing players during avatar creation to choose "a style", not a sex or gender. Nonetheless, after careful analysis, the present paper argues that the players have limited choices in avatar design (e.g. clothes available differ according to "style"). This means the game still has gendered binaries inscribed in its design, which can be quite limiting for non-binary players to feel represented. Indeed, the aesthetics of the player avatars are not as gender-fluid as the characters comprising the Team Leaders, which have androgynous bodies and very few gender markers.

Nonetheless, the analysis of this popular mobile game would be incomplete without juxtaposing the game's interface with its location-based gameplay. This paper therefore employed a popular science and technology study method, the actor-network theory, making use of its potential to look beyond gender constructs and analyse play space implications. The analysis showed not only the potential to use ANT in a feminist framework, but also the two perspectives' potential to uncover gendered issues in gameplay experiences. Indeed, even though it is an online game, players cannot remain anonymous due to its outdoor gameplay. One of the issues uncovered herein was female players' visibility, given that gameplay is easily spotted due to body movements and the user interface. This can be a positive thing for female gamers, who usually refrain from identifying as gamers (Shaw, 2011), because the game exposes their activity (e.g. bright screen, visible hand motions). On the other hand, they seem to avoid that identity sometimes due to

the prevalence of harassment of female gamers in online games (Fox & Tang, 2014). Future research into this aspect of *Pokémon GO's* gameplay and its female audience should reveal implications for gamer identity, visibility and whether outdoors gameplay is constructed as a sport activity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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4.

Computer Gameplay and the Aesthetic Practices of the Self

Game Studies and the Late Work of Michel Foucault

Feng Zhu

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to critically introduce the applicability of Foucault's late work, on the practices of the self, to the scholarship of contemporary computer games. I argue that the gameplay tasks that we set ourselves, and the patterns of action that they produce, can be understood as a form of 'work on the self', and that this work is ambivalent between, on the one hand, an aesthetic transformation of the self – as articulated by Foucault in relation to the care or practices of the self – in which

we break from the dominant subjectivities imposed upon us, and on the other, a closer tethering of ourselves through our own playful impulses, to a neoliberal subjectivity centred around instrumentally-driven self-improvement. Game studies' concern with the effects that computer games have on us stands to gain from an examination of Foucault's late work for the purposes of analysing and disambiguating between the nature of the transformations at stake. Further, Foucault's tripartite analysis of 'power-knowledge-subject', which might be applied here as 'game-discourse-player', foregrounds the imbrication of our gameplay practices – the extent to which they are due to us and the way in which our own volitions make us subject to power, which is particularly pertinent in the domain of play.

Keywords

Foucault, practices of the self, care of the self, aesthetics, gameplay practices, neoliberalism, transformation, hexis, habitus, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

INTRODUCTION

Although much has already been made of Foucault's concept of 'discipline' with respect to computer games, very little has been said about his late work, despite the fact that it can be read as an intensification and also a complication of his earlier thoughts on discipline. In the disciplinary vein, Sal Humphreys (2008, pp. 154-5) has noted that computer games technologies have the ability to quantify, measure, differentiate and compare players' actions, which resonates with Foucault's (1991 [1977]) discussion of the 'correct means of training': hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination, in the production of subjectivities amenable to the goals of particular institutions (schools, armies, etc.). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter began *Games of Empire* (2009) by remarking that the constitution of subjectivities at work in certain games is described as 'reassertion',

'rehearsal', and 'reinforcement'. And similarly, for Silverman and Simon (2009), the grind of the avatar levelling process exemplifies the disciplinary aspect of computer games.

In Foucault's later work, on Greek and Roman Antiquity, his studies revealed a subject that was not constituted, but involved in constituting *itself* through well-ordered practices, leading him to proclaim that 'it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of my research.' (Foucault 1982, p. 209) He emphasised that the subject emerged at the intersection of techniques of domination and techniques of the self, and could only be the product of historically contingent conditions (Foucault 1980, p. 117). It was by no means an unalterable substance but rather a 'form' that is capable of transformation (Foucault 1987 [1984], p. 121).

What would be involved in foregrounding Foucault's turn to the subject, with respect to the analysis of gameplay practices, would not be a straightforward emphasis on how the playing subject is able to escape the normative determinism, or disciplinary effect of the game, appropriating it to their own ends in a seemingly unfettered and creative way. It would call for a consideration of the following. First, it requires a comprehension of Foucault's synthesis of the axes that he had explored throughout his oeuvre, which he formulated into a 'tripartite' or 'orthogonal' analysis – the 'subject' is bound up with 'power' and with 'knowledge' into 'power-knowledge-self'. The subject is always to be considered in relation to power and to knowledge, not apart from them. Second, given that this fact is again captured in Foucault's explication of the concept of 'governmentality', which brings out the imbrication of the government of the self and the government of others, an examination of 'governmentality' is needed, particularly within a neoliberal context. This then leads to an important ambivalence between what Foucault called the 'cult of the self', and the care of the self, one that bears upon the nature of the transformation of the subject. Essentially, Foucault formulated a rich conceptual framework with which to consider the implications of power having become more fine-grained in its operation, bringing about the ambivalent entanglement between transforming the

self seemingly along lines that are determined from without, and transforming it seemingly in opposition to this, along lines that may be in opposition to the way in which power normatively fashions subjectivities.

This paper argues that contemporary computer games and the gameplay practices to which they give rise lend themselves to being read in terms of the practices of the self, which Foucault considered to have an aesthetic dimension. The two points mentioned above will be engaged with in the course of this paper, although they do not define its structure, which will be as follows. The first section dwells on the aesthetic practices of the self, otherwise known as the care of the self or the transformation of the self. It will be seen that the positive transformations denoted here – the subject is regarded as breaking from the subjectivities that are imposed upon them – stand in contrast to a potentially pernicious kind of neoliberal self-fashioning, which is a self-transformation nonetheless. The second section will articulate three broad assumptions that would be required in order to bring out the significance of seeing gameplay practices as a form of work on the self. Given that the assumptions themselves are not explicitly rooted in Foucault's work, this move shows that it is not that one needs to be a committed Foucauldian theorist to asseverate that a slow transformation of the self is involved with gameplay practices, but that the commitment to this transformation thesis via the assumptions reveals the relevance of his late work. The engagement with gameplay practices as aesthetic practices of the self should allow for the interpretation of findings that need not be limited by the Foucauldian framework, but may in fact have the potential to be corrective of it. The third section will consider some possible objections to the application of the practices of the self to gameplay practices, together with some thoughts about the category of the 'aesthetic'. The fourth section will briefly cover a game example that instantiates the kind of analysis that is being advanced, together with its attendant complexities.

This paper only has the scope to sketch out a rather introductory foray into considering computer gameplay practices as individualising practices of the self. More extensive arguments that arise organically from these theoretical commitments will have to be omitted due to the limitations of space. In particular, I have proposed elsewhere that Foucault's study into the practices of the self in Antiquity yielded some means for non-dogmatically distinguishing between positive and pernicious kinds of practices, which would inform us with respect to deciding between the aesthetic practices of the self and neoliberal self-fashioning (Zhu 2016). The more modest claim being made here, in contrast, is that by using a Foucauldean framework of the practices of the self, we are better suited to perceiving the player's self-construction as an accumulated process in which the player acquires a *hexis* or mode of being through their own voluntary actions within the historical context of the dangers posed by neoliberal self-fashioning. Our attention ought to be fixed upon the ambivalence between this neoliberal self-fashioning and the aesthetic practices of the self; the question of the means of disambiguation must be bracketed for now.

THE AESTHETIC PRACTICES OF THE SELF

The way in which the individual was to take the initiative in terms of shaping themselves was the main focus of Foucault's late work on the practices or techniques of the self, to which he turned to Greco-Roman antiquity. These transformative practices have been called 'the practices of the self', or 'the care of the self'. This called for the cultivation of a relation to self in which the self is neither given nor produced, but is continuously worked on in a labour of care (*epimeleia*) and skill (*techne*). For the ancients, the practices pertained to a form of mastery over oneself, so that one did not give in to one's unruly desires and become a slave to them; one had to master oneself as a free citizen before one could undertake the governing of others. It was these relations of self-mastery and self-knowledge that enabled individuals to transform their identity or to maintain it. Though not free in a totally unfettered

sense, it did amount to an 'arranging, embellishing and shaping of what is received from the past in a way that genuinely chooses between certain pre-given paths' (Hutter 2006, p. 15). As Deleuze remarked, the great novelty of the Greeks was that the ''exercises that enabled one to govern oneself' become detached both from power as a relation between forces, and from knowledge as a stratified form, or 'code' of virtue' (Deleuze 1999 [1988], p. 83).

The ancient practices of the self involved exercises and practices, such as 'abstinences, memorizations, examinations of conscience, meditations, silence, listening to others', and 'writing for oneself and others' (Foucault 1980, p. 364), and were 'defined as primarily concrete techniques of self-fashioning, rather than as forms of self-representation or ideological images of the self' (McNay 1992, p. 149). It was not the seeking of a final truth, or the adherence to strict codes, but a practice of artistic self-fashioning that transcended the formal, prescriptive, and dogmatic. The aesthetic attitude towards the self was centrally defined by the lack of external constraints or rules (transcendental values or social norms); the ethical self-transformation aspired towards an order that was held together by its own internal coherence. For there to be rules or principles governing the techniques that were used to transform the self, they would have to be invented by the individuals themselves (O'Leary 2002, p. 131). It avoided a universally imposed moral code and would provide 'a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure' (Foucault 1984 [1983], p. 348). It was, in fact, a relation that was 'independent of any 'statutory correlation' and 'isolate[d]…from the field of other power relations.' (Gros 2001, p. 540)

This task of transforming ourselves involves a philosophical ethos that may be described as the imaginative, creative attempt to surpass our limits (Foucault 1984, p. 47). Foucault suggests that the whole point of writing or reading his books is to try to detach oneself from oneself, or even to 'disassemble the self' (1988 [1984], p. 8). The knowing subject does not know for the sake of knowing, but in order to stray

afield from himself (Foucault 1988 [1984], p. 8). This 'straying afield' is, in French, *égarement*, which means, quite literally, a 'wandering'. 'There must be no global implications in the historico-critical analysis of identity', Foucault proclaimed; 'we must confine ourselves to specific transformations.' (Foucault 1984, pp. 46-7) The advantage of such an approach, characterised by its eschewal of a determinate destination, was the difficulty for this to be co-opted by new power relations or grand projects. The *aesthetic* exploration of new modes of subjectivity that was founded in an attitude of self-critique (see: McNay 1992, p. 87) suggested a way out of the cycle, insofar as it was possible, by which 'successful' resistance is transformed into domination when it becomes victorious and solidifies into a power complex that provokes a new counter-power.

That there can be no codified or determined end to self-transformation (see: Bernauer and Mahon 2005, p. 163) does not mean that resistance, which avoids totalising tendencies, must itself be formless and indeterminate. The aesthetic solution notably depends upon there being no *determinate* rules by which a work of art is made. We can recall that, for Kant, in *The Critique of Judgment* (1987 [1790]), the claim to universality of the work of art does not rest on concepts (§§6–9), and the artist cannot create such a work by learning rules. As such, judgments of beauty cannot be proved by resort to rules. Nevertheless, 'every art presupposes rules' (§46, 307), and the beautiful work is capable of serving as a 'standard or rule by which to judge' (§46, 308). Kant invoked the capacity of artistic genius (§46, 307) as that which enables individuals with the gift to produce beautiful objects without having to consciously follow any rules. It is not necessary to subscribe to a theory of artistic genius to establish a thesis concerning the workings of the aesthetic, but only to hold that any individual is able to have, or to be capable of adhering to, a style that exhibits a coherence, but which cannot be adequately encapsulated under a determinate series of rules. In other words, the truth-practices that constitute the moral subject are 'not nomothetic but aesthetic, creative of fitting moments of an admirable life.' (Flynn 1985, p. 536)

In view of the above, it may be asked whether computer gameplay practices could be thought to involve a series of exercises in which the player does not follow a strict code or final truth in deciding their actions, such as to lead to a kind of 'wandering' with the aforementioned ethico-aesthetic consequences. In other words, could gameplay practices be conducive to this kind of aesthetic subjectivity? Certain kinds of gameplay could perhaps be described as self-set, vigilant and careful activity, such as when a player seeks to comb through for all the Easter eggs, scouring every nook and cranny, albeit not strictly being required to do so to complete the game. And perhaps the habit of a daily duel with an opponent in *Magic Duels* (Stainless Games 2015), for example, for the purposes of keeping one's coin balance and playing skills topped up, could be compared with regular forms of work on the self in Antiquity. The broader significance of gameplay practices as a form of aesthetic work on the self will be addressed in the next section, in which I will propose that many 'contemporary' games, such as *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD 2017), intentionally make it a central feature to enable the player to set their own goals within the bounds of what must be done in order to continue playing the game. The players' self-set objectives can seem disproportionately punishing and demanding in comparison to what is strictly required to continue playing, constituting an asceticism that sits oddly with computer games' cultural status as non-serious works.

THREE ASSUMPTIONS

I propose that three broad assumptions are required in order to sharpen the significance of seeing certain gameplay practices as a form of work on the self. Firstly, that there has been a shift in contemporary computer games, such that they suggest or imply practices to us in the course of our engagements with them, rather than demanding a particular set of practices (such as with the example of finding all the Easter eggs); secondly, that our adoption of these practices in a prolonged manner has the effect of transforming or shaping ourselves through slow work or

a process of accumulation and sedimentation; and thirdly that there are similarities in the practices and patterns of action across different games, so that the effects in question are, in many cases, not incommensurate with one another but are in fact synchronised despite surface differences. One does not need to be a Foucauldean theorist to commit to these assumptions. Indeed, the structure of the argument here is that if one *does* commit to these, then it is but a short step to acknowledging that Foucault's writings on the practices of the self can be illuminating on this topic – the ordering here is crucial.

Contemporary computer games suggest practices

The first assumption is that contemporary computer games emphasise suggesting or implying practices, rather than demanding them for progression. This is a broad claim about the shift in games that has occurred with their development, and which has been driven by design ideologies that emphasise player choice. That is to say, the shift concerns not only games in themselves, but also the way they are talked about, and the way we try to play them. As director of *Breath of the Wild,* Hidemaro Fujibayashi, says:

> 'It's up to you how you play *Breath of the Wild*…There will be players who might gather lots of food and potions to recover hearts and stamina, so they can recover from any mistake. Other players might try to overcome difficulty by improving and strengthening their clothing and equipment…Some may rely on their bow-and-arrow technique and complete the game wearing just underwear.' (cited in Schilling 2017, p. 67)

Edge Magazine summarises that 'players exert a degree of control over the challenges they face in accordance with their individual play styles – and Fujibayashi is well aware that will include an audience that would rather raise the difficulty than lower it.' (Schilling 2017, p. 67)

In contrast to some classic games that simply escalated in difficulty, like *Tetris* (Atari Games 1988) or *Pac-Man* (Atari Inc. 1982), many contemporary games make possible very different ways and styles of

playing; not so much a series of obstacles to be overcome, they invite more than one skill-driven path through them. What I indicate here is a differentiation between, on the one hand, games that increase in difficulty in a linear progression and in which all players start from the same point with identical resources at their disposal, and on the other, those that are premised on fostering difference at the very outset (even from character creation), to inculcate a great deal of divergence between different players and play styles. This distinction reveals itself perhaps most clearly with regard to role-playing games (RPGs), in which various classes play very differently to one another – a fact that is exacerbated by the way in which players choose to level up their character, such that a Destruction school mage in the Elder Scrolls series will require a style that bears little resemblance to a Conjuration school mage.

The gamic or ludic freedom that is associated with the latter, however, is often over-exaggerated; there is much more convergence in gameplay than the marketing discourse makes out. Further, I refrain from suggesting that there has been some historical or technological 'break' after which computer games are best described as 'contemporary' and nonlinear. Older platform games, for example, often did not require the player to complete the level only via one possible route; there were hidden areas and shortcuts scattered throughout the levels, as well as entire levels that could be unlocked that would otherwise have been passed by. It is nevertheless worth noting here that many analyses of gaming history tend to steer towards imparting a localised account of the origins and development of particular design features. This kind of fine-grained attention, however, may miss more effusive overarching changes; the broad and tentative claim being made here is that the game industry discourse about games, and the way in which resources have been invested in their technological development, have both seen an emphasis on players being able to play the game in their own way, and that this is true of sizeable sectors of the game market. The result has been the opening up of possibilities of playing through self-setting certain limitations and challenges, such as not using more than one party member, or disallowing various weapons and armour. As computer

games have matured as a medium, we have adopted a more connoisseurial and reflexive orientation towards them, seeking to play them transgressively, or hoping that they give opportunity to express our individuality.

This argument about the work on the self cannot be confined to the question of what games are on a purely formal or ontological level, nor to how players choose to play them, and nor, indeed, to the broader cultures of creation and reception that delimit which games are made and how those games are approached. That is to say, this is not a theory that is motivated to critique, in isolation, the deficiencies of the games that exist, the ways in which we play them, or the manner in which we discuss them as being artefacts of a particular class. There is a messy and intersecting terrain between, in brief, explicit design ideologies, the formal structures of the game, the dispositions that we bring to the game as players, and the interpretive and cultural discourse around games.[1] For Foucault, the triple axes of 'power-knowledge-self' were inseparable from one another, and might be loosely understood here as corresponding to: 'formal game structure-game discourse-player disposition'. As I have noted above, he referred to this as the 'tripartite analysis', or 'orthogonal analysis'. Our gameplay practices take the form that they do due to the *conjunction* of all of these elements. Nevertheless, the balance between these is a matter for the interpreter; one axis may be accorded greater comparative weighting depending on the task at hand and what it is that the analysis is supposed to achieve given its justifications. This should not, however, lead the interpreter to forget the other axes or to fail to justify why they have been given comparative inattention.

Therefore, the 'suggestion' that flows from the formal features of the game in question to the player, where it does not strictly decide what is required to progress the game, cannot be understood as a determination,

1. Cf. Kirkpatrick (2011, p. 99), who proposed that the 'form' of the game is something that neither the player nor the game can claim possession of; instead, it lies somewhere at the intersection of player and game, subject and object.

but nor is it an open-ended set of possibilities without its own force or implicit direction. A strict determination, such that our only real option would be to refrain from playing altogether, would preclude us from developing our own practices. However, if there were no directive or force to prompt our practices that originates from the game itself, then any resultant analysis would hardly need to take into account the game as opposed to just the players of the game. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that the practices that we choose to adopt in the course of our play stem from the conjunction between what we bring to the game, the culture of reception, and that of the terms set by the game. The complexities of the player-game relationship have already received much attention (cf. Nicoll 2016; Eskelinen 2012; Kirkpatrick 2011). My argument here is that this complexity is especially interesting in certain cases: that of contemporary computer games in which the player is encouraged to develop their own style of play.

With contemporary games, there is often a reflexive relationship to one's own aspirations as one plays the game; if a task appears too difficult, it may be abandoned entirely, or the player might try even harder at succeeding, or even shift the parameters of the goal following some process of self-justification. Alternatively, the player may pragmatically consider what they would have to master or learn in order to facilitate the success of that task – this then becomes the new, shorter-term goal, whilst the original goal takes on the form of a longer-term one. Thus, the forms of struggle, persistence, relief, and desperation that it takes to hone one's gamic abilities in order to achieve self-imposed goals have implications for what may be called one's relation to self.[2] The player is incentivised to think for themselves as part of the play experience, to be creative and to express themselves.[3] As such, the activities undertaken

2. Game tutorials or even early levels may be instructive in an instrusively impositional way, but they can also be a means of getting the player to a stage where they *can* decide for themselves.

3. In this way, players create a relation between challenge and personal control. This can be said to be a customisation which is abetted by some standard features of most games that have a long legacy: 'the existence of a pause button, the possibility of saving intermediate results, and the existence of different levels of difficulty.' (Grodal 2009, p. 204)

are voluntary, and engender further activities that are even more remote and unforeseeable with regard to surface gamic structures, but this does not preclude them from being amenable to the tripartite analysis.

Computer games are transformative

The second assumption is that these practices transform us, that they do something to us. This transformation is not best captured as a kind of sudden artistic epiphany that profoundly changes us, but as a slow accumulation. As stated, this is encapsulated by the concept of '*askesis'*. There are obvious resonances here with the Marxist idea that labour is a process in which human beings shape themselves. In contrast, play has often been conceived as being removed from far-reaching implications given that it is thought to take place within a consecrated space (Huizinga 2001 [1949]; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).[4] On this point of 'labour' being distinct from 'play', one can turn to an intermediate concept, such as 'craft' (Sennett 2008; Liboriussen 2013), to indicate the idea that a gameplay practice can be situated outside the domain of labour, but also be transformative in the slow manner attributed to the labour hypothesis, i.e., that it may be read as a craft. Indeed, Liboriussen has noted that '[u]nderlying Sennett's book on craftsmanship is a Marxist understanding of labour as a process through which the human being shapes itself' (2013, pp. 274-5). Further, the craft dimension bears associations of a blurring of the boundaries between object and subject, which is brought out in the Greek term *techne* – one that is also involved in the work on the self as a crafting of the self along aesthetic lines. Aristotle's definition of *techne* involved the idea that a human-made artefact could have an essence that was only realisable through a skilled practitioner. An alternative to the above view of craft occupying an intermediate territory between work and play, with gameplay practices being a form of craft, which has the result of locating craft lower on the transformative hierarchy to work, is the idea that there is a common

4. Others, however, have argued for a 'gap' in the 'magic circle' of play (see, for example: Bogost 2006, p. 135).

shared ingredient between play and work: what is actually transformative in labour can also be found in activities that share those constituent ingredients, including repetitive and skilful forms of play. That is to say, there is a demiurgic aspect to both.[5]

The transformations at stake here are more profound than simply getting better at realising the specific *telos* of the object (the player getting better at the specific game in question) – what is designated is a transformation of one's very subjectivity. Here, Foucault's understanding of self-transformation stems from a long tradition that includes the notion of *hexis,* which Aristotle interpreted to mean 'a state of character' that is more enduring than a mere disposition (Categ. 8b 27-28 in Aristotle 2012). *Hexis* is a 'permanent disposition' progressively acquired through the repetition of specific actions: '[t]hus one becomes more moderate the more consistently one abstains from excess, the braver the more one faces danger. The act does not completely disappear in its being effected but subsists by leaving its trace in the subject's potentiality as an *hexis'* (Aristotle, cited in Han 2002, p. 160). Following its translation into the Latin term *habitus,* and a period of disuse, it has come to have a much narrower application – one associated with 'habit' (Hutchinson 1986). *Habitus* is now most notably connected with the work of Bourdieu, who sought to articulate a mode of being. Although the parameters of the term are still being contested, it has stronger associations with passivity than did Aristotle's *hexis*. The concept of a 'gamer *habitus'* (Kirkpatrick 2012; Crawford 2012) has been applied to computer games in the sense of the skills required to unlock the sensations that they have to offer, although it is possible to extend this to capture a wider range of transformations pertaining to a special sort of 'disposition' amongst gamers that directs our feelings and desires in a situation, and thus influences our choices.[6]

5. Such an ethico-political claim about the relationship between transformation and practice cannot be collapsed into the concerns about 'playbour' (Kücklich 2005) and the connections posited between play, work, and consumption today. However, it is because there is overlap that the latter pivot on the encroachment of exploitation

6. The concept of *habitus* also brings out some complexities orbiting the boundaries of the intentional and the non-intentional. Briefly stated, there can be much discussion over the

For Aristotle, a *hexis* is either an excellence or an aberration (Hutchinson 1986, p. 5). Returning now to the concept of 'neoliberal self-fashioning', I argue that we cannot hope to obtain an adequate grasp on the nature and significance of the transformations, as excellences or aberrations, unless we recognise the existing historical context. A wide range of theorists have emphasised that the present context of this kind of transformation is one in which the subject works on themselves in an instrumental manner (Dardot and Laval 2013; Baerg 2009), which can be designated as neoliberal self-fashioning. If the work on the self was taking the self as a work of art, as a thing to be crafted and laboured upon, then with neoliberal self-fashioning, we can envisage a more instrumental approach, geared towards maximisation and optimisation. Dardot and Laval have described the neoliberal, entrepreneurial self, as an 'ultra-subjectivation', whose goal is not a final, stable condition of ethical 'self-possession', but a beyond the self that is aligned with the logic of enterprise and market valorisation as self-valorisation (2013, p. 284). The onus for change and responsibility is placed on the self by the rhetoric of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as Nealon (2008, p. 13) argues, 'is dedicated to the economization of artistic self-creation as a strategy for resisting normativity: that style of subjectivity has in fact become American-style neoliberalism's primary engine and product line'. Our energies for work on the self are channelled by the entrepreneurial self into predefined categories that exist in discourse, which leads to greater self-exploitation than that which was born only out of economic

relative consciousness or degree of intentionality involved in the transformation. On the one hand, it is clearly not true that we *only* transform ourselves when we consciously set out to do so. On the other, some degree of volition and understanding is often required in order to steer change in a particular direction, rather than resulting in various practices that produce a myriad of incommensurate effects. It is true that the practices and exercises for achieving self-mastery favoured by the Stoics and others that Foucault described all have an element of deliberative wilfulness and care about them (see: White 1985; O'Leary 2002). However, given the complexity of deducing what is strictly 'intentional', this does not foreclose the possibility that practices may be considered to be practices of the self in a different historical context, and not line up perfectly with the intentions associated with Stoicism, for example. Certain practices may be *non*-consciously organised by a subject to produce predictable results that seem almost intentional. The concept of *habitus* is able to capture some of these complexities (see: Hutchinson 1986; Lizardo 2004).

necessity insofar as this channelling, being more self-driven than merely material inducements, can further reinforce the motivations for one's actions.[7]

Not all transformations are subsumable under this kind of neoliberal self-fashioning. There are difficulties, nonetheless, with regard to decidability. Assuming that we are committed to seeing the operation of power as now more diffuse than ever, acknowledging such ambivalence is itself unsurprising. On the new imbrication of self and power, Foucault has remarked: '[n]ever, I think, in the history of human societies – even in the old Chinese society – has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalization procedures.' (Foucault 1982, p. 213) He was not unaware that the new kind of aesthetic subjectivity which was required, and as outlined earlier, could not merely be individualising, since the State was precisely the matrix of individualisation, being simultaneously totalising and individualizing (Foucault 1982, p. 216). He famously observed, concerning the California cult of the self, which he witnessed on his visit to Berkeley, and which centred around discovering one's 'true self' and deciphering it with the aid of psychological or psychoanalytic science, that '[n]ot only do I not identify this ancient culture of the self with what you might call the Californian cult of the self, I think they are diametrically opposed.' (Foucault 1984 [1983], p. 271) If the former was a narcissistic quest in pursuit of a lost truth of the self, then the latter called for a vigilant introspection, for one not to be overcome by pains or pleasures, to be engaged in exercises and in work, being defined by 'an ethic of immanence, vigilance, and distance.' (Gros 2001, p. 530)

As I have stated, my task here is not to attempt to dissolve this ambivalence, but to propose that the entanglement between neoliberal self-fashioning and the aesthetic practices of the self is central to the way in which computer games transform us. That is to say, to consider the

7. We can disconnect this point from some of the difficulties of attempting to define 'neoliberalism' itself since what is gotten at here is neoliberal *subjectivity* as characterised by instrumentality and self-exploitation.

operation and limitations of the present form of power. Foucault defined 'governmentality' as a form of power that has come to pre-eminence over all other forms, and which is precisely the 'surface of contact on which the way of conducting individuals and the way they conduct themselves are intertwined.' (Gros 2001, p. 548) It is 'the encounter between techniques of domination exercised over others and techniques of the self.' (Foucault 2001, p. 1604), and the 'surface of contact on which the way of conducting individuals and the way they conduct themselves are intertwined.' (Gros 2001, p. 548)[8] The 'intensification' of power, leading to techniques of governmentality that rely on freedom as their condition of operation, means that the present form of power relies more than ever on the volitional actions of subjects, and is also subject to being thwarted by those actions. Thus, to re-iterate, the second assumption is that we have to understand any accumulated transformation of the subject as existing within, and with reference to, this historical context and its attendant ambivalence. This is to underscore the point that the consequences of self-transformation are far from transparent, but also that worthwhile analyses should ultimately set themselves the aim of trying to work through and beyond 'ambivalence' as an endpoint, as a block to further understanding. Thus, an analysis of a particular game, whilst recognising this ambivalence, should nonetheless attempt to congeal into new perspectives on the complex relation between freedom and power, and into proposals (albeit without definitive 'global implications') for facilitating transformative wanderings.

Similar gameplay practices are spread across different games

The third assumption is that there are similarities in the practices between different games. We are liable to spend a considerable amount of time playing a range of games in which similarities can be adduced

8. See also the definition given in (Foucault 2007, p. 108).

between the practices which are involved in playing them and which are suggested by them. The issue of discerning the particular similarities and differences between games would of course involve some long discussions concerning genre and of breaking games down into their constituent parts, but it is surely uncontroversial to hold that there are an ample number of similarities to motivate this kind of analysis, regardless of whether we take the narrower position that they only exist with respect to certain games within the same genre, or a wider position that looks for broader resonances across genres and even gaming epochs. For one to hold this third assumption, it is sufficient to commit to the belief that there can be similarities between practices amongst different games; it is not necessary to show exactly and exhaustively in which respects game *x*'s implied practices resemble or differ from those of game *y*.

For the ancients, the various exercises involved in the practices of the self, which constituted a continuous project or way of life, could all be directed towards the same goal: self-mastery (*enkrateia*, *chrēsis*, etc.). The significance of this assumption is that our repetitive actions in different games may, as with the aforementioned exercises, have a cumulative and even synchronised effect with one another; they are not necessarily divorced or isolated such that the minute transformations perpetuated in us from one is incommensurate with those from another. This claim also opens up the possibility that repetitive actions and practices *external* to games may also either contribute towards or counter the effects in question. That is to say, the question that follows on from recognising commensurability is: how are we to decide the impact of particular practices, positive or negative, on the accumulation of a certain *hexis*? This is a broader issue than I can address in this paper, as it bears on fundamental questions about disambiguation. But more than disambiguation as to whether it is neoliberal self-fashioning or the aesthetic practices of the self that is inculcated, there is a question concerning the converging tributaries of diverse practices towards the development of a single *hexis*, or 'disposition', i.e., the way in which we group and categorise practices. In which respects, for example, do action *a* and action *b* both contribute to the solidification of a singular

hexis Z? And in which respects are they conducive to different *hexeis* that possibly undermine one another or exist entirely independently of each other?

It is of course a possibility that computer gaming practices and practices *external* to computer games may align towards the same *hexis*. Against this view, one might counter that the specificity of gestural interactions with controllers, together with the player's naturalised response to screen stimuli, should not be overlooked insofar as they require a rather specific bodily *hexis* that is often unlikely to match up with practices external to computer gaming. This view is of course far from conclusive; the requisite task is to search for similar structures or patterns of action, and then to continuously consider the manner by which they are grouped.[9] That is to say, we might want to look for similar structures of action that underlie diverse gameplay practices, which would enable us to think about what may be homogeneous beneath apparent heterogeneity. There arises the question of how we are to ascertain these structures: what is it, if anything, that unites gaming practices such that when we refer to them collectively as 'gaming', and regard them as a type of activity with certain commonalities? Further research may attempt to refine the philosophical bases with which we come to consider subordinate actions under broader structures that then come to constitute a *hexis*. This considerable task is detachable from the commitment that there *are* similarities in the practices between different games, and that the more these 'structures' of actions are repeated, the more far-reaching may be their effects, i.e., we can hold these latter beliefs without having a definitive means of categorisation.

The above are what I think the underlying assumptions have to be in order to advance the argument. First, this raises the prospect of a transformation of the self, not through some sudden epiphany or shock, but as a result of slow practices that are accumulated in a way that

9. I use 'structures' here to denote the necessary move towards thinking of the non-specificity of gameplay practices – it is this conceptual move which enables us to consider them with the degree of abstraction that would allow us to perceive generalities.

constitutes one's *hexis* or disposition. Second, a relevant exercise would be to examine these relations to self as evidenced by practices within the context of neoliberalism, as it is understood to foster a particular kind of relation to self. This calls for a framework with which we can adjudge whether the transformation is an 'excellence', freeing us from entrenched modes of being, or an 'aberration', tying us to identities from which we would rather extricate ourselves. Thirdly, we are called to scrutinise the similarities between gameplay practices across different games in terms of the sedimentation of a relation to self, and to pose the question as to the way in which we might group certain practices under a single umbrella.

CRITIQUES OF THE APPLICABILITY OF FOUCAULT

I turn now to two possible criticisms against the argument in this paper. Firstly, Foucault obviously never wrote about computer games, nor gave their emergence any serious thought. Why then, should there be any affinity between his thought and the analysis of gameplay practices? Crucially, he emphasised that the process of self-formation involves the person being active, and that the 'way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject' (Foucault, 1982, 208), or 'subjectification', is becoming more prominent, with implications which have yet to be fully explored. There were new opportunities arising from the decline in the grand narratives of religion and politics, which have opened up a space for a modern aesthetics of existence (Foucault 1988, pp. 49-50). We can certainly situate new technologies within the new social possibilities for self-construction. It is from here that we can consider the implications of computer games. That is to say, contemporary games can be understood to be symptomatic of a series of much broader transitions in the operation of power that were very much the focus of Foucault's work.

Secondly, it must be recognised that not everyone plays games as a way of *consciously* working on or crafting the self as a work of art. In his examination of Antiquity, the practices of the self were outlined by

Foucault as part of a conscious way of living, in which the practitioner is vigilant and stoical with regard to their commitment to the art of the self (see: endnote 6, in which I comment on the boundaries between the intentional and the non-intentional). For gamers, such vigilance would seemingly be with respect to achieving goals in the game itself, and the seriousness of the attitude perhaps makes hardcore, competitive gamers the most relevant group. However, I propose that this is too narrow a perspective: although there are no doubt many gamers who play loosely and 'casually', we ought not limit our attention here to those competitive gamers that restrict their gameplay practices because they want to do well, but also include gamers who have goals that take serious effort, such as acquiring all the pieces for an outfit that is non-optimal in combat, but that have the appearance that the gamer desires – this may involve no less planning and effort than a goal set by the gamer bent on optimisation. Further, there is often no firm distinction between these various kinds of gamers; a 'casual' gamer may graduate into such an outfit hunter and then into a competitive kind of player in the course of a single playthrough. There is a spectrum of intersecting player typologies and behaviours such as to muddle firm distinctions between those for whom the work on the self may be appropriate and those for whom it may not. This is not to say that there is no value in distinguishing between player typologies and behaviours, but only that there is difficulty in trying to dismiss a discrete group of players as irrelevant to this analysis.

The point of play style and conscious intention bears on a key issue concerning the concept of the 'aesthetic'. With regard to gameplay practices, as players, we tend to choose consistent patterns of action, such as being a min-maxing 'super-instrumental' kind of player, with the effect of producing a certain work upon our own subjectivities. We might modify those patterns depending on the results, and whether the work is turning out as we would want. In creating a work of art, since there is the Kantian idea that no determinate rules can be followed, there must be a *to-and-fro* process, in which the artist constantly reviews whether each additional action, such as a new brushstroke, contributes to their

intuition of the overall whole. But here lies a potential incompatibility with certain gameplay practices. The ancient practices of the self called for the review of the effects of one's practices, often with the help of a philosophical teacher or guide, albeit not someone who dogmatically instructs. In cases of failed work on the self, in which the end result is not 'beautiful' (*kalos*), we might surmise that there was a lack of such reviewing; Foucault gives some humorous examples, for example, of those who got carried away with athletics and bodybuilding, to the detriment of other areas, which skewed their work on the self. Again, this is related to the mindfulness and intentionality (the to-and-fro aspect) with which the practices of the self were pursued, and perhaps to the comparative lack thereof within varieties of gameplay. With gameplay, whilst there may often be a tendency to review whether each action contributes to the goal set by the player, the player's own subjectivity and desired development is often not self-reflected upon. This omission does not mean that we should be mindful of gameplay practices by steering them towards particular goals regarding the self that we want – that would be rather calculated, and thwart the possibility of wandering and getting lost. There is room, however, for gaming culture to accommodate further reflection on the self in relation to gameplay, to facilitate players to do so, and for games that inculcate this to be made. To this end, what is needed is attentiveness to the nebulous zone between instrumentally desiring certain goals (which is dogmatic), and the lack of an overall order or coherence (in which we risk being subject to our immediate impulses without an overarching guide). This area, occupying the space between over-determination and under-determination, has traditionally been the domain of the aesthetic and of aesthetic theories.[10]

10. Indeed, a question that arises is this: if instrumentalised, strictly min-maxing play is compulsive, can it be made to give way to the above aesthetic reviewing, this to-and-fro process, to turn into gameplay practices that leads to the subject wandering away from themselves? Are there instances in which it contains the latter as a potentiality residing within itself?

GAME EXAMPLES

This paper has, as stated, the aim of arguing for the theoretical relevance of Foucault's late work to game studies. It is too constrained by space to be able to focus upon an extended case study. Elsewhere, however, I have used the example of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda 2009) and the way in which players might approach levelling up (Zhu 2016, chpt. 4). Only a short exegesis is possible here. Amidst the different possible playstyles, we may formulate some broad player typologies, of which the 'Attribute maximiser', who levels up with the aim of getting the maximum of 5 to three different Attributes each time, is one. To do this, a great deal of planning, repetition, and the timely *proscription* of using certain Skills is required. It is by no means required to complete the game or to complete any of the quests in the game; many players will have given it no thought at all. It will lend itself to consideration by those players who are curious about the significance of the numbers involved in the level up screen, and who desire to fashion their character to be the strongest that they can, regardless of the effort involved. This is a style of play that seems to fall foul of accusations of instrumentality (and neoliberal self-fashioning). Every game action, be it a swing with a bladed weapon, or a cast of a heal spell, has an impact on what is levelled, and so must be scrutinised. Crucially, to level up well, one needs to refrain from using certain Skills during planned character levels, saving them for later levelling. To do so involves a certain difficulty if one really needs to use the Restoration Skill to heal after a fight, or the Illusion Skill to become invisible and elude enemies, and so on.

This is surely not the way the game was intended to be played. In this way, this 'super-instrumental' way of playing is arguably transgressive, and due, ironically, to its very intemperance or immoderation. Consequently, it might facilitate a form of 'wandering' for the player who persists with it, but who eventually comes to find the ordeal of maximisation ridiculous, or who has various non-standard experiences due to the lengths they have to go to. In this way, it is not obvious that this is a banal, readily consumable experience. In contrast to this,

there is no shortage of RPGs that do trade in much more standardised forms of experiences, and which do not call for such an extreme kind of super-instrumentality. It should be noted, however, that this kind of delayed gratification or anticipatory deferral is a relatively common gamic structure, so it is possible that the work on the self through a hundred hours or so of gameplay is consonant with the work that we do in another game, particularly another RPG. Further, there will be a spectrum of various kinds of player engagement, many of which will tend or gravitate towards, but fall some distance short of this super-instrumental approach and the pull it exerts.

On this analysis, there is an ambivalence between, on the one hand, this being play that is approached with, and that also induces, an instrumental and laborious mentality, and there being, on the other hand, a potential transformation in which the mechanics of the game eventually come to be perceived as absurd by the player, leading to a reflection on the player's whole enterprise of playing in such a way and a shift into alternative gameplay practices. If the latter obtains, then *all* the gameplay practices performed up until that point could potentially be seen as having been done in service of the aesthetic practices of the self, as having paved the way for it. Alternatively, other lines of analysis are possible. The instrumental mentality that is induced may even have positive outcomes for the player, leading to a sense of empowerment beyond the game and a readiness to deal with difficulties, rather than merely the fashioning into a self-exploiting neoliberal subject. Here, we may refer to numerous claims that have been made for the efficacy of gameplay in terms of rendering one a superior manager, business person, leader, etc. (see: Beck and Wade 2004; Carstens and Beck 2005). These have in common the perceived transferability of skills between play and work, which may be understood in terms of the fashioning of the ideal neoliberal subject, although we may also be inclined to attribute more to these transformations than merely what is narrowly required to improve one's work performance, i.e., that there is an 'excess' that shades into the aesthetic work on the self. The precise contours of this have been examined in more detail elsewhere (Zhu 2016, chpt. 5); my purpose

here is to sketch out the possible directions of analyses that follow from foregrounding gameplay as a transformative work on the ambivalent nature of the individualisation techniques involved.

CONCLUSION

The claims made so far can be briefly summarised as follows: certain gameplay practices can be seen as a work on the self, and three assumptions are needed to underpin the significance of this claim. Firstly, contemporary computer games suggest practices, such that players set their own goals without being completely determined to do so. Secondly, computer games transform us through a slow *askesis* with implications for our *hexeis*, or modes of being. Thirdly, similar gameplay practices across different games may come together to bring about and reinforce this transformation. The work on the self at stake has the potential to be an aesthetic labour or craft that leads us to wander into unanticipated subjectivities and away from the subjectivities that are imposed upon us by power, but can also be an instrumental process in which we harden into the subjects demanded by governmental power. One need not be a committed Foucauldean theorist to hold to any of these views, although they collectively point towards the direction of his late work.

There are numerous repercussions that follow from viewing gameplay practices as a work on the self. The invocation of the category of the aesthetic allows for us to comprehend possible vectors of resistance as transformation without ossifying them; we are equipped to resist any rigid denunciation of computer games as producing discrete effects without barring the notion that some practices may be ultimately pernicious; and space is also opened up for investigating the complex connectedness between subject and object, or more expansively, the tripartite of subject-power-knowledge in the transformation of the subject. What is ultimately at stake here is reflection on the issue of philosophy as a way of life and as instantiated in ethico-aesthetic practices within the domain of gameplay practices.

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5.

Traumatic, Spectacular Prologues

AAA Players as Ethical Witnesses

Joanna Cuttell

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the depiction of violent, traumatic spectacles in the opening of select AAA videogames, questioning how these affective devices function to attach and motivate the player. This research deployed two methods: a qualitative content analysis adapted to engage with many layers of games and gaming; and an immersive-affective autoethnography that makes visible the researcher's role in the creation of knowledge and thus allows the critical 'gaze' to be turned upon this relationship. Utilising (vicarious) trauma theory, this paper considers the role of witnessing and the provocation of ethical responses when the player experiences the early victimisation of the player character. This

paper asserts that these early violent spectacles act as cues for moral disengagement and function as an enabling fiction legitimating the use of 'righteous' violence. Combined with the iterative 'overcoming' afforded by such games, this paper argues that these traumatic prologues create an affective and ethical attachment to the game's outcome.

Keywords

AAA videogames; prologues; vicarious trauma; empathy; spectacle; witnessing; ethics; affect.

INTRODUCTION

An unknown assailant is attacking. Fires have broken out. Now and then you may have to engage pockets of enemies, but the ringleaders are always unreachable or unknown – they are 'out there', somewhere else. You see scenes of devastation. In the distance, people are gunned down from behind reinforced glass, gored and mauled, blood splattering and bodies twisting as they die before your eyes. Screams and cries ring in your ears, but you are powerless to help. You can only push forward, learning each control in turn as you go. All that awaits you at the end is tragedy: injury, loss, kidnapping, death.

So begins many AAA videogames. Threat, failure, and confusion accompany the spectacle of violence, destruction, and chaos comprising the first hour of gameplay. AAA refers to a classification of games that can be thought of as equivalent to 'blockbuster' films. They usually have large development budgets, are widely promoted before, during and after release, and are consequently often bestsellers. While they are expected to be of a high quality, the AAA grading does not necessarily denote originality, nor does it predict a positive critical reception. Whether a stealth, melee or role-playing game, a first- or third-person shooter; the primary mechanic of these games is usually combat, and violence the main means of progression. Consequently, they are routinely part of the 'moral panic' (Cohen 2011 [1972]) surrounding videogames, present in

both the media (e.g. Pow, 2012; Daily Mail, 2012) and in videogame research (Ferguson, 2009). The commonsense notion fueling this moral panic holds that participating in interactive violent media will make the player more violent. While this is a reasonable hypothesis, research paints a more nuanced and complex picture of the relationship between mediated and 'real' violence (e.g. Eastin 2006; Szycik et al. 2017; Ward, 2010). However, in this paper, I am primarily concerned with how players may respond to mediated violence in-game. Many explanations for players' decisions to perform 'immoral' actions in-game have been proffered. For instance, some argue that players see it as not being real – i.e. it harms no one and is only a game (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). Other scholars have explored the personality of the player as a variable, concluding that there is, among other things, a gendered division in the approach to violent and immoral in-game acts and decisions (Lin, 2011). Moreover, others have recognised the importance of the game as a rule-bound space within which the player is forced to participate in certain moral or immoral actions (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986), and how narrative cues help the player morally 'disengage' from actions they find repugnant (Hartmann 2013). Moving away even from this discussion of the moral-immoral dichotomy of gameplay actions, in this paper I mobilise understandings of vicarious trauma and ethical witnessing to explore the early vulnerability and victimisation of the player character. Doing so, I question how these violent and traumatic prologues operate to attach, affect, and direct the player.

Throughout this paper, I use the term 'ethical' to highlight the way acts may be differentially viewed as right or wrong, and the game's judgement of particular actions. In discussing ethical actions in games, I do not seek to draw a normative or meta-ethical conclusion; that is, to determine the 'rightness' of certain in-game actions. Nor do I consider what 'right' means. Rather, I seek to address the way game processes may be argued to have an ethical valence, structured by the game or affectively rationalised by the player. I deploy the term ethical when describing an in-game action which may be seen as having an ethical valence. For instance, a game decision based on the 'trolley problem',

whereby the player can kill one person in order to save five, would be described as an ethical act. In discussing this action, I am not interested in the rightness or wrongness of the act beyond the fact that it is an 'ethical' act (that is, 'ethically problematic'). In describing an act as 'ethical', then, I am not saying it *is* good or bad, right or wrong, but rather that it is an act which could *potentially* be judged as good, bad, right or wrong.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA AND ETHICAL WITNESSING

In its exploration of traumatic spectacles in game prologues, this paper does not seek to engage with 'real world' instances of trauma—that is, a person's response to overwhelming levels of stress which impacts their ability to regulate their emotional state. Rather, it is concerned with the representation of traumatic experiences as a narrative device and as expressed through the game's mechanics. It discusses how the vicarious trauma of witnessing and participating in interactive, violent, and spectacular games might operate affectively and ethically.

In clinical settings, vicarious trauma refers to occasions when clinicians "feel the pain evoked by empathy-arousing mechanisms interacting with their own previous traumatic experience" (Hoffman 2003, 17, in Kaplan 2005, 88). In her book, Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature (2005), E. Ann Kaplan asks whether vicarious trauma in those who have viewed mediated traumatic events can "facilitate or interfere with pro-social individual or cultural change [… or might it] arouse anxiety and trigger defence against further exposure?" (87). Kaplan concludes that spectators who witness mediated traumatic events may, depending on the literary and filmic techniques employed, experience vicarious trauma. They do not feel the protagonist's trauma directly, but rather "feel the pain evoked by empathy" (90) which in turn can arouse feelings from their own past traumatic experiences.

The ethical responses to witnessing mediated trauma are also discussed by John Berger (1980) in his essay that considers photographs that depict

traumatic events from the Vietnam War. Berger argues that those who view such 'arresting' photographs, (as opposed to those who pass them over) have one of two responses—despair or indignation. The former results in the viewer 'taking on' some suffering of the other, while the latter "demands action" (42). However, the provocation of action is usually politically impotent due to the viewer's relative positioning in the field of global politics. Berger asserts that the strong responses to photographs which depict suffering are dispelled through the way they create feelings of "moral inadequacy" in the viewer (44). There is a sense of helplessness on the part of the observer—a feeling of impotence in relation to the atrocities committed in the picture. Thus, while they contain implicit criticisms of governments, "their effect is ultimately to depoliticise public response through feelings of impotence" (Meek 2010, 33). Kaplan recognises that witnessing "is not passive observation but active engagement… an engagement produced by the work of art itself through its techniques" (Kaplan 2016, 14). In its exploration of the openings of AAA games, it is necessary to ask whether this depoliticisation of traumatic spectacles functions in the same way in games as it does in mass media. Or do the techniques of games—their mechanics and interactivity—alter this process?

Alan Meek (2010) is critical of the use of trauma theory in media and film criticism, and argues that presuming the viewer 'ethically' witnesses the trauma is to assume a progressive reading. Indeed, there may be some who witness graphic violence and do not feel disgust, horror, or empathy. However, according to Matthew Grizzard et al.'s (2017) recent study of people's reactions to watching videos of ISIS beheadings, many do indeed take a 'progressive' reading of such violence, demonstrating that "graphic media violence can serve as a moral motivator" (2).

While Kaplan predominantly interrogates viewers' empathic relationship to film characters, and Berger is interested in the photographic representation of global violence, their conclusions also have potential implications for game scholars. Of course, there are no inherently 'traumatic' events, and in this study's examination of the use of

traumatic events in immersive gaming, I am examining the deployment of traumatic spectacle as a device which functions to attach the player to the game and the protagonist. The extent to which a player 'identifies' with their player character has been much discussed and contended by several scholars working within different disciplines within the field of games studies. Player characters are certainly important in that they act as a vehicle; they are the means by which the player acts within the world—the embodied will of the player within the gameworld. But do players also take on elements of their player character by "adopt[ing] (part of) the identity of [their] character" (Hefner et al. 2007: 41)? Do players see them as both a part of themselves whilst still being "unequivocally other" (Rehak 2003: 106)? Identification with the player character appears contingent on various factors, such as: the strength of the narrative (Shaw 2011); whether the player can influence the design of their character (Shaw 2011; Filiciak 2015); as well as mechanic factors such as whether the game is first-person perspective (Cairns 2015), and the interreactivity of the player's actions (Smethurst & Craps 2015). In this paper's discussion, I do not seek to advance the discussion of the extent to which the player invests in or identifies with their character. Rather, considering that shock "can form part of voyeuristic pleasure, but can also foster identification with the position of victim" (Meek 2016, 35), I consider whether the player's empathic relationship to the player character, and the early tribulations that the character is shown to suffer, could interpellate[1] (Althusser, 1971) them into the position of ethical witness and thus motivate them to action.

SPECTACLE

> The ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image—of an agony, of ruin—is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war (Sontag 2003, 24).

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1. Interpellation describes the process whereby subjects are 'hailed' in social interactions (especially in political and social institutions). It is when the hailed individual recognises themselves as the addressee that the subject is constituted by this (mis)recognition.

In *The Society of the Spectacle,* Guy Debord (1995 [1967]) argues that spectacle is "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12) which "unifies and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena" (14). The mobilisation of spectacle is 'seductive' in its ability to captivate and fascinate consumers and spectators, and it is through this seduction and the ability to "involve them in the semiotics of an ever-expanding world of entertainment, information and consumption [that spectacle is able to] deeply influence thought and action" (Kellner 2005, 25). Developed from Karl Marx's notions of commodity fetishism, alienation and reification, Debord's concept of the spectacular construes spectators as separate, passive, and depoliticised subjects (ibid., 25-26).

Video games have been recognised as being part of the economy of the spectacle, both in terms of their patterns of consumption as well as how they aid the development of specific skills required in the post-industrial economy. In his broad overview of spectacular media, Douglas Kellner (2005) briefly considers the spectacle of violent gaming:

> These games are highly competitive, violent, and provide allegories for life under corporate capitalism and Terror War militarism…. While some game producers have tried to cultivate kinder, gentler, and more intelligent gaming, most of the best-selling corporate games are spectacles for predatory capitalism and macho militarism and not a more peaceful, playful, and cooperative world (30-31).

Turning more specifically to the use of spectacle within gaming, in his exploration of spectacle and gratification in 'beat 'em ups', David Surman (2007) proposes that spectacle is deployed in two modes—that which is produced for the player (unalterable utilisation of spectacle within the game), and that which the player produces themselves (for example, skillful play as spectacle) (207). He terms the spectacular play which combines these two modes 'reward-spectacle'—moments of audial and visual spectacle-as-reward for executing precise, difficult and deadly fighting combos. In this paper's exploration of the use of spectacular imagery in AAA games' opening levels, I seek to question whether the 'depoliticisation' Debord discusses is also an in-game

product of spectacle, or whether, when combined with themes of traumatic destruction wreaked upon the player character, their loved ones and their home, could be said to be an affective and ethical device motivating certain modes of player interaction.

METHODOLOGY

This research, undertaken as part of my doctoral studies, utilises methods that critically examine how games' goals, rewards and ethical systems can in part produce the 'affectivities' of play. They require that the researcher has an in-depth knowledge of videogames and possesses various skills—including familiarity with hardware, interfaces, and awareness of generic conventions. I selected thirteen titles which were released in the half decade leading up to the start of this project's research period. The thirteen titles include a trilogy. Consequently, fifteen separate games were analysed: *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios 2012); *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011); *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009); *Halo: Reach* (Bungie 2010); *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013); *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal 2011); *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2012); *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios 2010); *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013); *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* (Naughty Dog 2011); *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013), and the *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare 2007-2012). The criteria used to select these titles included that they are AAA titles; "high-tech" (MacTavish, 2002); for adults; contain narrative or mechanical violence; developed in Western Europe or North America (because of cultural and mechanical differences); single player; original intellectual properties (not intertextual adaptations); widely played and praised (I considered both player and critic reviews by tabulating review data gathered from GameRankings, Metacritic, IGN, Edge, Game Informer, as well as sales figures); billed/promoted/discussed as being "immersive" and with strong narrative; as well as attempting to cover a general mixture of genres, themes and mechanics. When considering the range of

mechanics, I particularly privileged mechanics with which I already possess playing skills to enable greater exploration of various levels and difficulties. This also meant I did not have to undergo a 'learning curve' to develop the gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012) needed for success. Where possible, the release date was between 2011 and 2013 inclusively. However, other elements of the game were privileged over date of release relative to their importance to the methodology and the doctorate's overall focus on violence, interactivity, and narrative. These titles were then intensively and repeatedly played and analysed over the course of eight months. The two qualitative methods undertaken enabled this research to interrogate several layers of games and gaming experience concurrently; including the rule-bound, playful, interreactive, and narrative elements of gameplay, as well as the affective and persuasive qualities of these various elements.

Firstly, a mode of qualitative content analysis (QCA) was undertaken whereby several aspects of the game were analysed and coded. The mode of QCA developed took as its basis 'conventional' QCA (Zhang & Wildemth 2009, 310-312) and integrated textual analysis (ITA; developed by Michelle Kempson [2012] during her doctoral research into feminist zine culture). Conventional QCA requires that the researcher be immersed in the data such that the categorisation and naming process can emerge inductively (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1279; Zhang & Wildemuth 2009, 309). Like Kempson's ITA, this research integrated elements of semiotic and thematic analysis in order that the specific 'units' found via the QCA concerning narrative and mechanic features of the selected games, as well as the structuring of player action, could be interrogated vis-à-vis notions of desire, affect, agency and subjectivity. The selected games were played to allow the categorisation and naming to emerge from many elements of play and experience; specifically analysing text (both written, such as codex, clues, and notes, as well as dialogue), narrative tropes, sound and music, visuals (world and character design), mechanics (including, but not limited to enemy/ companion/NPC AI, character building, skill trees, combat, movement, cover, physics, maps, goals), and interaction (interface, goals, and

restrictions). The development and highlighting of 'units' occurred organically throughout the eight-month research phase. The results of the QCA as well as the second method (described below) were transcribed over a period of two months, and through a combination of coding by hand and using NVivo 10, these initial data and the 'units' inductively generated though the course of the research were systematically coded and described, with evidence given for each instance. Secondary nodes were developed from the initial coding of these units, which were then grouped into broader relevant categories relative to the focus of the research. Categories which constituted the key themes of analysis were identified and conceptually mapped, such that they might be interrogated rather than "merely presented" (Kempson 2012, 122).

To interrogate the different layers of games and gaming, Stephen Malliet (2007) calls for game scholars to repeatedly and 'expertly' play the game (para. 11). Moreover, in order to analyse game structures, researchers must consider the role gaming technology plays in directing play (Bateman 2008, 12), including the necessary interactivity of gaming. As Julian Kücklich (2002) recognizes, by interacting with a game, we necessarily influence it, meaning that the context of the player will impact the meaning made from the process of gameplay (Malliet 2007, para 9). To gain a broad perspective on modes of gameplay, Malliet (2007) suggests that they should roleplay as different 'categories of gamer' (perhaps by using Richard Bartle's [1996] categorisation of video game players as socialisers, killers, achievers, or explorers). Beyond playing from various perspectives, it is also necessary for game researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of the metagame and subculture surrounding the games studied by engaging with forums, fan creations, walkthroughs, 'let's play' videos, livestreams, and industry and fan reviews (Aarseth 2003). In following the advice of these scholars, this research achieved an understanding of each game beyond my own play style. In thoroughly and repetitively exploring the game structures, possibilities for different modes of play, and the surrounding metagame, this research considers both the 'preferred playing' (from 'preferred reading')—those modes of play which conform to the rules

and narrative structures of the game—as well as those which go 'against the grain'.

This approach was extended into the interactive and experiential with an immersive-participatory method developed from autoethnographic traditions. This method utilises the researcher's knowledge of, and familiarity with, games and game controls, as well as enabling them to reflexively turn the critical 'gaze' upon their personal relationship with the object of research. Following autoethnographic conventions, it recognises the researcher as 'situated' (Haraway 1988) and requires that they practice a high level of critical reflection about their experience of being embedded within the specific process of gaming and the culture of games. In employing elements of autoethnography as part of this immersive-participatory method, my experiences therefore became "the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns" (Spry 2001, 711, in Ettore 2005, 544). The processes of 'reading' and meaning-making from the games which are deployed in this method are a "contingent activity deeply rooted in [my] autobiograph[y] and the tools, means and knowledge they provide" (Stanley 1992, 84). It light of this, I utilised reflexivity as a key research tool, which enabled discussion of data produced as being *my* readings, and yet also allows for them to be located in a specific place and time. This places my research within a specific context and offers it to the reader as a discussion of the many and varied affective experiences of gaming. As a white middle-class British woman, my situation undeniably shapes the ways I make meaning whilst playing video games. As a lifelong gamer, I am already attuned to various debates and discussions within the community – from 'in-jokes' to the #gamergate controversy – which may influence my 'reading' process. However, in deploying a method which reflexively documents and examines my affective experiences of playing games, I am not merely restricted to researching myself. My self "encompasses second- and third-hand knowledges as well as first-hand knowledges" (Stanley 1993, 50). I am a socially-connected and situated agent. Whilst it is true that my 'reading' of the game cannot be said to be based on developer(s) intent, as "intentionality cannot be read from the text at all.

[…] What matters, and what is immediately accessibly, is the [game] itself" (Stanley 1992, 85). For this method to be autoethnographic as opposed to autobiographic, the researcher must reflexively connect their personal experiences to broader social, cultural, and political understandings (Ettorre 2005, 536). As such, in practicing this method, I maintained an intense relationship with both the gameworld and the online metagame surrounding the chosen titles, and kept a reflexive journal about the immersive-affective experience of gaming. In so doing, this method enabled me to not only shed light on a routinely obscured epistemological component of research in general, but content and discourse analysis especially.[2]

TRAUMATIC AAA PROLOGUES

> All varieties of suffering are therefore the theme of drama, which promises to create out of them pleasure for the spectator (Freud & Bunker 1960, 145).

During my doctoral research into the affectivities of a selection of AAA games—their forms and content—it became apparent that many of the prologues and opening levels are spectacular and violent, often deploying traumatic experience as a narrative device. In this section I present several examples of these instances of represented and vicarious trauma, broadly mapped into three categories, before moving on to a discussion of how they operate affectively.

The traumatic events that unfold in the opening levels of the AAA games studied in this project are deployed through both narrative and within the game mechanics. To aid this discussion, they have been broadly mapped into three common modes of representation. The first mode of representation focuses on the personal trauma of the player character. Existing within the narrative of the game, this trope is usually depicted though the character's loss of a loved one or through their bodily injury. An example of this mode of spectacle is in the prologue

2. For more detail about how this method gives critical insight, how it was conducted, and an example of the kind of results it can produce, please see Cuttell [2015]).

of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal 2011). Within the first twenty minutes of gameplay, the player witnesses the kidnapping and presumed death of the player character's ex-girlfriend. The co-workers whom the player character should be protecting (in their role as chief of security) are dead and dying throughout the level (fig. 1). And finally, the prologue closes with the brutal physical maiming of the player character. Similarly, in *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios 2012), the death of the Empress (whom, according to the backstory, the player character was sworn to protect) happens before the player's eyes within the first ten minutes of gameplay (fig. 2). In both games, the player character must seek answers pertaining to these prologues – who attacked them and why? These events function as the narrative lynchpin of the entire game and are the primary *narrative* impetus for character action.

Figure 1: Dying co-workers in the opening of Deus Ex: Human Revolution (Eidos Montreal 2011)

Figure 2: Death of the Empress in the prologue to Dishonored (Arcane Studios 2012)

The second mode is also a narrative device—the depiction of devastating world incidents such as outbreaks of diseases causing zombification; alien, monster, or human-led attacks on the city or vessel of the player character; natural disasters; and the accompanying spectacular scenes of horror, chaos, destruction, and death caused by these events. For example, at the beginning of all three games in the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007-2012), scenes of destruction and bodily harm are deployed to create fear and awe of the enemy (fig. 3).

The final traumatic device identified in this research is combat vulnerability. In many of the titles analysed in this research, during the earliest stages of the game the player controls a character who is vulnerable; usually within the gameplay (e.g. they possess no abilities), but also potentially within the narrative (e.g. they are depicted as a young or naive person). This is usually the character the player controls throughout the course of the game, but who has not yet acquired the skills the player will need to excel in combat – many games use the opening level as a training ground where the basic skill set needed for combat is taught. In the opening of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog,

2013), the player takes control of Sarah, a young American teenager and the daughter of the game's protagonist. She is home alone during the outbreak of spores that turn people into crazed zombie-like enemies. The player only takes control of her dad, Joel, when Sarah's leg is broken in their escape. Neither Sarah nor Joel is given any recourse to action if confronted by an enemy (beyond a few scripted quick-time events when playing as Joel). When carrying Sarah, if the player is too slow and Joel is caught by an enemy, he dies and the game forces a reload. At the end of the prologue, Sarah is shot by a member of the US army acting on official orders, and dies in Joel's arms (fig. 4).

Figure 3: Vancouver under attack in the opening to Mass Effect 3 (BioWare 2012)

Figure 4: Sarah's death in The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2013)

These prologues clearly induce a feeling of vulnerability in several ways. Vulnerability and spectacle are, in one sense, a narrative-affective device intended to create a sense of confusion, panic and horror. However, they are also notably deployed before the player has fully internalised the controls, become familiar with the interface, and thus developed the specific gaming habitus (Kirkpatrick 2012) needed for success; in this sense, this vulnerability and spectacle also operates beyond the game's narrative content alone. As with other representations of trauma (Farrell, 1998), the different modes of spectacles deployed within AAA games' openings act as 'enabling fictions'. In a medium and genre in which the primary mechanic is one of combat (few AAA titles do not involve violent combat), these early instances of spectacular traumas enable the player to 'buy into' the moral rules of the combat-oriented mechanics of the game. They act as cues of 'moral disengagement'—the detachment of moral judgements from ethical actions, due to various cues embedded within the narrative and mechanics. When moral disengagement occurs, in-game violence does not lead to self-sanctions[3] (Bandura 1990). "Although systematic content-analyses of moral disengagement cues in

3. Self-sanctions refer to the process by which people regulate their ethical actions. They are developed through the internalising of moral standards via socialisation. As the name

violent video games are lacking to date, justification of violence and a distorted portrayal of consequences seem to be among the more common cues embedded in violent games" (Hartmann 2013, 118). Albert Bandura, Claudio Barbaranelli, Gian Vittorio Caprara and Concetta Pastorelli (1996) termed such cues 'moral justification' (364) whereby immoral acts can be justified and reframed as moral. It is through the witnessing and ethical provocation of such prologues that the violence demanded by such events is seen as 'righteous'. This can be taken further by questioning whether such prologues do not only act as cues for moral disengagement (legitimating the use of violent action in seeking retribution) but also function to demand an ethical response from the player.

PROVOKING AN ETHICAL RESPONSE

As can be seen in the previous example drawn from *The Last of Us*, the three narrative devices discussed (personal narrative, world narrative, and combat vulnerability) are often employed in conjunction with each other. The thread tying these devices together is that they place the player character in positions where they are not *yet* powerful enough to do anything about the situations in which they find themselves—the death and destruction is inevitable. It takes place before the player has created their skillful gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012) and when the player character has not yet been furnished with the abilities or weapons that endow them with particular capabilities within the game's combat system. Considering the 'preferred playings' and the 'grain' of a game's narrative and mechanics, it is possible to see how these instances of spectacle—read in a 'preferred' manner—can function to make the player feel impotent. Of course, these modes of spectacle are often present throughout the game, or at least punctuate the game experience, providing a rise and fall of dramatic intensity. But it is how these devices function at a point in the game when the player has not yet internalised

suggests, self-sanctions are internally imposed and can be disengaged through various mechanisms (Bandura, 1990).

the controls and does not yet 'inhabit' their character that make the examination of traumatic and spectacular prologues key in this discussion.

In the immersive research journal that was coded and analysed as part of this study, several entries highlight the potential for emotional affect to be created as part of these narrative and mechanical devices. This is not something I expected to experience, since the devices in question were present at points in the game (usually very early on) before I developed a connection to the characters, the world, or the story. They occurred before I had internalised the control system such that I began to relate to the player character as my character—as an extension of myself and under my control:

> Putting me inside her young, inexperienced, small body made me feel more vulnerable as a player – surely, if I was playing as Joel, I would have a chance to outrun the infected or could potentially fight my way out or have access to weaponry – but why would the game force me to face the infected when I was not physically capable of doing so…? I feel very isolated in this world. At first, because I am Sarah, I feel isolated because my father is not there to protect me. Then, in the car, the radio is dead.… The isolation, heightened by the dark and the chaos, is furthered by the feeling of vulnerability in playing Sarah, and then by playing Joel who cannot fight because he is carrying Sarah. The vulnerability is heightened by the panicked people.… The chaos and panic all around you is infectious. It sucks you in (Immersive Research Journal: *The Last of Us*).

Although this journal entry was recorded within the first thirty minutes of gameplay in a story which takes many hours to be told, it highlights the emotionally affective use of the previously discussed early narrative and mechanical devices. Tracing my reaction to these early instances of violent spectacle in my immersion journal, several feelings were strongly elicited. I not only felt vulnerability, fear and shock when playing through these openings, I also felt anger.

> The game hits you with the assassination of the Empress – the woman whose life it is your duty to protect. You are thrown into a dungeon and have no weapon and no clue as to how to use the controls. There is an immediate feeling of danger and helplessness. At that initial assassination,

> I had floundered with the controls because I had not been taught to use
> them…. I did feel like I had somehow failed the Empress – even though
> I know her death was an inevitability in the narrative – I still felt like I'd
> failed from being useless with the controller (Immersive Research Journal:
> *Dishonored*).

At this stage of *Dishonored*, as with the opening level of most games, the
player is given no control over the direction or outcome of the narrative.
Yet, even with an awareness of its scripted and unalterable quality, the
lack of control over both the player character and their inability to
prevent the events can lead to feelings of impotence and failure. My
experiences so far seem to indicate that both Berger's theorization of
ethical responses to witnessing trauma, and Debord's notion spectacle
are correct—I felt vulnerable and somewhat impotent in the face of
such devices. Yet, the affectivity, feelings of complicity and impotence
when playing these prologues also functioned to motivate me to continue
playing:

When the soldier shot at Joel, I gasped. Realising that it had been Sarah
who was caught horrified me. Joel's reaction was so moving. The worst
thing was the noise Sarah made as he tried to move her. I was actually
crying from the upsetting nature of the scene. Not ten minutes in, and
I already feel emotionally drained by this game. That was it; from that
point on I had been drawn in to such an extent that there was no going
back, no stopping play. I had to complete the story (Immersive Research
Journal: *The Last of Us*).

In these openings, gameplay is usually interactive, but not yet
interreactive. That is, the player has no control over the outcome of the
prologues. Empress Jessamine Kauldwin will always die in *Dishonored*,
as will Sarah in *The Last of Us*. The tragic outcomes of the prologue
are not the player's fault, irrespective of their playing skills, style of
play, or narrative decisions (should any be offered by the game). The
player has no control over the outcome (yet). So why—as my immersive
research journal entries attest—did I find these prologues so affective?
More importantly, why did they compel me to complete the game? In

'Playing with trauma: interreactivity, empathy, and complicity', Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps (2015) have already made the connection between the unique gameness of games and their ability to position the player within traumatic events, such that emotional reactions can be elicited and the player can be made to feel somehow complicit. They argue that "games work with the concept of psychological trauma in ways that are unprecedented in other media" (ibid.: 271). In their examination of trauma and non-player character deaths in *The Walking Dead: Season One* (2012), Smethurst and Craps (2015) note the ability of the video game's form to make the player feel complicit, irrespective of whether it was their decisions/actions which led to the death. Their argument can be extended by positing that the interreactivity of gaming, which can indeed lead to players feeling complicit within traumatic game events, also functions to provoke an ethical response, and affectively ties the player to the outcome of the game.

OVERCOMING TRAUMA; BEATING THE GAME

> In the melodramatic universe of trauma culture, perpetrator and victim are understood as dichotomous subject positions and, cast as the embodiment of the absolute innocent and good, victims are ascribed the status of ultimate moral authority based on the notion that physical pain purifies the soul and sanctifies the sufferer (Rothe 2016, 57).

A trope common to most of the AAA titles analysed as part of this research was their presentation of the player character as 'special'. The playable protagonist is often depicted as a heroic, capable survivor. When the option arises to choose the path of the anti-hero, this trope is still present in how the game places the player character as being above and apart from the NPCs of the gameworld. The player character's influence is great and their contribution is marked. They endure physical violence and hardships in pursuit of their prize (fig. 5):

> You are more than a queen. *You are a hero.* You are Albion's champion. Its protector… *Only you* can defeat the creature that dwells in the shadow (*Fable III*, Lionhead Studios, 2010).

And *because of you* we found Halo. Unlocked its secrets. Shattered our enemy's resolve. Our victory – your victory – was so close. I wish you could have lived to see it. But you belong to Reach. Your body, your armor – all burned and turned to glass. Everything, except your courage. That, you gave to us (*Halo: Reach*, Bungie, 2010).

Your own species can be destroyed with a single thought. But *you are different*. We have witnessed your actions in this cycle; the destruction of Sovereign, the fall of the Collectors. The Reapers perceive you as a threat, and I must understand why […]. Your confidence is singular […]. *Your victories are more than a product of chance* (*Mass Effect 3*, BioWare, 2012).

Figure 5: Commander Shepard as the bloodied hero of Mass Effect 3 (BioWare 2012)

Roger Luckhurst (2008) argues that we are living in a 'trauma culture' in which 'extremity and survival are privileged markers of identity' (2); they are part of our cultural consciousness, pervade the personal, political, and economic spheres, and can even be the sole reason for fame. The player character's 'specialness' and their survival of tragic experiences become the player's impetus for action.

Moreover, many of these games offer a world which the player can master. The narrative and mechanical goal is to achieve, conquer, control and win. They are a space designed to challenge and test the player,

but ultimately, to be overcome. Krzywinska and Brown (2015) recognise how the player's sense of mattering and achievement is pivotal in gaming, arguing that "game designers actively want to convince players that they have achieved something: this endeavour was not time wasted but yielded achievement and progress, confirming therefore a sense of existence" (201). Video games are organised such that attempts to 'win' are iterative; in most AAA games, failure is impassable. Losing in combat is often accompanied by the death of the player character; a black screen or message of failure; and a menu appears, allowing the player to load from a previously saved file or autosave. In most video game combat scenarios, therefore, failure is not a valid option. The player must repeatedly attempt challenges in order to finally master them:

> Each has a core gameplay dynamic on which much of the pleasure it offers is based, a particular kind of activity at which the successful player has to become proficient, largely through a process of extended temporal engagement; playing again and again – and again – until further progress is made, the player coming to a closer understanding of the underlying logic of the game (King & Krzywinska, 2006: 3).

It is necessary to consider the mobilisation of trauma within gaming, vis-à-vis the interreactivity and mastery of games. If John Berger (1980) is correct that mediated representation of real traumas function to make the viewer feel impotent in their response due to the inability of the individual to enact political change, then what about the interreactive medium of videogames? Guy Debord (1995) asserts that the spectacle of mass media, in its function as a tool of depoliticisation and pacification, is a "permanent opium war" (30). This differs from the spectacles of gaming in which the traumatic spectacles of video game openings can be seen to act antithetically to mediated representations of 'real' trauma on account of video games' ability to furnish the observer with agency and give them the tools to enact not only violent revenge, but also other ethical judgements and actions. Due to the interactivity, reactivity, and agency afforded by video games (as well as their iterative temporality), there is potential for the player to respond to such displays. Unlike Debord's viewers, they are not depoliticised subjects merely passively

witnessing the spectacular imagery—they can dynamically respond to it. In some games, furthermore, the player is also able to enact an overtly moral response (e.g. through choosing to take a distinct moral 'path' in titles such as *Fable III* [Lionhead Studios 2010] or *Dishonored* [Arkane Studios 2012]). In her discussion of futurist dystopian films, E. Ann Kaplan (2016) argues that they do not inspire the viewer to "take the position of responsibility and ethics that witnessing in its true sense involves. The fictions may well prepare viewers for ethical responsibility, but the genre as such cannot provide that position" (119). However, as I have demonstrated, in their interreactivity, videogames go beyond film in that the player does indeed have the responsibility to respond to the traumas they have witnessed. As previously discussed, Kaplan (2016) recognises witnessing is an active process produced through the techniques of the art (14). In gaming, these techniques mean that it is only through player intervention and activity that changes to the gameworld can be made.

Through the interreactivity of gaming, therefore, the player can experience direct ethical agency in response to these spectacular prologues. In some games, there may be various avenues through which this response may occur, and the player may be furnished with several options for narrative progression. For instance, in some AAA titles this might take the explicit form of permitting the player to overtly make ethical decisions about the gameworld and its inhabitants, such as in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2010), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011) or *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios 2010). Whilst all games played for this research project required the player character to defeat (kill or otherwise) those responsible for their initial trauma, that does not mean the player will choose to act 'morally'—that is, according to a specific set of societal norms. Rather, even with games such as *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2012) where few ethical 'options' are available to the player (in terms of branching narrative or combat decisions), the gameplay itself can be an *ethical project* in the way the response provoked by such prologues provokes the player to action. By following gameplay through to its conclusion—requiring skill, time

and effort—the player is given the chance to right the wrongs of the prologue; to bring justice or vengeance on those that caused the initial traumas.

CONCLUSION

Smethurst and Craps (2015) have already identified that traumatic game content (such as NPC deaths), when coupled with a game's interreactivity, can function to elicit feelings of responsibility and empathy in the player. In this paper, I sought to consider the issue of traumatic game content and affective player responses by examining AAA games' prologues and their provocation of ethical responses. Exploring the spectacular traumas of game prologues, I argued that they function to make the player feel vulnerable, both within the narrative and the game mechanics. I argued that the emotional reaction to the witnessing of suffering in videogames produces an active and ethical response in the player; the player witnesses the traumatic images and is then given the ability (which they can utilise if they have the time and skill) to respond.

While Berger recognised that photographs of suffering were depoliticised in the way they produced feelings of impotence in the viewer, and Debord asserted that spectacular mediatised imagery depoliticised and alienated the viewer, videogames are necessarily interreactive. While it is not the player's ineffectiveness that led to the initial trauma and victimisation, the player is the antidote to that trauma; it is through their effort and skill that the player character enacts vengeance on those who perpetrated the violence. Therefore, unlike Berger's viewer-witnesses and Debord's passive viewer, during these spectacular and traumatic prologues, videogame players can witness and experience the player characters', NPCs', and gameworld's trauma, and they can ethically respond to it—a response which can only be enacted through the performance of legitimate violence in the name of retribution and 'winning'.

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6.

Interpassivity and the Joy of Delegated Play in Idle Games

Sonia Fizek

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the youngest video games genre, the so called idle (incremental) game, also referred to as the passive, self-playing or clicker game, which seems to challenge the current understanding of digital games as systems, based on a human-machine interaction where it is the human who actively engages with the system through meaningful choices. Idle games, on the other hand, tend to play themselves, making the player's participation optional or, in some cases, entirely redundant. Interactivity and agency – qualities extensively theorised with reference

to digital games – are questioned in the context of idling. In this paper the author will investigate the self-contradictory genre through the lens of interpassivity, a concept developed by Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek to describe the aesthetics of delegated enjoyment. This contribution aims at introducing interpassivity to a wider Game Studies community, and offers an alternative perspective to reflect upon digital games in general and self-playing games in particular.

Keywords

idle games, self-playing games, interpassivity, delegated play, interactivity, agency

INTRODUCTION: A VIDEO GAME THAT PLAYS ITSELF?

I am situated in a firelit room. The fire is roaring. The room is hot. The wood piles up, so I stoke the fire to keep it so. A stranger shares the space with me. She can build things. I disregard her for the time being. Soon, a mysterious wanderer arrives with an empty cart and inquires about wood. Shall I give him 100 logs and hope he will reciprocate the gift and come back with more in a distant future? I do not trust strangers, so I turn him away. The fire keeps roaring. The builder says she can make a cart for carrying wood. And so she manufactures it in exchange for 30 logs. The rickety cart will carry more wood from the silent forest surrounding the firelit room. I can gather wood there. So, I gather. The builder assembles a lonely hut. And another one. In no time a tiny village grows, attracting more gatherers. No longer do I have to worry about collecting the wood myself. The hut now stores 271 units of wood, and they keep piling up.

The fire is flickering. The water is boiling. I am out of the game, taking a short break to brew a cup of tea. While away, the log count rises to 3203 and still keeps going up. I come back to a fully stocked, warm room, and a few reported noises breaking out of the storage. The builder has stoked the fire. The gatherers have collected wood. The game has

played itself, undisturbed by my absence. Occasionally, it reminds me of its existence, sending a flickering pop-up window with a beggar to be turned down. Disconnected from the actual meaningful gameplay, I may choose to do something completely else instead, tea-brewing being the least spectacular of many other possibilities.

This introductory auto-ethnographic passage describes a short gameplay session in *A Dark Room* (2013), an example of a relatively recent casual video game genre – an idle (incremental) game (Figure 1).

the fire is roaring.

builder says she can make traps to catch any creatures might still be alive out there.

the stranger is standing by the fire. she says she can help. says she builds things.

the stranger in the corner stops shivering. her breathing calms.

the fire is roaring.

the room is hot.

the fire is roaring.

dry brush and dead branches litter the forest floor.

the sky is grey and the wind blows relentlessly.

the wood has run out.

the wood has run out.

the wood has run out.

the wood has run out.

the wood has run out.

the wood has run out.

the wood has run out.

the wood has run out.

A Firelit Room | A Silent Forest

stoke fire

build:

trap

stores

wood   16

Figure 1: A Dark Room (2013)

Idle games, also referred to as passive, self-playing or clicker games, are characterised by automated gameplay, which makes the player's participation optional or entirely redundant. In other words, there is minimal or no active engagement required from the player in order for the game to progress. As illustrated above, the initial stages of most idle games start with the player performing a simple task of clicking in order to gain more in-game currency (e.g. logs, coins, cookies etc.), which in turn allows them to acquire items or skills that automate most

of the gameplay in the future. As the game unfolds incrementally, more options emerge. Interestingly, idle games seem to have no end – "[t]hey are ongoing, never-ending affairs" (Bogost 2010).

This niche game genre was brought to a wider audience in early 2015 in a Gamasutra article: "The rise of games you (mostly) don't play" (Parkin 2015). Idle games also gained worldwide recognition among game developers and players alike after Anthony Pecorella's talk at the Game Developers Conference, titled "Idle Games: The Mechanics and Monetization of Self-Playing Games" (Pecorella 2015).

Two years later, in February of 2017, another sort of self-playing game was featured as part of a local gaming convention in North Carolina. While the gamers and attendees of the event strolled through the venue, gaming, participating in tournaments, "cosplaying", eating, talking or gazing, *Civilisation 6* (2016) ran in the background: "Throughout the entire day CIV 6 will be playing an all-bot auto-play game located on the show floor (Playthroughgc.com). More recently, in April 2017, Museum of Modern Arts (MoMA PS1) launched *Emissaries* (2017), a series of life simulation works or self-contained ludic ecosystems by Ian Cheng, who describes them as "a videogame that plays itself" (iancheng.com). And finally, David O'Reilly's *Everything* (2017), a recent project, which, apart from being an open-ended interactive experience and simulation, has a self-playing mode: "*Everything* requires no player input – it will play automatically if left unattended" (everything-game.com).

The above examples depict a recent trend and fascination with games and game modes, which play themselves, or require minimum engagement from the human player, with idle games as the most visible commercialised genre. Self-playing games have left the gaming and academic community puzzled. After all, until now games have been primarily understood as objects to be actively engaged with, conflicts to be resolved, and meaningful actions to be taken (Huizinga 1949/2002; Caillois 1958/2001; Crawford 1982; Juul 2003; Salen and Zimmerman 2003). Digital games are supposed to be ergodic, requiring a non-trivial

effort from their participants, who in turn need to actively interpret the activity as a game for it to be considered one (Aarseth 1997; Aarseth and Calleja 2015). If anything else, games have been described as inherently interactive (Crawford 1982; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005), and oftentimes in contrast to non-interactive or less interactive media such as films or books, however problematic such oppositions may be. In other words, most digital games, staged in the medium of a computer, could be described as "explicitly participational" (Manovich 2001, 71).

In most digital games, the role of the human player is to actively participate in gameplay, while the role of the machine to enable, sustain, and facilitate play; record its progress and communicate the outcome to the player. In self-playing idle games, the human is a spectator rather than an active player, and the activity of playing is, to a great extent, delegated to the machine. This should not be entirely surprising in light of Alexander Galloway's definition, according to which digital games are not only the actions of human operators, but equally so, those of machines (Galloway 2006). Even more so, of machines, which do not always act in response to human players, but independently of them in the so-called "ambience acts" of the machine – the moments when the digital game plays itself while waiting for the player to return and continue where they left off (Galloway 2006). Ambience acts happen in some games, for instance *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001), *Final Fantasy X* (2001), which play themselves when the player walks away. However, self-play is not the core of those games and, more importantly, all the changes to the gameworld performed in the player's absence are of no importance once the gameplay recommences; the machine's micromovements have no effect. An idle game, on the other hand, is based on, and designed around, the ambience act. The game plays itself and the changes in the gameworld are permanent and significant, whether the human player participates in their execution or not. The only difference lies in the timing – without the human player's input, the game will progress much slower, but it will not stop.

Galloway's shift of perspective from anthropo- to an "algo-centric" sheds some interesting light on idle games, but their core mechanics of self-executed progression still remains highly problematic. After all, most of self-playing games are designed with a human audience in mind. How, then, are we to understand this ludic paradox? How do we make sense of games that barely require human agency, effort and the execution of meaningful choices, and yet ask for human attention? In other words, what to do with games that we (mostly) don't play?

This paper will address the above questions, mapping out a possible avenue to study the emerging practice of self-play. The research falls within a larger body of work on agency and interactivity in digital games, digital media and virtual worlds. It also addresses the fundamental questions of what constitutes digital games (Aarseth and Calleja 2015) or the so-called "real games" in general (Consalvo and Paul 2013), and self-playing games in particular. Some preliminary studies into idle and zero-player games, as well as automatic play, have been initiated within the game studies community (Björk and Juul 2012; De Paoli 2015; Deterding 2016; Fizek 2017a, 2017b), but the subject belongs to a largely unexplored area. As Alexander King, a game designer, notices in a blog article series devoted to idle games, "[d]espite this proliferation and growing appeal, incremental games remain rarely discussed in games media and criticism" (King 2016).

This study aims to fill that thematic void. In order to do that, I propose to look at idle games through the lens of *interpassivity*, a concept revealing the nature of delegated pleasure, developed first by Robert Pfaller (1996) and later theorised by Slavoj Žižek (1997). Interpassivity sheds a new light onto the peculiarity of self-playing games. I will argue that idling may be understood as delegated pleasure derived from the act of outsourcing gameplay onto the game itself. Idling leads to a momentary escape from the responsibility of active play and, as a result, a dis-identification with the player's primary role as an active agent.

I will start this paper with a brief ludic sketch, providing a historical overview of the idle games genre. I will then open the analytical floor with a question focused on the core of idling. This section will be followed by an introduction into the concept of interpassivity, which will then lead to a further discussion on the delegation of play.

THE BIRTH OF AN IDLE GAME

Idle games emerged as a satire of social games and an ironic response to the mechanics of progression in role-playing games based on the so called "levelling-up", "grinding" or "gold farming" (Nakamura 2013; Nardi and Kow 2010; Zagal and Altizer 2014), repetitive and oftentimes laborious behaviours, which allow players to achieve new levels and thus advance in the game. In idle games, grinding has become a core hyperbolic mechanics, around which the entire gameplay revolves.

The history of idle games allegedly begins in 2002 with *Progress Quest* (2002), an automated game, which cannot be affected by the player's actions at all, except for "rolling" the character at the initial stages and setting two parameters – race and class (Figure 2). From that moment on, the game plays itself. After delegating the action of play, the player is welcome to enjoy the experience by watching, deriving pleasure from the systemic changes, or knowing that the game keeps unfolding in the background.
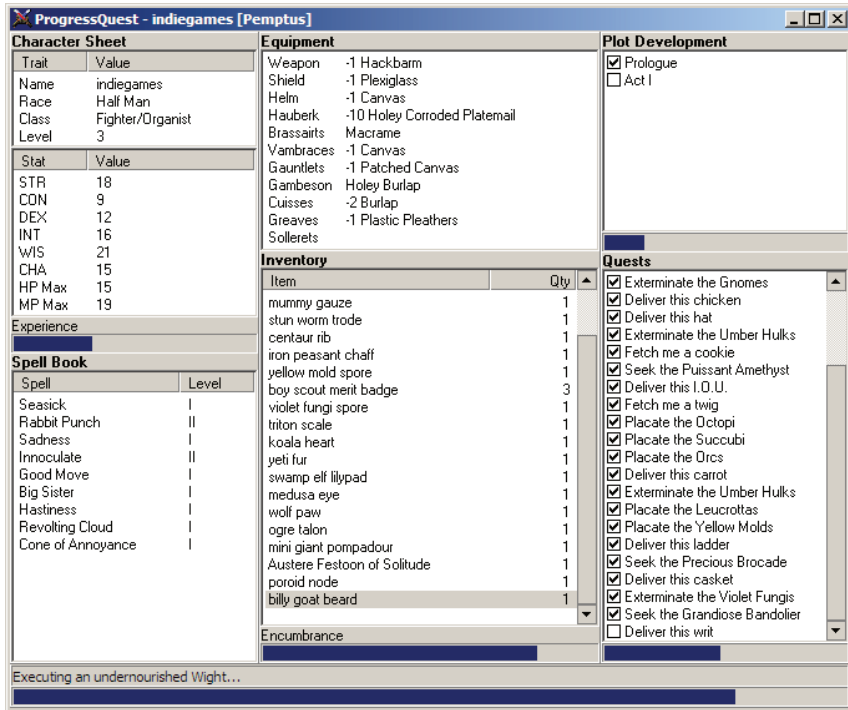
Figure 2: Progress Quest (2002)

One of the most iconic examples of "grinding parodies" is Ian Bogost's *Cow Clicker* (2010), which was designed as a satire of games such as *FarmVille* (2009), with minimal or no meaningful challenges for players to engage in. *Cow Clicker* "distilled the social game genre down to its essence" (Bogost 2010). Although Bogost designed the game predominantly as a critique of "mindless" social games played on Facebook, it soon turned out that *Cow Clicker* became immensely popular, despite the designer's early intentions.

Other titles followed, including *Progress Wars (2010), Godville (2010),* and *A Dark Room* (2013), amongst many others. One of the most recognisable idle games, which led to the popularisation and commercialisation of the genre, was Julien Thienot's *Cookie Clicker* (2013). Even CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research)

developed its own educational version called *Particle Clicker* (2014).

The growing appeal of idle games and their wide accessibility lured the gaming industry, which started to monetise the newly emerging genre. Currently, self-playing idle titles are amongst the most popular games on Kongregate, one of the biggest online game portals, which claims to attract tens of millions of players every month. Idle games are also to be found on mobile platforms, such as iOS and Android. Many, like *AdVenture Capitalist* (2015) and *Clicker Heroes* (2014), migrate to Steam, or, even more surprisingly, appear as part of a consoles title offer. *Adventure Capitalist* (2015) is now available on PlayStation 4. Both platforms are usually associated with "real games" rather than free-to-play clicker or social games.

Also, companies producing bigger console titles seem to be shifting their attention towards the idle games genre. One of those is Bandai Namco, a Japanese game developer known for its PlayStation 2 title *Katamari Damacy* (2004). Encouraged by the growing market and appeal of "idlers", it released its spin-off for mobile platforms – *Tap My Katamari* (2015). The game may be described as an endless runner with a predominant clicker component typical for idle games. While the player is away, the game keeps playing so that the player can return to the gameworld filled with new coins, an in-game currency enabling the purchasing of upgrades and thus advancement in the game.

Perhaps the most intriguing of all the recent examples of self-playing games is *Dreeps* (2016), an RPG-inspired semi-automated mobile "alarm playing game", which only obliges the player to set the alarm clock for the game's character to wake up and embark upon a journey. While the player is sitting at their desk at work, the game's character traverses fictional worlds, slays monsters and "lives" a life of their own. The player may lurk into the game at any time, watching the in-game world and the character progress independently. In the evening, the game is metaphorically and literally put to sleep. The player sets the alarm

clock for the "robot boy" character to wake up the following day and continue the adventures. As the designers themselves state, *Dreeps* is an RPG for those who do not have time for the actual playing:

> You can have a look at the adventure on the phone put on your desk while working, during snack time, just enjoy the game at your pace. If you woke up with dreeps, the adventure will automatically continue as long as the robot boy has enough HP, even if you don't open the app. (dreeps.net)

Playing *Dreeps,* one cannot escape the impression that it is the latest ludic incarnation of Tamagotchi, a digital toy created in Japan in the 1990's, with the main difference being that the robot boy does not require constant care and will not die, if unattended to. The constant attention has evolved into an intermittent attention model, in which every in-game and out-of-game moment is literally capitalised upon. The player is rewarded, whether they are actively clicking or delegating their clicks onto the game itself.

Rouguathia (2017) is an interesting recent example of a fully-automated roguelike idle game (Figure 3), whose aesthetics is a reminder of early cellular automata or the so called zero-player games, their most prominent example being *The Game of Life* (1970), designed by John Horton Conway. Conway's game was summoned in order to solve a mathematical problem posed by John von Neumann on machines that could reproduce themselves infinitely. The game is set up by a human in its initial state, from which point on, it does not require any further input and plays on its own. Fully automated idle games, such as the abovementioned *Progress Quest* and *Rouguathia*, emulate this genre in a social play context, displaying the pure mechanics of unfolding the system into a complex web of interrelations.
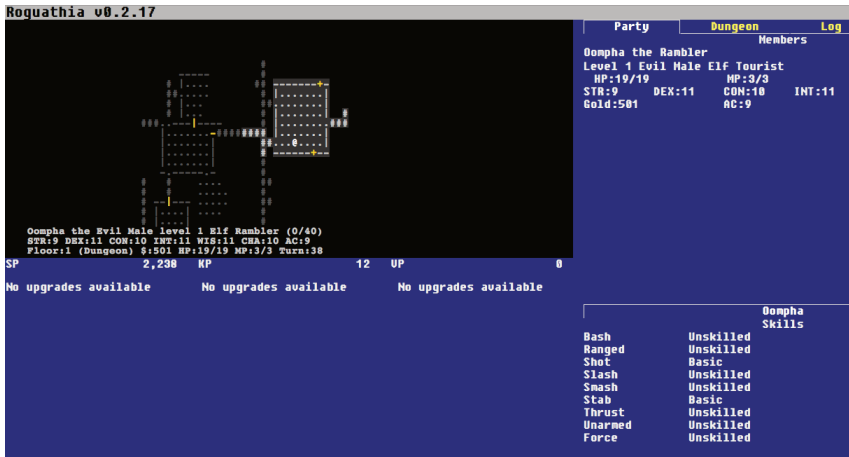
Figure 3: Rouguathia (2017)

The proliferation and increasing popularity of idle games seem to be pointing towards the normalisation process of the acceptance of the genre by a wider gaming community and what follows, the renegotiation of what counts as a game (Consalvo and DePaul 2013; Deterding 2016). Clearly, idle games have taken a visible place in the gaming landscape and moved from the satirical peripheries into the centre of what constitutes mainstream games. With idle games, the phenomenon of self-play has gained visibility.

TOWARDS THE HEART OF IDLING

But why have such automatic games gained such popularity in the first place? What lies at their heart and how come players so readily externalise gameplay onto self-playing systems? There are numerous paths to follow in order to scrutinize the nature and appeal of self-playing idle games. Some of them include:

- **The economy of attention** through a gameplay model that does not require constant presence from the players and hence treats their attention as a scarce resource;

- **Recurring gratification** by means of rewarding the player, also for the moments of absence from the game;

- **Compulsive gameplay** based on the behavioural model, seen on social platforms that encourage users to regularly check the status of their accounts;

- **Elimination of drudgery** by automating and/or delegating all the laborious and repetitive in-game activities.

The last point is particularly interesting within the context of the analytical discussion led on those pages. It fits the early examples of the genre, which provided a critical commentary on grinding as drudgery in massively multiplayer online role-playing games, where bots and macros have long been utilized to automate parts of the most laborious gameplay (De Paoli 2015). In idle games too, routine activities may be "skipped through delegation" (Bogost 2010). And since the entire gameplay is stripped to those routine play acts, it may be assumed that the enjoyment of the game as such is, to a great extent, delegated to "a technical device" (Pfaller 2017, 19), in this case, to the game's self-running algorithm.

It may be then the act of delegation of play, usually associated with utter and intense absorption (Huizinga 1938), that lies at the heart of idle games. Idling is a "falsely interactive" (Žižek 1997, 149) manifestation of an otherwise highly interactive practice – the player falls under the illusion of being active, while their true position, as embodied in the fetish of the self-playing idle game, remains passive. If we expand upon the elimination of drudgery argument with Žižek's distinction between "the Other taking over from the 'dull' mechanical aspect of routine duties, and the Other taking over from me, and thus depriving me of, enjoyment" (Žižek 1997, 147), we will end up with idle games, depriving the player of gameplay.

Still, the core question remains unsolved – why are games based entirely on such seeming deprivation of joyous play nevertheless considered fun? In other words, to ask with Roland Barthes, "[h]ow can we take pleasure

in a reported pleasure" (Barthes 1975, 17), in this case, reported by the game's system? Those crucial questions lead us towards the interpassive quality of idle games, a concept, which opens up an interesting interpretation of the essence and appeal of idling.

INTERPASSIVITY: THE AESTHETICS OF DELEGATED ENJOYMENT

A "little theory" (Pias 2000) of interpassivity was first developed in the 1990s by Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek as an opposition to, and an inverse structure of, the concept of interactivity, prevalent in the contemporary art discourse of that time. While interactivity assumed that the observers must act in order to complete the work of art, interpassivity relieved them, not only from active creating, but also from passive observing – "[t]he artwork would be an artwork that observes itself" (Pfaller 2003). In other words, while the interactive media invite the observer to participate productively in their reception and take over parts of the artistic effort, the interpassive media take the effort of participation away. Thus, media, supplying the very process of their reception, are referred to as interpassive (Pfaller 1996, 71).

According to the logics of interpassivity, pleasure is something experienced passively and it may be passed over to other people or technical devices. As Pfaller explains:

> Interpassivity is delegated 'passivity' – in the sense of delegated pleasure, or delegated consumption. Interpassive people are those who want to delegate their pleasures or their consumption. Interpassive media are all the agents – machines, people, animals, etc. – to whom interpassive people can delegate their pleasures. (Pfaller 2017, 55)

The prefix -inter is of utmost importance here. Similarly to interactivity, it signifies a transfer. In the case of interactivity, it is activity that is transferred from the product to the consumer (or from the work of art towards the audience). In the case of interpassivity, it is passivity that

is transferred from the consumer to the product (e.g. a work of art that observes itself relieving the audience of this task) (Pfaller 2017, 19).

As a typical example of an interpassive medium, Pfaller and Zizek refer to a video recorder, which watches the films for or instead of the observer while they can devote their time to something else. Other examples illustrating interpassivity include the Tibetan prayer wheel, the Greek chorus in ancient theatre, or canned laughter in American sitcoms (Žižek 1997, 34). In all those cases, the act of praying, the emotional catharsis, or the laughter are delegated onto someone or something else. Canned laughter provides an interesting contemporary media phenomenon, which gives the TV viewer an illusion that the laughter has been outsourced to a fictional audience. Another intriguing instance of interpassivity points towards the behaviour of some intellectuals in libraries when they copy text from a book and, feeling relieved, go home with a sense of satisfaction, as if the photocopier had read the pages instead of them: "They literally play reading by means of the machine" – the machine looks at every page in a linear process (Pfaller 2017, 56).

The examples are numerous, some divided not only in terms of historical periods, but also the type of activity involved. The common denominator lies in the observer, who enjoys through the medium, and may indulge in other activities at the same time. Interpassivity allows one to stay passive through the other:

> … to accede to the other the passive aspect (of enjoying), while I can remain actively engaged (I can continue to work in the evening, while the VCR passively enjoys for me…) (Žižek 1997, 149).

The above interpassive situation leads to a crucial question – why does the observer, who chooses to observe (e.g. watch a comedy), find it relieving not to actively watch the film or laugh at it (in the case of canned laughter), but rather enjoy it through a medium of some sort? What follows – "why does the observer experience the relief from their own indulgence as pleasant?" (Pfaller 1996, 71). Or in other words, "[i]s

enjoyment not something which, precisely, cannot be done through the Other?" (Žižek 1997, 147).

In the case of an interpassive medium, the transferal of pleasure may be interpreted as a jouissance (mis)perceived as one's own – we think we enjoyed the show or the game, but the Other (e.g. the video recorder, the bot, the automated game system) did it for us or rather instead of us. In an interpassive situation, the subject degrades the other to a pure instrument of their (non)pleasure. Such outsourcing or "extension" (McLuhan 1964) no longer signifies extending the pleasure itself, but leads to a paradoxical situation where pleasure does not need to be experienced at all (Pias 2000). It is lived out by the interpassive medium.

INTERPASSIVE GAMES AND DELEGATED PLAY

The concept of interpassivity, originally introduced within the context of art, has travelled into many other domains, such as media studies, film studies and political science (Feustel, Koppo, Schölzel 2011). It has even arrived in areas as seemingly remote as marketing and business, as an analytical tool used to explain consumption patterns of ethical brands (Walz, Hingston, Andehn 2014). In video games research, interpassivity has remained virtually unnoticed. It has been merely sketched as an analytical possibility to understand the avatar-player surrogate relationship through the Žižekian interpretation of Jacque Lacan (Falkowska 2011; Wilson 2003; Thorne 2016). Pfaller's foundational work has been overlooked altogether.

Digital games, seen as the epitome of interactivity, could not provide a fertile analytical ground for a concept, which questions their very core. With idling, however, we have arrived at a point where interactivity alone does not suffice anymore as a predominant conceptual framework. Idle games, discussed throughout this paper, seem to be the first video game genre to epitomise the delegation of pleasure and embody the interpassive relationship between players and the game.

Games such as the abovementioned *Cookie Clicker* (2013) (Figure 4), *Clicker Heroes* (2014) and *Godville* (2010) do something other than invite the player to an interactive spectacle where their participation is the necessary condition for the game to go on. Play emerges as a substitutive act – the player, represented by the automatic clicker algorithms, may take absence from the game. In the early stages of *Cookie Clicker*, I wilfully delegated the cumbersome task of cookie production to "Cursors" and "Grandmas". Having earned enough cookie currency, I proceeded to set up "Farms", "Mines", "Temples" and "Wizard Towers" to further multiply my cookie realm. Every now and then, I come back to the game in order to unlock further upgrades, check statistics, and browse through my expanding collection of achievements. The random "golden cookie" boost encourages me to come back to the game in order to increase the cookie meter and manually click alongside the automatically proceeding gameplay. The game may slow down without my presence, but it will not come to a halt. I flip between the tabs of the internet browser, constantly going in and out of the game. This intermittent interaction pattern, emerging as a result of delegated play, defines the active moments between automated gameplay sessions. The gameplay is reversed, as if the "load" screen was the actual game and the gameplay a moment to "wind up" or "load" the game.

The lineage of idle games, to a certain degree, can be traced back to the 19th century street barrel organs, played by rotating a handle in a cyclical motion, and thus delegating the actual task of playing the organs to the "programmed" cylinder. The tasks of an idle gamer resemble those performed by barrel grinders. After all, both consist in delegating the otherwise highly absorbing and oftentimes complex activity of play to a machine, which needs to be "ground" from time to time in order to keep playing.

Figure 4: Cookie Clicker

In an idle game, the player's agency collapses in a subversive act of play delegation. The player makes an attempt to click themselves away from the responsibility of being the sole agent. Paradoxically, with every delegated click comes an enacted click of the player, and so the agency and non-agency dance in an eternally unfolding embrace. In an idle game, the click – the most basic action that has defined computer use since the invention of the mouse in the 1960s – may no longer be associated solely with agency, activity and freedom. Instead, it becomes a sign of "human tragedy", of entering the game as a service prison from which one may never escape (Bogost 2010). The click seems to have lost its empowering dimension, if it ever had one. Idling and self-play subvert digital games as entertainment forms, relying on active participants and engaged players. Interpassivity deconstructs interactivity-centred discourse and lays bare the illusory nature of interactivity.

It could be argued that every digital game, to a certain degree, is idle. Idling points towards the phenomenon of automation, originally denoting a machine with a self-contained principle of motion (Truitt 2015, 2). A digital computer is in many ways precisely such a machine. Therefore, most games, staged within the medium of the computer, involve some level of automation, such as calculating gathered props, lost lives, or the player's proximity to an enemy NPC (non-player

character). Unlike board games, where all such computation must be done manually by the human player, in a digital game most of the processes are automated and hidden from the player's view. This type of automation is well known to an average gamer. What is much more mesmerising is the sort of automation projected onto the representational layer of the game, bringing the "aesthetics of agency and control (or the loss of these)" (Giddings 2005) to the forefront. Many examples of idle and self-playing games I have drawn upon in this paper tend to partially or entirely automate those parts of gameplay, which have been, until now, reserved for humans.

CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND INTERACTIVITY

Interpassivity provides a compelling perspective to look at games in general, and self-playing idle games in particular; one which reaches beyond interactivity, a concept that, despite its critique (Aarseth 1997; Manovich 2001), has remained largely unchallenged in the domain of games. As I have mentioned, in philosophy of art, art theory and practice, the seemingly empowering quality of interactivity was questioned and critically evaluated (Pfaller 1996). In Games Studies, the situation has been very different. After all, human-computer interaction is the core quality through which digital games are defined. It is the theories of action and interaction (Kaptelinin and Nardi 2006) that contribute to a grand narrative of our relationship with technology. In video games, the myth of interactivity is oftentimes strongly associated with the dream of freedom, especially in sandbox-type genres where the player is promised to be able to move freely in open worlds and influence their surroundings. As Espen Aarseth noticed as early as 1997, interactivity is "a purely ideological term, projecting an unfocused fantasy rather than a concept of any analytical significance" (Aarseth 1997, 51). Also, Lev Manovich in *Language of New Media* found interactivity to be too broad a concept to be truly useful, if not entirely redundant (Manovich 2001, 71).

And yet, when confronted with such genres as idle or zero-player games, game scholars still seem to be puzzled, mostly because the heart of gameness is no longer defined through the human-computer communication dynamics, which places the human as an active agent in dialogue with technology:

> [u]nless players have some agency to affect the outcome of a game and can intentionally exercise it, they are not really … playing a game. (Björk and Juul 2012)

Interpassivity opens a new interpretative perspective. It provokes questions reaching beyond the seemingly emancipatory dimension of interactive media. Looking at games through the interpassive lens of play delegation may contribute to a deeper understanding of activity, passivity and the role of the player. It untangles many contemporary paradoxes such as zero-player gaming or idling. In idle games, the player assumes a role of a playing subject, but to a large degree escapes the pressure of the actual play, giving up their agency and delegating it to the clicker algorithms. The game still progresses and its progress relies on the human player's decision to externalise the act of play onto a technical device, and thus delegate the pleasure derived from playing the game. Interpassivity sheds a new light on this peculiar practice of play. It seems a particularly fruitful, if not a necessary, contribution to game-related research. Without interpassivity, we cannot fully understand all the facets of the playful communication between the human and the machine, which lies at the core of digital gaming and what follows, idling.

It also opens up many other thematic fields, apart from idling discussed in this paper, which could be understood as instances of delegated play. For example, the usage of bots and macros in MMORPGs or the role of the player in movie games (also called interactive movies) relying mostly on cinematic sequences rather than pure gameplay (e.g. *Heavy Rain,* 2010). An interactive movie may as well be seen as an interpassive game, which consists more in spectating, witnessing and delegating, rather than enacting. From an interpassive perspective, the well-

established and discussed cut-scene may be interpreted as a delegated gameplay component in its own right rather than a mere disruption of an otherwise interactive experience or an embodiment of a visual narrative technique belonging to the previous medium – "an interpassive act … not only brings back a part of bygone pleasure, but constitutes a new, original one" (Pfaller 2017, 43). Finally, the recent worldwide practice of watching others stream their gameplay at Twitch.tv becomes much clearer when perceived through delegation and interpassivity. Twitch broadcasting defines a ludic pleasure derived from looking over the other player's shoulder. In all the interpassive examples of games, hands-on actors do not need to be the key figures of agency (Taylor 2012, 183).

I would like to conclude this paper with a playful lyrical commentary, quoting a verse "Aber wir lassen es andere machen" written by a German poet Theodor Fontane and recalled within the context of interpassivity by Robert Pfaller.

But we have others do it instead

A Chinese (200 years ago or more)
Visited France and went to the ball
And some asked whether he knew it?
And others whether he himself would do it?
"We call it dancing", replied he nodding his head
But we have others perform it instead.

And the word still rings a bell
Remaining for all to retell
I stare at runs, I glare when others hunt
But when people turn to me and ask blunt:
"Why don't you join? Why stand by side?
My reply is: "Everything goes with its own tide.
Chasing luck. All this only but troubles my head,
I'd rather others did it instead.

Theodor Fontane (1905, author's own translation)

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