Replay

The Polish Journal of Game Studies

RePlay

The Polish Journal of Game Studies

Spis treści/Contents

Aleksandra Prokopek* (iD)

The art presence of videogames

From the perspective of the mainstream history of videogames, 1980s can be perceived as turbulent times for the videogames' industry and market. Next to the technological developments, new personal computers and 16-bit consoles, given decade was marked with consoles war, successes and failures of small companies and big corporations, and most importantly – with the crash on the consoles' market of 1983, considered as the "historical milestone" on the medium's timeline (Newman 2017, p. 23). While the significance of given events is undisputable, need for a new perspective emerges. Because as Lana Polansky claims, the lens of "tech-progressivism" is not the only viable way of approaching the evolution of videogames and there is a lesser-known history of the medium, that instead of new developments or console wars, focuses on the "long heritage of games deliberately concerned with the artistic, political and personal" (Polansky 2016). Namely, the art history of videogames.

As Polansky explains, the connections between art and games transgress historical and cultural borders and can be traced way back to the medieval times, to so-called *volvelles*, a paper-based text generation machines. Astrid Ensslin says that the examples of literary games can be also found in popular in Persian culture parlour game Mosha'ere, in which players (bounded by the rules) recite the lines of poetries; or in traditional Japanese card game called Uta-garuta "in which players have to speed-match poetry lines written on cards to complete a full poem" (Ensslin 2014, p. 32). In twentieth century, games and art manage to get even closer, especially in avant-garde and experimental arts, including Surrealists games (like "exquisite corpse," "questions," or "one into another;" Brotchie 1995) or various board games created by Alberto Giacometti or by the artists from the neo-avant-garde group Fluxus (Flanagan 2009).

---

*   Doctoral School in Humanities, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6618-3802, e-mail: aleksandra.prokopek@doctoral.uj.edu.pl

While given examples may be considered as a non-digital prehistory of videogames art, their proper history begins around 1980s, presenting another "historical milestone" to the videogame's timeline. Because exactly in the year 1983 the magazine Video Games Player stated, that "videogames are as much an art form as any field of entertainment" (Video Games Player 1983, p. 49) presenting the first claim that videogames can be considered as a form of art. And few years later, in 1989, given claim was accepted by the institution that since the very beginning holds the power of appointing the status of art to processes and creation: the Museum of Moving Image[1] with the exhibition titled "Hot Circuits: A Video Arcade," considered the "first museum retrospective of video arcade game" (Slovin 2009). Lana Polansky proposes another significant event of that decade and points out the year 1984 similarly noteworthy, as a year when Automata ("a little outfit from Portsmouth") released *Deus Ex Machina*, a unique game that differs from traditional "shoot and jump" gameplays and focuses instead on reflective, meaningful and metatextual story (Polansky 2016). In other words, an *art game*.

But the concept of art games itself enters game discourse a little bit later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Today given term is quite universally accepted as a description for a genre of interactive works that "challenges cultural stereotypes, offers meaningful social or historical critique, or tells a story in a novel manner" (Holmes 2003, p. 46). John Sharp defines art games as works that uses "the innate properties of games – among them interactivity, player goals, and obstacles providing challenge for the player – to create revealing and reflective play experiences," and compares that concept to the category of *game art* that can be simply explained as "art made of games" (Sharp 2015, pp. 12–14). Videogames and their elements become here not only an inspiration for works of art, but also a new medium for art, which brings unique ways for developers' expression, social critic and recipients' engagement.

However, the first decade of twenty-first century was not only the moment when the academic discussion about art games and game art emerges, but most importantly the time of great productions, which moved beyond accepted boarders and definitions of games, bringing unique aesthetics, new ways of playing and critically and socially engaged perspectives. The noteworthy mentions of art games include innovative and reflective production, like Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008) and its problematization of the concept of time or Jason Rohrer's *Passage*

---

[1] Nowadays The Museum of Modern Art in New York has thirty-five games in their collection. In the time of writing that article given games and several computer interfaces, icons or apps from MoMA's collection are presented in exhibition *Never Alone: Video Games and Other Interactive Design* (September 2022 – spring 2023). See: https://press.moma.org/exhibition/video-games/

(2007) in which basic gameplay and simple graphics conveys abstract metaphor of the human existence. In case of a game art and the presence of videogames in the gallery spaces, Mary Flanagan's [*giantJoystick*] – a large, fully functioning game controller (modelled after classic Atari 2600 joystick), that demands gallery visitors to collaborate in an impressive performance of playing – may confirm the notion that not only art changes videogames, but also, that videogames change art.

As thoroughly presented by the contributors of the special issue of "Replay. The Polish Journal of Games Studies" (vol. 1(8), 2021), idea of videogames art is lively and present, continuously evolving and reconfiguring players' experience. What seems to be outdated for the authors are considerations if digital games *are* art, so-called "Ebert's debate" that is perceived here just as the event on the timeline of the art history of videogames. But that does not mean that given issue is fully resolved, because as presented by the contributors, the concept of videogames art – with its categories and definitions – is broad and problematic, with several questions that still need to be answered.

The most important one focuses on the relations and parallels between videogames and art, investigating the qualities of videogames as a new medium of art. Are digital games some kind of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that synthesis traditional forms of art: such as music, pictures, stories? How inner elements of videogames reconfigure recipients' experience? How developers' intention affects creation of meaning? How videogames aesthetics influences humans' existence and becomes a part of cultural and social critic? Deriving from philosophy of art, aesthetics and critical theories (and much more) contributors of given special issue present thorough and important insights into the contemporary position of videogames art.

In *16-bit dissensus: post-retro aesthetics, hauntology, and the emergency in video games* (pp. 17–36) Patrick R. Dolan investigates videogames art through the lens of Santiago Zabala's concept of "emergency". In *Why Only Art Can Save Us* Zabala, philosopher and cultural critic, presents how contemporary society tends to repress the crises and accepts an "overwhelming consensus that everything is fine in the global West" (p. 18). Given ignorance leads to tricky situation in which "the problem is not only the emergencies we confront but the ones we are missing" (Zabala 2009, p. 3). That lack of a sense of emergency becomes the greatest emergency.

Dolan applies Zabala's proposition to the state of contemporary videogame culture, claiming that "the mainstream AAA industry and culture of video games [is] dominated by corporations that perpetuate exploitative labor practices, work to de-politicize problematic narratives and gameplay, and are locked in endless technological progression" (p. 19). The games are technically progressing, but the themes, genres or gameplays stays the same – the repetition is safer than the money-risking ideas, especially the ones breaking with the *hegemony of play*

(that promotes certain ways of playing and marginalizes alternate products; Fron et al. 2007). Given category, aligned by Dolan with Mark Fisher's *capitalist realism* regarding "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009, p. 2) shows, that videogames add to the Zabala's emergency. However, as Dolan says, there is an alternative.

According to Zabala, what is needed to break through the emergency is a shock, an aesthetic force that can shake us out from the tendency to ignore the crises. Something opposite to consensus, a power that can disrupt accepted world picture and presents alternative understandings, namely, the dissensus. For Dolan, that transgressive, aesthetic force enters the videogame culture through post-retro games and exists in "their repurposing of supposedly superseded graphics, in simplified controls, in subversion of gameplay, and in representation of and accessibility for people outside of the core demographics of AAA" (p. 22). Games like Anna Antrophy's *Dys4ia* or Toby Fox's *Undertale* confronts capitalist realism and promotes representations outside the hegemonic, mainstream industry. Post-retro games gains here similar role to the one prescribed to avant-garde videogames (see Sharp 2015; Schrank 2014; Sell 2019; Flanagan 2009), including Bonnie Ruberg's concept of "queer games avant-garde", concerned with indie games that intervenes with the mainstream industry and promotes alternative and diverse perspectives.

In Klaudia Jancsovics' *Play the art: Artistic value in video games* (pp. 37–51), deliberations about videogames status as art shifts toward some crucial questions about relations between technological development and art. Photography brought us the possibility of capturing the moment and creating an image; films took the step forward and made the images move; videogames gave us even more, an action in which we can participate. And every one of those mediums demanded new kinds of engagement and reception.

Based on the terminology proposed by Janet H. Murray (2017), videogames aesthetics connect with the categories of immersion, agency and transformation. Recipient submerges into the virtual space and acts in that "other" reality, with their agency constrained by the system of rules that dictates the possible behaviours, but at the same time makes the action possible. Jancsovics compares that model to the colouring book, in which lines marks unchangeable shapes, but "we can fill these shapes freely with our preferred colours" (p. 39). Players, then, may choose their method of playing, but most importantly, they can create their own experience and interpret the game in individually meaningful way.

Jancsovics approaches the problem of videogames art from the perspective of the immersive virtual spaces and focuses on their inner elements that represents traditional medium of arts, including paintings, music, poems – elements that also

in videogames invoke powerful feelings and provides aesthetical pleasure. And the proposition of considering videogames as art due to their possession of common art qualities was quite important for the debate about the digital games' status. As said by Grant Tavinor in the definition of cluster theory of art: "art can be identified or even defined by its ownership of a significant proportion of art-typical features, such as representation, direct pleasure in perceptual features, emotional saturation, style, and imaginative involvement" (Tavinor 2009, p. 171). Jancsovics' analysis aligns with that description and presents videogames as a new medium for art.

But that belief was not always praised by the critics, and the status of videogames as art became a theme of long and problematic debate, exhaustively revised by Paweł Kaczmarski in the article *A tale of two Eberts: Videogames and the arbitrariness of meaning* (pp. 53–82). The long-lasting discussion, initiated by American film critic Roger Ebert's remarks that "Video Games can Never be Art" (Ebert 2010a) or even that for most gamers "video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic" (Ebert 2005), produced number of articles, blog posts, presentation and TED Talks, explaining why videogames are (not) art. Kaczmarski encounters given dispute from new, metacritical perspective, focused less on the presented arguments and criticised views, and more on what the debate says about the nature of art and games, but also on the thorough analysis of the contradiction in Ebert's claims.

The "Ebert's debate" may be considered as another important event on the timeline of art history of videogames. The harsh words from the prominent movie critic found number of opponents, who counterclaimed Ebert's statement with belief that almost anything could be art if we take into the consideration our experience of it. Given propositions were validated by chosen definitions of art, including the one borrowed from Wikipedia, describing art as a "process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions," that was used by game developer Kellee Santiago in a TEDx Talk directly responding to Ebert's words.

As Kaczmarski shows, Ebert in some way shared the belief that "anything can be made into art" which contradicted with critic's idea that videogames cannot be art "in principle" because of their inner features, especially interactivity and agency (p. 66). As Ebert claims "art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices" (Ebert 2010b) and William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* would be quite disappointing and meaningless if both characters would survive in some kind of a happy ending chosen by the audience. Through detailed analysis of the notions of meaning, intention and interpretation applied to videogames rules and games-as-works, Kaczmarski tries to resolve those issues, asking crucial questions about the debate itself.

Problem of intention is present also in Benjamin Hanussek's *Playing distressed art: Adorno's aesthetic theory in game design* (pp. 83–97) concerned with the idea that games can be deliberately based on given art theories and designed to evoke aesthetic experience. Based on the examples of *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) and *Observer* (Bloober Team 2017) author shows how traits of Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory can be found in videogames, but also how it can be intentionally implemented into the game. Author – from the perspective of the co-creator of a game – explains here how Adorno's understanding of art inspired the creation of indie cyberpunk title called *Distressed* (CtrlZ Games Collective 2021), that investigates the notion of "capitalistic hamster wheel in which most working-class people find themselves" (p. 85).

What is most important for Hanussek in Adorno's theory is the problem of truth, the aesthetic experience that exposes the subject to the social situation and reminds "the world of its lost realities: freedom and life, beauty and happiness, truth and reconciliation, hope and possibility" (p. 85). According to the author, given features manifest themselves in above-mentioned games that problematize unfairness, alienation and exploitation of capitalistic systems, and reflects on the idea of "wrong life that cannot be lived rightly" (p. 86). Inspired by them and intentionally deriving from Adorno's theory, *Distressed* goes even further, implementing into the gameplay unpleasant experience, which unveils the dialectic between labour and leisure.

Meanwhile, Emilie Reed in *The aesthetics of speedrunning: Performances in neo-baroque space* (pp. 99–115) examines how speedrunning, activity concerned with quick completion of a game, influences aesthetical exploration of videogames environment. Extremely different from standard playthroughs, speedruns are considered here in the categories of a performance, which affects both players' and audiences' experience, bringing pleasure and excitement of witnessing a perfect run. As an alternative to prescribed narratives and environments, speedruns aesthetic qualities connects with fragmentation, with unconventional ways of going through digital space.

Given features are analysed here through the lenses of Angela Ndalianis' work, concerning Neo-Baroque aesthetics in contemporary media, or to be more precise, focused on how features of historical Baroque (including instability, fragmentation or frame-breaking) exists in today's entertainment: in amusements parks, movies or videogames. And by adding to that list the activities of speedruns communities, Reed expands Ndalianis' propositions, describing frame-breaking, fragmentation of normative visuals, and skipping elements of gameplay, visible in the quick runs. To achieve them, speedrunners carefully examine the spaces, identifying errors and glitches that reveal hidden strategies of playing. And while for speedrunners given malfunctions help to speed up the playthrough, they also reconfigure

aesthetical experience, resembling works of *glitch art*, in which purposeful errors are used to display underlying code, to investigate the materiality of the media or replace smooth visual representations with almost tactile sensation of distortion (what is considered by Brian Schrank an avant-garde act; Schrank 2014). As Reeds concludes: "speedrunning practices that involve glitches, exploits, and sequence breaks give the player a toolbox of fragments from which to construct a new aesthetic experience, which they can then perform in real time" (p. 112). By applying the art theories to analysis of speedruns author describes its aesthetical qualities derived from the communities' activities, problematizing the idea of videogame as an aesthetic object.

In *Feeling the narrative control(ler): Casual art games as trauma therapy* Hailey J. Austin and Lydia R. Cooper (pp. 129–143) focus on another category, on *casual art games* in the context of their engagement in trauma therapy. Given games, described as "non-competitive" and "artistically-rendered" are presented here as useful practices, that can help the players to reorganize traumatizing events into the coherent, meaningful narratives. Their aesthetics elements, colour schemes or animation choices, propose reflective and immersive digital spaces, like the ones described by Klaudia Jancsovics. But here, to follow once again Janet H. Murray proposition, next to the immersion and agency, the biggest emphasis is put on the category of transformation.

While talking about trauma, the authors highlight that they do not mean the tragic or painful event itself, but rather the mark it left on one's body and mind. As a kind of imprint, it takes form of unprocessed memory, that escapes narrative organization. The goal of the trauma therapy is to processes and organize given memory, to "bring the sufferer into a place of feeling whole of once again being inside their own bodies and alive in a world that is no longer terrifying" (p. 133). Casual art games, through their agency and interactivity, have potential to become an art therapy, as they allow player to create alternate, meaningful storylines and practice the encounters with traumatic events. Calming aesthetics and feeling of control, visible in two titles interpreted in the article proposes how videogames may become powerful tool for practicing the need of letting go or developing empathy toward traumatic experiences of others.

Meanwhile, Filip Jankowski (pp. 117–128) approaches special issue theme from more methodological perspective, and in the article tilted *O gropowiastkach* (eng. *About game-satires*) proposes a new category, suitable to describe certain group of digital games, namely, games that through schematic stories try to convey moral message, similarly to the philosophical satires in literature. Based on the term *gamenovels,* proposed by Tomasz Z. Majkowski and applied to games that attempt to "create a total image of the world by employing various perspectives and worldviews" (Majkowski 2019, p. 317), Jankowski's *game-satires* describe

videogames that often escape rigid definitions of the medium and orbit on the margins of mainstream game culture. With their conventional (often humorous) stories and constraint exploration, game-satires lead player through the game, toward prescribed philosophical message.

While describing game-satires, Jankowski decides to discard the categories of *art games* and *non-games* – that had been proposed as a description of marginalized, artistic expressions in new medium – as strengthening the belief that digital games are mere entertainment and have nothing to do with art. Given consideration reminds the presentation showed by Belgian duet Tales of Tale, during the Art History of Games symposium in 2010, when Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn announced that games are not art, and they are not art in principle, because while games derives from the physical need or animal instinct, art is "born out of a desire to touch the untouchable," "to explore the unknown," that art has no rules or a goal that "evaporate as soon as it is discovered" (Harvey and Samyn 2010). And mainstream videogame industry got stuck, happy with the revenues it gets from the mere entertainment it provides, through the repetition of the same themes over again. But most importantly, videogames industry captured the technology, that with its affordances, with interactivity and possibility of generating the realities, may become a medium for social engagement, for meaningful critic, for bringing people's attention to crises at hand.

Creators from Tales of Tale proposes here "the notgames initiative," a project that focuses on the exploration of the potential of digital entertainment and art, which rejects typical game elements (including rules, goals, challenges, rewards). They consider "notgames" as a method of design that wants to broaden the spectrum, helps the medium to evolve. But as presented by the contributors of given special issue, videogames do not have to abandon their typical elements – they can intentionally use them, to implement critical theory, convey philosophical message, propose aesthetical experience or even change them into the aesthetical force, that critics mentioned stagnation and ignorance. From the perspective of art history of videogames, the medium is evolving and with present achievements, digital games can be considered as a new medium of art.

Bibliography

Antrophy, A. (2012). *Dys4ia* [PC]. Newgrounds.
Automata (1984). *Deus Ex Machina* [PC]. Automata UK.
Bloober Team (2017). *Observer* [PC]. Aspyr. Bloober Team.
Blow, J. (2008). *Braid* [PC]. Number None.

CtrlZ Games Collective (2021). *Distresed* [PC]. CtrlZ Games Collective.

Ebert, R. (2005). *Why did the chicken cross the genders?* https://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Ebert, R. (2010a). *Video games can never be art.* https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/video-games-can-never-be-art (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Ebert, R. (2010b). *Okay, kids, play on my lawn.* https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/okay-kids-play-on-my-lawn (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* O Books.

Flanagan, M. (2009). *Critical Play: Radical Game Design.* MIT Press.

Fron, J., Fullerton, T., Morie, J.F., & Pearce, C. (2007). The Hegemony Of Play. In *DiGRA '07 – Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play* (pp. 309–318). http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/the-hegemony-of-play/ (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Harvey, A. & Samyn, M. (2010). *Over Games.* https://tale-of-tales.com/tales/Over-Games.html (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Holmes, T. (2003). Arcade Classics Spawn Art? Current Trends in the Art Game Genre. In *MelbourneDAC. Proceedings of the 5th International Digital Arts and Culture* (pp. 46–52). RMIT School of Applied Communication.

Majkowski, T.Z. (2019). *Języki gropowieści: studia o różnojęzyczności gier cyfrowych.* Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Newman, M.Z. (2018). *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America.* MIT Press.

Polansky, L. (2016). *Towards an Art History for Videogames. Rhizome.* https://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/aug/03/an-art-history-for-videogames/ (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Pope, L. (2013). *Papers, Please* [PC]. 3909 LLC.

Rohrer, J. (2007). *Passage* [PC].

Ruberg, B. (2020). *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games.* Duke University Press Books.

Schrank, B. (2014). *Avant-garde Videogames. Playing with Technoculture.* MIT Press.

Sell, M. (2019). *Modernist Afterlives In Performance – Playing the Avant-Garde: The Aesthetics, Narratives, and Communities of Video Game Vanguards.* https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/playing-avant-garde (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Sharp, J. (2015). *Works of Game. On the Aesthetics of Games and Art.* MIT Press.

Slovin, R. (2009). *Hot Circuits. Reflections on the first museum retrospective of the video arcade game.* http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/hot-circuits-20090115 (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Tavinor, G. (2009). *The Art of Videogames.* Wiley-Blackwell.

Video Games Player (1983). *1983 Golden Joystick Awards. Video Games Player*, vol. 2, no. 1. https://archive.org/details/Video_Games_Player_Vol_2_No_1_1983-09_Carnegie_Publications_US/page/n47/mode/2up (accessed on December 17, 2022).

Zabala, S. (2019). *Why Only Art Can Save Us*. Columbia University Press.

Aleksandra Prokopek – PhD candidate; her research focuses on art, avant-garde and games. Guest editor of the special issue of "Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies."

Patrick R. Dolan*

16-bit dissensus: post-retro aesthetics, hauntology, and the emergency in video games

Abstract

Santiago Zabala reveals a crisis in modern society that perceives a world dominated by oppressive neoliberal ideology as acceptable and unproblematic. He claims that today's greatest emergency is that we fail to notice other emergencies in society. To break out of this state, we need an aesthetic force to shock individuals into a new awareness. Unfortunately, while many social and global issues have recently come to widespread attention, the emergency still prevails in many forms of media. For example, the emergency in AAA video games appears in their continual push for higher resolution graphics, hyper-detail, verisimilitude, and intricate gameplay, perpetuating a hegemonic ideology. Exploitative labor practices, lack of representation beyond hetero-sexual, cis-gendered and neurotypical, and capitalist ideals are perpetuated in popular games in service of a hyper-real, high-fidelity aesthetic. One force that combats this emergency is pixel graphics and simplified gameplay, or post-retro aesthetics. While tied to the past, these aesthetics are not nostalgic but transgressively hauntological. To explore this claim, I discuss *Dys4ia* and *Undertale* as key post-retro games and reach beyond commercial indie gaming to point to hauntological work being done through DIY game making platformers such as *Bitsy*.

Keywords: Pixel graphics, post-retro, aesthetics, hauntology, dissensus, Dys4ia, Undertale

*   York University, e-mail: pdolan@yorku.ca

According to Santiago Zabala (2017), the biggest crisis in modern society is an overwhelming consensus that everything is fine in the global west. This consensus involves a dominant stable and secure idea of the world, or "world picture" (Heidegger 2002b), that sidelines dissenting voices who speak against our current neoliberal status quo. What Zabala called "the emergency" was a lack of awareness and inaction toward global issues, such as the distribution of wealth, proliferation of war, and the prevalence of capitalism, which were largely ignored by the western world. During the pandemic, of course, many issues have risen to popular consciousness, as seen in the greater attention paid to #BlackLivesMatter, Canada's treatment of First Nations, and higher taxes for the wealthy, to name a few. However, the emergency – or the perceived lack of emergencies – prevails on many micro levels and across many media, particularly video games.

The emergency appears in modern mainstream video games in the continual push for higher resolution graphics, hyper-detail, verisimilitude, and intricate gameplay that perpetuate a hegemonic ideology. In service of a hyper-real, high-fidelity aesthetic in games, large corporations are exploiting workers and producing homogenous titles marketed to hetero-sexual, cis-gendered, and neurotypical white men that perpetuate aggressive capitalist ideals and lack any kind of diversity in representation. According to Zabala, an "aesthetic force" is needed to thrust us into an awareness of today's emergency (2017, p. 5). One such force is video games with pixel graphics and simplified gameplay, or post-retro games (Fulton & Fulton 2010). In embracing their supposed superseded graphics and control schemes, these games break through the emergency hauntologically, in an aesthetic practice that salvages elements of the past to propose a better future. In this way, post-retro games weaponize their aesthetics to produce shock (Vattimo 2010) and cause dissensus (Rancière 2015) in an act of critical transgressivity (Pötzsch 2019).

In order to explore this claim, I introduce the concept of emergency in video games and use aesthetic theory to explain how post-retro games confront the emergency through hauntology. I begin with exploring titles from 2010s, such as retro-style indie games *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy 2012) and *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015), as examples of hauntological games. I conclude by problematizing commercial post-retro games and point toward the game making platform *Bitsy* (Adam LeDoux 2017) as a site for hauntological transgressivity today.

The emergency in video games

According to Santiago Zabala, there is a specific kind of crisis in the modern world, direr than oppressive and violent governments, social and political injustices, or wasteful and predatory capitalist production. The critical situation today is that among all these crises, there is a prevailing sense – in the global west mainly

– that everything is fine. Using Heidegger, Zabala claims the current lack of a sense of emergency is today's emergency. An essential aspect of this situation is the notion of a "world picture" (Heidegger 2002b): a pervading view of the world that is both immediately perceptible and governed by certain a priori of how the world already is. Supported and reproduced by dominant ideologies in modern society, the world picture is normalized to such an extent that there is no understanding or acknowledgement of alternate ways of living.

While Zabala focuses on grand socio-political issues such as war, pollution, and genocide, our current emergency also penetrates many other aspects of the industrialized world. One instance is the mainstream AAA industry and culture of video games dominated by corporations that perpetuate exploitative labor practices, work to de-politicize problematic narratives and gameplay, and are locked in endless technological progression.

AAA games are increasingly more realistic in their graphic verisimilitude and more intricate in their control mechanics. However, while they are technically progressing, their genres, themes, narratives, and gameplay have largely stayed the same. According to the NDP group, the top five selling games of 2020 were *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (Treyarch, Raven Software), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2019), *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD), *Madden NFL 21* (EA Tiburon), and *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (Ubisoft Montreal). All five are entries in long-running game series, and all fit into established genres (i.e., first person shooter, farming sim/cozy game, sports simulator, and open-world adventure). Except for *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, all entries push for top-of-the-line, cinematic graphics. This goal requires higher budgets and ever-growing development teams (Keogh 2015). With so much capital at stake, AAA games need to control risk as much as possible to ensure profit, for instance, by using presold properties from other media, "reiteration and sequelization," and "narrowing of products in line with established game genres and gameplay mechanics" (Clarke & Wang 2020, loc. 115). Often these games feature what Christopher Paul (2018) calls a "toxic meritocracy." This term refers to games that overemphasize "winning" through how well a game is performed. To describe this popular gaming landscape, Harvey and Fisher (2013) use Fron et. al.'s concept of "hegemony of play," a "systematically developed a rhetoric of play" (p. 363) that is habitualized by years of playing a certain way and by certain narrative forms and gameplay. This hegemony of play is analogous to Zabala's use of the world picture, or what Mark Fisher (2009) describes as "capitalist realism," a situation where society not only sees problematic capitalist practices as normal but cannot even imagine an alternative.

While a more extensive discussion of labor is not in the purview of this paper, it is worth noting that part of the capitalist realism in games is exploitative work

practices and rampant sexism and abuse of women and other non-heterosexual white or Japanese men (See Consalvo 2009; Harvey & Fisher, Liss-Marino 2014; Martin & Deuze 2009). While these issues are becoming more public, such as the case with Activision Blizzard (Conditt 2021), the problems persist and need more attention.

The emergency of modern games culminates in their aesthetics. While AAA games are advancing toward higher resolution, lifelike visuals, and increasingly complex control schemes, they are halted in endless, yet stagnant, progression that ignores or attacks anything outside of the hegemony of play. However, there is a way out.

An aesthetic escape

As Zabala proclaims, "[a]n aesthetic force is needed to shake us out of our tendency to ignore [the emergency]" (2017, p. 5). Heidegger's (2002a) notion of shock (or *Stoss*) influences this idea. As described by Gianni Vattimo (2010), this shock is an immediately perceived angst in an aesthetic encounter where "the world [a person] was accustomed to seeing becomes strange, is put into crisis in its totality, because the work proposes a new general reorganization of the world" (p. 70). Thus, one is immediately affected by an aesthetic force that rattles their world picture – Heidegger's *Stoss* pairs nicely with what Jacques Rancière (2015) calls dissensus. The opposite of consensus, dissensus is a "re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible" (p. 140). In other words, dissensus disrupts sites of consensus, such as the world picture, to present a new articulation of what is understood and what can be understood. Dissensus then disrupts consensus favoring a more just distribution of the sensible through transgressivity.

Jørgensen and Karlsen (2019) use Chris Jenks to describe transgression as events that "violate or infringe limits set by law or convention" (p. 3) while being deliberately aware and reflexive of the established norms. An individual encountering the transgression is encouraged to confront the discomfort or shock produced by transgressivity (p. 7). The use of "transgressivity" situates the notion of transgression as subjective and dependant on a specific time, place, and person or people experiencing it (Pötzsch 2019, p. 49). This notion fits my approach to post-retro games, as I do not wish to assert their effects universally but to explore their transgressive characteristics and potential. It will be also be important further on that transgression is temporary and, as described by Jørgensen, Karlsen, and Pötzsch, what is transgressive at one time can be – and often is – adopted by popular media as the new norm.

Pötzsch additionally lays out a typology of different categories of transgressivity in games. His category "critical transgressivity" applies to post-retro games. Critical transgressivity "aims at questioning and possibly subverting prevailing discourses and power relations" in games and society with "[d]esign features and play practices in this category" that are "often driven by an awareness of injustice and oppression and aim at facilitating resistance and change" (p. 53). The critical transgressivity of post-retro aesthetics makes the games I will discuss apt to confront the emergency. For Zabala, representations of reality can no longer produce truth; we need "new interpretations instead of better descriptions" (2017, p. 9). To paraphrase Zabala: you cannot find better equity and accessibility in the hyperreality of AAA, but in post-retro games that critically transgress the high-def aesthetic.

While not ideal, Fulton and Fulton's (2010) term "post-retro" best describes my focus. Post-retro games "utilize a retro aesthetic mixed with both retro and modern gameplay elements to create a wholly new experience" (p. 474). In their guide to making a game with Flash (an accessible software for creating animation and games popular in the early 2000s), the authors lay out characteristics of post-retro such as: a retro aesthetic (i.e., graphics that looks 8-bit, 16-bit, or vector-based), hypnotic visuals, modern music, "games with play that feels retro but also feels not retro at the same time," "no nostalgia for nostalgia's sake," and no remakes (p. 474). Of course, this definition is over a decade old and could not have predicted the development of retro-aesthetics beyond hypnotic visuals or the strict use of modern-sounding music beyond games like *Bit.Trip Beat* (Choice Provisions Inc., formerly Gaijin Games 2009) and *Geometry Wars* (Bizarre Creations 2003). Therefore, some more peculiar and limiting characteristics can be left behind. One of the most attractive elements of the term is the prefix "post," a nod to post-modern, post-punk, and post-digital movements. These genres of art acknowledge what has come before while departing from it – a critical transgressive element of post-retro. Finally, post-retro's birth out of the DIY Flash scene ties the games it defines to the creative explosion of game making that came about from the software's accessibility and the adaptability of the simple mechanics of the classic platformer (Salter & Murray 2014). So, in short, the term "post-retro" describes games that adopt and adapt retro aesthetics (be it in visuals or gameplay), with a self-awareness of past games, yet also with a separation from straightforward nostalgia.

While they emerged from the Flash scenes, post-retro games rose to widespread commercial attention at the turn of the 2010s with games like *Braid* (Number None 2009), *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat 2010), and *Fez* (Polytron Corporation 2013). Much of the discourse around these games evokes nostalgia. For example, Edmund McMillian, the co-creator of Super Meat Boy, claims he made the game

to recreate the experience of difficult platformers of the NES (Meunier 2009). In discussing nostalgia, Nadav Lipkin (2012) highlights a sense of loss felt in the present with these games. The loss here is a certain kind of game design of the past or the youths of players. While this feeling of loss resonates with post-retro games, nostalgia as a driving appeal assumes that games like these have been lost until recently. Furthermore, it implies a straight line of technological progress in gaming, privileging "legitimate" industry development and ignoring the Shadow Economies of Games – to borrow Ramon Lobato's (2012) term – like emulation and other "underground" game making scenes, such as Flash (where the term post-retro comes from).

Nintendo and Sega might have mostly abandoned pixel graphics in the 90s, but at the same time, console emulation was gaining steam and is still strong today on home computers, emulation machines such as the *Retropie*, hacked Original Xboxes, and officially licensed plug-and-play consoles. As mentioned above, Flash spawned a DIY community in the early 2000s that created a slew of classic-style platforming games, with and without pixel graphics, through recreating old games, remixing them, or developing something new in the genre (Salter & Murray 2014). So nostalgia does not quite fit when considering these games and game-making practices. Retro aesthetics were not lost; they just continued outside of the mainstream. However, one cannot ignore that these games are tied to older games and confront a felt loss or absence in the present, which makes their appeal hauntological.

Coined by Jacques Derrida, hauntology has recently gained popularity as an overwhelmingly gloomy outlook on humanity's future casts a shadow over a capitalist culture that constantly reiterates the same forms instead of innovating: capitalist realism (Davis 2005; Fisher 2012, 2014). In this world we live in, hauntology becomes a way to dwell in the past and make something new. I will primarily be using Marc Fisher's take on hauntology to emphasize the practice's confrontation with the present. Hauntology confronts what Marc Fisher (2012) calls "the failure of the future" (p. 16). This temporal failure involves the lack of cultural innovation; the only progress is moving further into capitalist realism, as is happening with AAA gaming. Hauntology short circuits this by looking to the past for what we can salvage, what we have now, and what new alternatives we can imagine. Post-retro games become hauntological through critical transgressivity in their repurposing of supposedly superseded graphics, in simplified controls, in subversion of gameplay, and in representation of and accessibility for people outside of the core demographics of AAA. These elements are perhaps best represented through indie titles, *Dys4ia* and *Undertale*.

Hauntology and post-retro games
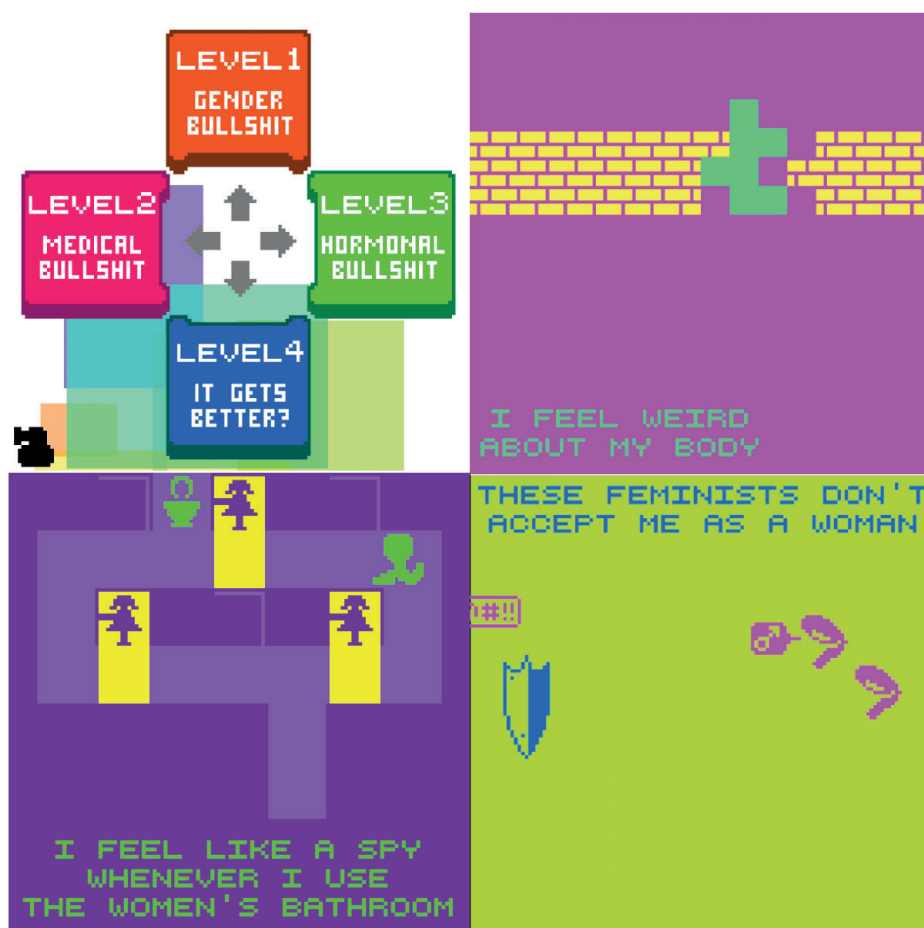
Figure 1. Examples of graphics in Dys4ia (Sources: https://zkm.de, https://medium.com, https://vice.com)

Similar to microgame collections, like the *Wario Ware* series (Nintendo, Intelligent Systems 2003–), *Dys4ia* apes the aesthetic and gameplay of classic games like *Tetris* (Alexi Pajitnov 1984), *Breakout* (Atari, Inc. 1976), and *Adventure* (Atari, Inc. 1980), to explore the developer Anna Anthropy's experience with hormone replacement therapy (Figure 1). Using primitive graphics, *Undertale* chronicles the player character's (PC) journey out of an underground world. In a kind of two-dimensional, isometric top-down view, the game imitates early Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), such as *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft 1986) and *Final Fantasy* (Square 1987), and their interface-heavy, turn-based combat (see Figure 2).
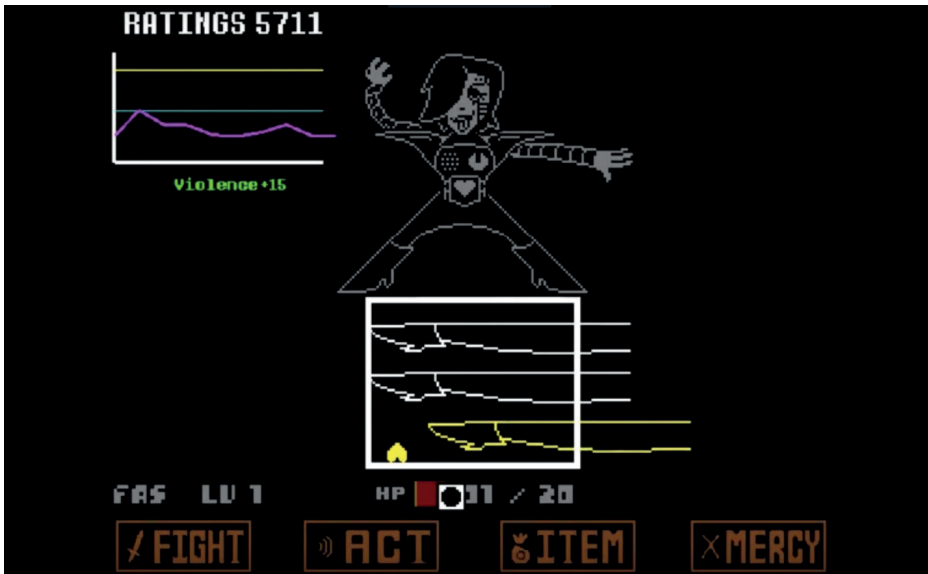
Figure 2. The boss fight with Mettaton in Undertale (Source: https://journal.transformativeworks.org)

Visuals

Hauntology is primarily apparent through the two games in their image, the most apparent instance of the salvaging of the past. Both titles use pixel graphics, reminiscent of the 80s and 90s. While colorful, *Dys4ia*'s graphics are abstract, similar to the visuals of the Atari 2600 console released in 1977. *Undertale*'s graphics are less abstract but simple with little on-screen detail and color, reminiscent of the capabilities of the Game Boy Color or DOS games. However, this visual style is departed from in the final boss battle that features more detailed elements and rendered photorealistic aspects. A stark contrast to realistic visuals typical in a modern AAA game, visuals are where the games produce the most overt shock; the immediately perceived angst that Vattimo claims is vital to a transformative aesthetic encounter. This aesthetic shock unsettles the uniform expectation of verisimilitude and immediately demands that gamers adjust their cognitive expectations of how game elements are represented. Among other highly detailed games, the pixelated style of these low-resolution titles stands out. Nevertheless, while they are pointing to visual styles of the past, their modern touches, such as *Dys4ia*'s vibrant and varied color and *Undertale*'s detailed final boss, reveal their pixels not as a limitation of the developers but as a deliberate stylistic transgression of AAA's verisimilitude. Of course, independent developers do not have the resources to produce graphics on the same technical level as corporate

owned studios. However, these developers are not beholden to the constraints of 8- or 16-bits in their hardware, software, or technical ability.

While critical transgressivity arises primarily in the visual shock of the games, lower-resolution graphics also allow lower computing requirements to run them. Both titles do not need up-to-date hardware such as a high-end gaming PC, Xbox Series X/S, PS5, or even Nintendo Switch. Reducing the power needed to run these titles allows those who cannot afford top-of-the-line tech to play them.

Controls

Aesthetic shock extends to an embodied aesthetic encounter in the use of stripped-down controls and subversion of gameplay expectations in post-retro games. AAA games often require controllers with ten buttons (often including two analog triggers), a digital directional pad, and two analog directional inputs, along with a habitualized, embodied knowledge of how these controllers function. *Dys4ia*, *Undertale*, and other post-retro games, on the other hand, adopt the simplified gameplay styles of older games using only four directional inputs and two action buttons, a computer mouse, or touch controls. In this way, they reject the convoluted controls of AAA titles and the need for expensive controllers. Many post-retro games that do not use mouse input or touch controls can be played using a few keys on a standard computer keyboard. For example, *Dys4ia* only requires directional inputs and the occasional action button (primarily for selecting menu options). In addition to directional buttons, *Undertale* only requires two inputs, often for accepting or cancelling actions or menu commands.

Without complex controls, these titles ape the mechanics of earlier games and are more accessible to those not habituated to the hegemony of play. Writing about *Dys4ia*, Linzi Juliano (2012) champions the stripped-down control scheme for keeping "the engagement" on the content of the game and away from a "mastery of a sophisticated controller system." Furthermore, the control scheme "forces the player to shift her focus from an idealization of command and conquer to one that is relational and possibly more 'feminine'" (p. 598). These simple inputs can also be easily mapped to various input devices beyond a computer keyboard and gamepad, including more accessible devices like the Xbox Adaptive Controller or the QuadLife.

Gameplay

Beyond input mechanics, many post-retro games employ gameplay that subverts common gameplay goals and narrative expectations such as "winning" a game through the honing of one's technical skills – what Paul calls toxic meritocracy.

Using non-human shapes (such as in *Tetris* and *Breakout*), action-puzzlers of the 70s and 80s are typically impersonal titles that focus on skills and score over narrative.

Dys4ia borrows the visuals mentioned above and their gameplay but subverts classic game conceptions by removing any score or point accumulation to illustrate a challenging personal journey.

In one of the first microgames, the player is tasked with moving a *Tetris*-style shape through an opening in a brick wall (as pictured in the upper-right of Figure 1). The dimensions of both the wall and avatar make this an impossible task, but the goal is not to be successful. Instead, it represents how developer Anna Anthropy feels about her body. Other segments work similarly. In one instance, the player navigates an avatar through a women's bathroom to avoid open stall doors; in another, the player moves a shield-like avatar to dodge projectiles from pink lips (pictured in Figure 1, bottom-left and bottom-right, respectively). You are not supposed to "win" in this game, nor are you supposed to lose. Instead, these minigames only function to represent the affective experience of Anthropy's frustration, anxiety, and societal disapproval.

Undertale subverts JRPG gameplay through the player's choices within a combat encounter. In addition to attacking or using an item, typical of JRPGs, the player is allowed to "act." Selecting act over fight opens up several non-violent actions, including compliment, pet, hug, and insult, depending on the enemy encountered. The game becomes transgressive as it does not instruct the player on which actions to take but uses subtle techniques and meta-gaming to encourage moral choice.

As Frederic Seraphine (2017) states, the game "uses negative emotions like guilt or regret to create an uncanny aesthetic that makes the player ripe for thinking critically about the game, its genre, society, and more importantly themselves" (abstract). For example, many encounters in the game, such as one of the first, with the motherly and protective Toriel, explicitly evoke morals. After arriving in the underground world, the PC meets Toriel, who guides them to the safety of their home and provides them with a bedroom. In order to venture further, Toriel demands you fight her to prove you are strong enough to brave the dangers of the outside world. If you decide not to attack and eventually spare her, she hugs you and sends you on your way. Shortly after leaving, however, you encounter Flowey (a reoccurring character who looks like a scary flower) who scolds and ridicules you for your choice. If you decide to fight Toriel, you defeat her in one hit. Visibly shocked, Toriel utters (through shaky letters in a dialogue bubble), "You really hate me that much?" followed by some more heart-wrenching dialogue, finally deteriorating into an upside-down white heart. Whether you spare or defeat Toriel, the player receives dialogue to evoke negative emotions and question their actions.

Depending on the player's actions throughout the game, elements of the game's narrative change. For instance, item availability varies and spared characters reappear. Even some story threads are limited to whether the player kills everyone (referred to as a genocide run), does not kill anyone (the pacifist run), or mixes it up (the neutral run). While Seraphine argues that the game incentivizes a pacifist run, the game does not overtly favour any play style and plants seeds of doubt for all narrative choices. Unlike

the JRPG games that inspired it mechanically and visually, the game is hauntologically transgressive by deconstructing the violent hegemonic gameplay of typical 8-bit and 16-bit JRPGs.

Whether it be classic puzzlers or JRPGs, both *Dys4ia* and *Undertale* acknowledge and employ many gameplay elements of genres they belong to. However, they become hauntological and transgressive when they adapt and subvert these tropes to focus on narrative over score (*Dys4ia*) and problematize combat to question morality (*Undertale*). Their critical transgressivity is pushed further through narratives that represent identities outside of AAA's white or Japanese, heterosexual male market.

Representation and accessibility

Dys4ia provides positive representation in games for trans people and does so in a space geared toward gameplay outside hegemonic paradigms. *Dys4ia* disrupts common assumptions of score-based retro games and aesthetics for narrative purposes, mirroring developer Anthropy's clash of identity and form. Made using Flash, this early entry in Anna Anthropy's interactive oeuvre reflects her advocacy for accessible game-making tools and her call for more diverse voices in video games (Anthropy 2012). This game becomes hauntological in its retro aesthetics and its push for trans representation and accessibility. Additionally, versions of *Dys4ia* can be found online to play for free or for little money.

Figure 3. Main characters, from left to right: Toriel, Sans, Papyrus, the player character (front--center), Undyne, Dr. Alphys, and Asgore (Source: https://bleedingcool.com)

Undertale also features queer representation. Primarily, the pixel aesthetics are used to great advantage in creating a non-binary PC. As shown in Figure 3, the player's avatar (front-center) possesses no discernibly gendered traits. In addition, they are never referred to by gendered pronouns, and beyond naming, the player has no visual customization options. Furthermore, as Bonnie Ruberg (2018) highlights, the game world is also full of queer-coded elements "such as a poster for a gay bar hung in the background of an otherwise seemingly straight area" (section 2.2). Unlike "superficial" queer representation in AAA games, "*Undertale* partially performs the creation of its own universe by integrating coded references that signal the game's engagement with queerness" (section 2.5). Ruberg uses the encounter with Mettaton (pictured in Figure 2) as an example, commenting on its use of high-heeled boots and a disco ball in the encounter, "calling to mind a nightclub scene or a drag performance" (section 2.5).

Additionally, there is a subplot in the pacifist run where the PC facilitates a romantic pairing with Dr. Alphys and Undyne (pictured in Figure 3). This romance between two female characters is normalized in the plot, but they subvert tropes for women in video games. Undyne is introduced as a powerful, armour-clad enemy, while Alphys is a squat, anime-obsessed nerd.

With no small thanks to accessible game making and distribution, we have seen a slew of independent games that represent experiences by people largely ignored or even maligned in AAA, such as LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and those who are neurodivergent. Many games that feature stories with more diverse characters and gameplay are less based on colonial and capitalist ideologies. Instead, the focus on empathy, critical thinking, equity, or personal expression is the goal of these games. Their self-conscious use of lower resolution graphics, stripped-down control mechanics, subversion of command-and-conquer gameplay, and diverse representation are what make post-retro games both hauntological and transgressive. Yet, they also make gaming more equitable and accessible for both players and developers. In their deliberate response to AAA's high budgets and graphics, it is understandable why these games have garnered widespread attention.

Commercial indie games

While mentions of *Dys4ia* can be found on popular online press sites such as *VICE* (D'Anastasio 2015) and *The Verge* (Souppouris 2012), it remains a relatively obscure example of hauntological games compared to *Undertale*, which has significantly penetrated mainstream game culture. It featured on best games of 2015 lists, won IGN's PC game of the year, and a "best game ever" poll on GameFAQs, not to mention extensive journalistic coverage that continues today (Barnewall 2021; Richter 2021; Rodriguez 2021) and a slew of fan games (see the tag *Undertale* at https://itch.io) and fanart (see the tag Undertale at https://www.deviantart.com/). *Undertale*'s invasion of

the mainstream market and deconstruction of the hegemony of play paved the way for future hauntological games. Examples include *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* (Sundae Month 2016), an "anti-adventure" about routine, discovery, and identity where the player is tasked with picking up trash and exploring a city and their place in it; and *Celeste* (EXOK, formerly Maddy Makes Games 2018), a forgiving masocore pixel platformer about climbing a mountain while struggling with mental health, with a shame-free, well-integrated "assist mode." At the same time, the aesthetics of post-retro games have also been adopted by the commercial indie gaming industry.

As mentioned above, what is transgressive at one time is often adopted by commercial interests. This is no different with hauntological aesthetics. As Jesper Juul (2019) claims, in recent years pixel graphics have become more markers of authenticity than transgressive aesthetics. Jon Vanderhoef (2016) also points out that many commercial indie publishers and developers, like Devolver Digital, are just as profit-driven as the big publishers and continue to perpetuate toxic masculinity in their games, even if this is done in a winking, self-conscious way. *Katana Zero* (Askiisoft 2019) cleverly uses neon pixel visuals, coupled with a pumping retrowave soundtrack, 80s VHS aesthetics, and rewind mechanic to explore the PC's struggle with trauma and memory. However, the gameplay is mainly dependent on the player deftly executing well-timed button presses to murder enemies acrobatically. *Olija* (Skeleton Crew Studio 2021) features an elastic band animation style in its pixel art but tells a colonial story of a white explorer saving natives from a monstrous threat with unproblematized orientalist elements.

There is nothing inherently wrong with transgressive works losing their transgressive power. The problem arises when post-retro aesthetics are adopted to perpetuate hegemonic ideologies, especially those rampant in the gaming industry already. While I still maintain that commercial indie games with post-retro aesthetics can be hauntological – *Ikenfell* (Happy Ray Games 2020), *Get in the Car, Loser!* (Love Conquers All Games 2021), and *She Dreams Elsewhere* (Studio Zevere, to be released) are all good examples – I cannot ignore how the market has adopted this style for profit. To get outside this, we need to get outside dominant gaming markets and for-profit production entirely. Fortunately, the hauntological spirit is still alive in DIY production.
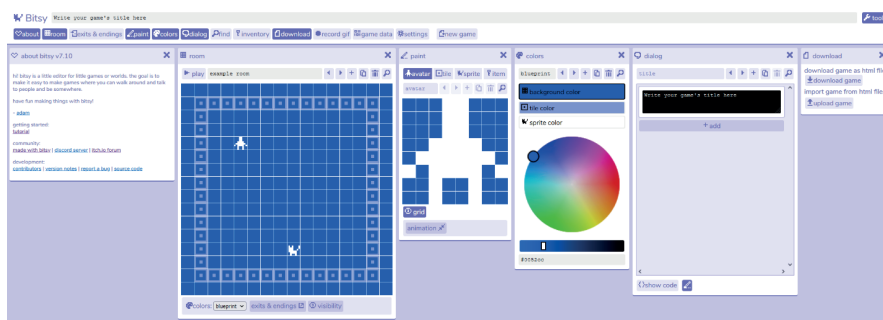
Figure 4. The starting Bitsy interface

DIY, altgames and *Bitsy*

What I am referring to as DIY games have also been called altgames. Essentially these are games made outside of capitalist modes of production, and outside the indie and AAA distinction. They are made by a broad audience of consumers and producers, using accessible game making tools and not typically made for much profit, or any at all. This kind of production can be seen across many supportive online and in-person communities at game jams, forums, and podcasts, all making and playing games, big or small (though mostly small), personal or not (though mostly personal or political). In its existence outside of the for-profit industry, DIY game making has also become a space where traditionally marginalized individuals, such as people with identities other than cis male, as well as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and those who are neurodivergent, can not only create games, but find games that appeal to them (Keogh 2015; Young 2018; Vanderheof 2016).

A lot of DIY game making is facilitated by accessible development tools like *Twine*, *RenPy*, *RPG Maker*, and *Pico 8* and *Bitsy* for making 8-bit, post-retro games. Many of these tools are free and have extensive online support and communities devoted to supporting this style of game making. *Bitsy*, in particular, takes the hauntological aesthetics of post-retro games to encourage a kind of expressive game making that limits graphics and controls to those of the 8-bit era while providing those unfamiliar with development with an easier method to make these games. *Bitsy* works similarly to *Twine* in that it does most of the heavy lifting code-wise and presents the user with an aesthetic and design-focused interface. Additionally, *Bitsy* is political as a tool for the non-developer that privileges a particular way of creating games that focuses more on aesthetics than coding and keeps the engine freely accessible (Nicholl & Keogh 2019). *Bitsy* is locked in highly-constrained allowances (though clever tricks allow getting around constraints) of an 8-bit era that work outside dominant modes of game development. Therefore, games made in *Bitsy* become critically transgressive and hauntological through the platform.

Figure 5. From left to right: My Face (AshG 2019), Under a Start Called Sun (Cecile Richard 2020), Starlight Motel (cwcdarling 2021)

Whether intentionally or not, much of the extensive output of *Bitsy* features gameplay and narrative that deviate from the hegemony of play. Instead, you find games that are personal and experimental. For example, *My Face* (AshG 2019) tasks the player with exploring a pixelized image of the developer's face to learn about their insecurities. Cecile Richard has made several affective narrative games in *Bitsy*, such as *Under a Star Called Sun* (2020). In the game, the player controls a lone crew member on a ship that escaped a dying Earth. While performing their routine, the player learns of the PC's loss, grief, and loneliness. Finally, based on a real place in Massachusetts, *Starlight Motel* (cwcdarling 2021) explores the lives of individuals and families without a permanent home, living in the titular establishment.

Due to *Bitsy*'s limitations and allowances, many games are narrative-heavy, exploration-based, and short. However, their constrained mechanics and lo-fi visuals still produce a variety of personal, complex, affective, and political experiences. And all these games are made by various developers, for little to no development cost, and are made available for little to no money (many offering a pay what you want/can price scale).

Through its accessibility, its limitations and allowances locked in simple mechanics and 8-bit visuals, and output that features a vast array of voices, *Bitsy* is deeply connected to hauntology and resistance to the commercial pressures of capitalist realism and AAA games.

Conclusion

In the face of the modern video game emergency that produces corporate products which exploit workers and reproduce hegemonic ideology in skill-based gameplay, post-retro games are a transgressive aesthetic force. Games like *Dys4ia* and *Undertale* fight against capitalist realism with hauntology, as presented in their 8-bit and 16-bit aesthetics, stripped-down controls, gameplay subversion, and representation of identities outside the straight, white, and Japanese dominant AAA industries. Despite a number of titles that remain powerful examples of post-retro, though, many commercial indie publishers have been engulfed by commercial interests and lost their critical transgressivity. In this context, DIY gaming has held strong, especially in the hauntological constraints and output of *Bitsy*. his essay barely scratches the surface of the power of this 8-bit game making platform and what it can produce. However, it lays the groundwork for moving past commercial post-retro games and looking toward *Bitsy*'s transgressive and hauntological potential.

Through their deliberate use of pixel graphics and subversion of gameplay expectations, post-retro games and the platforms that facilitate them are fulfilling Zabala's wish for an aesthetic force to confront capitalist realism, as it appears in

gaming. Entwined in their resurrection of past forms, they are creating new kinds of games and stories that are not produced by the AAA industry. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that post-retro games are just one piece of a history characterized by growing production of a different kind of game pushing against AAA's hyperrealism. Many aesthetic forces are saving us from the emergency, whether it is *Twine* and interactive fiction, flatgames, and the relatively recent, very hauntologically entrenched, low-poly horror games.

Bibliography

Anthropy, A. (2012). *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art.*

Barnewall, C. (December 1, 2021). Toby Fox Dominated Some Spotify Wrapped Lists Thanks To 'Undertale' And 'Deltarune Chapter 2'. *Uproxx*. https://uproxx.com/edge/toby-fox-spotify-wrapped-undertale/ (accessed on April 16, 2022).

Clarke, M.J., & Wang, C. (2020). *Indie Games in the Digital Age* [Kindle Edition]. Bloomsbury Publishing USA. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501356421

Conditt, J. (August 5, 2021). Inside the sexual harassment lawsuit at Activision Blizzard. *Endgadget*. https://www.engadget.com/activision-blizzard-lawsuit-discrimination-abuse-video-163056567.html (accessed on April 16, 2022).

Consalvo, M. (2009). There is No Magic Circle. *Games and Culture*, *4*(4), 408–417. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343575

D'Anastasio, C. (May 15, 2015). Why Video Games Can't Teach You Empathy. *VICE*. https://www.vice.com/en/article/mgbwpv/empathy-games-dont-exist (accessed on April 16, 2022).

Davis, C. (2005). Hauntology, spectres and phantoms. *French Studies*, *59*(3), 373–379. https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143

Entertainment with ActionScript (1st Edition). APress. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4302-2615-4

Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books.

Fisher, M. (2012). What Is Hauntology? *Film Quarterly*, *66*(1), 16–24. https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16

Fisher, M. (2014). *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. John Hunt Publishing.

Frank, A. (December 16, 2015). Undertale wins GameFAQs' Best Game Ever contest. Retrieved December 10, 2018, from Polygon website: https://www.polygon.com/2015/12/16/10323192/undertale-gamefaqs-best-game-ever

Fulton, J., & Fulton, S. (2010). *The Essential Guide to Flash Games: Building Interactive.*

Harvey, A., & Fisher, S. (2013). Making a Name in Games. *Information, Communication & Society*, *16*(3), 362–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.756048

Heidegger, M. (2002a). Origin of the Work of Art. In J. Young & K. Haynes (Trans.), *Off the Beaten Track* (1 edition, pp. 1–56). Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Heidegger, M. (2002b). The Age of the World Picture. In J. Young & K. Haynes (Trans.), *Off the Beaten Track* (1 edition, pp. 56–85). Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Jørgensen, K., & Karlsen, F. (2019). Introduction: Playful Transgressions. In K. Jørgensen & F. Karlsen (Eds.), *Transgression in Games and Play.* MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11550.003.0002

Juliano, L. (2012). Digital: A Love Story; Bully; Grand Theft Auto Iv; Portal; Dys4ia. *Theatre Journal; Baltimore*, *64*(4), 595–598.

Juul, J. (2019). *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Keogh, B. (2015). Between Triple-A, Indie, Casual, and DIY. In K. Oakley & J. O'Connor (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries* (pp. 152–162). Routledge.

Lipkin, N. (2012). Examining Indie's Independence: The Meaning of "Indie" Games, the Politics of Production, and Mainstream Cooptation. *Loading...*, *7*(11). http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/122

Liss-Marino, T. (2014). Sell (It) Yourself: Marketing Pleasure in Digital DIY. *Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations.* https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/1347

Lobato, R. (2012). *Shadow economies of cinema: Mapping informal film distribution.* Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute.

Martin, C.B., & Deuze, M. (2009). The Independent Production of Culture: A Digital Games Case Study. *Games and Culture*, *4*(3), 276–295. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009339732

Meunier, N. (April 5, 2009). Indie Queue: Meat Boy Gets Supersized. *The Escapist.* https://www.escapistmagazine.com/indie-queue-meat-boy-gets-supersized/

Nicoll, B., & Keogh, B. (2019). *The Unity Game Engine and the Circuits of Cultural Software* (1st edition). Palgrave Pivot. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25012-6_1

Paul, C.A. (2018). *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games* (1st edition). Retrieved from https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-toxic-meritocracy-of-video-games; https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt2204rbz

PC Game of the Year 2015. (January 6, 2016). Retrieved December 20, 2019, from IGN website: https://ca.ign.com/wikis/best-of-2015/PC_Game_of_the_Year

Pötzsch, H. (2019). Forms and Practices of Transgressivity in Videogames: Aesthetics, Play, and Politics. In K. Jørgensen & F. Karlsen (Eds.), *Transgression in Games and Play*. MIT Press.

Rancière, J. (2011). *The Emancipated Spectator* (Reprint edition). London: Verso. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474249966

Rancière, J. (2015). *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (1 edition; S. Corcoran, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic.

Richter, J. (November 23, 2021). Undertale Set Creator Toby Fox Up for Success. *Game Rant*. https://gamerant.com/undertale-creator-toby-fox-success-deltarune-nintendo-pokemon-smash-bros/ (accessed on April 16, 2022).

Rodriguez, B. (November 25, 2021). Undertale's Most Interesting Fan-Made Characters. *Screen Rant*. https://screenrant.com/undertale-fan-art-characters-best-cute-monsters/ (accessed on April 16, 2022).

Ruberg, B. (2018). Straightwashing Undertale: Video games and the limits of LGBTQ representation. *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures*, *28*. Retrieved from https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1516/1866; https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1516

Salter, A., & Murray, J. (2014). *Flash: Building the interactive web*. MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9833.001.0001

Seraphine, F. (2017). The Rhetoric of Undertale: Ludonarrative Dissonance and Symbolism. *Proceedings of the Digital Game Research Association Japan Annual Conference*. Presented at the 8th DiGRA conference, Japan. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Frederic_Seraphine/publication/323545890_The_Rhetoric_of_Undertale-Ludonarrative_Dissonance_and_Symbolism/links/5a9bdb8545851586a2acea7d/The-Rhetoric-of-Undertale-Ludonarrative-Dissonance-and-Symbolism.pdf

Souppouris, A. (May 6, 2012). Play this: 'Dys4ia'. *The Verge*. https://www.theverge.com/2012/5/6/3003067/dys4ia (accessed on April 16, 2022).

Süngü, E. (2020). Gender Representation and Diversity in Contemporary Video Games. In B. Bostan (Ed.), *Game User Experience and Player-Centered Design* (pp. 379–393). Springer International Publishing AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37643-7_17

Vanderhoef, J. (2016). *An Industry of Indies: The New Cultural Economy of Digital Game Production* [Dissertation, University of California]. https://www.alexandria.ucsb.edu/lib/ark:/48907/f3t43t7t

Vattimo, G. (2010). *Art's Claim to Truth* (S. Zabala, Ed.; L. D'Isanto, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Young, C.J. (2018). *Game Changers: Everyday Gamemakers and the Development of the Video Game Industry* [Thesis]. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/89734

Zabala, S. (2017). *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency*. Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/zaba18348

Ludography

Anthropy, A. (2012). *Dys4ia* [Adobe Flash]. Newgrounds.

AshG (2019). *My Face* [browser-based]. Itch.io.

Askiisoft (2019). *Katana Zero* [multi-platform]. Devolver Digital.

Atari, Inc. (1976). *Breakout* [multi-platform]. Atari, Inc.

Atari, Inc. (1980). *Adventure* [Atari]. Atari, Inc.

Bizarre Creations (2003). *Geometry Wars* [Xbox]. Microsoft Game Studios.

Choice Provisions Inc., formerly Gaijin Games (2009). *Bit.Trip Beat* [multi-platform]. Various publishers.

Chunsoft (1986). *Dragon Quest* [Nintendo Entertainment System]. Enix.

Cwcdarling (2021). *Starlight Motel* [browser-based]. Itch.io.

EA Tiburon (2020). *Madden NFL 21* [multi-platform]. EA Sports.

EXOK, formerly Maddy Makes Games (2018). *Celeste* [multi-platform]. EXOK.

Fox, T. (2015). *Undertale* [Microsoft Windows, OS X]. Toby Fox.

Happy Ray Games (2020). *Ikenfell* [multi-platform]. Humble Games.

Infinity Ward (2019). *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* [multi-platform]. Activision.

Love Conquers All Games (2021). *Get in the Car, Loser!* [Microsoft Windows, macOS]. Love Conquers All Games.

Nintendo EPD (2015). *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* [Nintendo Switch]. Nintendo.

Nintendo, Intelligent Systems (2003–). *Wario Ware series* [multi-platform]. Nintendo.

Number None (2009). *Braid* [multi-platform]. Number None, Microsoft Game Studios.

Pajitnov, A. (1984). *Tetris* [Electronika 60].

Polytron Corporation (2013). *Fez* [Xbox 360]. Trapdoor.

Richard, C. (2020). *Under a Star Called Sun* [browser-based]. Itch.io.

Skeleton Crew Studio (2021). *Olija* [multi-platform]. Devolver Digital.

Square (1987). *Final Fantasy* [Nintendo Entertainment System]. Square.

Studio Zevere (to be released). *She Dreams Elsewhere* [multi-platform]. Studio Zevere.

Sundae Month (2016). *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* [Microsoft Windows]. TinyBuild.

Team Meat (2010). *Super Meat Boy* [Xbox 360]. Team Meat.

Treyarch, Raven Software (2020). *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* [multi-platform]. Activision.

Ubisoft Montreal (2020). *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* [multi-platform]. Ubisoft.

Patrick Dolan – is a Ph.D. candidate in Communications and Culture at York University. His current research interests include affect, aesthetics, critical industry studies, video games with pixel graphics and low-polygon counts, and the politics therein. His research background focused on the industry, economics, and collector communities of horror VHS and DVD. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *First Person Scholar*, a middle-state academic journal.

Klaudia Jancsovics*

Play the art: Artistic value in video games

Abstract

Playing a game does not mean that we are doing something childish and useless. Using a new technology to express our feelings and raise the awareness of social issues does not mean we cannot call it art. If we go back in time, we can realize that there has always been a resistance to novelty and machines. Sometimes, they were even considered harmful. The same life cycle happens with video games: they are valuable in many ways, they are far more developed than they were twenty years ago, and they have even reached a stage where we can find art in them. But how can they be art? Is the answer in the story or in the audiovisual elements?

Keywords: art, immersion, feedback loop, feelings

Introduction: Technology and art

Can we consider technology as an art form? What can be art? What is art? These are recurring questions in human cultures and the technological development that force us from time to time to reevaluate our previous notions. If we go back in time, we can see that the rise of photography also raised these questions. Louis Daguerre's invention – the *daguerreotype* – democratized art by making it more portable, accessible and cheaper. As Walter Benjamin highlights in his essay, commentators had expended "much fruitless ingenuity on the question of whether photography was an art – without asking the more fundamental question of whether the invention of photography had not transformed the entire character of art" (Benjamin 2006, p. 258).

*   University of Szeged, e-mail: jancsovicsklaudia@gmail.com

As technical development – which has also become an inseparable part of humanity – questions the nature of art, it is getting more and more complicated to answer the questions asked above. With the rise of photography, painters started to be afraid that their artwork would not be needed anymore. As Benjamin mentions in his *Little History of Photography*, the agents who followed a "fetishistic and fundamentally antitechnological concept of art" (Benjamin 2005, p. 508) also raised their voices against the technology. They believed that such methods could not be called art because machines are responsible for the creation and it has nothing to do with humans. In the case of photography, the device captures the moment. The machine does the technical work, but somebody has to adjust and discover the beauty and/or the story in a setting or in an event. This machine extends our capabilities, it can place already existing things in a new perspective. As Laszlo Moholy-Nagy wrote in his *Painting, Photography, Film*, the camera offers outstanding possibilities: the visual image has been expanded and even the modern lens is no longer tied to the narrow limits of our eye (Moholy-Nagy 1969, p. 7). Taking a photo is not just a rigid, automatic process, it requires human participation since it mediates our experience of the world. We can express our feelings with photos, play with colours, brightness, and perspectives, and they can uniquely tell the unspeakable: one frame will speak instead of us.

Humans want to make everything faster, better, we try to create a more leisurely life with technology. Then these developments shape how we live our lives, and in many cases, we can find advanced ways of expressing ourselves with new technological tools. The newcomers (like photography or movies) have to undergo the same life cycle: they are "born," start to be popular, have to face many attempts to diminish their value, but then they show their artistic potential and eventually are accepted as a new form of expression. Video games have made the same journey. But how can they be art? Can the answer be found in the story or in the audiovisual elements? In the next few sections, I try to show how video games can have artistic values. To showcase a wider range of examples, I will analyze several games from various genres, produced by different companies.

Feedback loop and feelings

While playing video games, we have to follow the given rules and we also enter a virtual space, where our everyday rules no longer apply. Regulations, characters, environment, story, audiovisual elements, gameplay: all of these take part in creating an enjoyable experience and are responsible for the players' immersion.

According to Janet H. Murray, immersion is a metaphorical term based on the experience of being submerged in water: "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our

attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (Murray 2016, p. 99). When we become a part of a game, the same happens because we have to understand and apply its rules to achieve success.[1] While we are playing video games, our everyday environment becomes secondary – or at least we ignore it – and we direct our attention to the game. We have to become familiar with the different commands and explore how we can defeat the system or make it cooperate with us (Anable 2019, p. xii). This requires our active agency to which the game gives answers, and we have to react to those answers. In my opinion, "feedback loop" is a suitable term to describe this activity. From the beginning until the end, we are "communicating" with the system and this continuous feedback loop creates interactivity. We cannot change the ending of the game, but we have a mindset, a gaming style, that determines how we take the journey and what kind of routes we choose to reach the closure, or, in other words, how we experience the game's world.[2] This process is similar to when we have a colouring book: there are given shapes – in the case of video games, these are the fixed codes, commands and storylines – but we can fill these shapes freely with our preferred colours. We can decide how we want to play the game (e.g., when stealth is optional during a quest, we can still choose to be loud and reckless).

Alexander Galloway highlighted: "If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then *video games are actions*." He adds that without action, "games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book" (Galloway 2006, p. 2). The player becomes a co-author because their participation is needed to unfold the story or go on to the next level and this continues until they reach the endpoint.

I would like to complete Galloway's statements with one more aspect that plays a significant part: the importance of feelings. In order to truly immerse ourselves, we need an emotional connection. The way we experience a given scene in the game depends on our background (cultural, emotional, etc.). For example, many YouTubers play the same games, and it differs from player to player how they react to the same situation. Of course, there are cases when the most important motivation is to experience the success and joy of achieving something. It is hard to find the boundaries between a "simple game" and an artgame (Sharp 2015, p. 49) but one way to distinguish them is when the player encounters strong emotional impacts while playing, and they are able to identify with the characters' feelings. In this case, the game can be considered as art.

---

1   In this case, *success* means different goals based on the player's moral and ethical attitude. Players can have the goal to win the game, trigger new endings or just move around in the virtual world.

2   Some games have more than one ending, but the numbers are limited.

"Reading" between the lines

> *What we need is not great works but playful ones . . .*
> *A story is a game someone has played so you can play it too.*
> (Waugh 2001, p. 34)

In many cases, video games try to touch the untouchable and tell the unspeakable, just like art. Several of these games – mainly those that belong to the horror and psychological thriller genres – illustrate the different types of trauma and mental illnesses in symbolic ways. During the gameplay the player can feel that there is something more than what the story's surface shows, but usually only in the last few minutes is an explanation provided (or a twist offered).

Among the Sleep[3] tells a story of a two-year-old boy chased by two monsters. The little boy (David) can only rely on his talking teddy bear (Teddy). This causes a feeling of vulnerability, compounded by the fact that the world seems huge and the kid's movement is limited: David cannot jump high, but when stealth is needed, he can crawl. At first, *Among the Sleep* looks like a horror game with interesting gameplay, but in the end, it turns out that the game contains several clever symbols. For instance, each of the monsters represents how the toddler views his abusive mother in various stages of her alcoholism.

At the beginning of the game, the mother has a round body shape, her face is a circle (Figure 1), which represents harmony (Solarski 2017, p. 16), but later she becomes much taller, skinnier, with messy, floating hair and glowing eyes (Figure 2). This represents the drunken mother, a threat, but also a source of sorrow. Yet another stage is when she looks like she is wearing a trench coat and does not have a face, except for two glowing eyes (Figure 3). This inhuman appearance represents her hung-over self. These two appearances are more threatening than her original self and the environment also changes with her, which is a crucial element for the consideration of this video game as art. These changes are responsible for immersing ourselves more, and we can feel like a little kid who tries to understand what is happening around him and where his mother disappeared.

---

[3]   The original game came out in 2014 and a remaster titled *Among The Sleep: Enhanced Edition* was released for PC in 2017.

Figure 1, 2 and 3. The appearances of the mother. At first, she has a round face and the colours are warm. Later her shape changes, the colours become much colder, and the environment is less colourful. (Source of the last screenshot: Heap 2021)

The "game feel," according to game designers, is an intentional quality in the designs. As Aubry Anable states:

> Crafting a game that a player will find challenging but not overly frustrating, visually compelling, and narratively satisfying, with mechanics and a game structure that produce the right amount of tension and gratification, is a hugely complex endeavor, and game companies have invested a great deal of resources in trying to figure out how to meet all these criteria (Anable 2019, p. 44)

Among the Sleep aligns the audiovisual elements with the mother's state, which builds up the whole atmosphere. She has a nice, calm voice, but when she is drunk and David cannot find her, we can hear her humming a tone. This tune and the dark, oppressive images create a terrifying impression. If we can read between the lines, we can discover that the game raises the awareness of domestic violence, the abuser in this case being a woman. The game also reflects on alcoholism's side effects. The mom is afraid of losing her child, but her addiction is harmful because she cannot take proper care of David. At night – when, we can assume, she starts drinking – the kid tries to find her, but instead encounters a huge monster. He and Teddy will not realize that this beast is his mother. The player can connect the dots at the end, when they see the mother on the ground with a bottle in her hand (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The mother is sitting on the floor, the wine bottle is empty and she is crying.

The whole game tells a story about a little kid trying to make sense of his surroundings, imitating a two-year-old's point of view, which is an exciting and unique choice by the developers. *Among the Sleep* is not just a challenging horror game with a well-built fictional world, it also reflects on serious issues.

The Vanishing of Ethan Carter has several layers of symbols and storylines as well, it embraces art in many ways – I believe the whole game is art itself in the sense of its topic and the audiovisual methods. The plot starts when Paul Prospero, a supernatural detective, arrives at Red Creek Valley after he had received a letter from Ethan. The detective tries to find the young boy while solving murder cases in which the victims are the members of the Carter family. As we learn, the Sleeper, an unknown entity – that had been accidentally released by Ethan when he opened a room – infected the Carter family and they turned against each other. Their main goal is apparently to sacrifice Ethan to break the curse. To stop the Sleeper, Ethan tries to burn down the mysterious room. Even though he gets trapped in the Sleeper's room, he does not stop and starts the fire that burns down the whole house. Paul Prospero is too late, the boy is already dead. But this is not where the story ends. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* is much more complicated than it seems at first. The following part is my interpretation of the game, based on the fictive world's hidden symbols and influenced by Yaroslav Kravtsov's (2014) online analysis. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* builds on so many layers that some players can decode the story differently, which supports my claim: the game is art, and its interpretation is based on the recipient.

As it turns out, Prospero's journey is Ethan's last story. The truth is the boy wanted to finish a private detective's story, but he forgot about the time and missed the dinner. His family tried to find him and when they realized that Ethan had immersed himself in his own fictional world again, they became furious and started to argue. Ethan's mother accidentally broke a lamp and their old house caught on fire immediately. Ethan had no chance to escape. He had been trapped in his room and suffered smoke inhalation. It is 7:00 when Ethan lays down on his bed, Prospero finds him and wakes him up at 7:04. He tells Ethan that he can leave now, new stories are waiting for him. To sum up, the entire world that we see in the game is Ethan's dream. During the gameplay, every clock in the town shows 7:00 or 7:04. Paul Prospero's journey in Red Creek Valley is a four-minute dream of a dying boy, who wants to survive. The dream, the murder cases, and the stories show how Ethan saw his life and his family.

The young boy has a rich fantasy, he likes to write stories, but his family does not like this hobby. Some of them are also afraid of Ethan's imagination, they find his stories odd. During the game we can see the boy's fantasy through his writings and supernatural events: Prospero avoids several traps in the forest, chases an astronaut, finds a magician's house and a witch's tent, and encounters a sea monster in the depths of the mine. Of course, these "random" events have meanings. After these scenes, the player always finds a piece of paper with Ethan's story. The stories are heavily influenced by H.P. Lovecraft, H.G. Wells, or Jules Verne, to list a few. Even if we cannot recognize the references at first, at some point of the game we can see a collection of books in the Carter's house that have been written by the mentioned authors.

To give one example: the sea monster is a tentacle, resembling Lovecraft's Cthulhu, which has a tentacled head and is also related to the underwater environment. As we can read in the young boy's writing, some miners wanted to perform a ritual to unleash the "sea-thing." However, one of them realized the ritual would cause a flood on the world and he stabbed the others. The sea-thing cursed the miner to wander around the mine forever.

Ethan's stories also represent his family. The miner who turned against the others can be Ethan's father, Dale, who never helped his son, even though he felt sorry for him. He had good intentions, but he was not able to do anything until the very end, when it was too late. Dale also seems like a cursed man, his dream to be an inventor is ruined. Ethan usually describes his father as "sad." It seems that both Dale and Ethan are dreamy people, but their environment does not understand them and they separate themselves from others. Dale, just like the cursed miner, wanders alone. As Solarski mentioned, players can experience a one-sided approach to communication through written materials, which is usually not a welcomed approach, because players want interactivity. But this depends on the

game style. "Written narrative information may be a necessity for development budget reasons or a welcome story layer for players who enjoy delving into every aspect of a plot" (Solarski 2017, p. 55). In the case of *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, the written materials give more depth to the game.

The game – developed by The Astronauts – has an outstanding graphical design (Figure 5). The atmosphere suggests that the events of the story occur in an abandoned, quiet place. However, as Prospero states, "No place is truly quiet, and nowhere is really ordinary," and players can feel that something is not right and the town has its secrets.

Red Creek Valley. Seemed like a quiet, ordinary place.

Figure 5. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* has amazing landscapes.

Both the landscapes and the music create in the player a strong bond with the story. The shapes and the sound radiate harmony, but then we can see blood and corpses. On the other hand, the player and Prospero know that something bad happened to Ethan. The main goal is to focus on the story that can evoke strong feelings.

God of War, Detroit: Become Human, Titanfall 2

Games can not only present a story or an issue artistically. *God of War* was released in 2018, and it won several awards: Game of the Year, Best Game, *BAFTA Games Awards for Music*. Among the others, it also deserved the *BAFTA* award for its narrative.

God of War has an incredible set of soundtracks. The music creates an intense atmosphere and helps the players to immerse themselves in the fictional world.

> Video games would only deliver a fraction of their immersive potential without the support of audio. Audio alone can transform the aesthetic experience of gameplay by providing an ambient atmosphere for the player's actions. Audio is a term that covers two principle categories in the context of games: music and sound effects (Solarski 2017, p. 77).

We can hear the music in the background while the characters are on their journey, exploring an abandoned building or fighting against deadly creatures. The music also represents their feelings. Bear McCreary (n.d.), the composer, highlighted in one of his interviews that this game has well-developed characters and he wanted to capture their spirit. Kratos' character's song expresses age, wisdom, power, and masculinity, but these tones also develop through the game, the same way as the story evolves. *God of War* articulates strong emotions like anger, sadness, loss of a loved one, happiness, and hope. It also follows the development of the father-son relationship.

When Kratos fights, the player can feel his power, the controller – depending on the platform, because now it is possible to play the game on a PC as well – starts to vibrate. Kratos is a muscular man with a pillar-like body shape, which implies his powerful nature. But at the beginning of the game, he carefully touches a tree which has his wife's handprint on it (the music also expresses sadness). These small details can help us to understand Kratos' feelings. The character's artists (Rafael Grassetti and Dela Longfish) stated in an interview that when they created Kratos, they wanted to resonate with the Nordic region. In the beginning, they relied on different artworks – pictures and 3D models – to create the game's mood and represent the relationship between father and son. Their goal was to get an overall feeling (The Characters of *God of War…*, 2018).

The game also won an award for its narrative. A game can get this prize for excellence in creating and delivering the best story or narrative that captivates and engages the player. This award category also shows the importance of a story in a video game: not only the gameplay, but the cause and effect explanation is crucial too, it is not negligible how the story develops. *God of War* has a complex and engaging story, which builds on Norse mythology. It uses well-known mythological characters and elements, but in some cases gives them new backgrounds and meanings. The game also tells the story of a father (Kratos), who has to deal with his past, while raising his son (Atreus) on his own. We can also see how the young boy tries to understand the world around him and find his place in it.

We can find art and creativity in less obvious elements as well. If the player has little knowledge of Norse mythology, they are in the same position as the main characters, they have to explore the world together. Kratos has a different cultural background – he came from Sparta – and Atreus is too young to know everything about the gods, the Nine Realms, and the many threats to his and his father's lives. Atreus takes notes and draws so that the player can check the weaknesses of the enemies and, in this way, can learn more about the fictional world. This is a clever method to create a "help menu" for the game. Thanks to the cinematic motion capture, the graphics design and the characters' facial expressions are well-detailed and human-like. The game has breathtaking views, all of the different realms have unique appearances and enemies. This can also be considered as a form of art.

Let us look from another angle. *Detroit: Become Human* has several valuable aspects. The graphic is well-detailed, and thanks to the motion capture technology, emotions are expressed perfectly (this game depicts many of them and the characters represent these emotions via their facial expressions and dialogues) (Figure 6). The audio also transforms the aesthetic experience.

Figure 6. Markus experiences grief.

The main characters are human-like androids and the conflict starts when some of them become sentient beings (they are labelled as "deviants"). The story shows the dark side of human nature: humans can be cruel and sadistic with other beings, just because others are slightly different from them. One of the main characters, who is an android (Markus), experiences segregation: on public transport, he has to stand at the back of the bus with other androids, as they are separated from

humans. He also has to tolerate when others hurt him and cannot fight back, because society treats him like an object. His mentor, the artist Carl, sees him as a human being and asks Markus to paint something. At first, the android creates a perfect copy of his environment, but Carl reminds him that painting (and art) is not just about replicating the world, "it's about interpreting it, improving on it." After this, Markus shows how he sees the world. I believe that this and the other already mentioned video games (as well as many more) do the same: they do not just simulate the world around us, they try to interpret it and improve it through raising awareness.

One more example is *Titanfall 2*. This game is story-based but not as much as the above-mentioned examples. It is an FPS, "a style of game that parks you behind the main character's eyes. All games let you control and manipulate your environment to varying degrees, but almost no other genre of video game drops you closer to the action than an FPS" (Soulban, Orkin 2009, p. 51). The player becomes the protagonist, there are direct corollaries. "Your adrenaline is the character's adrenaline, your racing heart is the character's racing heart. And sometimes, even the reverse is true" (Soulban, Orkin 2009, p. 51). Even the reverse is true, because if the player is nervous, they can miss the aim.

In *Titanfall 2* the protagonist's (Jack's) partner is a huge robot (BT), who can carry and protect his pilot. This changes how the player can see the environment and how they feel about it. When Jack pilots BT, the player can almost feel how powerful the robot is, experiencing the feeling of invulnerability: they have more ammo and they do not die so easily. Whenever Jack is inside BT, the point of view changes and he can see the enemies from above. But in many cases, Jack has to leave BT and he has to fight alone. These parts make the player vulnerable and slower. In addition, these parts can be nerve-wrecking, because we do not know if BT is alright or if someone destroyed him. The story builds up the bond between BT and Jack, the player can relate to their feelings.

On the way to the future

What other ways can art merge with a technological tool? One great example of this is virtual reality (VR) games that offer the opportunity to create artworks within the fictional world. Most VR games are based on player immersion, typically through head-mounted display units or headsets and controllers. In 2021, there was a unique exhibition in Hungary, which showcased some interesting VR artworks. The event was co-organized by Random Error Studio and Zip-Scene Conference in the frame of the 3rd Zip-Scene Conference on Immersive Storytelling in Budapest. It showcased some of the most groundbreaking augmented reality (AR) and

VR productions that tackle the sense of immersion in various ways (Zip-Scene Conference 2021).

It was fascinating to experience how a VR headset can bring us to a virtual world of art. These electronic works were exhibited just like artworks in museums: next to the object (in this case, the computer, which contained one creation), the title, the creator's name, and a small summary were visible. Compared to conventional exhibitions, the biggest difference was the degree of interactivity: the visitors had to put on a VR helmet and look around to see the fictional world. In these creations, the artworks were not static objects, they were moving productions. It was something we could call game art. "The game art phenomenon is not a movement per se but rather an unaffiliated group of media artists using games to make works of art" (Sharp 2015, pp. 21–22). Thanks to the earphones, visitors could only hear the sound of these works and could only see the fictional world due to the VR helmet. In another sense, visitors were "locked inside" the artwork, they were "alone" and could experience everything without interruption.

One of the exhibited productions was *Nightsss*, a sensual VR experience of poetry, dance, and nature. This artistic animation is based on ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response). The poet Weronika Lewandowska uses sounds characteristic of the Polish language, creating onomatopoeic landscapes that cross language barriers. The spatially composed poet's voice takes the immersion to a virtual night environment where one meets a dancing character. The dancer's organic movements blend with her virtual body. *Nightsss* explores the possibilities of VR storytelling, creating an interesting tension of boundaries. As we can see, video games have reached a level where they can be exhibited like artworks and can "lock" the visitors inside them.

Another important aspect I would like to highlight is that games can be given awards due to their artistic performance. The previously mentioned BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Games Awards recognize and reward outstanding creative achievements. The award categories reflect the richness and diversity of the games sector. We could mention the Music, Artistic Achievement, Game Design, or Narrative categories, but the list continues. As BAFTA states on their website:

> Excellence. In a word, this is what the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) is all about, through its support, promotion and development of the film, television and games industries. We celebrate it, through our internationally renowned Awards ceremonies. We champion it, through an array of events, platforms and forums with the best practitioners in the business. We nurture it, through our innovative new and aspiring talent initiatives. We safeguard it, through our invaluable heritage work. And, as the leading UK charity supporting the moving image art forms, we actively promote it for the benefit and appreciation of all (Mission, n.d.).

As we can see, they recognize and celebrate outstanding games and their artistic values. In my opinion, this shows us that not every video game is "just a mean of entertainment," a game's plot can be as complex as a movie's or a book's, and games can express various feelings. We can find art in their audiovisual elements and in their story as well. It is worth mentioning that the above analyzed *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* won the BAFTA Game Innovation Award in 2015.

Closing thoughts

The paper aimed to show different examples and angles to shed light on the artistic values of video games. How can they be more than a tool of entertainment? I believe emotions have an outstanding role in answering this question. Video games, just like art, can express how we see the world and help us to be more emphatic towards others. With the help of a complicated technological background, we can connect playfulness, our desire to experience a great story, and different art forms. Genre is not an obstacle: we can discover the values mentioned earlier in story-focused games (*The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*) and even in FPS ones (*Titanfall 2*).

Visual elements are important – as we saw in the cases of *Detroit: Become Human* or *God of War* – but developers do not need to use up-to-date technologies to create an immersive world. *Among the Sleep* bases the audiovisual elements on the mother's state, and the combination of colours (dark or bright) and sounds can build up the atmosphere. Even though David cannot speak, players can feel and know when he is terrified or happy. In *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* players can hardly see the characters' facial expressions, they are not as detailed as in *Detroit*'s, *God of War*'s or *Titanfall 2*'s protagonists. But the dialogues and written pieces tell the story and expose all of the emotions. In addition, the environment in many cases looks like a painting and the sounds intensify the overall feeling of the different scenes.

Paintings, music, poems: all of these are considered as art and now we can also find them in video games. The paper highlighted many examples to show how these elements become essential in games. If we go further, we can see the next step in VR games: they belong to a technology that is younger than video games, artists are still experimenting with how they can merge technology and different art forms. In my opinion, this also shows us how technology can be art and how it can express our feelings. Now we can even paint pictures with a virtual paintbrush, we can see artworks from different angles. The question is: are we still in Huizinga's magic circle or are these games more? It is hard to find the boundaries, but I believe that, with technological advancement, we will find out soon. Until then, let us see how video games are interpreting and improving the world.

Bibliography

Anable, A. (2019). *Playing with Feelings. Video Games and Affect*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt20mvgwg

Benjamin, W. (2005). Little History of Photography. In M.W. Jennings, G. Smith, H. Eiland (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 2: Part 2: 1931–1934* (pp. 507–531). Belknap Press.

Benjamin, W. (2006). The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version. In H. Eiland, M.W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 4: 1938–1940* (pp. 251–284). Belknap Press.

Galloway, A. (2006). *Gaming Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London, Boston, Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Kravtsov, Y. (2014). Investigating the Story of *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* [SPOILERS!]. *Leaden.ru*. https://leaden.ru/2014/10/investigating-the-story-of-the-vanishing-of-ethan-carter-spoilers/ (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Mäyrä, F. (2008). *An Introduction to Game Studies. Games in Culture*. Los Angeles, London, New Dehli, Singapore: SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446214572

Moholy-Nagy, L. (1969). *Painting, Photography, Film*. London: Lund Humphries.

Murray, J.H. (2016). *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Singapore: The Free Press.

Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA, London, England: The MIT Press.

Sharp, J. (2015). *Works of Game. On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*. Cambridge, MA, London, England: The MIT Press.

Solarski, C. (2012). *Drawing Basics and Video Game Art. Classic to Cutting-Edge Art Techniques for Winning Video Game Design*. Watson-Guptill Publications.

Solarski, C. (2017). *Interactive Stories and Video Game Art. A Storytelling Framework for Game Design*. Boca Raton, London, New York: Taylor & Francis Group, CRC Press. https://doi.org/10.1201/b21636

Soulban, L., & Orkin, H. (2009). *Writing for First-Person Shooters*. In W. Despain (ed.), *Writing for Video Game Genres. From FRP to RPG* (pp. 51–67). A K Peters, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1201/b10641-7

Waugh, P. (2011). *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.

Ludography

Krillbite Studio (2015). *Among the Sleep* [PlayStation 4]. Krillbite Studio.

Lewandowska, W., & Frydrysiak S. (2020). *Nightsss* [VR]. Realized in the Visual Narrative Lab at the National Film School in Łódź.

Quantic Dream (2018). *Detroit: Become Human* [PlayStation 4]. Sony Interactive Entertainment.

Respawn Entertainment (2016) *Titanfall 2*. [PlayStation 4]. Electronic Arts.

Santa Monica Studio (2018). *God of War* [PlayStation 4]. Sony Interactive Entertainment.

The Astronauts (2015). *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* [PlayStation 4]. The Astronauts.

Further sources

Heap (2021). *Among the Sleep Wiki*. Retrieved from https://among-the-sleep-game.fandom.com/wiki/Among_The_Sleep_Wiki

McCreary, B. (n.d.). Interview retrieved from https://bearmccreary.com/Music/god-of-war/

Mission (n.d.). *BAFTA*. Retrieved from https://www.bafta.org/asia/about/organisation-mission

The Characters of *God of War* ft. Rafael Grassetti & Dela Longfish (20 18). *YouTube*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPdFkm1xLaI&ab_channel=Gnomon

Zip-Scene Conference (2021). Retrieved from https://zip-scene.mome.hu/2021/

Klaudia Jancsovics – is a doctoral student at the University of Szeged in the Department of Comparative Literature. Her research belongs to game studies, and she examines video games with the methods of literary and film studies. Her aim is to prove that video games can tell stories in unique, interactive ways while using the methods of literary writings and films. So far, she has published several studies focusing on different video games (e.g., *Heavy Rain*, *Detroit: Become Human*) and various approaches (like the characteristics of detective stories, movie language, or horror stories in video games). She has also been interested in narratology, game studies, digital humanities, intermediality, and film studies.

Paweł Kaczmarski* iD

A tale of two Eberts: Videogames and the arbitrariness of meaning

Abstract

The article revisits and examines in detail the so-called Ebert debate: an exchange of polemic voices between Roger Ebert, his opponents and supporters, on the issue of the relationship – both actual and potential – between games and works of art. Initiated by Ebert's famous remarks that games can never be art, the debate offers a variety of views on the nature of art, the role of experience in art and games, the possibility of artistic expression in games, and the autonomy of art.

The main point of the article is not so much to compare these views as to explain the contradiction at the heart of Ebert's own argument: the critic seems to be constantly torn between the idea that games cannot be art *in principle* and the more practical view that it is impossible to know for certain that no games will *ever* become art. This contradiction seems to stem directly from Ebert's inconsistent views as to the source of meaning in games, and it allows us to shed new light both on the nature of games as a medium, and on fundamental issues with contemporary games studies/criticism.

Keywords: Roger Ebert, games criticism, art, intention, meaning, Modernism

The following essay offers a metacritical re-reading of the debate surrounding Roger Ebert's famous remarks that video games should not be seen as an art form (see Ebert 2005, 2007, 2010). I seek to prove that the contradictions and ambiguities

---

*   University of Wrocław, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9488-0816, e-mail: pawel.kaczmarski@gmail.com

of Ebert's original position are too hastily dismissed today as either solved, dated, or generally made irrelevant by the more comprehensive, academic accounts of the relationship between art and games offered since.

On a methodological level, this essay may be seen as an attempt to apply to contemporary game studies – insofar as they remain interested in games' relationship to other media/arts, and in the ontology of the works of art in general – elements of what was sometimes called "strong intentionalism" (Goldsworthy 2005) or the "Nonsite school" of criticism: an approach to literature, art, and ontology of meaning that is perhaps most commonly associated with the work of Walter Benn Michaels. In *Against Theory*, a seminal essay co-authored by himself and Steven Knapp (1982), Michaels famously claimed that meaning is necessarily and strictly identical to the author's intention (i.e., they are two names for the very same thing). Based on the fundamental observation that the only way to decide whether something belongs to the work is by referring to the intention of its author (whoever or whatever that author might be) – i.e., that the authorial intent is the only "thing" that guarantees the work's identity, allowing us to define its boundaries and perceive it as a work in the first place – the argument made by the duo was anti-methodological in its essence. On a fundamental level, what we all do when we interpret is to make claims about the intention of the work's author; it is misleading to claim that various *methodologies* of interpretation make any difference to this process, as nothing may ever be said about any particular meaning in advance of interpretation – and making any a priori instructions as to the "method" of reading is a futile task.

In the decades that followed, this position was developed (by Michaels and others) into a somewhat comprehensive account of the ontology of literature/art, touching upon the issues of autonomy (Brown 2019), affects (Cronan 2013; Leys 2017), the politics of cultural theory (Michaels 2006), as well as philosophy of action and intention in general (e.g., Michaels 2019).

Perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, Knapp's and Michaels' position does not necessarily entail a wholesale rejection of the argument against intention famously made by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their 1946 essay "The Intentional Fallacy." As shown, e.g., by Jennifer Ashton (2011), this crucial piece of New Criticism is based on a set of essentially valid intuitions, and ultimately proves not the irrelevance of the authorial intention as such, but the impossibility of *reducing* intention to the external cause of the work. The lawn that the poet sat on before they wrote a poem is indeed meaningless, but that is because it serves (at best) as the external, material *cause* of the poem, rather than a part of the poet's intention expressed *in* and *through* the poem; intention is immanent, rather than external, to the intentional acts/works. Hence Ashton's suggestion that the "intentional" fallacy should be more accurately called the "causal" fallacy. The reduction of the intentional to the purely causal, on which "The Intentional

Fallacy" is founded, results in what Stanley Cavell called the "bad picture of intention" in his own polemic against Wimsatt (Cavell 1976, p. 227).

The metacritical nature of the following essay is perhaps worth emphasising at this point.[1] Metacriticism – or the study of criticism, its history, methodology, and socio-cultural functions – may be seen as providing "proper" academic criticism and theory (for instance, game studies) with only limited and essentially archival value. However, as I will try to show, a re-reading of important critical debates about games (even, or maybe especially, debates that took place outside the academia), if done in a systematic and somewhat disengaged manner – by an outside observer, rather than an active participant of the debate – may offer valuable lessons that stem directly from the *practice* of critical interpretation, rather than high academic theory. If my argument is correct, Roger Ebert's contradictory and ambiguous remarks were an imperfect articulation of a problem that, although presumably crucial to game studies, has yet to be solved. And in the last section of my essay, I will show how the contradictions of Ebert's theoretical position may shed new light on various influential academic accounts of the relationship between games, meaning, and art.

Finally, it should be noted that despite the metacritical nature and a relatively narrow methodological scope of this essay, its conclusions – insofar as they touch upon the structural and inevitable relationship between meaning and games – should be seen as claiming universal validity. This is not to say that they offer an exhaustive account of what this relationship may or may not look like in practice; rather, what I mean by "universal" is that the argument presented here fails or succeeds depending not on its "applicability" to any particular interpretation of any particular game, but on whether it correctly grasps the nature of games as a medium, on an analytical level. In other words, if the conclusions are valid, they are valid for all games *by definition*; conversely, if there is a game to which these conclusions do not apply, the entire argument must be deemed flawed.

It must follow that practical variations between different types of games (even undoubtedly crucial variations, like the technological chasm between traditional board games and modern video games), as well as their impact on the *historical* development of games as a medium, lie beyond the scope of this article. To the extent that Roger Ebert and his opponents were primarily interested in video games, they are my main focus as well – this, however, is mostly incidental to the main argument presented below.

---

1   Incidentally, this metacritical aspect also differentiates my approach from that offered by Trevor Strunk (2017). Writing for *Nonsite*, Strunk draws on many of the same inspirations in order to focus on various ways games problematize their own autonomy; I believe I share many of his initial assumptions, but apply them to a different area of interest.

*　*　*

To make predictions about the future is a notoriously difficult and risky task for any critic – be it a critic of literature, games, visual arts, or anything else. To make bold public assumptions about the future of *an entire medium* is, obviously, even riskier: after all, in the absence of a supernatural insight into the things yet to come, to make such statements is to claim an extraordinary degree of knowledge about the present. Accusations of narcissism and megalomania are certain to follow.

In many cases, however, it is easy to mistake a logical argument about the nature of the medium for a practical prediction on its future. Does a claim that video games *can never be art*, for instance, constitute a practical prediction? Or does it seek to define what games *are*, to locate some essential features that they all seem to possess by their very definition, and that exclude them from being art *in principle* (rather than just for a very, very long time)?

Admittedly, when the influential film critic Roger Ebert repeatedly made exactly such a claim in the first decade of the 21st century, he gave some decisively mixed signals as to how his statements should be read. Were they logical arguments or practical predictions? On one occasion, he claimed that games cannot be art "by their nature," i.e., that the entire medium is inherently incapable of fulfilling the definition of art (Ebert 2005). But elsewhere he seemed to restrict the scope of his claims to a single lifetime (Ebert 2010, April 16). Interestingly, there was no clear chronological progression to his argument either. After making some very explicit claims about the fundamental incompatibility of games and art (Ebert 2005), he seemed to backtrack a little in 2007:

> A year or so ago, I rashly wrote that video games could not be art. That inspired a firestorm among gamers, who wrote me countless messages explaining why I was wrong, and urging me to play their favorite games. Of course, I was asking for it. Anything can be art. Even a can of Campbell's soup. What I should have said is that games could not be high art, as I understand it (Ebert 2007).

The abstract and ultimately unelaborated upon distinction between "art" and "high art" weakened Ebert's initial argument significantly by tying it to the issue of the quality of specific games – games *as they already exist* – rather than the nature of games as a medium. Then in 2010 the critic returned as forceful and insistent as ever, posing that "Videogames Can Never Be Art" in the very title of what was to become his best-known piece on the subject. Even here, however, Ebert was ultimately tempted to present his claims as practical predictions rather than an essentially logical, or structural, argument:

Nevertheless, I remain convinced that in principle, video games cannot be art. Perhaps it is foolish of me to say "never," because never, as Rick Wakeman informs us, is a long, long time. Let me just say that no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form (Ebert 2010, April 16).

Is the principle in question historically restricted, i.e., could it change over time? Is it possible for games as a medium to develop in such a way and to such a degree that they achieve the status of art? Or would such a development necessarily mean that they transcend their own medium and become something else entirely? A few months later Ebert followed his comments with a series of predictably conventional and entirely unhelpful caveats:

I was a fool for mentioning video games in the first place. I would never express an opinion on a movie I hadn't seen. Yet I declared as an axiom that video games can never be Art. I still believe this, but I should never have said so. Some opinions are best kept to yourself.
. . .
My error in the first place was to think I could make a convincing argument on purely theoretical grounds. What I was saying is that video games could not in principle be Art. That was a foolish position to take, particularly as it seemed to apply to the entire unseen future of games. This was pointed out to me maybe hundreds of times. How could I disagree? It is quite possible a game could someday be great Art (Ebert 2010, July 1).

I believe that this tension – between Ebert's forceful claims as to the *structural* or logical incompatibility of games and art, on the one hand, and his *practical* or empirical predictions that games will never become art, on the other – is telling of a deeper issue in contemporary games criticism, and stems from the critic's unwillingness to recognise (and ultimately, perhaps, resolve) an important contradiction in what is essentially a Modernist argument – but, crucially, an *inconsistently* Modernist one. In order to understand the nature of Ebert's dilemma, however, we first need to take a closer look at some of the counter-arguments presented by his opponents.

*   *   *

Most of Ebert's opponents seem to agree with him on one point: indeed, *anything could be art*. However, in most cases this approach was rooted in the idea that art is defined by our experience of it. Games could be art not because they objectively

possess a set of features that they share with works of art – but because they are potentially capable of being *experienced* as art by the players.

Kellee Santiago's TEDx talk (Santiago 2009) – itself both a response to Ebert and the main object of his critique in "Videogames Can Never Be Art" – offers a handful of definitions of "art" that seemingly complemented one another. The first one, derived from Wikipedia, posits that "art is the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions." Another one, curiously adapted from Robert McKee's definition of explicitly *good* writing (rather than writing as such), defines art "as being motivated to touch the audience," "moved by a desire to touch the audience." Finally, Santiago herself defines art as "a way of communicating ideas to the audience in a way that the audience finds engaging."

What links those definitions together is an overt emphasis on the audience's experience, largely at the expense of what the work may be intended to express or convey by its author. After all, we can easily imagine a case where certain objects are "deliberately arranged," and while the arrangement does indeed "appeal to senses and emotions," it does so independently of its author's intentions, or the purpose of the entire process. A certain brick pattern, for instance, may be both aesthetically pleasing (think of all the blogs and forums dedicated to "things fitting perfectly into other things") and deliberately planned, but as long as its only purpose has to do with its function (say, to make the wall exceptionally sturdy), it is hard to see it as art. The aesthetic experience we may or may not have when confronted with such a pattern is incidental to its purpose. (Another way to put it is that while you can have a *wrong interpretation* of art, you cannot have a *wrong experience* of an object.)

Santiago's own definition is a little more precise in its consideration of meaning, in that it sees art as primarily a "way of communicating ideas." This might seem to narrow a definition for some, but both "communication" and "ideas" are just abstract enough to potentially include all sorts of different meanings. The second part of the definition is potentially more confusing. In addition to seemingly excluding bad, non-engaging works from the notion of art altogether, Santiago seems to propose that, when deciding whether something constitutes art or not, one should rely solely on its *actual effect* on the audience, rather than any *attempted appeal* to said audience. It is not enough for a work to seek to provoke a certain reaction – *it has to succeed*.

The confusing part of Santiago's argument is that while she seeks to define art as such, she seems to rely entirely on the audience's behaviour – our reactions to various objects – rather than on any objective features of the work of art as such. At times, it almost seems that Santiago sees art as a type of experience in itself: art

is not something we encounter in the world, it is a word we use to describe our own reaction to certain objects.[2]

Such a view may seem odd; but this is not to say that definitions offered by Santiago are incoherent. In fact, they seem perfectly coherent – in that they all suggest that whether a game is or is not a work of art relies on the reaction, or experience, of its players. In her subsequent rebuttal of Ebert's counter-arguments, Santiago seems to double down on this approach, especially in the closing paragraph of her piece for *Kotaku*:

> Art is in the eye of both the creator and the beholder. And as those two groups of people grow and change, so will the definition and perception of art (Santiago 2010).

In other words, games may become art because art itself may be redefined by its audience in such a way that it includes games. The latter is undoubtedly true; however, as a whole, Santiago's argument relies on the assumption that the very act of redefinition changes the nature of the object in question. If by expanding the definition of art we can change what constitutes art itself, then the question "can games be art?" seems to have little to do with games, and everything to do with the audience's subjective (which does not necessarily mean "individual") approach. Clearly, Santiago considers the creators' input only insofar as they participate in the social act of redefinition, or the "changing of perception." Even if the "artness" of a work of art is partly due to the efforts of its creators, it still has little to do with any features of the work itself, and more with all the inevitably social practices that surround it.

A very similar intuition may be found in Eric Zimmerman's rebuttal of Ebert's views (Zimmerman 2014). Although rather than defend games-as-art, Zimmerman urges his readers to ignore the issue altogether, his line of reasoning is essentially the same as Santiago's. He opens by claiming that "Anything can be, and has been, considered art. Games can be too." This, again, seems largely true – allowing for a certain rhetorical exaggeration – but does not seem to answer the question of whether games can be art. That is, unless we locate the entire issue once more on the side of the audience's experience, and assume that what art *is* depends solely on what the audience *believes it to be*. Zimmerman all but acknowledges this assumption, by posing in the next few paragraphs that

---

2 Arguably, McKee's definition stands out in that it locates the essence of "good writing" in the writer's own "desire" rather than the readers' experience; however, this is the part that Santiago seems to skip over.

what makes something art is not the object itself. You can't split the atom of a Picasso and find an essential art particle inside. Much contemporary art is about appropriation and recontextualization – putting advertising on a canvas, or a commercial product in a gallery. It's not about the object in and of itself.

What makes something art are the social structures that surround it (Zimmerman 2014).

Meanwhile, Jim Preston – whose comments Ian Bogost relies on in his *How to Do Things With Videogames* (see Bogost 2011, p. 9) – offers an interesting variation on the same argument. Preston openly admits that he is not interested in what art actually *is*; rather, the blurring of its boundaries seems to him to create a peculiar *political* opportunity:

My suggestion to my fellow gamers is not to piss on Roger Ebert, as tempting as that may be. Instead of adopting a philosophical or aesthetic strategy, we should adopt a political one. Even if I thought Ebert had a coherent conception of art, there is little to be gained by engaging him in an essentialist debate.

Instead, we should learn from Joshua Bell's example and focus on creating the conditions in which video games can be viewed as art (Preston 2008).

Such an explicitly anti-essentialist approach may very well prove effective. However, the political imperative put forward by Preston – that one should strive for games to be socially recognised as art irrespective of whether one believes they are, in fact, art – has in practice the same corollary as Zimmerman's (and Santiago's) argument: an act of redefinition changes the boundaries of the object in question. Only now we are not necessarily urged to believe that ourselves – just to behave as if we did. Thus, we are expected to suspend our beliefs as to what art *is* in order to achieve a certain political goal. But this in turn poses another question: if we have no working definition of what constitutes art (of what art is on its own, rather than what the experience of art may look like), then how are we supposed to convince anyone to see games as art? Or, more precisely, if we seek to convince someone that games are art, what are we trying to convince them of? Or yet in other words – to go back to the core of Santiago's original argument – if it's only the people's perception that sets the boundaries of what constitutes art, what exactly is it a perception *of*?

One way to provisionally solve this dilemma is to go further than Santiago did, and openly reduce art to a type of personal and subjective experience (rather than something external to the subject – something that only *provokes* a certain experience). That is the road taken by Kyle Chayka, who opens his piece for *The*

Atlantic by accusing Ebert of denying that Chayka's own experiences are "real or meaningful." He then follows this accusation by asserting that

> video games are nothing if not experiential. They are visuals and music and poetry all wrapped up into a single package. A video game isn't just a game – it is a controlled passage through an overwhelming aesthetic experience. This is also the basis for my own definition of art as any sensory aesthetic experience that provokes an emotional response in its audience, be it wonder, anger, love, frustration or joy (Chayka 2010).

Of course, no player would deny that their experience of games is "real," but neither did Ebert. In fact, he explicitly admitted that an experience may be moving, and yet its object does not necessarily constitute art:

> Many experiences that move me in some way or another are not art. A year ago I lost the ability (temporarily, I hope) to speak. I was deeply moved by the experience. It was not art (Ebert 2007).

In Chayka's account, however, art is no longer an object or a root of an experience, but a *type* of experience: specifically, any "sensory experience" that provokes a certain kind of emotion (from a seemingly arbitrary pre-set list). What was only implied in parts of Santiago's essay here becomes an explicit foundation for Chayka's entire argument. Art is no longer something external, a "thing" encountered in the world – and as such, it does not need any features that would make it autonomous of its audience.

IGN's Mike Thomsen does not go as far, and in fact tries to give his argument nuance by negotiating a more moderate position: combining an experience-based definition of art with the notion of art as a tool of authorial expression, a vehicle for various meanings, beliefs, and ideas. But in the end, the focus on the audience's experience prevails:

> I experienced the medium [of games] as an art form from the very first moment I played a videogame almost thirty years ago. Ebert says no critic has ever forwarded a videogame that could be compared to the great works of the old, canonized art. At the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, he's wrong on this count as well. I did just that six months ago when I described my experience playing Metroid Prime as of equivalent emotional and thematic value as my time watching Citizen Kane (Thomsen 2012).

Of course, it is easy to imagine that someone may experience *Citizen Kane* and *Metroid* in largely the same (if not identical) manner. A newborn, for instance, would

probably be unable to distinguish between the two. But when Ebert asserted that "no video gamers now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form," he clearly meant something else (admittedly, his use of the word "experience" here seems unfortunate): not that no gamer could experience a game the same way they experience a specific work of art, but that there is – in practice, if not in principle – a *formal* difference between games and art. Such a difference would surely be located in the medium of games itself, rather than in anyone's personal history with any particular title. Even Thomsen seems to recognise this, to a degree, by suggesting that games possess a "language" of their own that is neither better nor worse than that of other, more established media.

*   *   *

These comments are just a small sample of some of the more influential voices dissenting from Ebert's claims. However, even from such a limited sample a clear pattern emerges: the games can be art on account of being able to give us the same kind of experiences that art does; and if anything can be art, it is because potentially anything can give us the kind of experiences that art does. But this is clearly not what Ebert himself had in mind. Although he explicitly avoided offering his own set of criteria for distinguishing between art and non-art, on a few occasions he seems to have gotten close to a provisional definition of sorts. In his early comments, for instance, he emphasised the importance of "authorial control":

> I did indeed consider video games inherently inferior to film and literature. There is a structural reason for that: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control (Ebert 2005).

Ebert reiterated this stance in his comments on Clive Barker's talk a few years later:

> I believe art is created by an artist. If you change it, you become the artist . . . If you can go through "every emotional journey available," doesn't that devalue each and every one of them? Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices (Ebert 2007).

Moreover, Ebert decided here to clarify some of his earlier remarks; where previously to demonstrate that anything could be art he used the example of a can of soup, he now referred to a *painting* of a can of soup:

I mentioned that a Campbell's soup could be art. I was imprecise. Actually, it is Andy Warhol's painting of the label that is art. Would Warhol have considered Clive Barker's video game "Undying" as art? Certainly. He would have kept it in its shrink--wrapped box, placed it inside a Plexiglas display case, mounted it on a pedestal, and labeled it "Video Game" (Ebert 2007).

Of course, in such a scenario it is not really "the game" that becomes art; it is just the physical object that the game is recorded on. This rhetorical slight of hand aside, Ebert's position seems now more clear, and easier to distinguish from that of his opponents. Whereas for Santiago, Chayka, or Zimmerman to say that anything can *be* art means that anything can bring about the same *experiences* we have when confronted with various works of art, for Ebert it means that anything can be *made into* art. And whereas for his opponents to say that anything can *become* art is to say that art can be (and indeed has been, historically) redefined in such a way as to include almost anything, for Ebert this *becoming art* is of a distinctly more material nature: for an object (or a material) to become art, it needs to be *transformed* into a work of art by the work's author. Crucially, this does not mean that the experiential aspect of art is incidental or insignificant – rather, Ebert seems to point to a fundamental difference between the experiences the audience is *supposed* or *meant* to have (as an "inevitable conclusion") and the experiences it *just has*, independently of the work's meaning.

Nonetheless, this does not explain or solve the contradiction at the heart of our inquiry, namely: why is Ebert torn between the feeling that games are *in principle* (by nature, definition, or logic) incompatible with art, and the idea that they simply have to do much, much better, in order to *become* art in the future?

The tension between what a work of art compels us to do or think and our own subjective experience of it is of course one of the grand central themes of modern and contemporary criticism, especially within the broad Modernist tradition. It lies, for instance, at the very heart of Michael Fried's argument in his seminal *Art and Objecthood* (see Fried 1967/1998). In *The Shape of the Signifier* Walter Benn Michaels, one of Fried's most insightful readers, offers an interpretation that seem pertinent to our inquiry:

[T]he Modernist work refuses to be absorbed into its site. It is "exclusive" rather than "inclusive," and what it excludes is precisely the beholder; the context in which you encounter the work – where you see it, when you see it, who you are – is not a part of what it is. This is why Fried will invoke "the concept of meaning" (161) as against experience on its behalf. The idea here is that our experience of any work will vary with place, time, and so forth – the experience of reading some text on an airplane will be different from the experience of reading the same text in one's study – but the meaning of the text will not (Michaels, 2004, pp. 90–91).

Described in terms of meaning and experience, this tension is also crucial to Michaels' own work. The novelty of *The Shape of the Signifier* lies, however, not in the pointing out of the incompatibility of these two perspectives as such, but rather in the way Michaels links the entire issue to some more fundamental remarks on the nature of meanings, first offered by himself and Steven Knapp in *Against Theory*, a seminal piece of literary criticism from 1982 (see Knapp & Michaels 1982). There, Michaels and Knapp famously claimed that the meaning of a text is, by definition, always *strictly* identical with its author's intention (as in, these are just two names for the very same "thing"). I am unable to summarise their argument in any sensible level of detail here – extraordinarily concise, deflationary in its polemic attitude and clear in style, *Against Theory* is extremely difficult to quote other than in extenso – but in *The Shape of the Signifier* Michaels essentially reiterates and recontextualises its core points, by positing that the only alternative to the logic of experience is to focus on the authorial intention. In the very first chapter of the book, after discussing at length the case of eighty-six blank pages in Thomas Shepard's *Autobiography*, Michaels provisionally concludes:

> The effort here has been to think through the question not only of what a text means but, even more fundamentally, of what the text is – of what is in it and what isn't, what counts as part of it and what doesn't – without the appeal to the author's intention. And the point is that if you do this, you find yourself committed not only to the materiality of the text but also, by way of that materiality, to the subject position of the reader. You find yourself committed to the materiality of the text because, if you don't think it matters whether the author of the text did or didn't intend the eighty-six blank pages to count as part of it, the mere fact that they are there must be dispositive. And you find yourself committed to the primacy of the subject position because the question about what's there will always turn out to be . . . a question about what's there to you, a question about what you see. Once, in other words, the eighty-six pages count not because some author meant them to count but because they are there, in front of you, then everything that is there must also count – the table the pages are on, the room the table is in, the way the pages, the table, and the room make you feel. Why? Because all these things are part of your experience of the pages, and once we abjure interest in what the author intended (once we no longer care whether or not the author intended us to count the room the work of art is in as part of the work of art), we have no principled reason not to count everything that's part of our experience as part of the work. And, of course, while our experiences will often be very similar, they will always be a little different – where you stand will be a little different from where I stand, what you feel will be different from what I feel, who you are is not who I am.

> So the argument, in miniature, is that if you think the intention of the author is what counts, then you don't think the subject position of the reader matters, but if you don't think the intention of the author is what counts, then the subject position of the reader will be the only thing that matters (Michaels 2004, p. 11).

In other words, the very same meaning that guarantees the basic autonomy of the work of art/literature – or provides its identity, in the sense of defining its boundaries – cannot be derived from anything *other* than the author's intention (and, strictly speaking, even here it is not as much derived from the authorial intention, as it just *is* the authorial intention).

These remarks seem to echo some of Stanley Cavell's comments on chess made in his seminal *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1976, pp. 25–30). Although Cavell does not touch explicitly on the issues of meaning/intention (at least not in this particular part of the essay), his general point is that the rules of a game are in fact descriptive, rather than imperative, in nature; they describe what it means to play a game (what actions may be said to constitute "playing" it), rather than instruct us on what we should do *in order* to play it. For instance, the list of acceptable moves in chess does not instruct us on how we *ought to* move any of the figures; it only describes what actions count as playing the game (pushing the Queen across the board in a way prescribed by the rules does; throwing "the little object called the Queen" across the room does not). To put it in layman's terms, the rules, rather than advise and instruct the prospective players on anything, simply describe which actions fall within the confines of the game itself, and which do not. This is not to say that in practice players will not obey the rules in order to play (and perhaps enjoy) the game – it seems self-evident than on most occasions they do – what is implied here is that *the rules themselves* are indifferent to the player's motivations, because they are by their very nature indifferent to intentions as such.

It seems obvious how Michael's (and Cavell's) remarks may apply to Ebert and his opponents. With his emphasis on authorial control, Ebert falls on the side of meaning (even if at times he fails to understand it[3]) and remains sceptical of the role of experience – which, as we have already seen, does not mean that he somehow attempts to devalue or erase the viewer's (or players') experience, but rather, that he distinguishes between experiences as such and experiences that we are lead to by the work's meaning, as an "inevitable conclusion." [Michaels on Fried: "theatricality, which Fried understands as the production of objects designed

---

[3]   For instance, in the closing paragraphs of his final piece on the "art vs games" debate, Ebert seems to equate meaning with a purely narrative "message," quoting Archibald MacLeish's claim that "a poem should not mean, but be" (Ebert 2010, July 1). The issue, however, is largely semantic: here, Ebert defines meaning in a narrow (and arguably imprecise) way, which does not seem to affect the underlying logic of his argument.

exclusively to produce a response (or some range of responses) in the beholder and which he presents as 'the negation of art,' involves only incidentally the insistence on the object. What's crucial is that the transformation of the art object into an object like any other requires the transformation of the beholder's experience of it into a version of experience tout court".]

Michaels' argument in *Against Theory* and *The Shape of the Signifier* has another indirect consequence, or corollary, that is often ignored. If the author's intention is indeed strictly identical with meaning (in that they are in fact one and the same), then the latter is also entirely arbitrary, in the sense of being entirely dependent on the specific acts of a particular author. After all, no physical object, and no material one, may possess any meaning on its own; it all comes from "authorial control." "Anything can be used to mean anything" (Knapp & Michaels 1983, p. 799): Michaels (and Knapp) offer a more radical,[4] less vague (indeed, less arbitrary) version of E.D. Hirsch's famous remark that

> Almost any word sequence can, under the conventions of language, legitimately represent more than one complex of meanings. A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it (Hirsch 1992, p. 13).

Anything can be made into art: as we have already seen, Ebert seems to share this view. So why was he so consistently torn between the idea that games may become art *at some point* and the view that they cannot be art *in principle*?

Brenda Romero was probably the first to point out this particular inconsistency in Ebert's thinking. In her talk 2016 TEDx talk "Are Games Art?" she claimed:

> [G]ames invite us to be interactive. And that is perhaps what sets them apart from all other forms of art. It is their most exciting thing. Now, Roger Ebert had actually posited that games were not art because of that very problem. He says, "art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices" that you may have in games. But I'm going to argue that choice is the original expression. Choice is intentional. That is, as an artist, what I'm trying to present. Not a single thing. If you can do eight things in a world, it's because I decided that you could do eight things (Romero 2016).

Unlike Santiago or Zimmerman, Romero does not seem (at least at this point in her argument – her own views on the relevance of experience are also arguably

---

4 Their view remains more radical – and more consistent – than Hirsch's, insofar as they acknowledge that unless there is intention, there can be no "word sequences"; we only recognise words as words because we posit an author, and a meaning. There is no language before meaning, and no intentionless speech.

inconsistent) particularly interested in drawing parallels between the experiences we may have when confronted with art on the one hand, and games on the other. She seems to understand that any similarity of experience is, at least from Ebert's point of view, incidental, and it does not fundamentally alter his position. Instead, she points out that choice itself may serve as a means of expression. Whereas for Ebert to give the audience choice – to invite it to participate, or "be interactive" – is to relinquish authorial control, Romero claims that a game designer can exercise such control precisely by giving the player a choice.[5] In other words, confronting players with choices may *mean* something.

This meaningfulness of choices seems crucial, because it clearly separates some of the audience's choices from others. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which certain choices are *allowed for* by the work's author, but they nonetheless remain meaningless – in that they do not serve to express any authorial intention. In fact, it seems difficult to imagine art *without* the possibility of such choices. No one can force their readers not to choose to skip pages, and no one can in practice force their viewers to only look at a sculpture from a single point of view; indeed, this would defeat the very purpose of making a sculpture (rather than, say, a painting). For Fried himself, what separated Modernist art from its literalist counterpart in the first place was that a Modernist work remained the same irrespective of the point of view chosen by any of its viewers. For a choice to be meaningful in this sense, it seems necessary that it be integrated into the structure of the work itself; obviously, this is exactly what games seem to offer, at least in Romero's account. A choice that is explicitly derived from the very rules of the game is fundamentally different from any choice that transcends these rules (such as a choice to cheat, or to "break" the game). Choice, in other words, may be *made into* art.

These observations, in turn, seem to lead us to something akin to Ian Bogost's famous notion of *procedural rhetoric*. Explained in detail in his seminal 2007 book *Persuasive Games*, it is meant to describe a specific practice of representation and persuasion, important to games in general, and video games in particular:

> Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively. More specifically, procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular . . . Procedural rhetoric is

---

5   Ostensibly, it might seem important that Romero considers a limited choice scenario, where the player has only a certain number of preset options to choose from; however, in principle this does not seem to change anything. If it is the choice itself that is meaningful – that is, if the meaning is expressed by the very act of allowing the player to choose, rather than just through various "things" that they might choose *from* – then giving someone unlimited freedom (within the boundaries of the game) can surely mean as much as giving them only limited options.

a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created (Bogost 2007, p. 3).

[A]bstract processes – be they material like watch gears or cultural like crime – can be recounted through representation. However, procedural representation takes a different form than written or spoken representation. Procedural representation explains processes with other processes. Procedural representation is a form of symbolic expression that uses process rather than language (Bogost 2007, p. 9).

Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes (Bogost, 2007, p. 28–29).

Although Bogost is careful to stipulate that "procedural representations do not necessarily support user interaction" (Bogost 2007, p. 40) (they might, for instance, be performed entirely by a computer), it is easy to see how the notion of procedural rhetoric, and procedural representation more generally, could explain the existence of Romero's meaningful choices. As an action on the part of the player, any particular choice stems from and is enabled by the rules of the game, the procedural framework within which the player makes their moves. These rules are, in turn, defined in advance by the game's creator. By emphasising the impact of certain relationships (at the cost of others), by establishing causal chains and so on, the author gives the game meaning *through* the rules themselves.

So far, Bogost seems to pin down intuitions that are probably shared by the vast majority of players. However, one might be tempted to point out that his definitions can get quite abstract in places. What does it mean, for instance, that an argument is made *through* a process, or *with* a system? Is the system in question a part of the argument, or something that produces or results in an argument, or can it be an argument in itself? Take, for instance, classic abstract games like chess or go. We may certainly "read" the rules of these games as a series of claims about the nature of war (the necessity of sacrifice, for instance). But how are we supposed to know that this is indeed what these rules are – that they are supposed to mean something at all in the first place, let alone tell us something about war? If we were to consider the rules themselves, as a purely logical structure – and abstract from any form of symbolic expression that is incidental to the rules themselves, like the shape or the name of the pieces in chess – how would we know that the game we are playing is an allegory for war? What does it mean for Bogost – who clearly does not share Michaels' views on meaning[6] – that in procedural representation, processes take the place of language? Can a process be meaningful in itself? Or, to

---

6   See, e.g., Bogost 2011, p. 17 for his views on the so-called intentional fallacy.

keep with the linguistic metaphor, are we supposed to see such processes as words (i.e., meaningful units) or just shapes and sounds (i.e., physical objects)?

Interestingly, when Janet H. Murray first coined the idea of *procedural authorship* in her *Hamlet on the Holodeck* – the very idea from which Bogost's procedural rhetoric derives – she described it in terms of an extension or a broadening of the traditional authorship, a new type of authorship that builds upon the old one, rather than seek to replace it:

> Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions. It means establishing the properties of the objects and potential objects in the virtual world and the formulas for how they will relate to one another. The procedural author creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities (Murray 1997, pp. 152–153).

Here, it is very clear that procedural authorship consists, essentially, of two equally necessary elements: the author creates the rules as well as the "texts themselves"; a "world," but also a "set of scenes." The difference between Murray's and Bogost's approaches may seem insignificant at first, but it explains why the former stops short of claiming that the rules themselves – or the procedure itself – may represent anything, or be meaningful, on their own. In Murray's view, the practice of procedural authorship requires that the author create not just the procedure, but also the symbols themselves – a sort of an allegorical surplus, or meta-commentary, that presumably explains the specific symbolic referents of the procedure's various elements.

Does all this mean that Ebert was right in his initial assertion that games cannot be art after all? Are we now to conclude that although a game can certainly *contain* art – great writing, beautiful visuals – it cannot be a work of art *as a game*, in its own medium? But how would we reconcile such a statement with our previous claims about the arbitrariness of meaning? Is our inquiry fundamentally flawed?

*   *   *

Not necessarily. For even if art can indeed be anything, it still means that everything needs to be *made into* art first. And different things, objects, or materials may resist the artist's efforts in different ways.

Helpfully, in an insightful footnote in *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels offers some interesting remarks on the difficult relationship of games and meaning:

Hence the difference between losing a game and losing an argument: you don't lose at chess when you are convinced that you cannot move your king out of check; you lose when, whatever your views, you cannot, within the rules of the game, move him. The point can be put more generally by saying that in any game the players' moves have a force that is utterly undetermined by their beliefs about them. Beating someone at chess has nothing to do with changing his or her mind. And it can be put more generally still by saying that just as two players in a game cannot be described as disagreeing, two players playing two different games can't be described as disagreeing either, not because they have the same beliefs but because, once again, their beliefs are irrelevant. Chess isn't a set of beliefs; it's a set of rules.

. . .

And the analogy of the game is just as problematic for language as it is for ideology. No one cares what you meant by moving your rook four spaces to the left – you don't need to mean to checkmate your opponent in order to do it. (You can just as effectively, although not just as easily, do it by accident.) And if the meaning of your move is irrelevant to the question of whether your opponent has been checkmated, your opponent's understanding of the meaning is equally irrelevant. Indeed, this point can be put more generally just by saying that the moves in a game don't have any meaning (Michaels 2004, p. 189).

Of course, Michaels seeks to make a point about language, ideology and beliefs, rather than games as a medium, but this in no way invalidates what he has to say about the latter. If our actions in a game – understood now in a very abstract way, where once again we consider the game to be a purely logical structure, a set of rules and nothing more – have no meaning, then it only follows (which is also clearly implicit in Michaels' argument), that the rules that govern these actions cannot have any meaning either. Meaning has to come from the outside.[7] (Another way to put this would be to say that all logical propositions are, by definition, tautologies.)

By setting this claim off against Michaels' and Knapp's earlier argument – that "anything can be used to mean anything" – we may finally grasp the nature of the apparent contradiction at the heart of Ebert's comments on games and art. By itself, a game – a set of rules and choices derived from these rules, something to be played, a process that invites the participation of the players – cannot have meaning, it cannot convey any authorial intention, and it does not lead us to an "inevitable

---

7   We find a similar intuition in a 2011 piece by Brian Moriarty, game developer and a self-proclaimed "Ebert apologist": "the identity of a game emerges from its mechanics and affordances, not the presentation that exposes them" (Moriarty 2011). Moriarty's use of the traditionally vague idea of affordances aside, what he clearly implies here is that "presentation" lies outside the underlying system of rules, as a sort of a meta-commentary.

conclusion." Hence games cannot be art, *by definition,* and they never will be. However, the very idea of an objective meaning of a work (which, as Michaels and Knapp have shown but Ebert does not necessarily have to acknowledge, implies that meaning is strictly identical with the authorial intention) suggests that in principle, anything can be meaningful. Hence anything can be art, including games – once again, *by definition* – and we cannot rule out the possibility that someone at some point will make games into art.

Is then Ebert's thinking inherently flawed? Or perhaps he unwittingly discovered a dilemma that undermines the very idea of objective meanings, and of the work of art as an autonomous object? I do not believe either is the case; in fact, I think that the two sides of his argument are quite easily reconciled, if one is willing to take two possibly counter-intuitive steps.[8]

<p align="center">*   *   *</p>

What are the two steps in question?

First, we should recognise that the word "games," as it is daily used by players, critics, and researchers alike, tends to have a multitude of historically shifting meanings. Even when narrowed down to a single category of meanings that are particularly relevant for our inquiry – games as external objects, or artefacts (see Stenros 2017) to be interacted with, rather than a type of activity – the term "games" still seems to mean at least two very distinct things.

Most commonly, what is meant by "game" is a certain *cultural* artefact, a meaningful (indeed, often even narratively structured) totality that we could probably term a "work of game," to borrow John Sharp's phrase (see Sharp 2015). These are the games that might be interpreted and debated, judged and criticised, but also downloaded and modded and so on. These are games as we usually consider them when asking if games can be art. There is, however, another common usage of the word "game," a more technical or a narrower one, where it means something akin to "mechanics." Here, the game is just the game-y part of the game, so to speak; it consists solely of the game's rules, the purely logical structure underlying the

---

[8] It should also be noted – which might have been prudent to point out earlier – that some of the inconsistencies in Ebert's pieces may simply stem from his own indecision as to the importance of experience, his lack of knowledge about games, or his imprecise approach to issues of meaning and autonomy. However, what interests me here are not these obvious inconsistencies – that are, perhaps, inevitable in the thick of a heated debate – but the fundamental initial contradiction of his position, as described in the first part of our inquiry.

work of game, abstracted from all the symbolic or representational aspects. This is procedure *as procedure*, rather than Bogost's procedure-as-representation.[9]

The distinction between games as cultural artefacts (or meaningful totalities) and games as abstract rules or mechanics, though largely semantic, is nonetheless important in that it requires us to acknowledge that from every *work of game,* a game in a narrower sense – as a purely logical structure, an inherently meaningless set of rules – can be extracted, analytically (by the very nature of the medium) if not necessarily in practice. Such a possibility is telling of a fundamental tension inherent to all games – and hence, of the games' ultimately antagonistic nature as a medium. Whereas Bogost may urge us to see procedures as simply another tool in the artist's toolbox, something that facilitates the authorial attempts at representing various systems or processes, in reality *works of game* (or games-as-art) only allow for representation *in spite of* the underlying set of rules. Or, to be more precise, meaning is only achieved *both* through, and in spite of, the inherent meaninglessness of games as such.

This antagonistic nature of games as a medium is brought to the fore in our second step. Here, we turn back to some of the questions provoked by Bogost's comments on procedural rhetoric. What does it mean to represent something *with* or *through* a game? It now seems that we should think of games (in their narrower sense) not in terms of a tool – or a technique, or a form, or an art-producing machine[10] – but rather in terms of a work's *material support* that is both a condition for its existence and the primary obstacle for its coming into being. The material resists the authorial control, it has its own shape and possible uses independent of the author's intention; in order to become meaningful, it needs to be overcome, subordinated unto the work's own logic. On the other hand, the work obviously

---

9   All of this is not to say, of course, that rules, mechanics, and procedures have some inherent "primacy" over all the other aspects of any given game, as it may exist in practice. On a case to case basis, it might very well be said that many actually existing modern games – perhaps even the majority of them – want the player to focus as much on their semantic content as on the rules themselves. The argument presented here makes no claims about the practical importance of rules, mechanics, and procedures to what any particular game seeks to achieve. (Indeed, to make such claims one has to reject the idea that meanings are entirely arbitrary.) Nonetheless, the existence of said rules, mechanics, and procedures is clearly what defines games as games, allowing us to perceive them as formally and necessarily (and not just thematically and contingently) different from books, movies, etc. In other words, although any given game as a work of art (or an object of interpretation) does not not have to follow any a priori rules about the importance of rules and procedures, games as games (i.e., as a medium) are all (by definition) subordinate to certain formal implications of their rule-based nature.

10 Thus, although I borrow the term "works of game" from Sharp, it should be noted that the view of games as a type of material support does not seem to fall into any of the basic categories of the art-game relationship as described in his book (Sharp 2015).

cannot come into being without material support; the artist requires an object that is, initially, external to their own intention. In other words, material support is what ultimately allows the work to exist in the world, but it also poses a challenge, and a formal problem. (Famously, for Modernist painters one such problem was the flatness of the canvas.) The games' seemingly inherent indifference to meanings, beliefs, and interpretation is another such challenge. And just like with painting, a Modernist-inspired approach to games would focus on emphasising, rather than hiding, this problematic dimension – by making it a part of the meaning of the work. After all, the culturally unique feature of games as a medium is the extent to which their creators are encouraged, or even required, to create their own forms of material support for their subsequent work(s).

However, the purpose of this inquiry is not to give advice or instructions to game *developers*, but to compare and examine certain views of their *critics*. What made Roger Ebert an inconsistent Modernist – at least in his approach to games – was that his belief in the autonomy of the work, in the objective and arbitrary meanings that are essentially indifferent to their audience's subject-position, ultimately did *not* lead him to appreciate games as a form of material support, which offers art both a challenge and a promise. Indeed, reading his comments today, one could come to a surprising conclusion that for Ebert art should come easy, with its creators preferably opting for tools that bend to their will with the least resistance; while the difficulties posed to artists by the medium of games are a cause for pessimism, rather than a formal problem to be understood and overcome.

Games – again, in the second, more narrow sense of rules, procedures, or logical structures – should not be seen as representations, or works of art in themselves. Rather than a kind of language, they seem more akin to canvas – or perhaps a tube of paint. Marcel Duchamp, who appeared on the margins of the Ebert debate on multiple occasions,[11] once remarked that

---

11   And as always, remained tragically misunderstood. Contrary to popular belief, shared by both Ebert's opponents (Preston 2008; Zimmerman 2014) and his supporters (Moriarty 2011), Duchamp's *Fountain* did not owe its status as a work of art to being exhibited in a gallery or a museum, but to the *authorial signature* (which allowed it to be institutionally confirmed as art, and exhibited in the gallery in the first place). The idea that Duchamp promoted a type of naive idealism in art, where the work of art changes according to its audience's definition, experience, or understanding of it, goes contrary not just to his practice, but his own declarations: see, e.g., Duchamp 1975, p. 140, where he entrusts the audience only with the very limited duty of aesthetic judgement: "the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale." He also makes clear that the creative act (in which the spectator is an active participant) is not the same as the work (which remains the product of its author's intention).

> Since the tubes of paint used by an artist are manufactured and readymade products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are "Readymades aided" and also works of assemblage (Duchamp 1975, p. 142).

Of course, games are not readymades; Duchamp's point, however, was that for *any* work of art to exist in the world, it requires both artistic and non-artistic work. One of the goals of "readymades aided" was to bring the non-artistic labour into the fore – to emphasise the fact that non-artistic labour is a necessary *material* prerequisite for the very creation of the work of art. A cause for its existence, perhaps, though not necessarily a part of its meaning. It might seem counter-intuitive to think of rules or procedures in terms of something *material*, and of the game designer as someone akin to an artist mixing their own paint. However, to pose that games are inherently meaningless structures that may nonetheless carry meaning by the virtue of being integrated into the logic, or the structure, of the work – to pose, in other words, that games may indeed be art after all, not because they provoke experiences *similar to* art, but because they can (like quite literally *anything*) be used by an intention-capable subject to convey meaning – is, as we have seen, exactly that.

*   *   *

These conclusions, though largely provisional and inviting further investigation, may still be seen as having a direct impact on much of the work on art and games done within the field of academic game studies. We have already seen how Ian Bogost's remarks on procedural rhetorics seem, from the point of view suggested in the essay above, painfully unclear as to whether procedures are capable of conveying meanings entirely on their own. However, it appears important to briefly compare the argument made here with other influential accounts of the relationship between games and art.

It seems that among academic researchers investigating the relationship between games and art, by far the most common approach is to compare the two on the grounds of experiences, affects, and emotions they provoke. According to this approach, games may be seen as art insofar as they are found to emulate the kind of reactions (affects, moods, emotions…) commonly seen as crucial to our experience of art. Elements of this approach, either implicit or explicit, may be found across the field of contemporary game studies; as we have seen, they were also crucial to many of the polemics against Ebert. Even when researchers declare an explicit interest in structural or formal similarities between games and art, at the end of the day they tend to rely on the somewhat obvious observation that both games and art may impact their audience in similar ways. Bourgonjon, Vandermeersche

and Rutten recognise, for instance, that "[one] traditional artistic motivation is the expression of emotions and beliefs" (Bourgonjon, Vandermeersche & Rutten 2017, p. 6); but they immediately jump from this relatively uncontroversial assumption to the idea that games count or do not count as art based on how successfully they manage to evoke certain emotions, i.e., what reactions they ultimately result in, and whether these reactions are similar to those provoked by art. Meanwhile, an artwork's ability to mean does not depend on its ability to communicate the meaning *successfully*; every meaning may be misunderstood by definition. In fact, the idea that we may have a *wrong* reaction to a game is a better argument for counting games as art – it implies that a game has a purpose of its own, that it *means to* provoke a specific ("right") kind of reaction. Where there is a possibility of misunderstanding, there is meaning. But Bourgonjon, Vandermeersche and Rutten, speaking in terms of "impact", "effects", and "transmission" (rather than meaning), seek to claim art-like status for games by pointing out that both games and art may give their audience similar experiences.

By itself, however, the presence of a certain experience tells us nothing; what makes art – art is that it *means* to provoke a certain kind of reaction, not the fact that it *does*. This is what Ebert seemed to suggest when he compared (negatively) art to the "deeply moving" experience of having had lost his speech: we may be profoundly moved by experiences that have no meaning (like sickness), and so the fact that someone experiences art and games in a similar way tells us nothing about games and art as such. Or, to put it in once more in Michaels' terms,

> what's at stake in the distinction between meaning and experience has always been the distinction between two kinds of experiences, the ones you're meant to have and the ones you aren't . . . Affect matters insofar as it's supposed to matter; it's recognizing the intended affective response not actually having it that counts for understanding the work (Michaels 2018).

Still, the argument "from experience" – the idea that games count as art insofar as something in them may provoke a certain reaction in us, a reaction that is similar to those we have when experiencing art – crops up throughout contemporary game studies on an astonishingly regular basis, often in curious disguises. Grant Tavinor, for instance, combines the focus on players' experience with a focus on games' interactivity, in order to suggest that players' ability to have aesthetic experiences *within* a game is somehow relevant to whether games may count as art (Tavinor 2009, especially chapter 1). But again, this is just a variation on the same theme: the fact that playing games *may result in* experiences or reactions of the kind we associate with art says nothing about their status as art; what matters is whether we understand specific games as *intentionally seeking* a specific response.

To the extent that we ourselves create our experiences within the "exploratory aesthetics" of games (Tavinor 2009, p. 3), however, we can hardly say anything about whether the content of said experiences was intended by the game's designer. And, conversely, the moment we start making claims about what is intended in and through the game, we cross over from the domain of "having experiences" into the one of meanings and interpretations. But for this, pure abstract rules – as we have seen – never suffice.

Another variation of the argument from experience is to refer to *other people's* account of art to decide whether games may in fact count as artworks. Two instances of such approach appear in Smuts (2005) and Tavinor (2009, pp. 175–195) both of whom employ the so-called cluster theory of art to prove that games fit within many common definitions of art, written as well as unwritten. However, although the "cluster theory" may indeed allow us to understand how art has been defined *historically* (socially, culturally, etc.), it hardly answers the question of what art actually *is*. Thus we could say that it shifts the responsibility for answering the question "are games art?" from the researcher to cultural institutions, society at large, or history in general: art is what "people" believe it to be, or what people *experience as* art (which, as we saw, was also Eric Zimmerman's position), and if games fit the "people's" definition of art, they should be counted as art. As such, the cluster theory of art is a way of postponing, rather than solving, the problem. We may very well say that art is what others believe it to be; but this does not tell us what it is that people believe in when they believe a certain object (for instance, a game) to be art, and neither does it say anything about whether their definitions are correct.

The account of the relationship between games and art that is in some respects close to the one I offered in my re-reading of the Ebert debate is the one put forward by Brock Rough (2017), who posited the inherent incompatibility of games and art. To the extent that what Rough means by "attending" to art's "relevant features" is the interpretation of its meaning – and the observation that a work of art demands "appreciation" is similar to Fried's idea of art as "compelling conviction" (see Fried 1967/1998) – Rough seems absolutely correct in his conclusion that the "purpose" of art is entirely different from the goal set before the player by the rules of a game (which, as we have seen, remain fundamentally indifferent to any player's interpretations or beliefs – and are instead interested only in their "moves"). To interpret an artwork and to play a game are two distinct things. However, Rough's account is still problematic. Obscure language aside, it seems unclear why he chose to attribute such importance to players' motivations (can we really justifiably say that someone who was forced to play a game is not *really* playing it, from the game's own perspective? Does it matter, for the game itself, if the player is secretly trying to lose?); more importantly, he seems to believe that in-game goals may be

achieved through means other than those provided by the rules of the game. It is unclear, however, how this could work in practice. Just to reference one of Rough's examples: it is hard to see how the act of physically blocking the King (or, as Cavell would put it, the little object called the King) with other pieces achieves anything at all within the game itself.

Perhaps even more importantly, Rough does not have a precise account of what it is exactly that we should "attend to" when we experience art: "it is correct to appreciate a painting *inter alia* for its painted surface; it is incorrect, *qua* artwork, to appreciate a painting for how it tastes" (Rough 2017, p. 8). But how can we know that? The only plausible answer is that we assume one of these "features" to have been intended by the author, and the other one not; this is what Rough omits in his attempt to stay agnostic on the matters of intention. Once introduced, the concept of intention (and meaning as the intention of the work's author) not only makes the terms such as "lusory" and "prelusory" largely unnecessary, it also explains – as we have seen, and against Rough's own conclusions – why games, despite their inherent meaninglessness, may ultimately be used to convey meanings, and thus be made into art. Games become meaningful when they are used as a part of material support for a certain meaningful totality – what we conventionally call a work of art – and to mean they require nothing more than to be subordinated unto their author's intention (i.e., the logic of the work); just as traditional artworks mean not due to some pre-set "relevant features," but solely on account of their authors' intentions. Contrary to what Rough seems to believe, the game of chess may indeed be seen as an allegory – perhaps for war, or the hierarchies of a feudal society, or the necessity of sacrifice – insofar as we believe it to be *intended* as such by its creator (whoever that might be).

* * *

Finally, the re-reading of the Ebert debate allows us to shed new light on the work of those researchers who are not necessarily interested in the relationship between games and art as such, but who still claim for games a unique type, or perhaps even a unique ontology, of meaning. Here, again, the idea that experience can be substituted for the author's intention seems to have particular allure. Jason Begy, for instance, employs the concept of "experiential metaphor" in order to bypass the issue of authorial intent altogether, and derive meaning solely from the experiences of the player: "metaphorical projection occurs when the player finds meaning in a game by analyzing how the experience of playing it is similar to another experience, thus enabling a deeper understanding of both" (Begy 2013, p. 9). Begy is careful to emphasise that experience in question should not be seen as random: "While interpretation is an act of the player, and thus cannot

be perfectly predicted, it is important to note that the formal properties of the game are essential to this process. Metaphorical projection is not about associating disparate objects or systems at will, but relies on systemic correlations" (Begy 2013, p. 9). Still, throughout his piece he seems interested more in the experiences the players actually *have* rather than the ones they are *supposed to* have.[12] Moreover, at various crucial points Begy seems to suggest that in order to properly interpret "experiential metaphors", we need to find within the game a certain semantic surplus (for instance, a simulation has to signal what it is a simulation *of:* "the simulation must communicate to the player that it is based on another system in some manner" [Begy 2013, 14]). This more or less annuls any potential difference between an "experiential metaphor" and metaphor in general: the moment we understand that our experience of the game is meant to mean something, we are on the very familiar ground of "traditional" interpretation, and there is no need whatsoever for new methodologies or vocabularies.

Mike Treanor, an important representative of Bogost's "proceduralist" approach to game studies, seems to fall into much the same trap. In general, similar to Bogost, Treanor seems unclear on whether he believes abstract games are capable of carrying meaning. In a 2011 article, Treanor, Schweizer, Bogost and Mateas state explicitly that they are not (2011, p. 118); in a piece from 2016, Treanor suggests that they are (Treanor 2016, p. 1). One naturally leans here towards the later claim; however, Treanor's understanding of what constitutes meaning in an abstract game turns out to be founded on a very particular theoretical assumption:

> As abstract games have no diegetic story arcs, soundtracks, cut scenes or imagery, the aesthetic experience of playing the game can be argued to be *the meaning* of the game (Treanor 2016, p. 2).

In other words, the sole reason for the substitution of experience for the meaning is the very fact that abstract games *do not seem to have a meaning*. As a theoretical proposition, such a claim may raise understandable suspicions. However, as a rhetorical sleight of hand, it allows Treanor to conclude that his

---

12   It should be perhaps emphasised that an experience the audience is *meant to have* by a work of art is not the same as the experience the audience *has as a result* of the work's form or meaning. We may very well react to objective formal properties of a work in a way that is not intended; the fact that our reaction is not entirely random, but rather provoked by something *in* the work, in no way transforms our experience into an interpretation. The crucial difference is not between experiences that are random and those that are a reaction to something in the work; instead, what is at stake is the difference between us *having* the experience and *interpreting* the fact that we are meant to have it. (Whereas our experience is linked causally to its object, interpretation is not linked causally to the meaning.)

chosen object of interpretation, an abstract game called *Sage Solitaire*, is *about* the habits it forms in its players, such as "conditional decision making." It seems unclear, however, what this "aboutness" actually means or entails. Do we learn desirable behaviours simply through the act of playing the game? If so, how is this different from various forms of psychological conditioning? Is the game "about" economics in a way that a novel might be "about" an economic crisis, or is it more similar to the idea of school being "about" learning, a fastfood restaurant being "about" quick service and cheap prices, cocaine being "about" a boost of energy and short-term euphoria…? If the latter is the case, are we still doing interpretation – or are we just providing a psychological account of what happens to the player in the course of the game, and as a result of repeated playthroughs? (It is worth noting here that the "method" of criticism proposed by Treanor consists mainly of observing *other people* play the game.) And if the former is the case, should we not pay more attention to the semantic clues we have apparently unconsciously incorporated into our interpretation – such as the very idea of a "high score," or the word "trash" used in reference to some of the cards?

This, however, would mean abandoning any *methodological* ambitions, and Treanor – like Begy – seems very much oriented towards inventing a new method of interpreting games. Indeed, it seems that what is at stake wherever game researchers make claims as to the unique status of meaning in games is the possibility of a new methodology of interpretation (or criticism) to be invented, theorised upon, described, and promoted through various academic journals. Meanwhile, conclusions offered by this essay have been essentially deflationary, both regarding the nature of meanings and the importance of method.Iif there is meaning to be found in games, it must be of the same general quality that we find in (other) artworks; hence, instead of new methods of interpretation, we need careful analysis – on a strictly case-to-case basis – of how the tension between the meaninglessness of rules and the meaningfulness of games-as-works is resolved in each game, every time anew. There are no easy answers, and no step-by-step methods to follow – because while games are based on rules and procedures, interpretations are not.

Bibliography

Ashton, J. (2011). Two Problems with a Neuroaesthetic Theory of Interpretation. *Nonsite,* issue 2. https://nonsite.org/two-problems-with-a-neuroaesthetic-theory-of-interpretation/ (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Begy, J. (2013). Experiential Metaphors in Abstract Games. *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association, 1*(1). http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/3 (accessed on January 10, 2018). https://doi.org/10.26503/todigra.v1i1.3

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games. The Expressive Power of Videogames.* Cambridge, London: MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5334.001.0001

Bogost, I. (2011). *How to Do Things With Videogames.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816676460.001.0001

Bourgonjon, J., Vandermeersche, G., Rutten, K., & Quinten, N. (2017). Perspectives on Video Games as Art. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, 1*9(4). https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3024

Brown, N. (2019). *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478002673

Cavell, S. (1976). *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chayka, K. (2010, May 5). Why Video Games Are Works of Art. *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/05/why-video-games-are-works-of-art/56205/ (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Cronan, T. (2013). *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Duchamp, M. (1975). *Salt Seller: The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp.* Edited by M. Sanouillet & E. Peterson. London: Thames and Hudson.

Ebert, R. (2005, November 27). Why did the chicken cross the genders? *Rogerebert.com.* https://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Ebert, R. (2007, July 21). Games vs. Art: Ebert vs. Barker. *Rogerebert.com.* https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/games-vs-art-ebert-vs-barker (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Ebert, R. (2010, April 16). Video Games Can Never Be Art. *Rogerebert.com.* https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/video-games-can-never-be-art (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Ebert, R. (2010, July 1). Okay, Kids, Play on My Lawn. *Rogerebert.com.* https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/okay-kids-play-on-my-lawn (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Fried, M. (1967/1998). Art and Objecthood. In M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

Goldsworthy, J. (2005). Moderate versus Strong Intentionalism: Knapp and Michaels Revisited. *San Diego Law Review, 42*(2), 669–684.

Hirsch, E.D. (1992). In Defense of the Author. In G. Iseminger (ed.), *Intention & Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Knapp, S., & Michaels, W.B. (1982). Against Theory. *Critical Inquiry, 8*(4), 723–742. https://doi.org/10.1086/448178

Knapp, S., & Michaels, W.B. (1983). A Reply to Our Critics. *Critical Inquiry, 9*(4), 790–800. https://doi.org/10.1086/448233

Leys, R. (2017). *The Ascent of Affect. Genealogy and Critique.* Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226488738.001.0001

Michaels, W.B. (2004). *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Michaels, W.B. (2018). Grimstad on Experience, Flatley on Affect: A Response. *Nonsite*, issue 22. https://nonsite.org/grimstad-on-experience-flatley-on-affect/ (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Michaels, W.B. (2019). Blind Time (Drawing with Anscombe). *REAL, 35*, 49–60.

Moriarty, B. (2011, March 14). Opinion: Brian Moriarty's Apology For Roger Ebert. *Game Developer.* https://www.gamedeveloper.com/console/opinion-brian-moriarty-s-apology-for-roger-ebert (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Murray, J.H. (1997). *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, London: MIT Press.

Preston, J. (2008, February 11). The Arty Party. *Game Developer*. https://www.game-developer.com/design/the-arty-party (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Romero, B. (2016, February 16). Are Games Art? *Youtube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5sBdR4-GGM (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Rough, B. (2017) The Incompatibility of Games and Artworks. *Journal of the Philosophy of Games 1*(1). https://doi.org/10.5617/jpg.2736

Santiago, K. (2009, August 17). An Argument for Game Artistry. *Youtube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9y6MYDSAww (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Santiago, K. (2010, April 19). My Response To Roger Ebert, Video Game Skeptic. *Kotaku*. https://kotaku.com/my-response-to-roger-ebert-video-game-skeptic-5520437 (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Sharp, J. (2015). *Works of Game. On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*. Cambridge, London: MIT Press.

Smuts, A. (2005). Are Video Games Art? *Contemporary Aesthetics, 3*(3). https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol3/iss1/6/ (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Stenros, J. (2017). The Game Definition Game: A Review. *Games and Culture, 12*(6), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1555412016655679

Strunk, T.A. (2017). Alone In A World of Objects: Videogames, Interaction, and Late Capitalist Alienation. *Nonsite,* issue 22. https://nonsite.org/alone-in-a-world-of-objects/ (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Tavinor, G. (2009). *The Art of Videogames. New Directions in Aesthetics.* Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444310177

Thomsen, M. (2012, June 14). Dad is Dead: Rebutting Roger Ebert. *IGN.* https://www.ign.com/articles/2010/04/20/dad-is-dead-rebutting-roger-ebert (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Treanor, M. (2016). Finding Meaning in Abstract Games: A Deep Reading of Sage Solitaire. In *Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG, Dundee, Scotland, 2016.* Digital Games Research Association. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_432.pdf (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Treanor, M., Schweizer, B., Bogost, I., & Mateas, M. (2011) Proceduralist Readings: How to Find Meaning in Games with Graphical Logics. In *FDG '11: Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games* (pp. 115–122). ACM Press. https://doi.org/10.1145/2159365.2159381

Zimmerman, E. (2014, September 10). Games, Stay Away from Art. Please. *Polygon.* https://www.polygon.com/2014/9/10/6101639/games-art (accessed on June 20, 2022).

Paweł Kaczmarski – is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wrocław (Faculty of Historical and Pedagogical Sciences). He is a member of the editorial team of *Praktyka Teoretyczna / Theoretical Practice*, a journal of philosophy, sociology and culture, and a co-editor of *8. Arkusz Odry*, a poetry supplement to *Odra*. Recently, he has published *Oporne komunikaty. Strategie znaczenia w poezji współczesnej* (Łódź–Kraków 2021). His main interests include contemporary poetry, games criticism, and the politics of art/literature.

Benjamin Hanussek* ⓘD

Playing distressed art: Adorno's aesthetic theory in game design

A b s t r a c t

The discussion on games as (not) art has been raging for decades without reaching a consensus. It is argued here that the ontological status of games is irrelevant for the perception and development of aesthetic experiences in videogames. Instead, game design should be regarded as ripe to convey the experience of art according to established aesthetic theories. The essay presents Adorno's aesthetic theory and highlights its reflections in the games *Papers, Please* and *Observer*. It then describes how they were synthesized into a critical gameplay experience in the author's game *Distressed*. The latter may be regarded as an example of a method in game studies in which the aesthetic potential of games is explored by creation rather than analysis. Arguably, this reveals the importance of epistemological approaches towards games and art instead of the predominant ontological ones.

Keywords: games as art, game studies, Adorno, aesthetic theory, critical theory, *Distressed*

Introduction

Whether videogames are art or not is a discussion that has sparked much controversy, but also reform, in the last decades (Jenkins 2005; Pearce 2006; Tavinor 2009; Juul 2013; Sharp 2015; Parker 2018; Nguyen 2020). While art and

* Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6825-5980, e-mail: bhanussek@pjwstk.edu.pl

movie critics have seemed almost insulted by the idea of elevating videogames to the status of *high culture* (Ebert 2010; Jones 2012; Myers 2020), many game developers and researchers push for the "*games as art*" claim (Jenkins 2005; Adams 2008; Rauscher 2017). However, it should be highlighted that this discourse has been arguably dominated by the urge to either discredit or legitimize "games as cultural practice" (Bourgonion et al. 2017, p. 4). That implies that most claims regarding games as (not) art are teleological and often appear side-tracked by their authors' discrediting or legitimizing agenda.

This essay shall not attempt to discuss further the ontological status of games as (not) art (Tavinor 2016, p. 59) but to break with the discourse. It is of no interest here whether games are art, works of art, or artistic at all. What is argued is that games have the potential to evoke aesthetic experiences (Nguyen 2020, pp. 11–12). To be more precise, my argument is that games can be designed according to established art theories (i.e., Kant's, Hegel's, Adorno's) to produce distinct aesthetic experiences, which players also perceive as such.

Theodor Adorno's theory of aesthetics is grounded in critical theory and requires art to make "invisible forces visible, making things (political, economic, and social injustices) evident" (Hellings 2014, p. 19). His aesthetic conception in regard to (modern) art takes much from Marx's notion of the *mode of production* (Marx 1844/2009) to understand art in the way it is produced (Benjamin 1935/2003) and in how it depicts "the crisis of experience" caused by capitalistic alienation (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 34). In a videogame context, one could draw a comparison to Ian Bogost's idea of how game design is rhetorical and how it "make[s] arguments about the way systems work in the material world" (2007, p. 47). Regardless, to comply with Adorno's theory of aesthetics, the arguments games make must be critical and revealing in order to allow players to *experience art* (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 84).

Games such as *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) and *Observer* (Bloober Team 2017) exhibit evident traits of Adorno's understanding of art. While in *Papers, Please* systemic unfairness is endorsed by game design to evoke an experience of distress and moral conflict (Formosa et al. 2016; Morisette 2017; Sicart 2019), *Observer* pastiches classic cyberpunk films to create an implicit critique of capitalism (cf. Kilgore 2020). These games have been mostly praised for the intimidating gameplay experience they offer, which I argue results from the embedded core thought of Adorno's theory on *painful art* (Adorno 1970/1997; Juul 2013; Helling 2014). Further in this article I will analyse the relevant gameplay elements and present how they served as a main inspiration for the indie cyberpunk game *Distressed* (CtrlZ Games Collective 2021).

My team and I have tried to embed the thought of painful and revealing art within the game design of *Distressed*. The game unveils cyclically between going

to work to earn money and spending that money on videogames in one's free time, the capitalistic hamster wheel in which most working-class people find themselves (Horkheimer & Adorno 1945/2002; Marcuse 1964/2007). Traversing through this holistic experience is so fundamental to the intended gameplay that examining its sub-components by themselves (i.e., mechanics, levels, graphics, story, sound) can hardly address what our team envisioned as the idea behind the game. Therefore, the development and operation of *Distressed* are described below from the creator's perspective, presenting how Adorno's theory was deliberately embedded in the game's design.

Adorno's aesthetic theory

A short introduction to Adorno's aesthetic theory may help us understand how games immerse players. Adorno's theory of aesthetics is rooted in Hegel's phenomenology and is intermedial in nature. Here, an object (i.e., cultural artefact) in focus of a subject (i.e., consciousness) "becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth, just as it then has become a property of consciousness also" (Hegel 1807/1979, p. 21). This dialectic enables an ongoing "unfolding of truth" that is not centered within the object but within the subject (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 168; Helling 2014, p. 67).

This truth, emerging in the subject, is the aesthetic experience according to Adorno. However, the *absolute* truth art must possess is not that of "world-history" (Hegel 1807/1979, p. 178; Milne 2003, p. 69) but that of deception, illusions, and dependencies (Horkheimer & Adorno 1947/2002, p. 130; Adorno 1970/1997, p. 56; Richter 2006, p. 134). At this point, Adorno adds a crucial modification to Hegel's aesthetics by turning to Marx (Helling 2014, p. 49). The truth (the aesthetic experience) that art needs to evoke in the subject is the feeling of exposure to one's alienation, the pain of being unfree, and the grotesqueness of society. "The socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts; where in their expression, historically determined, the untruth of the social situation comes to light" (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 226).

According to Adorno, art is always a social fact that highlights humanity's ruination by manipulative and exploiting forces of the socioeconomic system in place (Zuidervaart 1991, p. 81; Ross 2015, p. 60). In revealing these truths, art "remind[s] the world of its lost realities: freedom and life, beauty and happiness, truth and reconciliation, hope and possibility" (Helling 2014, p. 66). That is often mirrored in formal aspects of the artwork itself. These challenge conventions by exceeding boundaries of genre and technique (Zuidervaart 1991, pp. 50, 221; Adorno 1970/1997, p. 199). Art preserves the social reality it simulates while simultaneously

negating it in its form. This makes art a manifestation of bondage and revolution at the same time: bondage in the form of the social order that the artwork represents and revolution as the invocation to break free from that order (Helling 2014, p. 35; Ross 2015, p. 133). The aesthetic experience, thus, spawns within the dialectic of what art reveals and the potential utopia it suggests. Art is essentially balanced through an internal opposition.

> The contamination of art with revelation would amount to the unreflective repetition of its fetish character on the level of theory. The eradication of every trace of revelation from art would, however, degrade it to the undifferentiated repetition of the status quo. A coherence of meaning – unity – is contrived by art because it does not exist and because as artificial meaning it negates the being-in-itself for the sake of which the organisation of meaning was undertaken, ultimately negating art itself. Every artifact works against itself (Adorno 1970/1997, p. 106).

And in working against itself, being bondage and revolution at the same time, art becomes the ultimate social critique, reflecting on a "wrong life that cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 1951/2005, p. 39). However, Adorno himself was aware of the fact that the power of an artwork itself is not sufficient to enforce an epiphany. As described earlier, the aesthetic experience emerges from the dialectic unfolding of truth between subject and object; an interplay of two agents. Thus, it is required of the subject (the human) to engage with the object (the artwork) critically in order to unleash its emancipatory forces (Adorno 1951/2005, p. 42). In other words, it is not enough to see or feel the pain that the artwork exposes us to. What is needed is our critical reflection as well our immersion into the aesthetic experience.

Papers, Please: Aesthetics of immorality

Traces of Adorno's theory can be found in the videogame *Papers, Please* made by Lucas Pope (2013), in which one takes the role of a border guard officer in the fictional communist state of Arstotzka. One "must process the documents of travellers, deciding who to admit and who to reject or detain. There are rules to be followed and moral choices to be made if and when they are bent or broken" (Formosa et al. 2016, p. 212). From a game design perspective, *Papers, Please* exhibits caricatural traits of a serious game for job training purposes (Lellock 2015; Hanussek 2021). The overall gameplay experience is constructed around a recurring working day schedule in which players have to reject or admit incomers according to a rotating set of rules. At the end of each day, players receive a wage based on how many people they accurately processed. The wage has to be used to pay bills and provide

for one's family (i.e., food, rent, medicine). Within this repetitive level design, the main storyline is inserted through scattered events, in which players sometimes have the option to align either with terrorists or with the state. The game has multiple endings and is over once one of the story-based endings is achieved, once players fail to pay their rent, or once all family members die. The described cyclical level design in *Papers, Please* became a foundational aspect for the gameplay experience developed in *Distressed*.

The game design enforces a systemic unfairness that financially disadvantages players (i.e., low wage, rising rent, illness of family members). Within this environment, players repeatedly face moral dilemmas that involve bribing. For example, terrorists promise money for being allowed to enter the country illegally, or a co-worker provides a bonus for more detained immigrants (Formosa et al. 2016, p. 213). Besides the worrying financial situation – a sword of Damocles hanging over players' heads – decisions are made under immense time pressure and receive, in most cases, no direct feedback (Sicart 2019, p. 151).

The gameplay experience has been frequently labelled as captivating but far away from what one would call normatively enjoyable or pleasurable (Lellock 2015; Formosa et al. 2016; Morrisette 2017; Sicart 2019). Juul has discussed the phenomenon of games that operate beyond traditional pleasure principles with the *paradox of painful art* that demonstrates that "1. People do not seek out situations that arouse painful emotions. 2. People have painful emotions in response to some art. 3. People seek out art that they know will arouse painful emotions" (Juul 2013, p. 37). This paradox is often explained through the catharsis theory, which expects a form of sublime knowledge as compensation for painful experiences (Juul 2013, p. 39).

Through the critical arguments *Papers, Please* makes by simulating a punishing reality (cf. Bogost 2007), the presence of Adorno's aesthetic theory is detectable. The aesthetic experience with which the game engulfs its players is a harsh confrontation with the notion of morality itself. How can we make moral decisions if they will destroy us and the ones we love? How can we live a *right* life in an inherently wrong world (cf. Adorno 1951/2005, p. 39)?

Observer: Alienated aesthetics

Apart from *Papers, Please*, the game *Distressed* has been inspired by *Observer* (Bloober Team 2017), especially in the context of alienation and labor which were used as core building blocks within the concept of *Distressed*. *Observer* can be visually and thematically categorized as cyberpunk (a world entrenched in techno-capitalism, humans physically immersed in technologies). Mechanically, it exhibits evident psychological horror traits (first-person perspective, walking simulator aesthetics,

hide-and-seek gameplay). Despite having received no academic attention, the game has been celebrated widely with top ratings and reviews and even received an enhanced version in 2020 (Evans-Thirlwell 2017; LeBoeuf 2021; Observer (PC) 2021).

In the game, players adopt the role of a cyborg detective Daniel Lazarski in Kraków in the year 2084. Lazarski is called to a crime scene in District C, where primarily social outcasts live. While he is looking for clues, a lockdown is triggered in the district. Suddenly, Lazarski finds himself in the middle of an ongoing murder spree. The story unfolds with players trying to hunt down the murderer while exploring the district, talking to inhabitants, and hacking into victims' brains.

Although the game is itself primarily story bound to the murder case, its meta-narratives take on a contextualizing role, adding a considerable dimension of social critique. For example, in the second brain hacking sequence concerning Helena Nowak, players enter her unstable and psychotic memories. These memories are partly built around her working environment (office scene) and her home (domestic scene). The former is a large-scale office at the hyper-capitalist corporation Chiron, consisting of computers, which suggests immaterial labor jobs. Uncountable human shapes can be observed passing through and working in cubicles in time-lapse. These shapes are faceless but they are visibly stressed, exhausted, and confused. Simultaneously, players are engulfed by a wall of sound, noises, voices, and whispers that represent a busy day at the office. Later on, the sequence takes players to Helena's home, where domestic overextension is in focus. The walls are made of washing machines, and the floor is covered in laundry. It is raining detergent, and unwashed dishes stack up high. At the same time, players repeatedly hear her husband saying, "Hey baby, I'm home!"

The sequence unfolds further and carries much more detail than mentioned, but the aspects described are sufficient to set these two scenes into context. What the scenes represent is the worker's or, to be more precise, a woman's fate under capitalism. The office scene displays definite elements of alienation or estrangement.

> Estrangement is manifested not only in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another, but also in the fact that everything is itself something different from itself – that my activity is something else and that, finally (and this applies also to the capitalist), all is under [the sway] of inhuman power (Marx 1844/2009, p. 54).

The office is infested with anonymity, and all computers display only the corporate logo of Chiron, expressing a significant unrelatedness between workers and their work. The symptomatic depression within the body language of the

faceless workers is a manifestation of what it means to be alienated through capitalistic forces.

The domestic scene highlights another critical dimension within the whole sequence – namely, that of not just being a worker but also a woman. In this case, players are confronted with the burden of traditional gender roles in which women are supposed to be responsible for housekeeping (cf. Thomas 1988). The mounds of laundry and detergent, unwashed dishes, and walls of washing machines are cynically contrasted with the husband's voice announcing his return home.

Both scenes are audio-visually presented with horror elements (i.e., sudden shifts in audio volume, jump-scare-like events). The game has translated the issues of alienation and exploitation by traditional capitalistic systems into playable horror. In utilizing devices of the horror genre, *Observer* enforces a streamlined experience on its players. The aesthetic experience that is evoked may be horrifying based on its dynamics; however, the game only becomes truly revolting through its embedded social critique. In *Observer*, players are unpleasantly confronted with total alienation and exploitation. That raises issues not only about our contemporary mode of existence and its *hustle culture* (Griffith 2019), but also about the role of women in conservative capitalist countries like Poland (home of the developers of *Observer*).

Both *Papers, Please* and *Observer* formulate vital critical perspectives by simulating fiction, deducted from real-world conditions. These perspectives are embedded in punishing aesthetic experiences woven into the mechanics and narrative of these games. And in this very dialectic, between exceeding the boundaries of the ordinary through what they communicate while remaining bound to the formal aspects of videogame technology, the games become disciples of Adorno's aesthetic theory.

Distressed: Experiencing labor/leisure dialectics

The aspects of Adorno's aesthetic theory visible in *Papers, Please* and *Observer* became an inspiration for *Distressed*, an indie cyberpunk game that combines 2D point-and-click aesthetics with a 3D arena shooter to critically thematize labor and leisure. The game takes place in a dystopian future, in the year 2069, when work is fully automated, which worries many people. However, at the same time, no *free* citizen wants to get back to work. To calm society and to show that the human race is still in control of automated machines, prisoners get labor deals that allow them to live in apartments with entertainment systems, as long as they attend 9-to-5 assembly line jobs. These deals are issued by the Hypercorps Federation, the most powerful company on the planet. It also owns all factories where every contractor ends up working.

Players act as Xen, one of the prisoners who received a precious get-out-of-jail card. The game is designed in a dialectic between work and leisure. Each cycle begins in a 2D world, graphically inspired by the slums and low-life districts in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) and *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii, 1995). Players can explore the labor district and talk to NPCs to learn more about the socio-political situation within the game (see Figure 1).
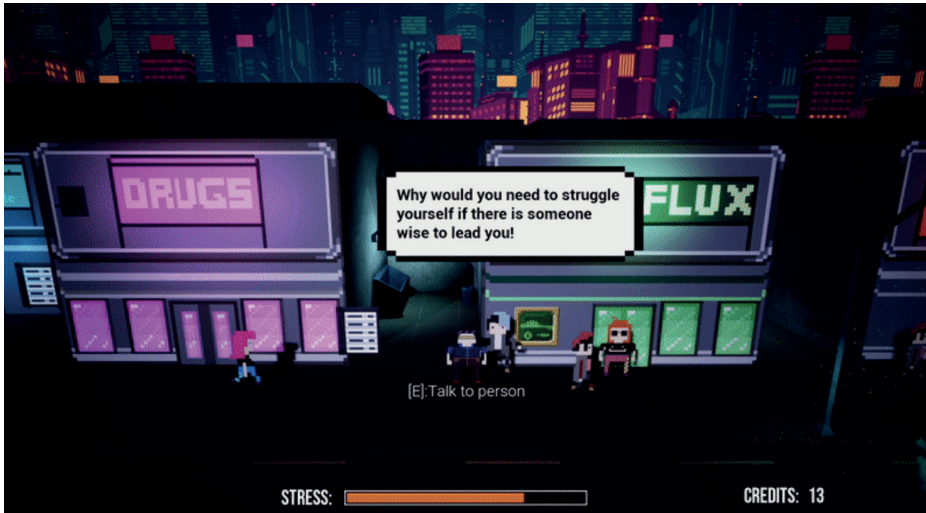

Figure 1. Talking to a tech-optimist on the streets of Xen's district

Despite the exploratory aspect, the game is designed to make players go to work at a transshipment point owned by the Hypercorps Federation. The job consists solely of scanning parcels on an assembly line (see Figure 2). Players receive one credit per scanned and processed parcel. With ten credits, they can leave their workplace and go back to their appartement.

In the apartment players can access their entertainment system, which to play an arena shooter visually inspired by *Tron* (Lisberger 1982). At this point, the game switches into a first-person shooter in which players have to collect keys and defeat enemies (see Figure 3) in order to reach a portal that ends the level. The game then switches back into the 2D perspective, where the cycle starts anew. The game possesses five levels that are based on the same cycle but provide progressing narrative elements in the 2D section and varying difficulty and space arrangements in the 3D section. Also, the game's stress bar mechanic indicates the degree to which Xen is (di)stressed. To lower stress, one needs to win games in the 3D section. Also, the game's stress bar mechanic to decrease stress by donating credits to a homeless person. If the stress bar reaches 100%, the game is over.

Figure 2. Xen's job at the assembly line

Figure 3. Shooting for leisure (in 3D)

The game was originally developed for a seminar on Cyberpunk aesthetics in 2020/2021. It was around five months in development from the brainstorming stage until its initial alpha upload on the platform itch.io. I was responsible for the concept, the story, sound and music. The primary objective of the game was to adapt cyberpunk aesthetics within a prototype. Early in the development process, it was clear that the

game would be based on a critical concept, given the nature of the cyberpunk genre and its critical techno-capitalistic tropes (Kilgore 2020, p. 48). The first major issue in development arose in the conflict between one side of the team opting for a 2D game and the other aiming for a 3D game. After much consideration, we decided to try to combine both perspectives under an umbrella concept. I proposed to represent a dialectic of labor and leisure à la Marcuse where the meaning of leisure is contradicted by its *containment* of the capitalist mode of existence.

> Here, the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity; the need for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefication; the need for maintaining such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets (Marcuse 1964/2007, p. 9).

This dialectic is visually represented in the game by the shift in perspective. The mundane labor aspect is traversed in 2D while exciting leisure playtime is experienced in 3D. In addition, the assembly line job has been deliberately designed to induce disenchantment by pressing one button to scan a parcel, having to wait until it reaches the assembly line, and having to do that at least ten times to finish a shift. That enforces a stupefying impact on on's consciousness, just as many labor jobs do.

Bored but glad to disengage after receiving at least ten credits, players are supposed to *run* back home and access the entertainment system to immerse themselves into a 3D shooter. We did our best to provide a challenging but satisfying experience that would stand in stark contrast to the 2D assembly line aspect of the game. The 3D sections are kept short and action centred in playtime (around three minutes if players focus on objectives) to be perceived as dynamic and engaging. Once the stage is cleared, the cycle repeats and players have to get back to work. To continue playing the *fun* part of the game, one needs to go back to one's mundane work and earn money to afford it, again and again. Even if one were to enjoy the 2D part of the game more than its 3D counterpart, one would struggle to survive because of the stress mechanic. And in order to mentally persist despite the pressure and dullness of life, one has to play. Play is changed into a desire necessary to fulfill and thus transforming it into something *like* labor. Or in Horkheimer and Adorno's words: "Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again" (1947/2002, p. 107).

The cyclical game design, which is heavily influenced by *Papers, Please,* is essential for the intended aesthetic experience that *Distressed* shall evoke within its players.

We presented our game to hundreds of players during a videogame Expo in Salzburg in 2021 (see Figure 4). That brought an unsurprising but interesting observation to light. There were two kinds of players: those who left the booth just after one cycle and those who went through more cycles. When asked what they thought about our game, the former kind would address the 3D part as the engaging section of the game, while the latter would be able to comprehend the concept, which made the whole experience enjoyable to them.

Figure 4. Playtesting at the Level Up Festival in Salzburg, Austria

Distressed remains heavily inspired by *Papers, Please* and *Observer* but goes a step beyond these titles in gameplay and visual aesthetics. In regard to gameplay, *Distressed* uses the core experience of a labor simulator from *Papers, Please* but does not provide the state of flow, accessible in the latter through clearly defined instructions and manageable challenges.

Papers, Please also allows involvement due to powerful moral dilemmas intertwined with a border guard officer's work. In *Distressed*, the activity of scanning parcels is as unengaging as it sounds. The game tries to represent the dull and stupefying experience of 9-to-5 labor without having any playful illusions of its nature. *Distressed* does not treat this part of the game as a space ripe with gamification potential.

What allows *Distressed* to transcend its inspirations is its in-game shift between being a 2D side-scrolling point-and-click adventure at day and 3D arena shooter

at night. When games offer levels that break with their core gameplay (like the arcade game *Fire and Sword* available in *Observer*), these shifts occur as an element of surprise or feature of the overall game experience. *Distressed*, on the other hand, makes this break central to its gameplay experience. Players cannot shift from 2D to 3D once in a while to get a break from the core gameplay experience. Rather, they are caught in between this break.

Papers, Please and *Observer* thematize dark and critical topics but their gameplay still tries to keep players engaged by conventional feedback systems. *Distressed* wants them to break free of those. In the finals of Subotron's prototype competition in 2021, *Distressed* was criticized for using abusive game design choices. According to most of the jury, designing a game that pushes the player to stop playing was simply ridiculous from a player and investor perspective. Unfortunately, the jury seemed to not consider the concept nor the fact that the game had not been created as a commercial product.

At any rate, if players allow *Distressed's* game design to guide them, they will experience art in line with Adorno's aesthetic theory. It is an aesthetic experience that reveals bondage and painful social realities through a self-balancing dialectic between contradicting dimensions, modes of interactions, narratives, and mechanics. *Distressed* cynically allows players to experience a "wrong life that cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno 1951/2005, p. 39), yet with a real chance of breaking free.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt in applied game studies. I have tried to go beyond theoretical game analysis by using an aesthetic theory as a blueprint for the creation of a videogame which functions as an argument itself. Whether games are art or not is, from my perspective, absolutely irrelevant, as long as they can evoke aesthetic experiences that inspire people to see the world differently, challenge their views to realize their dependencies, and remind them of alternative ways of living. A message to provoke critical awareness needs to be painful; it must be unpleasant and exhausting. Change is unpleasant and exhausting, at least initially.

The games that have made use of Adorno's aesthetic theory (intentionally or not) have proven to evoke experiences that are captivating, inspiring, and sustainable, even beyond the normative pleasure principle. In *Distressed*, my team and I tried to embed Adorno's aesthetic theory within the core game design while learning from *Papers, Please* and *Observer*. We wanted the game to evoke an exhausting aesthetic experience to prove a point; to unveil the bondage of our times, the dialectic between labor and leisure. I would not go so far as to call *Distressed* a piece of art, but I would go to great lengths to argue that it evokes an aesthetic experience à la Adorno.

Bibliography

Adams, E.W. (2008). Will Computer Games Ever Be a Legitimate Art Form? *International Journal of Technology Management & Sustainable Development, 7*(1), 67–77. https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.7.1.67/1

Adorno, T. (1951/2005). *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (trans. E.F. Jephcott). London: Verso.

Adorno, T. (1970/1997). *Aesthetic Theory* (trans. R. Hullot-Kentor). London: Continuum.

Barthes, R. (1984/1986). *The Rustle of Language* (trans. R. Howard). New York: Hill and Wang.

Benjamin, W. (1935/2003). *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames.* Cambridge: MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5334.001.0001

Bourgonjon, J., Vandermeersche, G., Rutten, K., & Quinten, N. (2017). Perspectives on Video Games as Art. *Comparative Literature and Culture, 19*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3024

Ebert, R. (April 16, 2020). Video Games Can Never Be Art. *Rogerebert.com.* https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/video-games-can-never-be-art (accessed on October 26, 2021).

Evans-Thirlwell, E. (August 17, 2017). Observer Review. Hauer of Reckoning. *Eurogamer.* https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-08-17-observer-review (accessed on October 26, 2021).

Formosa, P., Ryan, M., & Staines, D. (2016). *Papers, Please* and the Systemic Approach to Engaging Ethical Expertise in Videogames. *Ethics and Information Technology, 18*, 211–225. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-016-9407-z

Hanussek, B. (June 16, 2021). Exercises in Immorality: *Papers, Please* as a Cynical Serious Game. *Bhanussek.com.* https://bhanussek.com/exercises-in-immorality-papers-please-as-a-cynical-serious-game/ (accessed on October 26, 2021).

Hegel, G.W.F. (1807/1979). *Phenomenology of Spirit* (trans. A.V. Miller). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Helling, J. (2014). *Adorno and Art Aesthetic Theory Contra Critical Theory.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. (1947/2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. J. Cumming). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Jones, J. (November 30, 2012). Sorry MoMA, Video Games Are Not Art. *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/nov/30/moma-video-games-art#:~:text=The%20player%20cannot%20claim%20to,it%20precedes%20the%20digital%20age (acessed on October 10, 2021).

Juul, J. (2013). *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Kilgore, C.D. (2020). Post-Cyberpunk. In A. McFarlane, G.J. Murphy, & L. Schmeink (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (pp. 48–55). Oxon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351139885-7

LeBoeuf, S. (July 28, 2021). Observer: System Redux Review. *Blade Runner* Meets *1984* in a Tense and Atmospheric Murder Mystery. *IGN*. https://www.ign.com/articles/observer-system-redux-review (accessed on October 26, 2021).

Lellock, J.S. (2015). Media Review: *Papers, Please* (2013) Work Simulation Role-playing Video Game. *Humanity & Society, 39*(1), 121–123. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597614566347

Lisberger, S. (dir.) (1982). *Tron*. Buena Vista Distribution.

Marcuse, H. (1964/2007). *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Oxon: Routledge.

Marx, K. (2009). The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. *Marxists*. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm (acessed on October 25, 2021).

Milne, D. (2002). The Beautiful Soul: From Hegel to Beckett. *Diacritics, 32*(1), 63–82. https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2004.0016

Morrissette, J. (2017). Glory to Arstotzka: Morality, Rationality, and the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy in *Papers, Please*. *Game Studies, 17*(1).

Myers, D. (2020). *Games Are Not: The Difficult and Definitive Guide to What Video Games Are*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526153746

Nguyen, C.T. (2020). *Games: Agency As Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190052089.001.0001

Observer (PC) (2021). *Metacritic*. https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/observer (acessed on October 26, 2021).

Oshii, M. (dir.) (1995). *Ghost in the Shell*. Shochiku.

Parker, F. (2018). Roger Ebert and the Games-as-Art Debate. *Cinema Journal, 57*(3), 77–100. https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2018.0032

Pearce, C. (2006). Games as aArt: The Aesthetics of Play. *Visible Language, 40*(1), 66–89.

Rauscher, A. (2017). A Game of Playful Art. Transmedia Auteurs, Genre Settings, and the Cineludic Form. In G.S. Freyermuth, L. Gotto (eds.), *Clash of Realities 2015/16. On the Art, Technology and Theory of Digital Games. Proceedings of the 6th and 7th Conference* (pp. 195–216). Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839440315-014

Richter, G. (2006). Aesthetic Theory and Nonpropositional Truth Content in Adorno. *New German Critique, 97*, 119–135. https://doi.org/10.1215/0094033X-2005-007

Ross, N. (2015). *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory.* London: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd.

Scott, R. (dir.) (1982). *Blade Runner.* Warner Bros.

Sharp, J. (2013). *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Sicart, M. (2019). *Papers, Please.* In M. Payne, N. Huntemann (eds.), *How to Play Video Games* (pp. 149–156). New York: New York University Press.

Tavinor, G. (2009). *The Art of Videogames.* Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444310177

Tavinor, G. (2016). Art and Aesthetics. In J.P. Wolf, P. Bernard (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (pp. 59–66). Oxon: Routledge.

Thomas, J. (1988). Women and Capitalism: Oppression or Emancipation? A Review Article. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 30*(3), 534–549. https://doi.org/10.1017/S001041750001536X

Zuckert, R. (2007). *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the Critique of Judgment.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511487323

Zuidervaart, L. (1991). *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Ludography

Bloober Team (2017). *Observer* [various platforms]. Aspyr.

CtrlZ Games Collective (2021). *Distressed* [itch.io: https://yenrye.itch.io/distressed]. CtrlZ Games Collective.

Pope, L. (2013). *Papers, Please* [various platforms]. 3909 LLC.

Benjamin Hanussek – is a researcher, lecturer and developer in game studies and design. He works as lecturer and research advisor at the Polish-Academy of Information Technology in Warsaw. During the time in which the article was written he was studying game studies and engineering at the University of Klagenfurt and was working as a teaching assistant at the Klagenfurt Critical Game Lab. In his free time, he develops indie games as producer and game designer at CtrlZ Games Collective.

Emilie Reed*

The aesthetics of speedrunning: Performances in neo-baroque space

Abstract

Speedrunning describes activities related to the development and performance of strategies to complete games quickly, and is a valuable source of historical and technical information, while producing specialized aesthetic explorations of a videogame's environment. Most research on speedrunning emphasizes its metagaming or documentary function. However, speedrunning also changes the aesthetic experience of gameplay, both for players and in spectated performance. Aesthetic investigation informed by art historical perspectives, such as Angela Ndalianis' theory of the Neo-Baroque and H.S. Becker's study of Art World formations, offers new insights into the experience of speedrunning and how discontinuous and disjointed simulated space is experienced and appreciated as aesthetic phenomena by players and spectators. While Nidalianis has applied her theory to videogames, among other types of contemporary entertainment, further investigating speedrunning performances through this lens extends her analysis and problematizes the idea of a videogame as a singular aesthetic work, instead drawing attention to alternative aesthetic experiences videogames can offer.

Keywords: speedrunning, gaming community, performance, aesthetics, metagaming

*   University of Abertay, e-mail: emilie.m.reed@gmail.com

Speedrunning sits at an intersection between competition, fandom, and emulation and hacking scenes. While speedrunning demands deep knowledge of the game, and manual dexterity to varying degrees, most speedruns primarily rely on a collaborative and cumulative process through which many speedrunners and fans of the game discover and investigate new strategies or "strats" for cutting hours, minutes, seconds, or even frames off of a run, and then asynchronously practice and perform these runs, with the best times reviewed by the community and ranked on a leaderboard. While record attempt speedruns may be required to be performed on certain standardized versions of games or hardware, and include visually displaying these elements in their documentation, speedrunners also often use emulated versions of games, for their increased reliability and accessibility compared to obsolete hardware, as well as the ability to explore glitches more systematically, record states and move through the game frame by frame (Janik 2020). These legally gray practices, usually tolerated by game companies but not necessarily condoned or acknowledged, may seem like cheating from an outsider perspective, but are representative of various sub-categories of runs within the community (Scully-Blaker 2014).

Most speedruns can be sorted into 100% or Any% categories. While 100% runs plot how to most efficiently collect or complete every element within a videogame, Any% runs chart the fastest way to get to the last button input required of the player, usually before the credits sequence. Tool-Assisted Speedruns (TAS) are also a common subset within speedrunning communities. These are runs performed with precision often surpassing human ability, where inputs are instead plotted out beforehand to be replayed by a bot. Initially contentious, this type of run has earned its own block at Games Done Quick (GDQ) events, where speedrunners gather to perform a marathon livestream of runs to raise money for charities, and has also contributed strategies to the improvement of what are alternately classified as real-time attack (RTA) runs, or runs performed live by a human player (Boluk & LeMieux 2017, pp. 182–183). Analysis of speedrunning has primarily focused on the unique community of practice surrounding it, events organized to represent speedrunning to a broader public, and the models it provides for archiving games and types of play that may no longer be accessible. While studying the community, its practices, and how it presents itself to a broader gaming culture is valuable for better understanding videogame fan activities as well as challenging misconceptions about the attitudes and motivations behind speedrunning and emulation communities, this approach neglects to analyze the records of performances the community grew around in their own right. Additional research has identified the ways particular speedruns create emergent narratives that diverge from and alter the narrative sequence, experience, and themes of a game's scripted elements, as well as how the combination of digital space and collective behavior

patterns of speedrunners can create new haptic and spatial "digital textures'" within a game's programmed space (McKissack & May 2020, p. 5; Janik 2020). The novel aesthetic pleasure and excitement of witnessing a compelling speedrun is what often fuels the communal fan practices and events. These performances of unconventional play also affect players' and audiences' aesthetic experience and appreciation of the videogames in question.

Videogaming in general is a practice that involves engagement with technology and specific communities and social practices. However, for those who play and watch others play, it is also an aesthetic experience. Speedrunning involves fragmenting the totality of space or narrative presented in a videogame, allowing the player to skip areas, complete levels out of order, and discover unconventional ways of moving through the game, by breaking the game into parts that can be rearranged. This paper focuses primarily on Any% runs based on the categories identified by Rainforest Scully-Blaker in his analysis of the practice (2014), because this is where the Neo-Baroque qualities associated with contemporary forms of digitally-mediated entertainment most strongly assert themselves. Visually, but also in terms of the haptic play and rules involved, Any% speedruns differ most dramatically from what is considered "standard" player experience. It is therefore important to investigate aesthetic qualities of speedruns, and what they reveal about contemporary experiences of digital space, including their potential to offer functional alternatives to "prescribed narrative scripts that can facilitate new modes of play from which emergent narratives can thrive," alongside new aesthetic experiences and values (McKissack & May 2020, p. 18). Analyzing speedruns in light of the perspective developed in Angela Ndalianis' work, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (2004), will allow more aesthetic qualities of speedruns to be defined, and supports the argument that analyzing speedruns for their aesthetic qualities usefully problematizes the idea of a videogame as a single aesthetic object.

What is speedrunning?

In general, speedrunning is concerned with finding the fastest way from the first required input of a game (such as pressing the start button) to the last (usually what triggers a closing cutscene). While playing the game more skillfully with practice is an element of speedrunning, more often greater leaps in records and discoveries of new strategies to reduce times take place at a technical level, where runners will repeat short sections over and over or investigate the game's code to discover exploitable glitches and predictable patterns behind seemingly random events or enemy behaviors. This practice not only draws on skill and experience

then, but also generates a different experience and understanding of the videogame than play oriented around simply completing the game.

Henry Lowood discusses the inherent archival properties of speedruns, beginning with the play recording capabilities of *Doom* and *Quake*. The ability to record and share gameplay over the Internet was built into these games in the form of demo files. These lightweight files were not videos, but "sequences of commands or scripts that tell the game engine what to do, essentially by repeating the effects of keyboard and mouse input in the same sequence as the player did when playing a game" (Lowood 2011, p. 115). Sharing and watching demo files led to competition between players who wanted to demonstrate their abilities, finishing levels with impressive speed or skill. As video sharing and streaming sites became more popular and easy to use, games without this feature gained communities of similar competition and experimentation. James Newman (2012) examines speedrunning's status, alongside walkthroughs, cosplay, fanart, and fanfiction, as a similarly important space of fan productivity and discourse. He notes that repeated, attentive play as well as delight in glitches and imperfections of favorite titles in a collaborative environment has led to discoveries and knowledge of version differences that game developers may not have official record of (Newman 2012, p. 131). Since these observations were made, speedrunning has grown as a fan practice, with the biannual event Games Done Quick steadily attracting larger audiences since its establishment in 2011, and a growing variety of Twitch and YouTube channels, online platforms where players can both livestream and save recordings of their gameplay, chronicling increasingly diverse games, and types of speedruns.

In addition to its communities' embrace of a game's instabilities and imperfections, which may only frustrate or confuse other players, speedrunning, while it involves high-level competition over slight improvements in run times, differs from eSport for its less toxic and competitive social setting, noted by Lucas Cook and Seth Duncan (2016, p. 177). The sharing of strats and practice of giving credit for developments in the history of a run do not make head-to-head competition a primary element of speedrunning. Events serve as a showcase of new or interesting practices in the community rather than the ultimate product of speedrunning as a whole. Runs setting a world record or even personal best are a rarity at such events because runners see this environment as a chance to demonstrate to potential future speedrunners in the audience (Obrist, Smith & White 2013, p. 132).
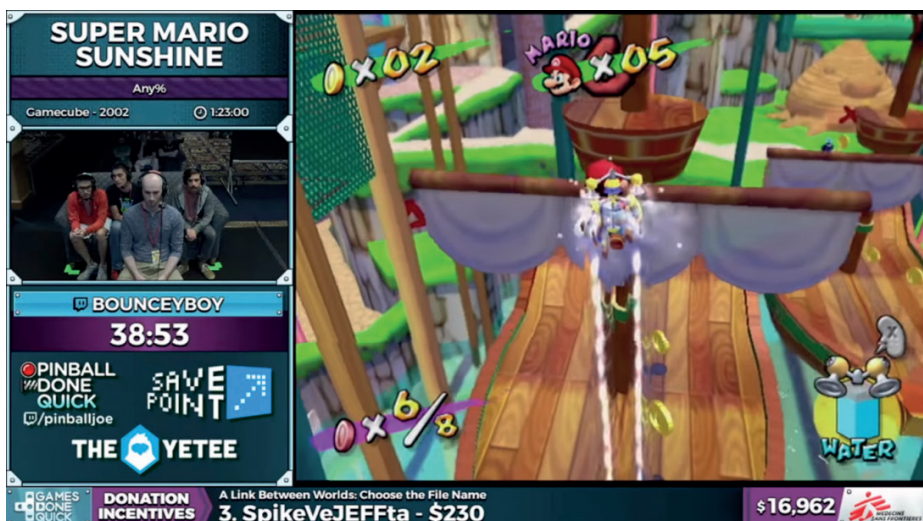
Figure 1. Screencapture of BounceyBoy playing *Super Mario Sunshine* at SGDQ 2016

At events, the runner typically explains the community's history of exploring the structure of the game in question, giving credit to community members who discovered particularly impressive "strats" or exploitable game glitches as they play. This divides the speedrunner's attention in a way that is not common to broadcasted eSport, where complete concentration on the game being played is the expected posture of competitors. The viewer's attention is similarly divided between shout-outs, commentary, charity and sponsor logos, and a ticker of upcoming events and donation totals in addition to the gameplay. Record-setting speedruns are more often perfected recordings of solitary runs to which commentary is added later, once the runner is satisfied with an iteration of the run, which may be one out of many thousands of attempts. At events, by contrast, live commentary helps viewers to appreciate and make sense of the way the speedrun strats the player performs manifest onscreen, and allows a space for expressing the speedrunner's discernment. This discernment becomes evident in how "participants often attempt 'marathon safe' strategies that balance expedience with dependable, predictable tricks and glitches," and indicates an eagerness to communicate the appeal and interest of speedrunning as a visual and experienced phenomena in an effective way, rather than simply achieving a record time (McKissack & May 2020, p. 4).

Seb Franklin (2009) focuses on TAS videos that play directly with the videogame's underlying code through these glitches as a "tactics of abandonment," allowing users to work outside of the intended usage of technology to expose and exploit the coded space. Similarly, Patrick LeMieux (2014) sees TAS as playing with the serial interface, subverting expectations of videogames by transferring the site of play to a direct

mediation between humans and circuit input/output. He studies the response of players to one of the earliest TAS videos, a run of *Super Mario Bros. 3* uploaded by a runner named Morimoto in 2003. In the run, due to automated and perfected bot inputs, Mario appears to zip through levels faster than physically possible, never missing a jump and traversing the levels with inhuman efficiency. LeMieux describes the comments as dumbfounded by this "spectacle" of both "virtuosic yet alien" play. He cites commenters who post shocked responses like "I think some things are better left alone or untold so they don't shatter peoples' hopes and dreams." Some draw on stereotypes to explain the play style, stating "teh japanese are :alien:" (LeMieux 2014, p. 14). While TAS videos are now embraced by the community rather than facing the rejection and racism Morimoto's video received in the early 2000s, the wonder at seeing a game broken beyond recognition through an intimacy with the code and the use of clever exploits is still a strong part of the aesthetic appeal of speedrunning. Exploration of these limits, leading to the discovery of new techniques and creation of new ways to play the "metagame" of speedrunning, stokes the creativity of speedrunning communities, where "there is a plasticity to speedrunning categories, which tend to multiply and transform as the metagame evolves through the community's collective research, discovery, and exploitation of new techniques for playing each game" (Boluk & LeMieux 2017, p. 44).

Based on this existing research about speedrunning communities, the outcome of speedrunning can be described as a curated performance of a specific trajectory through the game space, a trajectory that is made up of a series of collaboratively discovered player actions, and therefore, is presented to the community of peers and online and in-person audiences as a distinct product with specific deliberate aesthetic qualities as well as individual innovations, determined by communal activity in these networks. Rainforest Scully-Blaker's spatial analysis of speedruns (2014) considers some potential qualities, introducing a distinction between "finesse" and "deconstructive" runs. The finesse run roughly maps to the 100% category within the speedrunning community, where the runner simply finds the most efficient route between all goals of the game. He relates this practice within space to de Certeau's concept of the tour, which is the active navigation of a space, contrasted with the map, which works from an outside perspective (Scully-Blaker 2014). 100% tours of games respect the boundaries established by the game narrative. For example, Mario cannot walk through walls in *Super Mario 64*, and must have so many stars to access each progressive iteration of Bowser's lair. Meanwhile, deconstructive runs can be equated to the community concept of the Any% run, which allows for the use of glitches and sequence breaking to skip major sections of intended gameplay. According to Scully-Blaker's framework, these runs break down the narrative boundaries de Certeau discusses within the space of the tour with Virilio's concept of the violence of speed. This break is an example of

where the unique aesthetic qualities of speedrunning that are compelling to the community emerge, and elements of the Neo-Baroque aesthetics become most apparent.

Figure 2. Screencapture comparing the same ending cutscene depicted in a recording of a 100% run (left) and Any% run (right) of *Super Mario 64*

The Neo-Baroque

Angela Ndalianis (2004) deploys an aesthetic framework that connects emerging tendencies in contemporary entertainment media to shifts in culture that defined the historical Baroque. The Baroque period, usually defined as spanning the late 16th through 17th centuries, contrasted with the Renaissance that preceded it. While the historical Baroque manifested in visual art, architecture, literature, theatre, and music, the Neo-Baroque Ndalianis describes has manifested in media associated with contemporary entertainment, such as amusement parks, blockbuster films. and videogames. The main characteristics which connect the Neo-Baroque to the historical Baroque are the breaking of the frame, an inherent interest in dazzling the viewer, and a concern for virtuosity (Ndalianis 2004, p. 7). While Ndalianis notes videogames already fit within this aesthetic framework, because they are not strictly linear or static works, the appreciation of Any% runs in speedrunning importantly pushes the experience of a videogame further into Neo-Baroque aesthetic qualities.

Analyzing speedruns through a Neo-Baroque aesthetic framework therefore builds on existing perspectives on speedruns, which generally do not delve into their aesthetic qualities, or do so only from a player-centric perspective. This neglects to address their surrounding culture of reception which, while playing a large role in the production and performance of speedrunning, also attracts many who do not personally participate in speedrunning or even play the specific

game being performed. In this sense, it is useful to read the aesthetically engaged and discerning culture around speedrunning as a sort of "art world," the term used by H.S. Becker to describe the network of roles and activities involved not just in the production of individual artworks, but the social contexts in which the work is received, and the development of critical and aesthetic innovation that comes out of this process. Within an art world, aesthetic values are "characteristic phenomena of collective activity" where "the interaction of all the involved parties produces a shared sense of the worth of what they collectively produce" (Becker 1982, p. 39). Individual innovations that are initially controversial or rejected, such as particular Any% strategies or TAS, can be accepted as having aesthetic values through gradual incorporation into this process, which in turn changes the overall aesthetic values of the collective. Therefore, examining the aesthetic values of speedrunning communities as a process within an active and changing art world expands on the original cultural insights of Neo-Baroque aesthetics.

Ndalianis describes the emerging qualities of Neo-Baroque aesthetics by first analyzing the shift in aesthetics from the Renaissance to Baroque period. The program of the Scrovegni Chapel by Giotto (1305) offers an example of Renaissance principles in visual aesthetics. The fresco series presents the passion of the Christ, with each episode set in a discrete, geometrically proper window that recedes from the frame. The frames progress in bands around the chapel, and the viewer is expected to go from one frame to the next, stopping to view each from the viewpoint presumed by the use of perspective. Giotto's style and early use of perspectival frameworks influenced painters through the 15th and 16th centuries, who refined these techniques.

The beginning of a shift to Baroque style manifests in a work such as Caravaggio's *Seven Works of Mercy* (1607) because it presents a cluster of thematically linked episodes in a single, non-perspectival space. The space generated by the painting envelops the viewer with its rendering of harsh light and dark, where there is no clear narrative or order of events, and figures reach dynamically from the shadows. While this painting was also made for a chapel where the ideal viewer would be in a single, privileged position, it is not a series of linear narrative incidents or a list of ideas that are core to Catholic beliefs, but an overwhelming expression of many at once. Caravaggio's work also notably differs from Renaissance works for its virtuosic attention to dynamic light and shadow, as well as frequently gory, frightening, and scandalous treatments of Christian themes. The change from Renaissance to Baroque era representations of space represents, as Ndalianis argues, a move away from the rigid and hierarchical mathematical perspective and symbolic meanings that contained Renaissance work in a singular perspective, instead going outside of the frame, presenting a loss of static totality and equilibrium, replacing it with "instability, fragmentation, polydimensionality and change" (2004, p. 19).
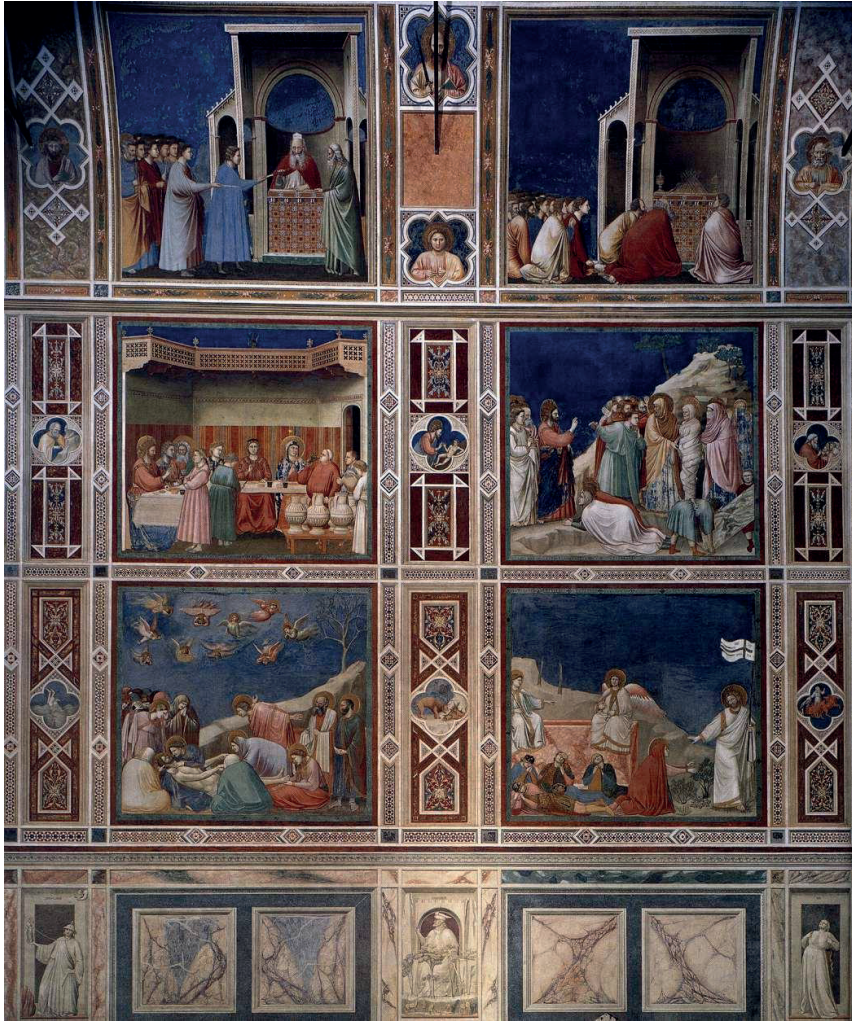
Figure 3. Giotto di Bondone, detail from the Scrovegni Chapel fresco program, 1305

Baroque illusionistic ceilings, especially Giovanni Battista Gaulli's *Triumph of the Name of Jesus* (1674), represent the height of breaking free from the architectural frame. Figures float over the established architectural settings and sculptural installation blends with illusionistic representation that invades the viewer's subjective space, not merely providing a porthole to a simulated view. Baroque ceilings emphasize indeterminacy between architecture and image, structure and representation, by bringing points where the two spill over into each other fully into the viewer's attention as they move through the space below.

Figures 4 & 5. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Seven Works of Mercy*, 1607 (left) & Giovanni Battista Gaulli, *Triumph of the Name of Jesus*, 1674 (right)

The Neo-Baroque emerges in the contemporary era from a similar shift in visual and narrative representation that is exacerbated in the 20th and 21st centuries by multimedia conglomerations and new technology. 3D movies or immersive digital environments break the frame in a more literal sense, but more often in digital games, the frame is figuratively broken through the simulation of multiple narrative compossibilities. Ndalianis cites the Baroque philosopher Gottfried Leibniz's use of the term, describing the things that can exist together without contradictions to make up a world. In the religious context of the Baroque, Leibniz uses this concept to argue that God has created the best compossible world, but within the Neo-Baroque, informed by societal shifts towards secularism and the theories of quantum mechanics and multiple universes, one compossibility is no longer privileged, and instead multiple compossibilities may coexist.

The existence of multiple compossibilities rather than one authoritative perspective already exists in digital games because the player's movement and viewpoint within the space is individualized and unlikely to be exactly replicated by another player even in casual play. Videogames are often described as different from films or literature because of this, but James Newman (2008, p. 137) argues

that "many videogames that appear to present . . . variable structures highly contingent on gamer performance and choice are, in fact, structured in such a way that the completion of specific sequences in a prescribed order is essential for progress to continue." He goes on to note that subverting these requirements through glitches and sequence breaking "reveals much about the pleasures of gameplay as an exploratory activity," expanding the nonlinear possibilities of the games speedrunners deconstruct (p. 140).

Videogame aesthetics and speedrunning aesthetics

Simon Niedenthal (2009, pp. 2–3) notes that there are three core meanings of "aesthetics" in relation to videogames. First, similarly to other forms of media, the aesthetics of a videogame include the sensory phenomena the player encounters. This includes visual information and sound, but also haptic sensations of play and sense of space, as well as the rhythms of play. Videogame aesthetics can also include what videogames have in common with other aesthetic forms, allowing for generalizations or comparisons, and a third type of aesthetic experience derived from the game, which can be based on sociability or emotions that are part of the experience of play. Speedrunning affects these aesthetics in multiple ways, often breaking with normative visuals, depictions of space, gameplay rhythms, community practices and emotional responses expected from videogames, and creating specific networks for the production and appreciation of these aesthetic experiences, and so the aesthetics of speedrunning should be analyzed in their own right.

The speedruns produced by the exploratory activity of the speedrunning community reveal an extension and expansion of the Neo-Baroque qualities found in games, and challenge typical and desirable aesthetic traits of videogames. Digital games generally remain conservative in how they depict space. They typically resort to existing perspectival approaches that simulate, sometimes within the programming itself, a single, unitary visual framework, based on techniques using mathematical and geometrical relationships codified during the Italian Renaissance (Arsenault & Larochelle 2013, p. 2). Further, Michael Nitsche (2008, p. 50) notes that the player's movement through game space, both audiovisual and defined by systems, creates the meaning the player gleans from the game. Rather than being determined in the videogame's rules or visually mediated space at the level of environment design, the cognitive connections that give a game its plot and meaningfulness happen in the space as intuitively understood by the player, or what the player describes as the "fictional space."

Nitsche specifically notes that play which goes along with the videogame's intended design and nonconformist play both infuse the space with meaning

(2008, p. 50). Speedrunning frequently skips narrated portions of gameplay, where meaning is explicitly given to the character and events progress in a designed sequence, leading to the generation of an entirely different meaning within the game space for player and audience. The movement of the player through this space defines their aesthetic experience. The violent frame-breaking of unconventional play, such as Any% speedrunning, foregrounds issues traditional approaches to aesthetics face when applied to videogames. A videogame is not a single aesthetic object but a system allowing for a multiplicity of aesthetic experiences, some of which can be vastly different from one another.

In addition to providing the illusion of a window into a space represented by the 2D screen, the simulation of a sensible, if not entirely realistic, world that feels logical and predictable is the frame containing most videogames, and it is procedural, visual, and narrative. Speedruns, especially Tool-Assisted and Any% runs, do not maintain the typical illusion of a coherent space and set of rules for the player to act in. Speedrunning that utilizes sequence breaking, unconventional movement strats, and glitches breaks the frame of the videogame form in a similar way.

Once these framing devices are broken, the illusion of the digital game as a designed, singular whole fragments, and its reality as a set of assets controlled by code, with no inherent representational meaning except by their relation to each other, assembled by the player, becomes apparent. In this case, the game becomes, in Ndalianis' words, a "bewildering excess of symbolic material, image liberated from storytelling function" (2004, p. 221). Narrative and space, both intimately connected in gaming, as Julian Kücklich (2007) argues, are influenced by exploits, such as sequence breaks and clipping, "stripping the game space of its representational qualities" and "revealing its functional architecture" (p. 120).

The breaking of the frame is vividly demonstrated in Torje's (as of June 12, 2016) record-breaking Any% run of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. Assets and code are broken free from the narrative and implicit rules of the game when he uses a major sequence break to teleport to the final tower level. The run ends when he lands the final blow to Ganon as Young Link in an area typically only accessible by Link's adult form. He also saves even more time during the tower escape sequence by clipping into out of bounds areas, a common speedrunning strat which typically "means moving through empty spaces, falling into black abysses or existing just outside the populated map space," in ways which allow digital space and game time to be witnessed separately from intended player movement or narrative linkages (McKissack & May 2020, p. 8). In a single area of the game, this run not only disconnects game assets from narrative function and content, but also defies the perceived function of walls, revealing them as only a suggestion, in some cases, according to the underlying code. Seeing Link clip through apparently solid surfaces and float through out-of-bounds space has

visual similarities to glitch art, and the runner and audiences' aesthetic response based on skillful, subversive uses of technology can also be closely related to the use of glitches in such artworks.

When a viewer or user notices and critically engages with a glitch, it "reveals both the material foundations and processes of digital media," according to Michael Betancourt (2014). However, glitches are just as likely to be "tuned out" by the average viewer. Glitches like those harnessed to create the effects in glitch art, and the ones used by speedrunners to skip areas or go out of bounds, are not a technical failure as commonly assumed, but simply technology acting in a way that is interpreted as functioning incorrectly by the audience in relation to its normative function. These glitches necessarily have to be repeatable, and hence are an existing part of the game code that simply does not maintain the implicit rules or structure within the simulated game space. Therefore, runners investigate the technological form of digital media, and draw attention to the windows into this form glitches produce through sharing strats and delivering oral histories and commentary on these discoveries during runs.
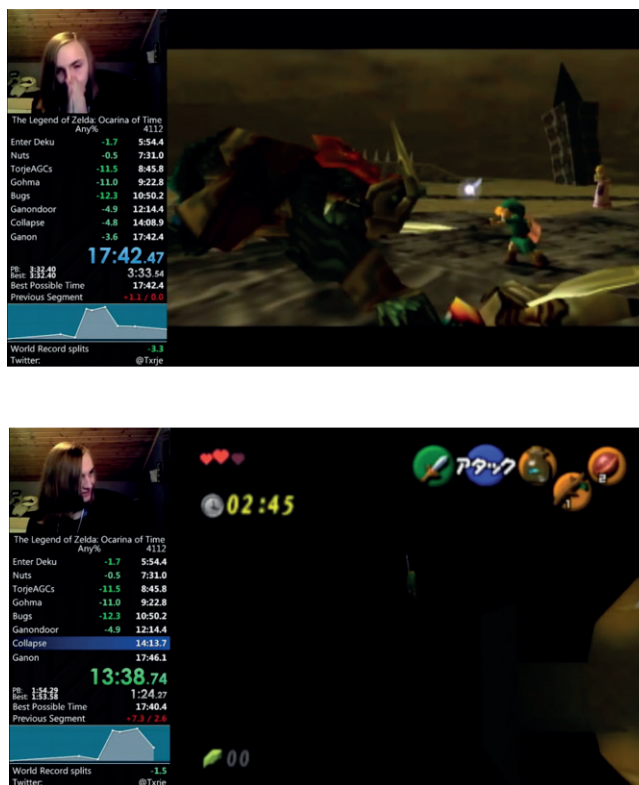

Figure 6. Screencapture of Torje defeating Ganon as Young Link (top) and going out of bounds (bottom) in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*

Ndalianis (2004, p. 126) references savvy users of the PC game *Phantasmagoria* who go directly to the game's files to access cinematics and graphics in any order as one way of playing with the polydimensional and reconfigurable nature of digital games offered by their technological form. This allows players to separate the visual spectacle from the rules and narrative of the game, if they know how to play with the underlying technological structure. This form of play is not referenced within the videogame itself, which encourages a certain style of normative play, and must be uncovered with technical knowledge and experimentation. Reconfigurations allowed by the multiple expected and unexpected paths available through a game open up new aesthetic possibilities, through what may be considered "nonsensical" or "bad" gameplay, or not gameplay at all. Ndalianis' existing analysis of unusual types of play predates the visibility speedrunning currently has in the gaming community, but still demonstrates how speedrunning techniques can reconfigure the fundamental aesthetic experience of the game and the simulated space.

Conclusion

Speedrunning practices that involve glitches, exploits, and sequence breaks give the player a toolbox of fragments from which to construct a new aesthetic experience, which they can then perform in real time. This experience divorces almost completely from the videogame as marketed to or discussed by non-speedrunners, but within the gaming community it has become an alternate but equally significant aesthetic experience for the runners and thousands of spectators who demonstrate knowledge sharing, discernment, and appreciation about particularly entertaining, elegant, or humorous runs. These art world participants are oriented around finding increasingly obscure and impressive ways to shave seconds off existing world records, setting the rules and developing aesthetic values for new runs and categories, while also responding to new or transgressive experimentation in this area.

Often players use these new tools to collaboratively manipulate and rearrange fragments to perfect a sequence of maneuvers that finishes the game in record time; however, there are also growing communities built around using the fewest button presses to clear levels, or to stretch the limits of the reconfiguration possibilities afforded by glitches. Lord Tom's TAS video of *Super Mario Bros. 3*, for example, is less about completing the game and more about incorporating strange and humorous reconfigurations of graphics and code through "frame perfect" inputs (inputs that only have the desired effect within a game during a single frame of gameplay or a similarly short window outside of human reaction times, therefore requiring a bot) for the sake of entertainment, as well as showcasing deep technical understanding and virtuosity. By using arbitrary code execution glitches which

allow for changes in the code of the game itself, Lord Tom's TAS run results in visuals that appear nonfunctional, incorrect, and inexplicable within the expected Mario universe, causing items and abilities to respond in seemingly random or humorous ways. The run also changes the text in iconic scenes, such as when Mario finds Princess Peach at the end of the game, replacing the usual dialogue with graffiti-like self-referential humor, similar to the experiences created by the *Phantasmagoria* players who use the reconfigurable nature of the game file structure to create humorously "bad" gameplay or absurd scenarios in contrast to the horror narrative of the game's scripted sequences.
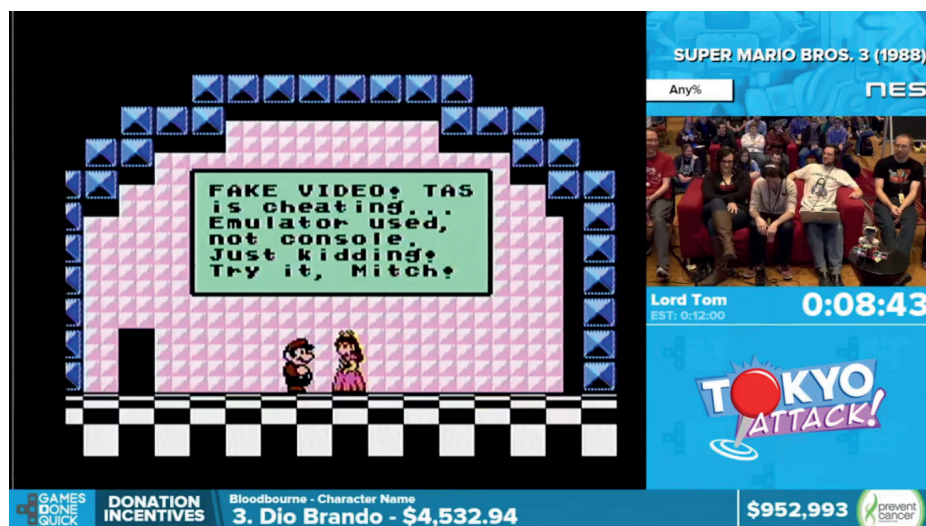

Figure 7. Screencapture of LordTom's Tool-Assisted Speedrun of *Super Mario Bros. 3* at AGDQ 2016.

Because it is reliant on an existing videogame, already seen as the object of most academic investigations into videogames, the speedrun itself, as well as the reception and appreciation of speedruns, are often considered relevant only in relation to other perspectives on gaming culture, such as the study of fan communities or videogame conservation. However, speedruns are worth attention for their own sake as well, because of their relation to contemporary digital aesthetics, and what the practice can reveal about our shifting aesthetic experiences in an increasingly digital age. Analyzed alongside the maximalist aesthetics, rupturing or combination of standard framing devices, and nonlinear narratives that indicate the return of Baroque ideas in other media, such as film, speedrunning emphasizes videogames' connection to larger Neo-Baroque aesthetic trends in contemporary art and entertainment, while also pushing beyond, heightening,

and revealing the structures behind these traits, experimenting and recombining them in new ways. For this reason, in addition to a rigorous close reading of a game, as well as a productive fan practice, speedrunning is valuable as a rich creative and aesthetic experience even outside of these contexts, for both player and viewer. Speedrunning demonstrates an intimate engagement with glitch aesthetics, delighting in recording instances of a videogame's unexpected behavior. Speedrunners also use these glitches as tools to move through digital space in new and unforeseen ways, and audiences seek them out, to more fully realize and appreciate videogames as polydimensional and reconfigurable expressions of the Neo-Baroque aesthetic.

Bibliography

Arsenault, D., & Larochelle, A. (2013). From Euclidean Space to Albertian Gaze: Traditions of Visual Representation in Games Beyond the Surface. *Proceedings of DiGRA* (*DeFragging Game Studies*). http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_242.pdf (accessed on August 29, 2022).

Becker, H.S. (1982). *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Betancourt, M. (2014). Critical Glitches and Glitch Art. *Hz Journal*, *19*. http://www.hz-journal.org/n19/betancourt.html (accessed on August 29, 2022).

Boluk, S., & Lemieux, P. (2017). *Metagaming*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press.

Cook, L., & Duncan, S. (2016). "Any% No Sketch Glitch": Speedrunning Final Fantasy VI and Expanding "Well Played." *Well Played*, *5*(2), 173–188.

Franklin, S. (2009). On Game Art, Circuit Bending and Speedrunning as Counter-Practice: "Hard" and "Soft" Nonexistence. *CTheory, Resetting Theory* (1). https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/download/14760/5632 (accessed on August 29, 2022).

Janik, J. (2020). Negotiating Textures of Digital Play: Gameplay and the Production of Space. *Game Studies*, *20*(4).

Kücklich, J. (2007). Wallhacks and Aimbots: How Cheating Changes the Perception of Gamespace. In F. von Borries, S.P. Walz, & M. Bottger, (eds.), *Space Time Play: Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism – the Next Level* (pp. 118–121). Basel: Birkhauser Verlag AG.

LeMieux, P. (2014). From NES-4021 to moSMB3.wmv: Speedrunning the Serial Interface. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, *8*(1), 7–31.

Lowood, H. (2011). Perfect Capture: Three Takes on Replay, Machinima and the History of Virtual Worlds. *Journal of Visual Culture*, *10*(1), 113–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412910391578

McKissack, F., & May, L. (2020). Running With the Dead: Speedruns and Generative Rupture in Left 4 Dead 1 and 2. *Games and Culture, 15*(5), 544–564. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018821528

Ndalianis, A. (2005). *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Newman, J. (2008). *Playing with Videogames*. New York: Routledge.

Newman, J. (2012). *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*. New York: Routledge.

Niedenthal, S. (2009). What We Talk about When We Talk about Game Aesthetics. *Proceedings of DiGRA* (*Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*). http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.17350.pdf (accessed on August 29, 2022).

Nitsche, M. (2009). *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Scully-Blaker, R. (2014). A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space With de Certeau and Virilio. *Game Studies*, *14*(1).

Smith, T., Obrist, M., & Wright, P. (2013). Live-Streaming Changes the (Video) Game (pp. 131–138). https://doi.org/10.1145/2465958.2465971

Torje (n.d.). *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time Any% speedrun in 17:42 by Torje [Former World Record]*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YdcgFe74RE (accessed on August 29, 2022).

Emilie Reed – is a curator, researcher, and writer who received her PhD from Abertay University for a dissertation which combined art history and new media perspectives with game studies to better present videogames in arts contexts. Her writing has appeared in *ToDiGRA*, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, and the edited volume *Indie Games in the Digital Age*, as well as gaming press sites like EGM and Rock Paper Shotgun.

Filip Jankowski*

O gropowiastkach

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł proponuje wprowadzenie nowej kategorii opisującej część gier cyfrowych – „gropowiastek" – na podobieństwo literackich powiastek filozoficznych. Za punkt wyjścia autor przyjmuje zaproponowane przez Tomasza Z. Majkowskiego określenie „gropowieści", odnoszące się przeważnie do gier bogatych znaczeniowo i pozostawiających graczowi spory margines swobody. W przeciwieństwie do gropowieści, w gropowiastkach z góry ustalona jest kolejność zarówno pokonywania wyzwań, jak i toku opowiadania; wizja świata – zgodna z założoną przez twórców tezą. W pojęciu gropowiastek można zawrzeć przykładowo gry przygodowe, autobiograficzne, dziennikarskie i „symulatory chodzenia". Tak więc proponowane pojęcie pozwoliłoby zakwestionować sztywny podział oprogramowania ludycznego na „gry" i „nie-gry" oraz łatwiej włączyć je w dyskurs artystyczny.

Słowa kluczowe: gry wideo, gropowiastki, gropowieści, nie-gry, gry przygodowe

Wprowadzenie

Gry przygodowe, interaktywne fikcje, symulatory chodzenia (*walking simulators*), nie-gry (*non-games*)… Na przestrzeni lat powstało sporo nazw dla programów komputerowych, które wymykają się łatwej kategoryzacji jako gry cyfrowe. Do tego stopnia, że część badaczy usiłowała usunąć wspomniane gatunki z orbity zainteresowań groznawstwa, jak to czyni chociażby Veli-Matti Karhulahti. Według Karhulahtiego, przykładowo, gry przygodowe nie są grami, ponieważ z trójcy wyzwań stawianych użytkownikom gier (łamigłówek, wyzwań strategicznych

* Uniwersytet Jagielloński, e-mail: filip.jankowski@doctoral.uj.edu.pl

oras kinestetycznych) oferują tylko te pierwsze (Karhulahti 2014, s. 10). Podobnie Karhulahti odnosi się do pozbawionej wszelkich tych wyzwań kategorii nie-gier (*non-games*), uznając „growość" wyłącznie za wypadkową ewaluacji wydajności gracza (Karhulahti 2015). Podobnie niefortunną retorykę przyjmuje Olaf Szewczyk (2013), proponując zastąpić termin *non-games* neologizmem „inwid" (interaktywne wideo). Niefortunnie, ponieważ jak zauważa Espen Aarseth, interaktywność w kontekście wszelkich programów komputerowych – z reguły zakładających współudział odbiorcy – jest pleonazmem (Aarseth 2014, s. 59).

Termin „gropowiastka", który przedstawiam w tym artykule, pozwala precyzyjniej opisać wybraną grupę gier cyfrowych. Moją intencją nie jest obalanie istniejących nazw gatunków ludycznych takich jak „gry przygodowe", ale propozycja opisania kategorii funkcjonalnej, która pozwoliłaby uniknąć binarnych podziałów „gra – nie-gra", często pojawiających się przy okazji licznych programów komputerowych, na przykład:

- gier przygodowych, utworów „napędzanych historią, które zachęcają do eksploracji i rozwiązywania zagadek oraz zawsze mają przynajmniej jedną postać gracza" (Fernández-Vara 2011, s. 133);
- symulatorów chodzenia, w których nawigacja po środowisku stanowi kluczowy element i które są pozbawione potencjalnie frustrujących wyzwań typowych dla innych gatunków gier, w tym przygodowych (Reed, Murray, Salter 2020, s. 117);
- gier autobiograficznych, których twórcy „za pomocą algorytmów starają się odwzorować osobiste doświadczenia, takie jak miłość, choroba czy poszukiwanie tożsamości, oraz relacje rodzinne" (Bakun 2019, s. 9); w użyciu jest też termin *personal games* (Król 2018, s. 153);
- gier dziennikarskich (*newsgames*), w których głośne wydarzenia i wrażliwe tematy zostają przedstawione w formie zachęcającej użytkownika do przyswojenia opinii twórców lub wyrobienia własnego poglądu na temat danych wydarzeń (Gómez-García, de la Hera Conde-Pumpido 2022, s. 17).

Przytoczone przeze mnie, przykładowe gatunki gier łączy jedna cecha: niszowość czy wręcz queerowe doświadczenie porażki. Owo doświadczenie polega na zakwestionowaniu konwencjonalnie rozumianego sukcesu jako ostatecznego celu gry (zob. Kozyra 2019, s. 188–189), nie było więc akceptowane przez reakcyjnych graczy. Reed, Murray i Salter (2020, s. 11–17) zauważają przykładowo, że gry przygodowe były i są tworzone o społecznych *outsiderach*, a zarazem – przeznaczone dla *outsiderów*. Ten gatunek stracił przejściowo swą renomę pod koniec lat 90., kiedy gry cyfrowe stały się ogólnie zmaskulinizowanym medium, podczas gdy wśród odbiorców gier przygodowych znajdowały się przeważnie kobiety i dziewczęta, stopniowo wykluczane ze społeczności graczy (Reed, Murray, Salter 2020, s. 117). Z kolei nazwa „symulator chodzenia" jest używana pejoratywnie wśród męskiej

społeczności graczy (Ruberg 2020, s. 637), zwłaszcza, że ów gatunek utożsamiany jest ze stereotypowo kobiecym uczuciem znużenia oraz błąkaniną, przywodzącą na myśl również „kobiecy" flâneuryzm w galeriach handlowych (zob. Kagen 2017, s. 278–285; Pelurson 2019, s. 921–923). Również grom autobiograficznym, często ze względu na ograniczenia techniczne tworzonym z użyciem oszczędnych konwencji estetycznych takich jak *pixel art* i *low poly* (Król 2018, s. 153, 156), w deprecjonującym stylu odmawia się statusu gier. Przykład stanowi argumentacja projektanta Rapha Kostera, że jedna z najsłynniejszych gier autobiograficznych, *Dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012), równie dobrze mogłaby powstać w PowerPoincie (cyt. za: Juul 2019, s. 221). Nawet gry dziennikarskie, jak przyznał współautor terminu Ian Bogost, stały się z upływem czasu gatunkiem niszowym, wręcz marginalnym (Bogost 2020, s. 575), spotykając się jednocześnie z nieufnością części graczy. Przykładowo, *The Uber Game* (Financial Times 2017), gra dziennikarska o dylematach taksówkarzy współpracujących z międzynarodową korporacją, oparta wyłącznie na podejmowaniu wyborów poprzez klikanie, spotkała się z mieszanym odbiorem wśród społeczności Reddita. Do tego stopnia, że była klasyfikowana pejoratywnie – choć bez szczególnego uzasadnienia – jako symulator chodzenia lub też kwestionowano jej status jako gry (Cabales 2019).

Termin „gropowiastka", który może odnosić się do gier przynależących do wspomnianych gatunków, jest kontrpropozycją dla pojęcia gier perswazyjnych Bogosta (2007), które przylgnęło w istocie głównie do gier określanych później mianem dziennikarskich. Teresa de la Hera Conde-Pumpido (2017) dowodzi, że perswazyjność zawsze jest wpisana w gry cyfrowe, tyle że może przybrać wielorakie strategie: językową, dźwiękową, wizualną, haptyczną, proceduralną, narracyjną i kinematograficzną (s. 32). Z podobnych względów odrzucam kategorię gier artystycznych (*art games*) oraz nie-gier (*not-games*). Wprawdzie powstały one z myślą o uwzględnieniu nieoczywistych przykładów artystycznej ekspresji za pośrednictwem nowego medium, ale – jak słusznie zauważa Felan Parker (2013) – tylko umacniają redukcyjne przekonanie, że gry cyfrowe w swej istocie nie są sztuką i pozostają dziecinną rozrywką. Wiele gier określanych mianem artystycznych, jak na przykład wspomniana *Dys4ia* oraz *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016), stanowi w istocie autobiograficzne gropowiastki.

Długo istniało ogólnie przyjęte przekonanie, że gry cyfrowe muszą z reguły dostarczać rozrywki (zob. Tavinor 2008); ale czy z tego powodu należy współcześnie odrzucać programy pokroju *September 12th* (Frasca 2002) oraz *Depression Quest* (The Quinnspiracy 2013), które bynajmniej nie dostarczają przyjemnych doznań? Wszak *September 12th*, który Gonzalo Frasca sam określał mianem nie-gry, traktujący o ubocznych skutkach wojny z terroryzmem, posługuje się wciąż systemami formalnymi zapożyczonymi z konkretnych gatunków (przede wszystkim imitacją estetyki *shooterów*). *Depression Quest* z kolei porusza problematykę zaburzeń

depresyjnych, która nie ma potencjału rozrywkowego; gra jednak wciąż zakłada udział użytkownika, podsuwając mu i ograniczając na przemian opcje, umożliwiające podjęcie walki z chorobą. Właśnie w tych przykładowych programach manifestuje się obecność gropowiastek, które należałoby odróżnić od kategorii gropowieści oraz gier „czystych".

Gropowieść, gropowiastka a gra „czysta"

Tomasz Z. Majkowski (2019, s. 21–22) słusznie zauważa, że Karhulahti, oraz badacze zajmujący podobne doń stanowisko, próbują wiktymizować gry skupione na narracji w imię walki z narracyjnością oraz formalistycznych zapędów do definiowania „growości" (zob. np. Aarseth 2001; Eskelinen 2001; Frasca 1999; Juul 2001, 2010; Karhulahti 2014). Tymczasem gry cyfrowe, zwłaszcza współczesne piszącemu te słowa, często łączą w sobie elementy ludyczne i literackie (Mukherjee 2015).

Majkowski proponuje inny termin, lepiej ujmujący istotę współczesnych tytułów ludonarracyjnych: **gropowieść**. Inspirując się koncepcją światoodczucia karnawałowego Michaiła Bachtina, badacz definiuje gropowieść jako „odmianę gry cyfrowej, w której manifestuje się impuls powieściowy" (Majkowski 2019, s. 49). Gropowieść przedstawia różnorodny, otwarty świat, w którego centrum znajduje się człowiek – zmuszony do wchodzenia w relacje z tym światem oraz zajęcia stanowiska wobec różnych idei reprezentowanych przez pozostałe postacie (s. 49). Gropowieść stawia użytkownika przed moralnymi wyborami, mierząc go jednocześnie z ich skutkami (s. 56), ale też pozostawia odbiorcy spory margines swobody poruszania się po wirtualnym świecie oraz możliwość różnorodnego pokonywania przeszkód (s. 102). Wśród przykładów gropowieści Majkowski wyróżnia między innymi *Wiedźmina 3* (CD Projekt RED 2015) oraz *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal 2010).

Propozycja Majkowskiego niewątpliwie wypełnia lukę w badaniach nad wielogatunkowymi grami z otwartym światem, które wymykają się zarówno klasyfikacji do gier przygodowych, jak i umieszczeniu w formalnych regułach innych gatunków ludycznych. Moim zdaniem jednak wciąż pozostaje luka w nazewnictwie. Istnieją bowiem gry, które narzucają kolejność zarówno pokonywania wyzwań, jak i toku opowiadania, co sprzyja pewnej przewidzianej przez twórców tezie filozoficznej lub moralistycznej. Takie gry nazywam **gropowiastkami**.

Pojęcie gropowiastki zapożyczam od powiastki, a więc gatunku literackiego mającego korzenie osiemnastowieczne, cechującego się „schematyzmem konstrukcji (marionetkowe postacie, epizodyczność), ironiczno-parodystycznym przedstawieniem fabuły […], mającym ujawnić jej właściwą funkcję – przekazanie treści moralistycznych i światopoglądowych" („Powiastka filozoficzna" 2021). Przykładem tak rozumianej cyfrowej powiastki filozoficznej – być może nieoczywistym – jest

The Secret of Monkey Island (LucasArts 1991). Wyróżnia się ona nie tylko skonwencjonalizowaną formą (podporządkowanie fabuły przeszkodom w postaci łamigłówek), ale również humorystyczną, pełną absurdów treścią służącą libertariańskiej pochwale rozumu (Giappone 2015; Kriss 2015). Główna treść moralistyczna *The Secret of Monkey Island* opiera się na przekonaniu, że wrogów można pokonać przede wszystkim za pomocą dowcipu, nie zaś bezpośredniej przemocy, czego dowodem jest słynny element gry oparty na szermierce słownej, czyli wyrafinowanym obrażaniu przeciwnika (Natunen 2010, s. 24–25). To właśnie pean na cześć rozumu był immanentną cechą literackich powiastek filozoficznych takich jak *Kandyd* (Voltaire 2021/1759) oraz *Kubuś fatalista i jego pan* (Diderot 2021/1796).

Gropowiastki, choć zwykle umożliwiają ograniczoną eksplorację przestrzeni, narzucają zarówno sposób posuwania ich akcji do przodu, jak i idee oraz morały, które przekazują. Dlatego odczytywanie ich znaczeń przywodzi na myśl uruchamianie procesu, który Ian Bogost nazywa retoryką proceduralną: „Retoryka proceduralna jest ogólną nazwą na praktykę komunikacji sensów poprzez procesy. [...] Argumenty są tworzone nie poprzez konstrukcję słów lub obrazów, ale poprzez tworzenie reguł zachowań, tworzenie dynamicznych modeli" (2007, s. 28–29; tłum. za: Petrowicz 2014, s. 88). Jak zwięźle opisuje metodę Bogosta Piotr Sterczewski, retoryka proceduralna umożliwia „analizę znaczeń gry, które powstają ze splotu jej zabiegów mechanicznych oraz warstwy estetycznej (tekstowej, wizualnej itp.)" (Sterczewski 2013, s. 25). Podczas gdy mistrzowie literackiej powiastki filozoficznej, Wolter i Denis Diderot, uciekali się w swoich utworach do retoryki werbalnej (zob. Beeson, Cronk 2009, s. 61; Skrzypek 1982, s. 31), mistrzowie gropowiastek formułują idee i morały za pomocą procesów wbudowanych w oprogramowanie.

Czym jednak z kolei odróżniają się gropowiastki od gier „czystych"? Odpowiedzi może dostarczyć przykładowo narracyjna teoria gier Espena Aarsetha (2012, s. 132). Badacz definiuje grę „czystą" (*pure game*), posługując się przykładem powszechnie znanej produkcji *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011). Gry „czyste" mogą zawierać otwarty świat, jak na przykład *Minecraft*; nie są jednak gropowieściami ani gropowiastkami, ponieważ nie zawierają żadnej linii fabularnej. W *Minecrafcie* cele stawia sobie sam gracz, któremu również twórcy pozostawili inicjatywę światotwórczą (wytwarzanie przedmiotów, stawianie budowli, obronę przed pozbawionymi osobowości botami). Podobną mechaniką cechowałaby się na przykład gra *Flow* (Thatgamecompany 2007), która nie stawia konkretnego celu i całościowo opiera się na pożeraniu innych morskich osobników.

Tak więc gropowiastki, inaczej niż gropowieści (narracyjnie polifoniczne, umożliwiające w miarę swobodne kształtowanie świata przedstawianego) oraz gry „czyste" (pozbawione wewnątrzgrowej narracji, a więc też odautorskiej retoryki proceduralnej) narzucają graczowi określone wyobrażenie świata i zasady roz-

grywki, przyjęte przez twórców. Świadomość tej różnicy – mimo braku odpowiedniego pojęcia – ma Majkowski, opisując *The Secret of Monkey Island* oraz sytuację, w której musiał „na ślepo odgadnąć, czego wymagają ode mnie Ron Gilbert, Tim Schafer i Dave Grossman", figurujący jako autorzy gry (Majkowski 2019, s. 99). Tyle że gropowiastka nie kończy się wcale na grach takich jak wspomniana produkcja LucasArts. Perswazyjność gropowiastek ma wszak tradycję sięgającą poza krąg transpacyficzny (Japonia – USA).

Przykłady gropowiastek

Weźmy za przykład grę *Paranoïak* (Froggy Software 1984), zrealizowaną przez francuskiego programistę Jeana-Louisa Le Bretona. W *Paranoïaku* gracz jest wrzucony w rolę bezrobotnego mężczyzny zmagającego się z szeregiem lęków i kompleksów. Gra nie stroni od łamigłówek, które podobnie jak w *Monkey Island* są trudne do rozszyfrowania, tym bardziej, że w dziele Le Bretona można posługiwać się wyłącznie poleceniami tekstowymi wpisanymi w parser[1]. Również ubogi tekstualny opis miejsc akcji może wprawić w dezorientację. Tyle, że owa strategia dezorientacji doskonale wpisuje się w przesłanie gry, która po wpisaniu komendy „pomoc" zwraca odpowiedź: „Radź sobie całkiem sam". *Paranoïak* w istocie jest gropowiastką egzystencjalną, po której świecie można swobodnie się poruszać i w której kolejność rozwiązywania wyzwań jest dowolna, lecz która zostawia odbiorcę bez jakiejkolwiek pomocy. Wskazówki udzielane przez pełnego szarlatanerii psychoanalityka imieniem Sigmund Fraude (aluzja do Freuda, ale też „oszustwo" w języku francuskim), pozbawiają gracza zebranych funduszy i jedynie zachęcają do własnoręcznych poszukiwań. Tak więc postulowane przez Jeana-Paula Sartre'a hasło praktykowania „psychoanalizy egzystencjalnej", która skłania do wzięcia pełnej odpowiedzialności za własne życie, zamiast trzymania się własnych lęków (Sartre 2007, s. 704–705), staje się *credo* gropowiastki Le Bretona.

Innym przykładem dowodzącym, że gropowiastki wciąż istnieją i mają się dobrze także w XXI wieku, byłby „dziennikarski" utwór *When Rivers Were Trails* (Indian Land Tenure Foundation & LaPensée 2019). Gropowiastka metyskiej projektantki Elizabeth LaPensée była zamierzona jako polemika z imperialną rekonstrukcją podboju Dzikiego Zachodu przez europejskich osadników w *The Oregon Trail* (MECC 1985). W grze LaPensée gracz wciela się w rolę zgoła odwrotną, obejmując kontrolę nad wybranym przedstawicielem północnoamerykańskiego narodu Anishinaabe, zmuszonym do przesiedlenia przez europejskich osadników na przełomie XIX i XX wieku. *When Rivers Were Trails* jest pozbawiona zagadek i łamigłówek, przybiera wręcz formę uproszczonej gry planszowej. Celem tej gro-

---

[1] Parser to komponent programu, który analizuje i przetwarza treść poleceń wpisanych za pomocą klawiatury (Montfort 2005, s. ix).

powiastki jest doprowadzenie awatara do Zachodniego Wybrzeża USA, co przy skąpych początkowych zapasach żywności okazuje się niemożliwe bez wsparcia ze strony przedstawicieli innych „pierwszych narodów" Ameryki Północnej. Możliwości dokonywania wyborów podczas dialogu z innymi postaciami są ograniczone i próbują wywołać u gracza empatię wobec innych narodów poddawanych podówczas eksterminacji przez europejskich osadników. Co więcej, wielokrotnie właściwą rozgrywkę przerywają stylizowane na kino nieme napisy, które ukazują szersze tło ludobójstwa narodów Ameryki Północnej. Wśród nich znajdują się informacje o niesławnych internatach (*residential schools*) dla dzieci w Kanadzie i USA, gdzie odbywała się przymusowa i przemocowa asymilacja wychowanków (Churchill 2004, s. 29–44), a także masowych przesiedleniach do rezerwatów na mocy Indian Removal Act z 1837 roku (Churchill, Morris 1992, s. 13–14).

Spośród gropowiastek z kręgu symulatorów chodzenia można wymienić na przykład *Event[0]* (Ocelot Society 2017). Mechanika gry opiera się na przemierzaniu opuszczonej stacji kosmicznej oraz stałej konwersacji tekstowej (za pomocą terminali) z komputerem, który kontroluje stację. Zależnie od tonu zapytań i wypowiedzi gracza, komputer zmienia swoje nastawienie do awatara, co ma wpływ na zakończenie gry. Mimo to, zanim gracz odkryje tajemnicę stojącą za niewyjaśnionym zniknięciem załogi stacji, jego awatar musi przejść przez korytarz pełen cytatów z książek Georga Wilhelma Friedricha Hegla. Odsłaniając swoje inspiracje, twórcy *Event[0]* za pośrednictwem Heglowskiej dialektyki pana i poddanego, odwrócili hierarchię człowiek-komputer, skłaniając graczy do przyjęcia w dyskusji ze sztuczną inteligencją nastawienia na partnerstwo, nie zaś władczość (Jankowski 2020, s. 129–130).

Najbardziej ikonicznym przykładem autobiograficznej gropowiastki byłaby z kolei wspomniana wcześniej *Dys4ia*. Posługując się konwencją gier „czystych" (rozumianych za Aarsethem) z lat 70. i 80. XX wieku, w tym *Tetrisa* (Pażytnow 1984), Anna Anthropy opowiedziała w istocie o swoich osobistych doświadczeniach związanych z operacją korekty płci. Osiągnęła swój cel, wplatając odautorskie komentarze w minigry ilustrujące owe doświadczenia, np. niemożność dopasowania siebie do poziomo ułożonych kwadratowych bloków, co jest zarówno aluzją do *Tetrisa*, jak i własnych przeżyć jako osoby nieheteronormatywnej (Strużyna 2014, s. 191). *Dys4ia* ma nie tylko potencjał ekspresywny (jako akt autobiografii), ale również perswazyjny, gdyż ma moc przekonywania odbiorców do zrozumienia dylematów, z jakimi mierzą się osoby transpłciowe.

Podsumowanie

Proponowane pojęcie gropowiastki odnosi się do kategorii gier cyfrowych, w których z góry ustalona jest kolejność zarówno pokonywania wyzwań, jak i toku opowiadania. Gropowiastki narzucają graczowi sprecyzowaną wizję świata oraz zasady rozgrywki, które założyli twórcy. Prezentowana tu kategoria pozwoliłaby ukrócić zwyczajowy spór wobec „przypadków granicznych", których twórcy wstydzą się używania terminu „gra" wobec własnego oprogramowania i traktują gry cyfrowe jako dziedzinę działalności nieartystycznej, jak w przypadku belgijskiego studia Tale of Tales (Pratt 2010). Co za tym idzie, pozwoliłaby śmielej włączyć przykładowo gry przygodowe, autobiograficzne, dziennikarskie i symulatory chodzenia w dyskurs artystyczny, bez zamykania ich w getcie nie-gier, jak chce np. Karhulahti.

Filip Jankowski

About game-satires

A b s t r a c t

This paper proposes introducing a new category to describe certain digital games – "game-satire" (*gropowiastka*) – similar to literary philosophical satires. The author takes as his point of departure the term "game-story" (*gropowieść*) proposed by Tomasz Z. Majkowski, which usually refers to games that are rich in meaning and leave the player with a large margin of freedom. In contrast to the game-stories, the game-satires impose both the order of overcoming challenges and a particular flow of narration; the vision of the gameworld suits the thesis assumed by the creators. The term "game-satires" can include, for example, adventure games, autobiographical games, newsgames and "walking simulators." The proposed concept would make it possible to challenge the rigid division of ludic software into "games" and "non-games" and more easily incorporate them into artistic discourse.

Keywords: video games, game-satires, game-stories, non-games, adventure games

Bibliografia

Aarseth, E. (2001). Computer Game Studies, Year One. *Game Studies*, *1*(1). http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html (data dostępu: 6 września 2021).

Aarseth, E. (2012). A Narrative Theory of Games. *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (s. 129–133). https://doi.org/10.1145/2282338.2282365

Aarseth, E. (2014). *Cybertekst. Spojrzenie na literaturę ergodyczną* (tłum. M. Pisarski, P. Schreiber, D. Sikora, M. Tabaczyński). Kraków–Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Ha!art.

Bakun, M. (2019). Algorytmy osobiste. Analiza zagadnienia amatorskich gier autobiograficznych udostępnionych na platformie itch.io. *Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Nauki Humanistyczne*, *24*(1), 9–24. https://doi.org/10.26361/ZNTDH.10.2019.24.01

Beeson, D., Cronk, N. (2009). Voltaire: Philosopher or philosophe? W: N. Cronk (red.), *The Cambridge Companion to Voltaire* (s. 47–64). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Bogost, I. (2020). Curiosity Journalism, or the First Decades of Newsgames. *Convergence*, *26*(3), 572–576. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520918075

Cabales, V. (10 czerwca 2019). A Brief Introduction to Newsgames. *Northwestern University Knight Lab*. https://knightlab.northwestern.edu/2019/06/10/newsgames-intro/ (data dostępu: 28 sierpnia 2022).

Churchill, W. (2004). *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*. San Francisco: City Lights.

Churchill, W., Morris, G.T. (1992). Sand Creek: The Morning After. W: M.A. Jaimes (red.), *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (s. 13–21). Boston: South End Press.

de la Hera Conde-Pumpido, T. (2017). Persuasive gaming: Identifying the different types of persuasion through games. *International Journal of Serious Games, 4*(1), 31–39.

Diderot, D. (2021/1796). *Kubuś fatalista i jego pan* (tłum. T. Boy-Żeleński). Warszawa: Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska. https://wolnelektury.pl/media/book/pdf/kubus-fatalista-i-jego-pan.pdf (data dostępu: 3 września 2021).

Eskelinen, M. (2001). The Gaming Situation. *Game Studies*, *1*(1). http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/ (data dostępu: 6 września 2021).

Fernandez-Vara, C. (2011). From „Open Mailbox" to Context Mechanics: Shifting Levels of Abstraction in Adventure Games. *Proceedings of the 6th International*

Conference on Foundations of Digital Games (s. 131–138). New York, NY: ACM. http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/100262 (data dostępu: 7 lipca 2022).

Frasca, G. (1999). Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences Between (Video)Games and Narrative. https://ludology.typepad.com/weblog/articles/ludology.htm (data dostępu: 6 września 2021).

Giappone, K.B.R. (2015). Self-Reflexivity and Humor in Adventure Games. *Game Studies*, *15*(1). http://gamestudies.org/1501/articles/bonello_k (data dostępu: 6 września 2021).

Gómez-García, S., de la Hera Conde-Pumpido, T. (2022). Newsgames: The Use of Digital Games by Mass-Media Outlets to Convey Journalistic Messages. *Games and Culture*. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221105461

Jankowski, F. (2020). Galaktyka Hegla. „Event[0]" jako gra (post)humanistyczna. *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, *110*, 120–136. https://doi.org/10.36744/kf.142

Juul, J. (2001). Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives. *Game Studies*, *1*(1). http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/ (data dostępu: 6 września 2021).

Juul, J. (2010). Gra, gracz, świat: W poszukiwaniu serca „growości". W: M. Filiciak (red.), *Światy z pikseli* (s. 37–62). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SWPS Academica.

Juul, J. (2019). *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity*. Cambridge–London: The MIT Press.

Kagen, M. (2017). Walking Simulators, #GamerGate, and the Gender of Wandering. W: J. Eburne, B. Schreier (red.), *Nerds, Wonks, and Neocons* (s. 275–300). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Karhulahti, V.-M. (2014). Puzzle Is Not a Game! Basic Structures of Challenge. W: P. Calia, H. Kennedy, J. Sharp (red.), *Proceedings DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies*. Atlanta, Georgia: Digital Games Research Association. https://archive.ph/zp5wM (data dostępu: 12 czerwca 2022).

Karhulahti, V.-M. (2015). Defining the Videogame. *Game Studies*, *15*(2). http://gamestudies.org/1502/articles/karhulahti (data dostępu: 6 września 2021).

Kozyra, M. (2019). Ukryty potencjał queerowych przestrzeni w grach wideo. W: D. Ciesielska, M. Kozyra, A. Łozińska (red.), *Retelling. Strategie przestrzenne* (s. 173–192). Kraków: Wiele Kropek.

Kriss, A. (3 września 2015). LucasArts and the Rationalist Tendency in Videogames. *Kill Screen*. https://archive.ph/7k4FA (data dostępu: 12 czerwca 2022).

Król, J. (2018). That Dragon, Cancer – dokument osobisty w formie gry komputerowej. *Images. The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication*, *21*(30), 151–164. https://doi.org/10.14746/i.2017.30.11

Majkowski, T.Z. (2019). *Języki gropowieści. Studia o różnojęzyczności gier cyfrowych*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Montfort, N. (2005). *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Cambridge–London: MIT Press.

Mukherjee, S. (2015). *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Natunen, M. (2010). *Nuclear Tycoon: Designing Simulation Rhetoric for a Persuasive Game.* Praca magisterska, Aalto University. https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi:443/handle/123456789/3581 (data dostępu: 22 sierpnia 2022).

Parker, F. (2013). An Art World for Artgames. *Loading…*, *7*(11), 41–60. https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/119 (data dostępu: 3 września 2022).

Pelurson, G. (2019). Flânerie in the dark woods: Shattering innocence and queering time in The Path. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *25*(5–6), 918–936. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856518772421

Petrowicz, M. (2014). Ludo-narratywizm, czyli proceduralizm Bogosta na tle sporu ludologii z narratologią. *Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies*, *1*(1), 81–91.

Powiastka filozoficzna. (2021). W: *Encyklopedia PWN*. https://archive.ph/JEAtZ (data dostępu: 12 czerwca 2022).

Pratt, C.J. (8 luty 2010). The Art History... Of Games? Games As Art May Be A Lost Cause. *Game Developer*. https://archive.ph/ToT0G (data dostępu: 12 czerwca 2022).

Reed, A.A., Murray, J., Salter, A. (2020). *Adventure Games: Playing the Outsider*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ruberg, B. (2020). Straight Paths Through Queer Walking Simulators: Wandering on Rails and Speedrunning in *Gone Home. Games and Culture*, *15*(6), 632–652. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019826746

Sartre, J.-P. (2007). *Byt i nicość. Zarys ontologii fenomenologicznej* (tłum. J. Kiełbasa, P. Mróz, R. Abramciów, R. Ryziński, P. Matochleb). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Zielona Sowa.

Skrzypek, M. (1982). *Diderot*. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna.

Sterczewski, P. (2013). Retoryka porażki. Semantyczne i perswazyjne funkcje przegranej w serious games, art games i grach głównego nurtu. *Homo Ludens*, *5*(1), 23–34.

Strużyna, A. (2014). Artystyczne gry Anny Anthropy. *Homo Ludens*, *1*(6), 187–198.

Szewczyk, O. (26 listopada 2013). Interaktywne wideo jako powieść. *Polityka*. https://archive.ph/NKn5e (data dostępu: 12 czerwca 2022).

Tavinor, G. (2008). Definition of Videogames. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, *6*(1). https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol6/iss1/16 (data dostępu: 28 sierpnia 2022).

Voltaire. (2021/1759). *Kandyd czyli optymizm* (tłum. T. Boy-Żeleński). Warszawa: Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska. https://wolnelektury.pl/media/book/pdf/kandyd.pdf (data dostępu: 6 września 2021).

Ludografia

Anthropy, A. (2012). *Dys4ia* [Windows]. Newgrounds.

CD Projekt RED. (2015). *Wiedźmin 3: Dziki Gon* [Windows]. CD Projekt.

Frasca, G. (2002). *September 12th* [Flash]. Newsgaming.

Froggy Software. (1984). *Paranoïak* [Apple II]. Froggy Software.

Indian Land Tenure Foundation, LaPensée, E. (2019). *When Rivers Were Trails*. Michigan State University's Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab.

LucasArts. (1991). *The Select of Monkey Island* [DOS]. LucasArts.

MECC. (1985). *The Oregon Trail* [Apple II]. MECC.

Mojang Studios. (2011). *Minecraft* [Windows]. Mojang Studios.

Numinous Games. (2016). *That Dragon, Cancer* [Windows]. Numinous Games.

Pażytnow, A. (1984). *Tetris* [Electronika 60].

Thatgamecompany (2007). *Flow* [PlayStation 3]. Sony Computer Entertainment.

The Quinnspiracy. (2013). *Depression Quest* [WWW]. The Quinnspiracy.

Ubisoft Montreal. (2010). *Assassin's Creed II* [Windows]. Ubisoft.

Filip Jankowski (ur. 1993) – historyk gier, filmoznawca. Doktorant na Wydziale Zarządzania i Komunikacji Społecznej UJ, absolwent Instytutu Sztuk Audiowizualnych UJ. Specjalizuje się w badaniu dziejów francuskich gier cyfrowych, z naciskiem na ich tło społeczno-historyczne. Publikował między innymi w *Homo Ludens*, *Game Studies* oraz *Games and Culture*.

Filip Jankowski (born 1993) – is a game historian and film scholar. Doctoral student at the Faculty of Management and Social Communication, Jagiellonian University, graduate of the Institute of Audiovisual Arts, Jagiellonian University. Specializes in the history of French digital games, emphasizing their socio-historical background. He has published, among others, in *Homo Ludens*, *Game Studies,* and *Games and Culture*.

Hailey J. Austin*
Lydia R. Cooper**

Feeling the narrative control(ler): Casual art games as trauma therapy

Abstract

Through a combination of aesthetics and game mechanics, casual art games offer unique engagements with trauma, allowing players to practice grief or empathise with the traumatic experiences of others. Both *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games 2020*)* and *Mutazione* (Die Gute Fabrik 2019) utilise similar aesthetics (2D art, pastel colours and calming music) alongside agency-driven gameplay mechanics (choosing when to let spirits go or how to react to a character's trauma) that create a safe space. This is possible because neither game is competitive, nor does it allow the player to lose. Instead, agency is given to the player through narrative choice and exploration of the beautiful storyworld. We argue that games like *Spiritfarer* and *Mutazione* can be used as models for the further development of casual art games that can be used as art therapy through their emotional connections embedded in both the aesthetics and gameplay.

Keywords: aesthetics, videogames, trauma therapy, casual games, art games, *Spiritfarer*, *Mutazione*

Introduction

Casual art games – that is, non-competitive, artistically-rendered videogames – offer unique insights into the ways that games, as aesthetic and integrative experiences, might offer therapeutic interventions in trauma studies. This paper will examine

* Abertay University, e-mail: h.austin@abertay.ac.uk
** Creighton University, e-mail: LydiaCooper@creighton.edu

the aesthetic and narrative structures of two such games, Thunder Lotus' *Spiritfarer* (2020) and Die Gute Fabrik's *Mutazione* (2019), as case studies demonstrating how these games allow players to "practice" effective therapeutic interventions for healing from trauma. Specifically, as short, "casual" games, they help players reorganize traumatizing events (such as death/loss of a loved one and/or coming out as a queer person) into coherent, meaningful experiences. Through repetitions of short narrative pieces, players practice expressing grief and attachment; and they calibrate or control risk, centring the element of choice, a critical step to re-empowerment. Finally, the games' aesthetics, from colour schemes to animation choices, work to create an immersive experience where players can transform otherwise traumatic events into organized, meaningful narratives.

Figure 1. Thunder Lotus Games, *Spiritfarer* (2020), Steam.

It is not a novel claim that art can have therapeutic purposes (see e.g., Kramer, Gerity 2000; Rolling 2017). What we want to establish here is that casual art games offer potentially innovative and powerful therapeutic interventions because of unique interactions and hybridities between their aesthetic and narrative aspects. Some scholars distinguish between artgames and game art, basing the distinction on the premise that "artgames focus on playability and rhetoric, whereas game art focuses on unplayability and aesthetics" (Moring 2021, p. 30). Similarly, comics are a hybrid medium that combine narrative and aesthetics. Aesthetics, in this sense, refer to the artistic principles involved in the creation of a storyworld which can vary across genre and modality. Comics and games, thus, can both be understood

as hybrid mediums that combine aesthetic and narrative. Andreas Rauscher et al. find that "it is possible to frame the ways in which comics and videogames borrow, adapt, and transform a diverse range of aesthetic, ludic, and narrative strategies conventionally associated with the 'other' medium in terms of *hybrid medialities*" (2021, p. 2). While aesthetics tend to be divorced from function in certain mediums, we argue that particularly in the case of casual art games the conjunction of these two is of value to the player experience, creating a unique therapeutic potential.

Figure 2. Die Gute Fabrik, *Mutazione* (2019), Epic Games Store.

We define "casual art games" as games whose characteristics share key attributes of casual games and art games. According to Aubrey Anable, "casual games" encompass several different genres, but can be classified as casual because they have simple graphics and mechanics, are low cost to play, and are designed to be played in short bursts (2013, p. 1). Carlos Mauricio Castaño Díaz and Worwawach Tungtjitcharoen define art games as having "the purpose to provide the player an *experience of reflection* outside the gameplay," but note that they go beyond normal play "by focusing on aesthetic looks, concepts and plots rather than competence" (2015, p. 4). In this way, casual art games stay with the player, allowing them a space to reflect on their experience rather than focusing on competitive play. Díaz and Tungtjitcharoen also find that "the main value of art games is *the transmission of feelings*" (2015, p. 6). By our definition, casual art games are designed to elicit emotional responses and to privilege the emotional content of the narrative. That is, rather than focusing on competition and precise gameplay, art games focus on

emotions and feelings. Because of this, they can be considered body genres which privilege a bodily reaction (see Clover 1987; Williams 1991). Casual art games tend to elicit emotional responses through their colour palettes, music, interactivity, and narrative control. Ernest Adams finds that "interactivity operates in a tension with narrative: narrative lies in the control of the author, while interactivity is about the freedom of the player" (Adams 2014, p. 421). It is this interactivity that allows casual art games to operate therapeutically.

Clinical trauma therapies and how they work

It may be helpful to begin with a brief overview of trauma before describing how casual art games might intersect with therapeutic interventions for PTSD. Trauma is not an event itself (e.g., a car crash), but rather the "imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body" (van der Kolk 2014, p. 21). That imprint takes the form of disorganized or unprocessed memory. That is, traumatic events trigger a reaction from the amygdala, the brain's evolutionarily ancient core meant to warn humans of danger and issue imperatives (fight, flight, or freeze), with corresponding visceral emotions (alarm, panic). A traumatic memory is when the traumatic event becomes "trapped" in the amygdala, so that, even years later, external stimuli that triggers a recollection of the past-event evokes a strong bodily reaction as though the past traumatic event were happening in the present (p. 42). Trauma causes us to get stuck in the traumatic event, to make the pain-event the fixed focal point of our narratives.

Talking about trauma is necessary: sufferers cannot be fully healed without breaking the seal of silence. However, talk therapy alone has been shown to be ineffective in healing the psychological wounds left by trauma because a traumatized person may not be physically capable of organizing the non-processed trauma memory into a coherent story (van der Kolk 2014, p. 233). Trauma patients' brain-imaging scans reveal abnormal activation of a part of the brain that "integrates and interprets" the input from various organs – our sense of "being" in our own bodies. The sufferer therefore feels alienated from their own physical reality.

Effective trauma therapies therefore have to work with the sufferer's body as well as their mind. Therapies such as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy), and other body/brain therapies such as mindfulness, somatic processing, and yoga each "rewire" the brain through engaging the body, so that the brain can begin to cognitively process – to organize – the traumatic event. Francine Shapiro explains that "[m]emories that have been processed naturally… are transformed into learning experiences so that the disturbing emotions, beliefs and physical sensations are no longer held in our memory networks" (2012, pp. 71–72). In these therapies, the trauma memory is

evoked while the patient is "grounded" in the present through physical stimulation (through eye movement in EMDR, breathing in mindfulness, etc.), which keeps the prefrontal cortex engaged even while the amygdala is activated. The trauma memory, stuck in the amygdala, begins to be processed by the prefrontal cortex. As the therapeutic practice continues, the patient begins to notice that their alarm or panic at recalling the trauma event lessens, while their memory and language centres increasingly organize the trauma. Ideally, the patient eventually no longer feels distress when recollecting the event and can narrate it with a clear sense of personal meaning.

The goal of trauma therapies is to bring the sufferer into a place of feeling whole, of once again being inside their own bodies and alive in a world that is no longer terrifying. Organizing memory is at the heart of healing. Van der Kolk says, "Our sense of Self depends on being able to organize our memories into a coherent whole" (2014, p. 249). While traumatic memory is a past event erupting violently into the present, freezing the sufferer in a disembodied sense that they are outside-of-time, trauma therapies "create new emotional scenarios intense and real enough to defuse and counter some of those old ones" (p. 310). Effective strategies for clinicians working with trauma sufferers focus on helping individuals organize the traumatic event, reprocess the negative emotions surrounding it, and integrate the reprocessed memory into a coherent sense of self.

Casual art games as trauma therapy

Multiple studies point to the unique possibilities of addressing cognitive deficits through gaming. Daphne Bavelier and C. Shawn Green provide a multi-study overview that suggests videogame play "boosts a variety of cognitive skills" through requiring players to focus on detailed visual aspects of gameplay while engaging responsive fine motor skills in the game. In their study, players who engaged in multiple hours of nonviolent gameplay showed "heightened sensitivity to visual contrast," as well as being able to multitask and "mentally rotate objects more accurately" (2016, p. 26). Emerging from work on the cognitive benefits of gaming, new studies have begun to look at gaming's impact on trauma. "By experimenting with player agency and interactivity, videogames have the potential to work with psychological trauma in ways that more traditional media such as books or films cannot," says Tobi Smethurst (2015, p. 817).[1]

---

1   Smethurst's case study is the game Limbo, which "uses the unique characteristics of the game medium" to evoke traumatic responses in the player by creating a scenario in which the player must "caus[e] the death of the protagonist – a small boy – in countless gory ways." Smethurst suggests that the medium of role-playing games may access trauma and offer new opportunities in trauma therapies (2015, p. 819).

Currently available research on trauma and videogames tends to focus on Virtual Reality (VR) gaming (Kniffin et al. 2014) or on warfare-based videogames and military veterans experiencing trauma (van Gelderen et al. 2020; Etter et al. 2017). We are not the first to suggest the potential therapeutic uses of casual games; Whaley (2019) examines a Japanese game which uses the aesthetics of "disaster photography" to represent the catastrophic 2011 earthquake that triggered a tsunami and resulted in a nuclear reactor meltdown. This article specifically reveals how the artistic medium draws attention to marginalized victims overlooked in national narratives about the event, but also, in the interactive framework of the game, allows players to become victims of the tragedy in their own way, personalising their own expression of victimisation.

Casual art games have the potential to become art therapy when the narrative and aesthetic strategies combine to allow players to construct alternate or reiterative storylines that illustrate or practice the process of integrating traumatic memory into processed memory. The reiterative aspect of play, where players can re-engage with the short game multiple times, functions similarly to reiterative sessions of EMDR or other visually- and narratologically-engaged trauma therapies. We will now look at two games that deal with more general traumatic situations – death and grieving in *Spiritfarer*; natural disaster and queer identity in *Mutazione* – to examine how these games offer therapeutic possibilities.[2] The aesthetics of these two examples maintain a consistent calming effect, while gameplay guides the player through a series of narrative choices that result in non-traumatic reactions to difficult subjects, creating a sense of calm or control around those subjects through repetition, and even moving players towards a more active understanding of healthy attachment to others.

Spiritfarer, and learning how to let go

Because the single greatest indicator of well-being is our capacity to experience healthy attachments to others, attachment disruptions are one of the most common sources of trauma. Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory (2017) is derived from the neurobiology of attachment. Porges offers compelling evidence that our mammalian species needs to feel safe with others in order to be physiologically and emotionally "well": "to connect and co-regulate with others is our biological

---

2   For the purposes of this paper, we are looking at games with similar aesthetic approaches, which are integrated with the content and narrative in a way that makes them particularly good case studies for our argument. However, the aesthetics of casual art games vary as widely as the games themselves. We are not narrowing our definition of which aesthetic strategies are most likely to be effective in therapeutic contexts, but rather giving one specific example.

imperative" (p. 51). The absolute rupture of death therefore provides one of the most common sources of distress for humans. Saying goodbye, experiencing the emotional tides of grief, loss, panic, suffering, and absence, is one of the most difficult actions humans undertake – and yet learning how to say goodbye, how to grieve, is necessary for the loss of a loved one to become an organized memory, rather than a traumatic rupture.

Spiritfarer, a game "about dying," gamifies the practice of grief. Traumatic grief – when the sufferer experiences the heightened fear of trauma alongside an overwhelming sense of loss – traps the sufferer in the devastating "now" of bereavement. In *Spiritfarer*, the protagonist Stella ferries spirits to their afterlife. The player's game choices focus on aspects of life (building and expanding her ship, developing relationships with different animalised spirit characters). The player must develop a narratological attachment to the spirits, taking care of them, finding out their favourite foods, and eventually taking them around the map to come to terms with their past and unfinished business. When the spirit is ready to cross over to the spirit world, the player must make the decision to take them to the Everdoor. They then hug them before the spirit floats upward toward the stars and into the next plane of existence. Completion of this journey results in release, both physically in the story-world, and emotionally for the player. This is possible because of the hybrid medialities of in-game aesthetics and mechanics.

Figure 3. Thunder Lotus Games, *Spiritfarer* (2020), game still as Stella hugs the spirit Gwen before letting go.

Aesthetically, *Spiritfarer* is a hybrid mediality mixing several international visual styles: 2D French comics-inspired *ligne claire*, manga-inspired cut-scene animation, and backgrounds akin to Japanese woodblock paintings. The comic book style of the 2D art is stylistically similar to that of *bande dessinée* or traditional French comics that have historically been heralded as high art, like Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin* (see Groensteen). This is not surprising as the studio is Canada-based with several French and French-speaking creators. The manga-inspired cut scenes transport the player into part of the spirit realm to meet Hades, an owl that confronts the player and forcefully reminds Stella of her traumatic past as a nurse who could not save all her patients. The background art was inspired by Japanese woodblock painter Hiroshi Yoshida, providing open spaces that encourage casual exploration. The colours throughout the game also inspire the player to relax, as there are no harsh tones or contrasts. There is no true or fully black tone featured in the game. The dark colours instead consist of dark blues and dark greys, while the majority of the game features comforting pastel colours (Escapist 2021).

As a hybrid mediality, *Spiritfarer* also weaves in several gameplay mechanics, effectively making it a narrative-driven management platformer that is engaging rather than competitive (Escapist 2021). It is a casual management game in that the collection of items for spirits, the dynamic and pleasing music, and hugging mechanic create a safe space to feel emotion and practice grief. The controlled environment means the player can build relationships with the spirits throughout the game. The player can hug spirits at any time, usually resulting in an increase in the spirit's happiness and an accompanying satisfied sound.

Porges claims that the future of trauma therapy lies in developing our understanding of "how our relationship with others enables the co-regulation of the physiological state" (2017, p. 195). Our bodies experience our emotions with changes in our physiological states. Hugs, for instance, are key physical attributes in co-regulation. Porges describes the difference between a body that is "tightly wrapped" – muscles tense, breathing shallow – indicating a person who experiences anxiety, a lack of safety. By contrast, a body in a hug is relaxed, muscles conforming to the shape of the other body, breath becoming synced with the other (pp. 222–223). A hug indicates the dominance of parasympathetic autonomic system function, but it is important to note that a strong hug can also *trigger* a transition from that state of sympathetic arousal to a decelerated, calm, even peaceful state. Thus, in certain cases, a person in distress may find their bodies physiologically transition from heightened anxiety to calm while in a hug.

In *Spiritfarer*, the player also must make the ultimate decision to let the spirits go, something that is not always the case in real life. In the game, loss is triggered not by rupture or disruption but instead by coregulating with the one leaving, and then engaging in a choice (to let go). In so doing, the player enacts a physiological

process that moves through the undertaking of healthy, regulated grief: care for the other, coregulation with the other, and release of the other. Sorrow – but not the dysregulated panic of traumatic grief – may follow. The player practices this hugging and letting go 11 times with 12 characters throughout the game (more characters have been added in recent updates). By playing this game, players are able to practice letting go and saying goodbye to animal spirits that they have built emotional connections with. In order to accomplish this, the game creates a safe space where the player cannot fail (Escapist 2021). It is almost impossible to burn food that is cooking, and the player does not have to reset after failed attempts at anything. The player is allowed to try again in a casual and safe environment made possible through repetitive actions and calming art aesthetics.

Identity and choice are also important aspects of the gameplay that intersect with the aesthetics of the game. The protagonist, Stella, is a woman of colour and as such is a marginalised identity. The players, who are less likely to be from this particular marginalised background also have the ability to play as an identity that is likely to not be their own. This is balanced, however, with the choices of when to say goodbye to the spirits as well as the different outfit colours and customisable colours of the cat companion, Daffodil. These customisable aesthetics are unlocked through in-game achievements and add an important ability to choose within the game.

Spiritfarer thus straddles the line between narrative control and interactivity, as Adams suggests art games do. The game allows the player to practice and work through the inevitable grief of saying goodbye to others, and eventually themselves. In order to complete the game, the player must let themselves/Stella and their cat (Daffodil/Daffy) go through the Everdoor. In an emotional display, see-through versions of all the spirits the player already fared through the Everdoor appear to hug and thank Stella once more. The game ends when Stella and Daffy let themselves go, coming to terms with their own mortality with the knowledge that they have helped several other souls.

As a casual art game, *Spiritfarer* allows the player to adopt a different identity and practice saying goodbye, eventually teaching them to let go of themselves when the time comes, reframing death and letting go, and allowing them to process and reframe possible traumatic experiences in their lives. In fact, while playtesting the demo, emotional responses from players were overwhelming with many reduced to tears (Escapist 2021). This cathartic emotional experience occurs because of the multimodality of the aesthetic, the art, colours, music, casual gameplay, and character development, allowing players to understand their own loss and grief by working through trauma in a repetitive and safe manner.

Mutazione, interactivity within an empathetic, healing world

While *Spiritfarer* focuses on letting go and coming to terms with grief, *Mutazione* focuses on the ways in which the cultivation of community and empathy can help others work through their trauma. The game focuses on character choice through dialogue; agency through exploration; and, having fewer repetitive actions, it elevates the importance of listening, exploring, and empathising. In *Mutazione,* the player assumes the identity of Kai, a young woman of colour, who visits the island Mutazione one summer to see her dying grandfather. While exploring the island, the player discovers several traumatic events have happened to the islanders, including a meteor strike that killed the majority of the inhabitants. The game focuses on the aftereffects of this natural catastrophe, with the mutations of humans, plants, animals and fungi creating an emotional backdrop to the small island.

Mutazione is a mutant soap opera which focuses on the dramatic as well as the domestic through an ensemble of characters. It is a "cosy" adventure game that promotes agency through exploration of the beautiful, mutated world, but also a narrative-driven game where the player is encouraged to learn more about the inhabitants by talking to them. The interactivity of the aesthetics and game mechanics, including the musical gardening and the branching option of the narrative, make it a casual art game that allows the player to safely experience and practice empathy towards others and a compassionate and healing encounter with traumatic events.
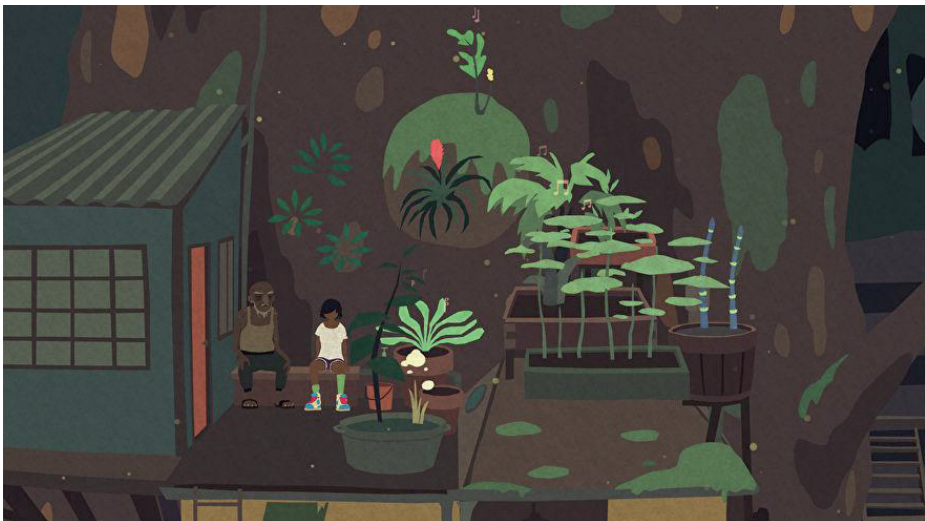

Figure 4. Die Gute Fabrik, *Mutazione* (2019), game still as Kai gardens with her grandfather.

Aesthetically, *Mutazione* employs a bright and calming colour palette similar to that of *Spiritfarer*. The 2D art is flatter and more muted than *Spiritfarer*, but this adds to the mysticism surrounding the island and its mutated inhabitants. The cartoonish appearances of the characters are less detailed than the spirits, but complement the fantastical, mutating plants without going overboard and overwhelming the player. One of the most important aesthetic features of the game is the garden. The player cultivates seeds on different parts of the island, and chooses where they will grow and flourish best with gardening technique learned from Kai`s grandfather and in conversation with other people on the island. On top of having calming colours, the plants also emit different sounds. The player can create pleasant harmonies or disparagingly sad sounds depending on what seeds are planted. The goal of this game is to reorient the player to a better and healthier relationship with the natural world and to promote consideration of their own position towards others in the game-world. The gardens create both a sense of calm and control. The player chooses which plants to cultivate where as well as what sounds the garden can emit. In this way, the game gives agency and calm through the aesthetics of the artistic and musical components of the game.

Equally important, however, is the branching narrative of the game and the ability of the player to choose how they react to the island inhabitants. The player is able to choose different responses while in conversation with characters on the island that affect the discussion and how other characters feel toward Kai. This control is important. Montford considers games to be where interactive art and interactive fiction meet, allowing players to interact with a world where they feel like they can influence events (2006, pp. 731–735). The powerful feeling of narrative control is also helpful in trauma therapy. Because "[t]rauma robs you of the feeling that you are in charge of yourself," an important aspect of trauma therapies is allowing the individual to feel that they are "in charge" of their own choices and that their choices can change outcomes (van der Kolk 2014, p. 205).

The narrative design structure of the game is unique because, there are "multiple middles" rather than alternate endings (Nicklin 2020). The mechanics manipulate time so that a player can complete as much or as little as they want and still progress the plot. The aesthetic choices of the garden and 2D art, however, encourage the player to explore the island beyond the amount needed to progress time in-game. This gives "agency through exploration", both allowing and encouraging players to spend more time investigating, giving them a better understanding of the community (Nicklin 2020). The player has control over how Kai responds in normal interactions, whether she jokes, tries to diffuse the situation, or stays silent. While there are branched conversation choices, they close on a similar result at the end of the conversation. This narrative construction allows the player to interact more with certain characters (or all of them) to better understand their

backgrounds. Once different members of the island have a good rapport with Kai, several characters choose to speak through their traumatic experiences with her.

A challenge for traumatized people in their healing process is that the experience of trauma is deeply isolating, but the root of healing lies in developing and maintaining meaningful attachments to others. Part of the success of this narrative control is that the player has the power to decide how Kai reacts to the other characters when they divulge their traumatic experiences, and whether she should reveal secrets of her own. The player can choose whether to console, blame, or say nothing to characters who divulge various traumas, including unplanned pregnancy and child death. While Kai's choice of response elicits different emotional responses from the island inhabitants, it does not change the overall game. This allows the player to practice or consider various responses without the fear of failing or losing the game. The game not only rewards the player for exploring and connecting with other characters but allows them to practice empathy in Mutazione that could also be implemented in real life.

Similarly to *Spiritfarer*, *Mutazione* is a casual art game because of the mix of identity and narrative control. Kai is a queer woman of colour, and the player can choose whether or not she comes out to some characters. Through the gamified conversations, players are able to act out self-disclosure in a non-traumatic context. For queer players who may have experienced trauma related to their own coming out disclosures, this type of practice can create new framing for the trauma, de-normalizing traumatic experiences and normalizing healthy and supportive responses to coming out. In addition, the gamification of listening to self-disclosure helps the player engage in active listening, an important action for a person supporting someone suffering from trauma. As van der Kolk says, the "challenge of recovery is to reestablish ownership of your body and your mind" (2014, p. 205). The player's ability to control Kai's conversational and disclosure choices practices this experience of being "in charge" of narratological experiences that can feel particularly "out of control" in the real world.

Unlike *Spiritfarer* which is a longer game where you can have over 100 hours of gameplay, *Mutazione* is a short game, often completable in a weekend. Multiple middles allow the player to pace themselves and experience their own journey through the story, giving them the chance to do the same with trauma in their own life, or be better suited to empathising with the trauma of others. Trauma from the past changed the flora and fauna of the island; it informs the player's current actions; but it does not result in tragedy. Through empathy and connection with others, the player heals from traumatic rupture in ways that they can take with them into the real world.

Conclusion

Because of their capacity to mediate artistic and emotional experiences, casual art games may offer uniquely rich engagements with trauma, allowing players to practice letting go or empathising with the traumatic experiences of others. Both *Spiritfarer* and *Mutazione* are casual art games that utilise similar aesthetics (2D art, pastel colours, calming music) alongside agency-driven gameplay mechanics (choosing when to let spirits go or how to react to a character's trauma) that create a safe space. This allows players to practice overcoming their own trauma and/ or empathise with others who have experienced trauma. This is possible because neither game is competitive, nor does it allow the player to lose. Instead, agency is given to the player through narrative choice and through exploration of the beautiful storyworld. The casualness of the game allows the player to choose when they are ready, a rarity in real life in terms of loss, grief, or trauma. *Spiritfarer* and *Mutazione* can, and should, be used as models for the further development of casual art games that can be used as art therapy through their emotional connections embedded in both the aesthetics and gameplay.

Bibliography

Adams, E.W. (2014). Will Computer Games Ever Be a Legitimate Art Form? In A. Clarke, & G. Mitchell (eds.), *Videogames and Art* (pp. 419–429). Bristol– Chicago: Intellect Books.

Anable, A. (2013). Casual Games, Time Management, and the Work of Affect. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 2.

Bavelier, D., & Green, C.S. (2016). The Brain-Boosting Power of Video Games. *Scientific American*, *315*(1), 26–31.

Clover, C.J. (1987). Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film. *Representations, 20*, 187–228.

Díaz, C.M.C., & Tungtjitcharoen, W. (2015). Art Video Games: Ritual Communication of Feelings in the Digital Era. *Games and Culture*, *10*(1), 3–34.

Escapist (July 19, 2021). The Making of Spiritfarer | Escapist Documentary. *Youtube.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxx8sEGjntI

Etter, D., Kamen, C., Etter, K., & Gore, F.C. (2017). Modern Warfare: Video Game Playing and Posttraumatic Symptoms in Veterans. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *30*(2), 182–185.

Groensteen, T. (2007). *The System of Comics* (B. Beaty, & N. Nguyen, trans.). University of Mississippi Press.

Kniffin, T.C., Carlson, C.R., Ellzey, Al., Eisenlohr-Moul, T., Beck, K.B., McDonald, R., & Jouriles, E.N. (2014). Using Virtual Reality to Explore Self-Regulation in High Risk Settings. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 15*(4), 310–321.

Kramer, J., & Gerity, L.A. (2000). *Art as Therapy: Collected Papers*. Art Therapies Series. Jessica Kingsley.

Montford, N. (2006). *Interactive Fiction*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Moring, S. (2021). Artgames v. Game Art – Diskurse und Strategien der Computerspielkunst zwischen spielbarer Rhetorik und unspielbarer Ästhetik. *Informatik Spektrum, 44*(1), 30–37.

Nicklin, H. (November 10, 2020). Multiple Middles & Mutazione. *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUlwwBNESpU

Porges, S.W. (2017). *The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory*. W.W. Norton & Co.

Rauscher, A., Stein, D., & Thon, J. (2021). Introduction: Comics and videogames. In A. Rauscher, D. Stein, & J. Thon (eds.), *Comics and Videogames: From Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions* (pp. 1–14). London–New York: Routledge.

Rolling, J.H. (2017). Art as Therapy. *Art Education, 70*(5), 4–5.

Shapiro, F. (2012) *Getting Past Your Past: Take Control of Your Life with Self-Help Techniques from EMDR Therapy*. New York: Harmony/Rodale.

Smethurst, T. (2015). Playing Dead in Videogames: Trauma in *Limbo*. *Journal of Popular Culture*, *48*(5), 817–835.

Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score*. Penguin.

Van Gelderen, M.J., Nijdam, M.J., de Vries, F., Meijer, O.C., & Vermetten, E. (2020). Exposure-Related Cortisol Predicts Outcome of Psychotherapy in Veterans with Treatment Resistent Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, *130*, 387–393.

Whaley, B. (2019). Virtual Earthquakes and Real-World Survival in Japan's Disaster Report Video Game. *Journal of Asian Studies, 78*(1), 95–114.

Williams, L. (1991). Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. *Film Quarterly*, *44*(4), 2–13.

Ludography

Die Gute Fabrik (2019). *Mutazione* [multi-platform]. Akupara Games.

Thunder Lotus Games (2020). *Spiritfarer* [multi-platform]. Thunder Lotus Games.

Hailey J. Austin – is a research and development fellow for transnational creative industries at Abertay University in Dundee, Scotland. After completing her PhD in comics studies at the University of Dundee, she has pursued a career in researching comics, games, and transmedia. Her academic work has been published several times, including an article about intergenerational trauma in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and a book chapter on transmedial iterations of *The Walking Dead.* Her chapter on female masculinity in superheroines features in *The Routledge Companion to Masculinity in American Literature and Culture*, edited by Lydia R. Cooper. She is also an accomplished comics creator and editor.

Lydia R. Cooper – is associate professor of contemporary American and Native American literature at Creighton University. She is the editor of *The Routledge Companion to Masculinity in American Literature and Culture* and author of *Cormac McCarthy: A Complexity Theory of Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2021), *Masculinities in Literature of the American West* (Palgrave, 2016), and *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in the Novels* (LSU Press, 2011). Her work on contemporary American and Native American writers has appeared in journals such as *GLQ, Contemporary Literature, Modern Fiction Studies, Studies in the Novel, Studies in American Indian Literature, Western American Literature*, and *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment.*