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(Post)pandemic academia, or rising from the ashes

we live in interesting times. The COVID-19 pandemic struck academic life hard, especially when it comes to conferences and personal meetings between researchers. Two important game conferences had to be postponed: the 2020 DiGRA conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, and the 2021 Central and Eastern European Game Studies (CEEGS) Conference in Tallinn, Estonia. Fortunately, despite the ongoing risks, it was possible to hold both overdue conferences in 2022 (though DiGRA was moved to Kraków, Poland). Not that there were no illnesses at both events; even during DiGRA itself, some participants tested positive for COVID-19. However, the conference life must go on.

At DiGRA 2022, several researchers attempted to demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected our lives. For example, in their talk *Playing A|part Together in Animal Crossing: New Horizons During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin and Pierre Gabriel Dumoulin showed how Nintendo's game helped the players sustain mutual elementary social relations. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the presentation *Digital Gaming During the Early COVID-19 Pandemic: Healthy Escapism and Social Connectedness* by Timo Partala. Based on the sample of 146 games, Partala argued that staying home and playing digital games promoted the so-called healthy escapism, that is: "managing boredom and loneliness, coping with stress, seeking mental distraction, and fulfilling the need for social connectedness." Far from being solely an alienating medium, digital games helped people cope with the forced lockdown.

A connection can be drawn between the forced lockdown and Magdalena Zdrodowska's keynote talk in disability studies. Zdrodowska, whose work is deeply rooted in cinema and media studies, argued for the term "dis/cinema," that is,

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cinema for people who cannot experience it multimodally due to sightlessness or deafness. Dis/cinema challenges the normative and repressive norms of experiencing cinema that exclude disabled people. The introduction of sound cinema in the 1920s and 1930s would serve as an example; it meant the sudden disappearance of dialogue subtitles, which excluded deaf persons from participating in visual culture. One might note that many more people experienced a somewhat similar exclusion in the lockdown, though only from some cultural forms and only temporarily. And as a digression, I would say that dis/cinema manifests itself in a French-developed digital game *A Blind Legend* (2015), dedicated to blind players, which undermines the common belief that digital games *must be* video games.

Speaking of the "game/not-game" division, what I found to be one of the most exciting presentations at DiGRA was Olli Tapio Leino's *The Tragedy of the Art Game*. The "tragedy" results from inconclusive attempts to reconcile the author/player stances, especially seen in the so-called art games. While the author wants to express themselves, the player desires, in turn, a suitable environment to play, thus trying to avoid the author's persuasion. Different conclusions can be drawn from Braxton Soderman's talk *The Playful Attitude and the Critical Attitude*. There, the researcher argued against the fetishistic appraisal of game-specific values dominating in game studies (influenced by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's concept of flow) over the actual ideological content and meaning of games.

The "what is a game?" question returned in Sonia Fizek's talk at the CEEGS 2022 conference, revolving around her recent book *Playing at a Distance*. Fizek's account of idle games that do not require the player's constant attention concluded in a reappraisal of interpassivity: watching instead of participating in a game. Fizek concluded her talk with the statement that "we play games as much as games play us," reversing the standard view of digital games as interactive media. Games shape our knowledge of the world, just like we shape their meaning. Hence, the player's activity meets the game's activity.

The COVID-19 pandemic was referenced in Jonne Arjoranta's presentation during the CEEGS 2022 workshop about political activism, *Playing the Socialist: Solution to the Climate Crisis*. Within the workshop, Arjoranta presented his JavaScript game *Half-Earth,* which simulated the political fiction scenario: a socialist revolution in 2022 aiming to solve the climate crisis. After the revolution, the player needs to balance between different factions, prevent climate catastrophe, and not get overthrown by political enemies. However, Arjoranta admitted that regardless of the player's attempts, playthroughs might still lead to catastrophic events such as wildfires and flooding. He suggested that in the game, the climate issue may be solved only by degrowth and depopulation. In other words, the Earth may avoid the environmental catastrophe if the player allows for industrial decline and (what is even more controversial) significant population loss during

the recurring pandemics. Yet, the ultimate solution may need forward-looking planning, and thus *Half-Earth* advocates for a change of mentality, opposing the dogma of economic growth.

Beatriz Blanco referred to the pandemic as well. Her talk during the same workshops, *Punhos de Repudio – A Ludic Revenge Against Pandemic Negationists*, described some games made by Brazilian designers infuriated by the politics of the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro and the fanaticism of his supporters. For example, progressive designers in Brazilia created *Punhos de Repudio*, where the main objective is to fight Bolsonaro's voters (including COVID-19 deniers), with mechanics inspired by brawler games like *Double Dragon*. However, Blanco stated that *Punhos de Repudio* mainly responds to Brazilian mainstream political games, whose right-wing developers called for lynchings of opposition politicians. Thus, *Punhos de Repudio* constitutes a reaction against the actual reaction in Brazil.

Politics also caught the attention of Hanna Wirman, the last keynote at CEEGS 2022. A researcher of Hong Kong gaming history, Wirman said in her talk, *Games and (Inter)national Politics*, that the resistance against China's violation of human rights during the Hong Kong protests was tremendous. Moreover, it affected numerous tactical games aimed against the continental Chinese repression. Yet, Wirman also stressed that games in the region – even board ones – had been involved in politics since their beginnings, which challenges the common view of gaming as an escapist form of entertainment. One example is the 1909 board game *Pank-a-Squith* about the suffragette movement.

Digital games can also be indirectly involved in political discourses, and this was discussed with regard to Poland and Czechia. In their two talks (*Polish Ghost in American Shell*, *The Invention of Leshy*), Tomasz Majkowski, Aleksandra Prokopek, and Magdalena Kozyra indicated the local roots of the seemingly cosmopolitan productions *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and *Cyberpunk 2077*. The last game, while making use of an American-licensed universe, references the Polish systemic transformation in the 1990s. It includes the audiovisual cues typical for that period (advertisements on every surface, failed infrastructure, omnipresent poverty, and organized crime). Tereza Fousek Krobová, Justyna Janik, and Jaroslav Švelch made a similar effort in their talk *Haunted Spaces of Post-Soviet Horror Games*. They presented a comparative study of two games: Czech-developed *Someday You'll Return* and Polish-developed *The Medium*, both firmly rooted in the local landscapes and history.

The current global crisis is being addressed at game studies conferences, and also in game studies journals. A special issue of the *Arts and Cultural Studies Review*, "Playing While the World Burns: Games in a Time of Crisis," will soon appear, edited by Justyna Janik and Daniel Vella. Just as games are still interested in politics (at least some of them), research has not missed another important phenomenon of collective life: pandemics.