

The Impossibility of Resurrecting Hundreds of Dead Animals: Outplaying Violence in and the Rules of Video Games

by Luka*s Friedland, May – September 2023

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*“But one source of inspiration for video games deserves particular attention: war. Just as commercial interest was instrumental in the progress of writing, so military interest was instrumental in the progress of video games.”*¹

- Ian Bogost, *Foreword to Joystick Soldiers*

*“While video games are a relatively new media form and are attracting scholarly attention from a range of disciplines, games are but a recent technological innovation with roots in a centuries-old defense culture.”*²

- Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne, *Introduction to Joystick Soldiers*

*“Even the earliest computer games were representations of war, or, perhaps more accurately, rivalry. The more technology has advanced and the better graphics and visual effects have become, the bigger the role played by war. Statistics show that over half of all video games relate to war, in one way or another.”*³

- Christian Rollinger interviewed by Melek Balgün in *Art of Gaming: Total War*

*“The relationship to war has always charged the game with a social explosiveness, which in a scholarly perspective has become an unavoidable topic on the agenda of cultural-theoretical discussions of the 'playing human being' at least since Johan Huizinga. The incompatibility of play and war, which is always transported in the shared history and inherent to both spheres, has never lost its explosiveness.”*⁴

- Philipp Bojahr, *Krieg, Spiel, Spielverderber.*

Überlegungen zum Regelbruch im analogen und digitalen Kriegsspiel

*“Viewed from the outside, the use of video games by any military force is a seemingly inevitable step in the increasingly close relationship between the military and game companies. [...] As techno-cultural commodities which are easily distributed and engender passionate fan communities, video games represent an ideal means to reinforce or challenge an ideology.”*⁵

- Randy Nichols, *Target Acquired: America's Army and the Video Games Industry*

1 Bogost 2010, p. xii.

2 Huntemann et al. 2010, p. 4.

3 Art of Gaming 2017, TC: 00:04:12-00:04:38.

4 Bojahr 2016, p. 345. Translated by LF.

5 Nichols 2010, p. 49.

*“In recruitment games, the boundaries between play and seriousness become blurred. Real conflict management and war simulations are handled with the same aesthetics, technology, and functionality, but point beyond the game as a simulation system.”*⁶

- Margarete Jahrmann, *Newsgames, Wargames, Artgames. Kunst gegen Krieg, Krieg durch Spiele?*

*“Most games are copies of existing successful games. They play like other games, resemble their contemporaries in shape and structure [...]. If there’s a vast pool of experiences that contemporary videogames are failing to tap, then there’s just as a large pool of aesthetic and design possibilities that are being ignored.”*⁷

- Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*

6 Jahrmann 2016, p. 361. Translated by LF.

7 Anthropy 2012, p. 5.

Introduction

*“The game industry is a huge driver of gun culture, pushing specific gun brands and gunmetal shader aesthetics”*⁸, writes Robert Yang in an artist statement about his game *The Tearoom* (2017). This game is a historical bathroom simulator about gay cottaging in which *“you service a fellow gun owner’s ‘gun’ from the side”*⁹. The fleshy guns at the guys’ trousers appear to be cyborgian human-gun-entanglements, the ultimate insertion of a gun into the body. According to Yang, replacing genitals with guns *“to appease this oppressive conservative gamer-surveillance complex”*¹⁰ not only prevents this game from being banned from being streamed on Twitch, but also ensures *“a variety of shapes”*¹¹. Yang writes: *“Therefore, there is no basis for Twitch to ban my game, like it banned the rest of my games – however, if they still ban my game, then it will be the first time in history that the game industry regulates and bans a game about guns”*¹². Guns are probably *“the only thing that the game industry will never moderate nor ban”*¹³, as Yang sums it up: *“Now, there’s nothing wrong with guys appreciating other guys’ guns, right?”*¹⁴

When searching the Unity Asset Store for “weapon”, it gives 7,300 results. For “gun” it is 2,890 results, for “peace” it is only 69¹⁵. Even though these numbers are very low in comparison to 14,339 results for “environment” or 19,178 for “character”, it doesn’t change the fact that there are thousands of gun models.

According to Eugen Pfisters infographic on video games and depictions of contemporary and historic war, included in *WASD 13*, the term “war” appears in 170 titles of video games, whereas the term “peace” only does appear in the title of one¹⁶. This seems to be emblematic of video games, as they are most commonly associated with violence, war and combat (due to most games having these as their main mechanics) rather than with peaceful activities¹⁷. As Gareth Schott writes in *Violent Games* about the connection *“in peoples’ minds between mass shootings and game violence”*¹⁸ and on the political discussion of the Columbine High School massacre from 1999: *“This argument went on to become one of the most conspicuous and espoused explanations, eclipsing gun control,*

8 Yang 2017a.

9 Ibid.

10 Yang 2017b.

11 Yang 2017a.

12 Ibid.

13 Yang 2017b. Emphasis in italics in the original.

14 Ibid.

15 As of 22.08.2023, 19:58.

16 Cf. Pfister 2018a.

17 Cf. Schott 2016, p. 1.

18 Ibid, p. 2.

bullying, and the domestic terrorist agenda set out by the killers”¹⁹. Schott also states that “*games constituted an easier target than the more politically perilous topic of gun control*”²⁰, even though it seems logical to assume that restricted access to guns also reduces the use of them. As Derek A. Burrill notes in *Die Tryin*’:

*“The public and the media have postulated connections between actual violence and violence represented (or performed) in videogames, regardless of whether scientific studies have shown any clear connection between the two (although recent research has identified some correlations). [...] These comments are (of course) never followed up with any mention of genuine gun control measures, or other possible causes or solutions.”*²¹

I personally don’t want to give any space to popular discussions about video games causing real-life violence, because this isn’t productive and it is just not scientifically proven – in fact, there is even research suggesting the opposite as well, violent games being helpful to reduce stress and aggression in the people who play them, games therefore actually may preventing real-life violence²². But as of now there just isn’t any clear evidence indicating the increase or decrease of aggression in gamers who play violent games.

My standpoint is always one that doesn’t condemn games as a whole (or any other medium, because to me from a media scientific point of view, media is first and foremost neutral, as it literally just *mediates*), but one concerning a lack of creativity regarding game themes and mechanics, and one that pleads for broadening our understanding of what a game can be in order for this medium to strive towards its potential²³. The following parts of this essay explore the history of

19 Ibid. Cf. also Studying Pixels 2022a and Galloway 2006, p. 71, the latter calling this the “*Columbine theory*”.

20 Schott 2016, p. 3.

21 Burrill 2008, pp. 22-23.

22 Cf. for example Campbell 2014. Interesting to include here would be also a discussion of the age ratings for video games in relation to violent or other adult-themed content, cf. for an introduction to that for example kiro talks 2023 and Rocket Sloth 2023. Cf. also for example RetelFactor 2021 regarding the infamous “hot coffee” mod/controversy surrounding sexual content in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004). (*Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013) will be discussed later.) Cf. also NeverKnowsBest 2023 regarding “concerned parents” about video game violence. Cf. also Studying Pixels 2022a, Studying Pixels 2022b and Müllner 2022, pp. 13-14.

23 I am in line here with for example Jonathan McIntosh, who noticed the overrepresentation of combat mechanics in the video games presented when visiting the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in 2017, the most important and largest trade show for video games. McIntosh states that such a combat-focused design is uncreative and that the whole environments of these games are designed with combat in mind – when players are given weapons, this influences their interactions with the world; they then interact with the world *via* their weapons. The popular indie game *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015) is mentioned as a rare exception to that. But, as I would argue, even *Undertale* is heavily based on combat in its very direct critique of combat; its underlying design doesn’t escape combat’s dominance at all. Cf. Pop Culture Detective 2017. Cf. also for example Munt Chunk 2023, TC: 00:10:42-00:13:23. For a great video essay that can serve as connecting combat-focused design in digital games with Gareth Schott’s thoughts on mass shootings cf. Jacob Geller 2019a. Geller also made a great video on headshots in video games that can provide further insights, cf. Jacob Geller 2019b.

video games regarding the military-entertainment complex, talk about different modes of play and game rules as well as video game ethics. This essay will also discuss different machinima and virtual performance artworks, and will look at different strategies of countering combat mechanics, militarism and violence in video games.

I

Video Game History as Board Game Remediation

Like most of technology, digital games as well have a historic entanglement with the military²⁴. But this doesn't just apply to digital ones, but analogue games like board games and other toys, especially children's toys, as well. "After all, digital games did not become mainstream objects until the 1970s, while play has been central to human culture for millennia [...]"²⁵, writes Alenda Y. Chang in the introduction to *Playing Nature*. And: "[...] [E]ven though digital games have greatly proliferated in terms of both quantity and variety, we would do well to remember that digital games are just a subset of games, in general, and that games are themselves a subset of playful activity"²⁶. "Just as war has accompanied people throughout history, so has the preoccupation and playfulness with the topic. Every past time, era and epoch had toys inspired by war"²⁷, says historian Christian Rollinger in an episode on war games of the arte series *Art of Gaming*. Sebastian Deterding writes in his text *Living Room Wars*:

*"War, games, and simulation have always been closely intertwined. The oldest known boardgame surviving in its original shape, the Chinese Go, represents troop formations and has been used as strategic training for more than two millennia [...]. Western military wargames originated from amended versions of Chess in late eighteenth-century Germany, and quickly spread as an integral tool for strategic planning and training through military academies around the globe."*²⁸

Deterding observes that historians either neglect "boardgaming's digital heir, the video wargame"²⁹ or neglect board games and center the technological history of games instead of "where video wargames got their ideas, rules, and settings"³⁰ from. Deterding approaches wargames with Bolter/Grusin's very influential concept of remediation and as inherently transmedial, and thus digital wargames got their military relationship not only from digital technology, but from the history of board games as well, and in Europe especially remediated versions of chess³¹. *Dungeons*

24 I would like to point out with Claudia Costa Pederson that "contemporary video games have multiple historical origins, including one that is rarely acknowledged in game studies, in the field of ecology" (Pederson 2021, p. 101). As I have for example mentioned in my bachelor's thesis, theme parks are another one of these origins. But these other origins are just not the focus of this essay.

25 Chang 2019, p. 9.

26 Ibid.

27 Art of Gaming 2017, TC: 00:05:18-00:05:34.

28 Deterding 2010, p. 21. Emphasis in italics in the original.

29 Ibid., p. 22.

30 Ibid.

31 Cf. Ibid., pp. 22-24. Cf. also Müllner 2022, pp. 211-247.

and *Dragons* (Tactical Studies Rules, 1974), the first pen-and-paper RPG that is still popular and well-known today, “was designed by two wargamers”³² and added a fantasy-medieval turn to analogue wargames³³. “[...] [C]omputer role-playing games and first-person shooters are digital remediations that owe many game mechanics to their role-playing (and, therefore, wargaming) predecessors”³⁴. Deterding mentions the popular *Warcraft* franchise by Blizzard Entertainment as transmedial with remediations from board game to video game and the other way around³⁵. Interestingly, the *Warcraft* franchise started with strategy games played from a top-down perspective akin to board games and strategic map planning associated with military practices, but is probably best known for the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) – thus, kind of mirroring (video) game history moving from distanced, abstracted strategic planning to more individual character-centered role-playing³⁶. Fittingly, Fabian Siegismund, who has a military background himself, describes in the aforementioned *Art of Gaming* episode that being a soldier is similar to playing a first-person shooter with a more personal connection to the people around you, but when climbing up the career ladder, it gets more strategic, impersonal and abstract with tactical planning on a map³⁷. The top view onto the map of course being the most common point of view of board games.

When playing some city-building and real-time strategy games in my teenage years like *The Settlers II (10th Anniversary)* (Blue Byte & Funatics, 2006), *Imperium Romanum* (Haemimont Games, 2008) or *March of Empires* (Gameloft, 2015)³⁸, I wasn’t quite aware at the time of the very explicit colonial-imperialist sentiment of “colonize and conquer” that these games are based upon and that they indulge in. The trailer for *The Settlers II (10th Anniversary)* even highlights the ability to colonize as a seemingly positive selling point³⁹. In these games one doesn’t feel a personal connection to any avatar (although, in case of the Settlers, they are indeed quite *knuffig*), but just delegates tasks to playing pieces. What is important to point out here is the ideology that video games inherited from (militaristic) board games, to once again quote Sebastian Deterding:

32 Deterding 2010, p. 27.

33 Cf. also Bogost 2010, p. xiii.

34 Deterding 2010, p. 27.

35 Ibid., p. 28.

36 Cf. for an impression of the historic development for example Zet GameZ 2022.

37 Art of Gaming 2017, TC: 00:07:38-00:08:42.

38 By the way, I would classify me playing *March of Empires* back in 2017 or something retrospectively as my first online game intervention/field research, as I there too was interested in playing this game without engaging in combat. I will write about this experience at some other point. Interesting videos on free-to-play games and their monetization strategies are for example STRG_F 2018 and Game Two 2021. There will be a short passage on micro-transactions in *GTA Online* later as well.

39 Cf. GOG 2013.

*“When the designers of the first video wargames basically copied the rule systems of boardgames, including the exact game variables (e.g., movement, firepower, armor) and numerical values of playing pieces, they also copied the specific claim board wargames made about how the world in general and wars in particular function.”*⁴⁰

The first video wargames were, according to Deterding, developed by boardgamers and they “imported the historical and fictional settings”⁴¹ of these, as well as directly adapted board games, like Chris Crawford did for his game *Tanktics*, “the first commercial video wargame”⁴². The step from board game to digital game meant an “invizibilization [sic!] of the game rules”⁴³, as “software [...] prevents users from studying and manipulating its code”⁴⁴, at least without the corresponding programming knowledge and additional tools, and thus a decrease in accessibility regarding player-made modifications.

40 Deterding 2010, p. 35.

41 Ibid., p. 31.

42 Ibid., p. 30.

43 Ibid., p. 34.

44 Ibid., p. 36.

II

The Misuse of Army Equipment and the Emergence of the Military-Entertainment Complex, or: Video Game History as Military Technology History

The development of video games and other technology is especially closely tied to the First World War and the Second World War, and they, as Ian Bogost writes in the foreword to *Joystick Soldiers*, “have become ever more intertwined since World War II, thanks both to the commercialization of wartime technologies (including the system that would become the Internet), and the technological mediation of war itself”⁴⁵. Deterding states: “Before and during World War I, Europe was literally flooded with war-themed toys and games [...]”⁴⁶. “The closer the war came, the more armaments were put into children’s rooms”⁴⁷, writes Ernst Strouhal as well in the introduction to *Agon und Ares* regarding the First World War. Analogue games and toys acted as containers of ideology and taught children about weapons and war during World War I⁴⁸.

The German theorist Friedrich Kittler famously described media technology as a misuse of army equipment; in a text accordingly titled *Missbrauch von Heeresgerät*, Christian Huberts writes:

*“The First World War shaped isolated radio broadcasts into mass entertainment. A little later, the world owes television, space travel and computers to the Second World War. The pioneers of the video game are also – in the old French meaning of the word – foot soldiers. When there were no wars to simulate, rocket trajectories to calculate or communist thinking to understand, they misused their military calculating machines to play games. [...] Games would be unthinkable without the Second World War. No, not because it occurs so often in them, but because war technology is used as entertainment during time of peace. The military legacy of video games still defines them today.”*⁴⁹

“[T]he military’s contributions to video gaming are embedded in the very material fabric of the earliest of game technologies”⁵⁰. Military technology was developed into game machines; the knowledge for video game technologies comes from the military and the first games were

45 Bogost 2010, pp. xii-xiii. Cf. also NeverKnowsBest 2023.

46 Deterding 2010, p. 24.

47 Strouhal 2016, p. 9. Translated by LF.

48 Ibid, pp. 9-10.

49 Huberts 2018a, p. 101. Translated by LF.

50 Huntemann et al. 2010, p. 4.

developed in the context of government and military facilities, and the ideology of the military didn't just disappear⁵¹:

*“Video games hand out medals and define hierarchies with a self-evidence that should make you think. But even a supposedly anti-war game like This War of Mine hardly moves away from the military's planning games and logistical control fantasies.”*⁵²

Referencing McKenzie Wark, Huberts calls the resulting entanglement between the entertainment industries and the military-industrial complex *“military entertainment complex”*⁵³, or, as for example Martin Ganteföhr terms it specifically for video games, *“games as militainment”*⁵⁴. Ganteföhrs text *Nahtoderfahrungen*, which is a very insightful self-described *“autobiographic walk through the military-industrial complex”*⁵⁵, deals with him (and his students) visiting the IT²EC (International Training Technology Exhibition and Conference), which is a trade show demonstrating simulations and visualisations for about every part of a contemporary army⁵⁶. Ganteföhr also describes how British soldiers were playing war as a training while he passed them on a bike as a child at the end of the 1970s to play games like *Battlezone* (Atari, 1980) on an arcade machine. Meanwhile, this game was modified into being a training game for the US army called *The Bradley Trainer*⁵⁷. On the increasing graphical realism and technical capabilities of these games he notes: *“It is war like never before, and Only-A-Game like never before”*⁵⁸, hinting at the increasing intertwinement of war and games, he later describes the historic dimensions of that:

“Now I am learning to read the history of computer games as military history. A great line of armament projects related to games leads from 1947 to the present. The Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device: inspired by World War II radar technology. Pong: side development of a military corporation. The Bradley Trainer, the SIMNET program. The creation of DARPA, the internet as military infrastructure. The rise of shooter developer Bohemia Interactive as a powerful military contractor. The triple exploitation of Full Spectrum Warrior: first commercial war game and military tactics simulation, then trauma simulator for the psychological war-wounded. The Institute for

51 Cf. Huberts 2018a, p. 102.

52 Ibid., p. 103. Translated by LF.

53 Ibid., p. 102.

54 Ganteföhr 2018, p. 43. Translated by LF. Cf. also Müllner 2022, p. 44.

55 Ganteföhr 2018, p. 38. Translated by LF.

56 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

57 Ibid., pp. 40-41. Deterding writes, highlighting the mutual interdependency of games and the military: *“Ironically, the arcade game Battlezone was likely inspired by the U.S. Army's own Panther PLATO (1975) training system for tank gunners”* (Deterding 2010, p. 29. Emphasis in italics in the original).

58 Ganteföhr 2018, p. 42. Translated by LF.

Creative Technologies as an academic laboratory of virtual armor, the Serious Games Summit & Challenge as a hotbed for young talent.”⁵⁹

Ganteföhrs description is echoed by others as well. Franz Ablinger for example discusses in his text *Spacewar!* various military games and also notes that electronic music in part originated from military laboratories in Australia⁶⁰. He emphasizes an interdependency between war and computer, epitomized by the assistance of early (proto-)computer systems in the population census, the calculation of ammunition and the encryption and decryption of messages during World War II. “*The Second World War was the first electronic war [...]*”⁶¹, he states, because of an arms race for radar technology; today’s important Silicon Valley was known as Radar Valley before⁶². “[P]layful approaches [were and are still] present in all [military] machines”⁶³. Ablinger describes that “[e]specially the ludic scenarios of the later electronic-mechanical shooting galleries were often used to explain the functions of military developments at public events [...]”⁶⁴. Due to the common financial means of military laboratories and the resulting financial freedom lots of developments originated in these contexts⁶⁵. Sebastian Deterding highlights the importance of the Cold War as well:

*“During the hot years of the Cold War, war and games became practically indistinguishable. The binary logic and finality of nuclear war made it necessary to calculate every possible step and reaction of the enemy in advance, and simulation games built on systems analysis and mathematical game theory promised a scientific solution to this demand. The DoD [U.S. Department of Defense, addition LF] and associated think tanks like the Rand Corporation consequently created whole simulation and gaming departments that designed and ran endless variations of the game ‘Blue’ (U.S.) vs. ‘Red’ (U.S.S.R.) to make the unimaginable predictable and to create the U.S. nuclear war strategy [...].”*⁶⁶

Deterding writes that the military-entertainment complex emerged during and after the 1980s, as “[d]evelopers and their technical breakthroughs in 3D graphics, computer networks, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence were regularly exchanged between the military, academia, and the video

59 Ganteföhr 2018, p. 43. Translated by LF.

60 Cf. Ablinger 2016, p. 319.

61 Ibid., p. 316. Translated by LF.

62 Cf. *ibid.*

63 Ibid. Translated by LF.

64 Ibid., p. 317. Translated by LF.

65 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 318. Cf. also Deterding 2010, p. 21.

66 Deterding 2010, pp. 21-22.

game industry”⁶⁷. The above mentioned think tank Rand Corporation contacted game developers as early as in the 1950s for their war simulations; and over time “*knowledge of military wargaming flowed into the commercial sector*”⁶⁸.

In their introduction to *Joystick Soldiers*, Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne pinpoint the “*Military-Entertainment Complex*”⁶⁹ as well as having “*coalesced during the post-Cold War years*”⁷⁰. During the early years of video gaming the Pentagon, that is the United States Department of Defense, financed some selected military games like the aforementioned *Bradley Trainer*, but expanded its financial backing of games during the following years and decades⁷¹. Huntemann/Payne give a more concrete definition of this military-entertainment complex:

*“Generally speaking, this amorphous hyphenate refers to the commercial and non-commercial linkages between the military sector and its defense firms, and the entertainment industry and its media and software companies. These associations run the gamut from Hollywood films, to ‘serious games’ for military training, to computer-based war modeling software, to theme park rides, to TV programming about war and the armed forces [...]. [...] Thus, unlike the military-industrial complex which describes the nexus of power and influence between defense contractors, the military, and lawmakers post-World War II, the military-entertainment complex is a post-Cold War phenomenon that enjoys considerably more opaque linkages between its numerous constituents, and generates texts that blur the line between entertainment and militarism.”*⁷²

In the 1990s the technical advancements of private companies outdid the ones of the military and therefore the military incorporated them as its norm⁷³. Today, games as a former side product of the military are being integrated into the military again, which Huberts describes as a full circle⁷⁴. He adds: “*Today, game engines are doing a better job of pre- and post-conflict analysis than the military’s own developments could*”⁷⁵. A notable example of military-developed games is *America’s Army* (MOVES Institute, 2002), which I am going to discuss later when talking about Joseph DeLappe’s online performance *Dead-in-Iraq*⁷⁶. *America’s Army* initially didn’t allow its users to create their own modifications; this hostility towards modding of military games is a phenomenon

67 Deterding 2010, p. 22.

68 Ibid., p. 28.

69 Huntemann et al. 2010, p. 3.

70 Ibid., p. 4.

71 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 5.

72 Ibid.

73 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 7.

74 Cf. Huberts 2018a, p. 104.

75 Huberts 2018a, p. 104. Translated by LF.

76 Cf. on this game also Galloway 2006, pp. 78-84.

that Huntemann/Payne observe as well and that contrasts the otherwise “*participatory spirit*”⁷⁷ and user-generated content symptomatic of the gaming community.

Ablinger references Ted Nelson's 1974 publication *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* as symptomatic of a counterculture that sought to “*liberate computers from the clutches of the military machine*”⁷⁸. The goal was for people to write code and add hardware components themselves, and eventually to make hitherto top-secret military technology available without proper training; the technological emancipation of people with the goal of connection to prevent future wars⁷⁹.

The pro-militaristic ideology of these military games is therefore to remain intact and not to be modified by gamers and turned against the developers’ pro-war ideology. As Christian Huberts notes: “*Serious anti-war games remain useless for the military*”⁸⁰.

77 Huntemann et al. 2010, p. 9.

78 Ablinger 2016, p. 323. Translated by LF.

79 Ibid., pp. 323-325. Ablinger also describes that badly produced games were developed during this era as a result of the hype and new accessibility, which nearly crashed the entire industry. He also refers to the famous phenomenon of cartridges of the game *E.T.* (Howard Scott Warshaw, 1982) being buried in New Mexico. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 324. In 2014, these cartridges were actually excavated (cf. for example WIRED 2014).

80 Huberts 2018a, p. 105. Translated by LF.

III

Ludus, Paidia, and the Magic Circle

*“Battlefield only consists of a battlefield. Whoever attempts to leave, is immediately executed.”*⁸¹

How to Disappear: Deserting Battlefield is a machinima by the collective Total Refusal. It poses questions concerning war and desertion in the video game *Battlefield V* (EA DICE, 2018). Specifically, it examines the impossibility of revolting against the game’s system of rules: *“A place for peace is not inscribed into the algorithm of a war game”*⁸².

When talking about the rules of games, it seems like a good starting point to talk about some influential concepts in Game Studies referencing Roger Caillois and Johan Huizinga. For example Astrid Ensslin, drawing upon Roger Caillois, subdivides games into the two opposite modes *“unstructured play (paidia) and rule-based gaming or gameplay (ludus)”*⁸³. Derek A. Burrill describes these two forms of play as follows: *“Paidia is free and unfettered, less structured, and is often associated with the fantasy play of children. Ludus, on the other hand, is controlled, ruled by conventions, thoughtful, and skill-oriented”*⁸⁴. In his dissertation on modding and artistic research, Thomas Hawranke writes that, according to Caillois, especially children play *paidia* and that *paidia* is fun via chaos with unstable rules, whereas *ludus* is about overcoming difficulties and artificial tasks and the players comparing each other⁸⁵. Every game exists in this *“spectrum between order and chaos”*⁸⁶. *“Ludus follows paidia”*⁸⁷, writes Hawranke. *Ludus* stabilizes the rules following every phase of *paidia*, as somehow rules always emerge over time while playing. *Ludus* transforms unregulated play into a regulated one. In his dissertation, Hawranke wants to show the opposite in computer games, *paidia* following *ludus* and moving from *ludus* back to *paidia*⁸⁸. Stephan Schwingeler states in *Kunstwerk Computerspiel* that one can translate *ludus* as game, and *paidia* as play(ful)⁸⁹. The second relevant idea from Caillois is subdividing games into the four categories *agôn* (games of competition), *alea* (games of chance), *mimicry* (games of theatre and, like the

81 *How to Disappear*, TC: 00:01:41-00:01:48.

82 *Ibid.*, TC: 00:03:39-00:03:44. Cf. also Müllner 2022, pp. 89-92.

83 Ensslin 2014, p. 23. Cf. also Ryan 2001, p. 188, where Marie-Laure Ryan talks about a recent cultural shift from *ludus* to *paidia*. In this essay, I will write *paidia* and not *paidea*, as for example Grant Tavinor and Rachael Hutchinson do; cf. Tavinor 2009, p. 87 and Hutchinson 2017, p. 167.

84 Burrill 2008, p. 42.

85 Cf. Hawranke 2018, pp. 23-24.

86 Hawranke 2018, p. 23. Translated by LF.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 24. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

88 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

89 Cf. Schwingeler 2014, p. 43.

concept in biology, imitation) and *ilinx* (games of vertigo and dizziness)⁹⁰. In a talk printed as part of the book *Agon und Ares*, Helmut Lethen and Thomas Macho talk about these concepts and that they all can be located within real-life, serious war as well: whereas the competition of *agôn* and the element of randomness in *alea* seem self-explanatory; *mimicry* can be found in the form of medial stagings, re-enactments and performances, and *ilinx* as intoxication, addiction and drugs used on soldiers to enhance their will to fight⁹¹.

Games constitute a space in which their rules apply, which has been referred to with Johan Huizinga's term *magic circle*, meaning a space with its own rules separate from the outside reality⁹². Schwingeler explains that this concept actually was introduced by Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman in *Rules of Play*, and in fact isn't an idea that is overtly present in Huizinga's 1938 publication *Homo Ludens*⁹³. Schwingeler states that one can't change the fundamental rules of computer games easily, in the same way as one can't change the laws of physics, therefore, rules always apply automatically, no matter whether one accepts them or not. He therefore talks about an absence of a *magic circle* in computer games, which constitutes the difference between them and traditional analogue games⁹⁴. Even though he is right to a certain extent, I would disagree with Schwingeler here, because when playing traditional games, you also don't have to accept the rules: I can take a chess figure into a doll house and play with it, only that I then do not play chess – or do I? And if I would for example extract the Alice avatar from *American McGee's Alice* (Rogue Entertainment, 2000) and place her in *Portal* (Valve, 2007), I definitely wouldn't play *American McGee's Alice* anymore as well, but I would definitely reference it in an intertextual/intermedial way, and so the game would still be present as a subtext shimmering through. Is it therefore possible to both accept and not accept a game's rules, only not both at the same time?

Not dissimilar to Schwingeler, Burrill points out:

“Far from being foregrounded then, rules seem to hover in the distance, coming to life usually only when there is a dispute between players. If much of the videogame play is created by males for males, what does this say about the rule structures of the games? [...] Rules in videogames tend to vary quite a bit from genre to genre, but in general, programmers attempt to erase the presence of the rules to give the player the feeling of total freedom and choice. This is not to say that within the games the

90 Cf. for example Burrill 2008, pp. 42-43; Ensslin 2014, p. 23; Hawranke 2018, pp. 17-25; Ryan 2001, p. 182 and Schwingeler 2014, pp. 45-46.

91 Cf. Lethen et al. 2016, pp. 18-19.

92 Cf. also Müllner 2022, p. 16.

93 Cf. also Zimmerman 2012. Zimmerman states there: *“The magic circle, as put forward in Rules of Play, is the relatively simple idea that when a game is being played, new meanings are generated. These meanings mix elements intrinsic to the game and elements outside the game.”* (ibid.)

94 Cf. Schwingeler 2014, pp. 42-43, footnote 60. Cf. also Bareither 2016, p. 58, footnote 185.

rules are not important. In fact, when examined closely, videogames are extremely structured and rule bound. [...] The player must follow the logic of the game to win – really, to play at all. Arguing or bargaining with the software does not work.”⁹⁵

“[V]ideogames fall under all of the rubrics set out by Caillois”⁹⁶, Burrill writes, and *paidia* and *ludus* are both present. On these rubrics of games he also states that, according to Caillois, *ilinx* and *mimicry* are suppressed on a societal level in the so-called process of “civilization” in favor of *agôn* and *alea*⁹⁷. What becomes clear here and as he explicitly notices as well: “*To a certain extent, the work of Huizinga and Caillois points to an outdated style of scholarship and masculinity, as well as an outdated notion of play*”⁹⁸. Sebastian Möhring criticizes Caillois and Huizinga as well, stating: “*Huizinga and Caillois can be called representatives of the romantic theory of play in that they make play appear as a realm of freedom as opposed to the restrictions of the everyday life. [...] And since the restrictions of a game are self-imposed, playing a game counts as a free choice of self-imposed restrictions*”⁹⁹.

It is always good to take any historical theoretical writings with grains of salt, but for the sake of this text I still would like to keep them in mind, especially the differences between *ludus* and *paidia* and also the idea of the *magic circle*. Hawranke states that the latter becomes fragile in the fathoming of the borders and rules of games and that, according to Sybille Krämer, a game slows down and pauses time¹⁰⁰. Even though games are only a “*simulation of freedom*”¹⁰¹, rules and freedom don’t contradict each other, but a game is rather in a constant oscillation around these two. There also is an ambivalent seriousness in playing, as it becomes real for the players within the *magic circle*; the freedom of action despite rules and limitations constitute the fun¹⁰². Huizinga juxtaposes play/unseriousness and seriousness, as Christoph Bareither writes as well¹⁰³. Bareither notes:

“Second, game theory describes playful activities as rule-oriented. Here, too, there are more pointed perspectives that argue that no game would be possible without fixed rules. A cursory glance at playful imitations or the improvising and constantly changing rules of children's play already calls this into question. Thus, we would have to start from a very broad concept of rules, which also

95 Burrill 2008, p. 40.

96 Ibid., p. 43.

97 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

98 Ibid., p. 7.

99 Möring 2014, p. 1.

100 Cf. Hawranke 2018, p. 17.

101 Ibid., p. 32. Translated by LF.

102 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 18 and p. 22.

103 Cf. Bareither 2016, p. 60.

includes fleeting and changing routines and meanings. However, the orientation towards rules is then no longer a specific characteristic of playful activities. Because all cultural practices follow principles or routines that can be understood as rules in the broadest sense.”¹⁰⁴

With Hawranke, I would also like to add the notion of formality or informality of games:

“The limitations of these game spaces are binding and are acknowledged by the players in the course of playing, just like the rules. [...] The rules specify how formal or informal a game is. This makes the time window in which a game is played more definable. Playing with a doll can be interrupted suddenly and resumed just as flashily. In chess, repeated entry and exit is less possible. [...] By entering the magic circle, its inherent rules suddenly make sense. Only within the circle do they have their validity, and often they are only applicable there.”¹⁰⁵

On the *magic circle* and war games, Ernst Strouhal states:

“War games are cold chambers of sociability. Their play requires a thoroughly armored ego of the player, and the consciousness of the game is highly ambivalent: on the one hand, it must be forgotten during the game that it is being played (otherwise every game would be merely boring), on the other hand, every game must also take place in the consciousness that it is only being played (otherwise the game, like war itself, would be unbearable, infinitely vicious, infinitely cruel). Although in the 'magic circle of the game' (Johan Huizinga), inhibiting superego instances are suspended, but nonetheless the game, and especially the war game, remains a space full of bureaucratic rules that leave no room for discretion and to which the player submits.”¹⁰⁶

With all of this in mind, the question would then become of course, whether one can break the Huizingian *magic circle* of the game at all and still be playing – every game definitely requires some sort of agreement as where the game ends and where reality starts. When leaving the *magic circle* of a video game, depending on the type of game, one’s avatar might just exist in a virtual environment but not in a game state anymore. But still, contrary to Schwingeler, a kind of *magic circle* exists, that one can enter and exit within a virtual environment, even though one technically still is playing a video game while just existing in a virtual space and not explicitly playing the actual game as intended. I would argue, that a virtual environment encapsulates the *magic circle*

104 Bareither 2016, p. 60. Translated by LF.

105 Hawranke 2018, p. 21. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

106 Strouhal 2016, p. 11. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

separately in the case of video games, in which one can still *act playful* while not strictly playing the game in the intended way.

Thinking about war again, it appears to be an inherently strange venture to “play” reality, as it just isn’t possible, as every game by definition resides outside the rules of reality, and especially games can, as illustrated by Strouhal, first and foremost only simulate reality. One couldn’t play reality, one couldn’t play “real” war. Reality and game couldn’t exist together, couldn’t be approached with the same mindset, one would conclude. “*It is war for its own sake. No one asks what it’s for, and when it’ll be over*”¹⁰⁷: War as a game would have to become flawed and inaccurate for it to still be a game, and a game seems to be played without reaching “real” goals, but inside its own separate realm, the *magic circle*.

*“In order to be fun to play, war is made convenient and aesthetically consumable. Complex, ambivalent situations and moral uncertainty are primarily avoided. In the game’s logic, there is only friend and foe. There is no space for an ambivalent figure like the deserter.”*¹⁰⁸

107 *How to Disappear*, TC: 00:06:53-00:07:01.

108 *Ibid.*, TC: 00:10:23-00:10:45.

IV

Leaving Without Leaving: Players Threatening the *Magic Circle* by Cheating in *GTA V*

Deserting a game, leaving – impossible without quitting?

United Ranger Films' *Diary of a Camper* is considered one of the first machinimas ever made¹⁰⁹. In it, a group of players encounter a camper: another player hiding somewhere, strategically using the game's world for their own advantage¹¹⁰. In *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, Anna Anthropy writes: "Diary of a Camper is widely remembered as the first game demo interested purely in storytelling, rather than presenting a sample of play footage"¹¹¹. Camping is considered an unfair playstyle.

A related figure to the camper is the griever. Grievers similarly are a phenomenon within MMOs, they are players who annoy others and destroy their fun, often times with the usage of cheats¹¹².

According to Burrill, these are all common phenomena in the relation between player and rules:

*"In some cases when the rules cannot be bent, players attempt to cheat. This can include breaking the rules to gain an advantage, breaking the rules to lessen an opponents' advantage, using a 'walk-through' manual so that the players' progression becomes a scripted matter, and/or breaking the rules in order to suspend game play without actually leaving the state of play."*¹¹³

Grievers are therefore still in a state of play, especially in some of the more loosely structured MMO games with a strong tendency towards *paidia* like *Grand Theft Auto Online* (Rockstar North, 2013). As a completionist, I am usually quite stressed by MMOs being regularly updated with new content, and they are for this and other reasons a genre I don't engage with that often; the same goes for lengthy open world games that fill up lots of hours of runtime. Still, these artifacts are culturally significant and definitely worthy of academic discussion.

109 Cf. also Förster 2008 pp. 423-424. Actually, Matt Turner writes that there might be "examples that pre-date it" (Turner 2019), pointing towards Miltos Manetas' *Miracle* that was also released in 1996 (cf. Turner 2019). Cf. also Anthropy 2012, p. 82.

110 Cf. *Diary of a Camper*.

111 Anthropy 2012, p. 82. Emphasis in italics in the original.

112 Cf. Stirnemann 2014.

113 Burrill 2008, p. 41. It is interesting to note that, especially for video games of the previous decades with oftentimes harder and more unforgiving design than more recent ones, playing with such a walk-through manual is quite common or even necessary due to the difficulty and seemingly unfairness. Cf. also for example MarcoStyle 2023, TC: 00:31:03-00:31:22, talking about the common use of a walk-through for players playing early titles of the *Tomb Raider* franchise.

As another quick info dump regarding the emergence of online games, according to Deterding online games originated in play-by-mail games and wargames:

*“Whoever did not find playmates at home could play at a distance with games like Nuclear Destruction (1970), the first professionally marketed play-by-mail (PBM) game. Cultivated by wargame fans, PBM flourished into a vibrant hobby of its own before it was gradually replaced by play-by-email and today’s online games.”*¹¹⁴

I would like to add a quote from Georgie Roxby Smith’s master’s thesis *Art 2.0* on the origins of online game spaces:

*“Beginning with the hooded and gloved immersions of early virtual environments, these technologies have developed through chat rooms, Multi-User Domains (MUD) and MUD Object Orientated virtual rooms and online environments which worked like collaboratively authored text books, evolving from games such as Dungeons and Dragons. It was only a matter of time until technology advanced enough to allow high end 3D graphical forms of these virtual realities to be available on personal computers, accessible to anyone with an internet connection.”*¹¹⁵

With advancements in technology came new possibilities of interaction amongst players and with that new challenges. Coming now back to the phenomenon of griefing in more contemporary online games, the Oppressor MK II is a vehicle within *GTA Online*, that is notorious for being used for griefing¹¹⁶. In the words of YouTuber Ocean Powell: *“Three million dollar rocket bikes that put the players at unfair advantages over less well-off players”*¹¹⁷. For years, gamers begged for it to be nerfed (made less powerful for a more balanced gameplay), until it finally received an update in 2022¹¹⁸. In this case, an in-game vehicle was used to play against the game and steal the fun within the game’s rules, while of course still being in a playful state, at least on the side of the griefer. My own avatar was grieved lots of times by players using this vehicle, but my character was also put in

114 Deterding 2010, p. 27. Emphasis in italics in the original.

115 Roxby Smith 2011, p. 12. Cf. also Plant 1997, pp. 46-50 on the emergence of the internet and Ted Nelson’s *Project Xanadu*.

116 *“When confronted with experienced players who lurk on beginner’s games to find easy prey, the new gamer may experience a disconnect with certain weapons [...]”* (Lukas 2010, p. 87). Cf. also TGG 2023.

117 Dark Space 2019, TC: 00:25:08-00:25:14. On a side-note, even though it is generally a decent video, one should take these YouTube opinion pieces that aren’t as verifiable well researched as some video essays, with a grain of salt. I wouldn’t universally trust a YouTuber who includes *“UGLY FEMALES”* in a list about issues with *GTA Online*, whether meant as a joke or not (Dark Space 2019, TC: 00:23:44-00:23:58).

118 Cf. TGG 2022.

a cage by someone, sent to a party on the island Cayo Perico against my intentions, or a vehicle my avatar uses for transporting goods to sell suddenly started to fly, fly away without me having any control over it. In episode 35 of the *Studying Pixels* podcast, a similar situation is described in *GTA V*, where griefing is defined as a player purposefully focussing on displaying dominance by repeatedly killing and annoying a specific avatar of another player until one of them gets bored/frustrated and quits the game¹¹⁹. Griefing as not playing by the rules is described as cruel here. Still, one has to expect these things to happen; in the *magic circle* of for example a boxing ring, you have to expect getting punched since you sign up for a fight, but outside of the boxing ring you normally shouldn't just punch someone¹²⁰. The morality of virtual violence also depends on whether there is an honorable goal/intention behind it; killing lots of NPCs in order to, according to the game's narrative, for example saving the world could be considered such an honorable intention¹²¹.

It is interesting to note, that the addition of powerful futuristic vehicles not only encourages griefing, but also alters the quasi realistic timeline of the connected *GTA V* game¹²². Another regularly referenced example for this is the game's orbital cannon, a possible upgrade for the "facilities", which are militaristic underground bases. This orbital cannon is a laser shooting out of the sky with the sole purpose of precisely targeting players, but that also costs a lot of in-game money for each individual shot in an attempt by the developers to balance out its power¹²³.

I would situate camping and griefing along the same line of cheating practices as modding and hacking, specifically as they similarly play against the game and fair play in some way, even though vastly different. The definition of the terms "modding", "hacking" and "cheating" remains vague and they are used very much interchangeably in popular discourse when talking about video games and about *GTA Online* specifically. Camping for example obviously is a technique of cheating but, contrary to hacking and modding, without altering the game and its code, instead it displays knowledge about the game environment and it is thus a "clever" strategic practice. I would associate modding more with additional content created for a game and therefore as an artistic practice, whereas hacking alters the code and attacks the game. The use of a so-called "mod menu"¹²⁴ can spawn in various assets, but it can also activate an invulnerability-unlocking "god mode", which

119 Cf. *Studying Pixels* 2022b.

120 Cf. *ibid.*

121 Cf. *ibid.*

122 Cf. Dark Space 2019, Dark Space 2021 and Zwiezen 2018.

123 Cf. also for example TheProfessional 2022, TC: 00:36:18-00:37:21, calling it "*the worst part of the update*" and stating: "*The orbital cannon forever changed GTA Online*". Cf. also TGG 2023. On a side-note, there is a nice video essay by Jacob Geller on orbital lasers as well, cf. Jacob Geller 2023. Cf. also Metz 2010, pp. 139-140.

124 Cf. also Mors Mutual Insurance 2023.

seems to me more like a hack altering variables in the game's code than a mod – like I said, the terms remain imprecise, even though “cheating” seems to be a suitable umbrella term to me¹²⁵.

Modding and hacking also bring moral dilemma with them for everyone involved that griefing and camping do not. To give an example from *GTA Online*, one time while playing the Diamond Casino Heist, the only other player that joined was a person who glitched through the heavy vault door and took a lot of the stored valuables with them, while I had to wait, because the mission progress froze displaying a message that I have to wait until my other team member catching up with me, even though I would have been the one having to catch up with them. After emptying the vault, the other player teleported our escape vehicle across the map to the buyers in the blink of an eye. It was a quite efficient and rewarding heist, but it wasn't much fun and no challenge, as the other player just did everything for me while I *was forced* to wait and couldn't do a lot. At another time, during the Adversary Mode *Assault on Cayo Perico*, a player on my team spawned in tanks, that overpower the more restricted selection of weaponized vehicles provided during this mode. The spawning of powerful vehicles that go contrary to the level design is outplaying the *magic circle* by destroying fun in boring mayhem, eliminating all challenge and frustrating the opponent team. I don't begrudge players wanting to make sure to get as much reward money as possible, but to impose this onto me without my consent isn't fair. It also poses the question whether it makes me guilty of cheating as well whenever I am necessarily participating in a heist with a cheating team member or when I would use a tank myself that was spawned in by another person.

Will people always (attempt to) cheat, even in a well designed game? Is cheating a natural part of a game, and part of the fun? While playing *Risen 2: Dark Waters* (Piranha Bytes, 2012), which I will briefly discuss later in part 6 of this essay, I encountered some game-breaking bugs and situations near the end where I felt that the in-game currency and experience points weren't properly balanced, and so I made use of the in-game cheat console to make up for that. If one makes their character too high-leveled and rich that way, the game becomes boring as well. But as this is a single-player game, it doesn't matter to me that much, as I don't drag other players into that. Games always bring a negotiation of rules and expectations with them, an invisible contract that every player signs with it, and if for example players who want to experience a game “vanilla” are forced by other players to break their contract with the game, it of course results in experiencing frustration.

125 A discussion on the Arqade forum also exemplifies this lack of precision, cf. Arqade 2015. Markus Bauer uses the more general term cheater as well, cf. Bauer 2020.

Considering that cheating in multiplayer games constitutes quasi-violent acts of forcefulness, cheating practices seem to connect well with masculinity. Derek A. Burrill sees masculinity as a tool and technology of domination:

*“That is to say that masculinity, as a set of practices, is a tool the male uses to navigate, comprehend, and most often dominate or subjugate the object world. This technology of masculinity is typically manifested in the male and the masculine as violence to others (particularly women), and, more often than expected, as pain and violence to one’s own body, as well as figurative violence in the form of hegemonic flows across the socius and the enactment of masculine violent myths and fantasies. Masculinity can be thought of as itself foundational to Western notions of technology as force and tool, as well as a tool for force.”*¹²⁶

Burrill continues by connecting this masculine violence with heteronormativity:

*“[...] [I]t becomes clear that the violence of technoscience and technoplay is intimately wrapped up in heteronormative, masculinist imperatives to keep the gender divide stable and unassailable. [...] To overcome his panic [of becoming feminine, addition LF], the digital boy straps on his technological tools, all the better to penetrate you (and anything) with. As both tool and weapon, technoscience inspires the need to prove, and this anxiety is materialized in the form of penetrative and dominating violence, a science-fiction, fantasy-based masculinity.”*¹²⁷

The Oppressor MK II rocket bike could be then described as such a strap-on penetration tool, it even has “oppression” in its name. Burrill also makes the obvious connection to homo-, queer- and transphobia, which is connected to misogyny, by stating that this heteromale violence is “disavowing gay masculinity as ‘soft’ or biologically perverse”¹²⁸. And yet, these masculine enactments of violence can still be turned into a productive force, as Burrill further writes:

“[...] I want to articulate that violence, in some sense, can be a productive force. Like Artaud’s ‘theatre of cruelty,’ the violence I refer to is not the real-world violence of school shootings, but a type of violence that shocks the system into reorganization, a disruptive surge through the circuits of masculine power. Possibly, through an enactment of violence – in live and mediated performance, in videogame play, in virtual subjectivities in the digital imaginary – masculine destructive force can be seen for what it is – not a biological imperative, not a socially determined excess, but a performance,

126 Burrill 2008, p. 14.

127 Ibid., p. 22.

128 Ibid.

a proving that is alterable, reversible, and ultimately something that contains the 'seeds of its own undoing.'"¹²⁹

Griefing becomes such an act of displaying masculine power and superiority, that forces something onto others and that steals their time and kills their joy, but it also could be read as a productive force, even though it is definitely more destructive than productive, in the sense of “destructive” as killing fun and “productive” as playing against ludo-capitalist norms. It is productive by being destructive. One might say that griefing plays against the capitalist framework of productivity and hustle culture that *GTA Online* consists of by negating “productive” play: Being killed by a headshot over and over again by a player’s avatar who deliberately follows my avatar around, prevents me from grinding¹³⁰ criminal businesses, selling virtual cocaine and other goods. But of course, the phenomenon of griefing is just enabled via the game’s inherent design flaws in the first place: Maybe nobody would want to grief, if the in-game items, vehicles and other properties weren’t massively overpriced in comparison to the little money that most of the missions and jobs do offer. There is also a certain capitalist notion present in Caillois’ theory as well, that Burrill observes: “*It is safe to say that for Caillois, play should, to a certain extent, be beholden to work. The best kinds of play are those that teach us how to be better members of the Real*”¹³¹. A connection between reality and game shimmers through here, questioning the separateness of the *magic circle*. Contrary to Caillois and as *GTA Online* illustrates, I think Mark Fisher was right, capitalism is inherently boring (to play)¹³².

Leonhard Müllner writes that lots of games “*introduc[e] the myth of meritocracy*”¹³³ via their “rags to riches”-narratives, in which success is hard-earned by working, and that they “*mak[e] it truer there than it ever was in the physically real world*”¹³⁴. And: “*The new medium creates a paradox: In the burnout chambers of late capitalism, the time-intensive video game, of all things, becomes the top-selling entertainment medium*”¹³⁵. Müllner adds that video games don’t have a “*secondary productivity effect*”¹³⁶, they are thus first and foremost unproductive and thus anti-capitalist. As Grant Tavinor writes in his text *Welcome to the Achievement Machine*, games seem to “*achieve nothing of value*”¹³⁷: “*Video games are just one instance of a human activity the appeal of which*

129 Burrill 2008, p. 23.

130 On grinding, cf. also Pixelbit 2023.

131 Burrill 2008, p. 42.

132 “[...] [T]he boring is everywhere” (Fisher 2018, p. 552).

133 Müllner 2022, p. 42. Translated by LF.

134 Ibid. Translated by LF.

135 Ibid., p. 39. Translated by LF.

136 Ibid., p. 40. Translated by LF.

137 Tavinor 2017, p. 99.

seems nearly universal, but the purpose or value of which is far from clear”¹³⁸. “[...] [F]or to be a fully grown member of society, one must be productive in a way that game-playing impedes”¹³⁹, Tavinor continues. Gaming can be described as a highly performative, transitional practice that, in my view, is definitely both theatrical and artistic. Tyler writes that “many games require huge amounts of time to complete, with much of it spent on game-play that feels quite empty”¹⁴⁰. To quote Tavinor once more:

*“The ludic treadmill is a feature of game design that keeps players playing – and it is common in subscription games that rely on a continuing player base – but it effectively means that because the gamer’s desires for the game rise along with their achievements, any feeling of achievement is transitory.”*¹⁴¹

Total Refusal’s 2022 short film *Hardly Working* is a fitting artifact for analysis of capitalist labour as well: In it, some NPCs are observed doing their work in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios, 2018), and this work is exposed as meaningless, boring and background facade, as errors and repetitions become visible¹⁴². NPCs are only performing their labour in order to be superficially looked at and to pretend realism¹⁴³. The NPCs aren’t progressing, there is no tomorrow for them: “It’s hard to imagine a world without progress. Our faith in tomorrow’s abundance is an imperative to keep everything going. It drives us forward without a sense of direction. In capitalism, the future is an asset, and it’s already been sold”¹⁴⁴. Triple-A games are “billion dollar capitalist investments”¹⁴⁵, and using cheats to extract more value faster out of the game undermines this by saving time. Does a player’s game time belong to the game’s developers? And are players employees of a game that features micro-transactions? “[...] [I]n capitalism, a worker’s time belongs to the person who bought it. To the employer. Idle laborers aren’t just lazy. They are stealing time”¹⁴⁶. In comparison to *GTA V*, for example Maxis’ *The Sims* franchise aims at simulating capitalist life, but does so in a more obvious cartoon-like way and doesn’t include combat as its main mechanic. One could pose the question whether this lack of realism contributes to more fun and whether engaging in ludic-virtual violence as a mechanic gets boring over time.

138 Tavinor 2017, p. 102.

139 Ibid.

140 Tyler 2022, p. 73.

141 Tavinor 2017, p. 103.

142 Cf. *Hardly Working*.

143 Cf. Dirk 2022.

144 *Hardly Working*, TC: 00:13:45-00:14:06.

145 Dirk 2022. Translated by LF.

146 *Hardly Working*, TC: 00:18:37-00:18:49.

“Hyper-realism is the aesthetics of capitalism, it’s the political aesthetics of hyper-capitalism”¹⁴⁷. As members of Total Refusal write:

*“The hyper-realism presents archetypal ideas as reality and thus manages to match with our concept of reality even more than reality itself. After this conception one could ask pointedly whether hyper-realism forms a visual order of reality. In semiotics and the theory of postmodernism, hyper-realism is constituted by the lack of a clear separation between the real and the simulated. [...] An object that emerges out of the condensation of capitalist mythology is mediated as reality.”*¹⁴⁸

In his 2022 dissertation, Total Refusal member Leonhard Müllner describes hyper-realism as “Referenzverdichtungen”¹⁴⁹/densities in references, as an “exaggeration of realism”¹⁵⁰ and as a mere “realism claim”¹⁵¹.

Even though *GTA V* and *GTA Online* offer lots of peaceful activities, albeit still limited, people rather engage in virtual violence, as these games are designed around that and every part of the game ultimately feeds into combat and *agôn*. Müllner notes: “Non-aggressive behavior is made possible, but rarely applied in the game’s world”¹⁵². As Total Refusal and Ismaël Joffroy Chandoutis point out in their 2021 art tour and performance *Everyday Daylight*:

*“[...] [P]eaceful interaction is quite difficult here. And I guess this goes to show one of the conflicts between even hyper-realist open worlds and the gameplay that is kind of embedded in them. Because while Los Santos might feature or might replicate a lot of real-life cultural aspects and portray them and while it’s like a very detailed and open recreation of a real-life city, it’s still very limiting in the gameplay that you’re able to take part in inside the game. Saying that, even though the game allows so many different actions, so actually you can go to play tennis, you can go to the cinema, you can go to hike here, but at the same time, even though the game allows you to have these options, still not many people do these kinds of things, they rather, most of them, prefer to go around shoot people I guess. It is not always the game itself that is limiting, but rather the conditioning you have as a gamer.”*¹⁵³

147 *Everyday Daylight*, TC: 00:24:00-00:24:10.

148 Klengel et al. 2020, p. 2. Translated by LF. Cf. also Müllner 2022, pp. 23-24 and pp. 163-176.

149 Müllner 2022, p. 164.

150 *Ibid.*, p. 174. Translated by LF.

151 *Ibid.* Translated by LF.

152 *Ibid.*, p. 89. Translated by LF.

153 *Everyday Daylight*, TC: 00:17:42-00:19:02.

Griefing spotlights these flaws. The game developers could avoid the urge to grief by balancing the price tags more and by giving more money to players, but thus discouraging them from buying their in-game micro-transactions, “Shark Cards”, with real-life money¹⁵⁴. For instance, every couple of in-game hours players already get some in-game money for “good behavior” when they aren’t acting as a killjoy, but which is only 2,000 GTA\$, next to nothing in the game’s economy. The developers could drastically increase this amount of money, for example to 200,000 or even 2,000,000 GTA\$, and explicitly clarify what exactly counts as “good behavior”, while also rigidly sanctioning “bad behavior”.

“Even the online I feel is flawed, because it has a lot of content, but it encourages griefing, because it feels like that’s the only thing you can really do with the content you unlock, because there is very little meaningful the game allows you to do that you couldn’t do before you unlocked the content other than using it to grief other players.”¹⁵⁵

Camping is players playing against the game within the game for their own advantage, while griefing is in the end beneficial to the developers. The latter discourages playing the actual game and instead encourages buying in-game currency with real-life money, to be able to compete with other players without hustling and loosing for hours. Griefing is frustrating and game developers use this to their financial advantage. None of these phenomena truly subverts the rules. Additionally, as I pointed out earlier on the simulation of freedom in games, *Grand Theft Auto* illustrates that a freedom of choice for the player can only be situated within a game’s ruleset and therefore has to be limited. As Burrill writes on rules:

“This is arguably what made the Tomb Raider franchise so popular – the game environments provided very clear and well-delineated ‘rules’ for the player. However, not all games consist of such obvious rule mechanisms. Often the player may entertain a number of actions and choices in what appear to be wide-open spaces of interaction, such as in the Grand Theft Auto series. There appears to be an almost total absence of rules (and often a freedom to break other social and cultural rules). This ‘set of actions available to a player’ seemingly releases the player from the earlier constraints of the game, that is, until the scenario becomes redundant or a list of tasks is completed.”¹⁵⁶

And:

154 Cf. also Dark Space 2019 and Tactical Bacon Productions 2023a.

155 Tactical Bacon Productions 2023a, TC: 00:14:38-00:14:55.

156 Burrill 2008, p. 77. Emphasis in italics in the original.

*“As periods (and spaces) of ostensibly ‘free’ play, the open spaces encourage the player to endlessly imagine that they can subvert the rules; however, in reality they accomplish a subversion of social rules, but the rules of the game remain intact. For instance, in the Grand Theft Auto series, the player is allowed (encouraged) to run over pedestrians, mug citizens, shoot bystanders, and wreak general havoc. In other words, most games in this genre, manufacture (in fact, often require) a desire in the player to perform acts of violence or destruction throughout the game.”*¹⁵⁷

The *paidia* in *GTA* (and most other open world games as well) is disconnected from the story, which unfolds in a more linear way. The aforementioned feeling of a lack of things to do appears to stem from the fact that open world games are in essence linear with several branches of story available simultaneously to choose when to start them, but the fundamental order in which a story unfolds, cannot be altered by the player, because in most games it is always told linear, games are “*definitively hierarchical*”¹⁵⁸ and not rhizomatic. When discussing *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar North, 2002), Burrill refers to the *paidia* sequences as player-fabricated micronarratives:

*“To a certain extent, the hyperviolence is required for the narrative to move along, but the game can play as a game within a game, in which the player performs random violence as the primary pleasure. Most important, the game appears to offer an ‘experience’ rather than a game. The freedom of exploration and destruction appears to replace the more standard linear structure of the genre. This, however, is not the case at all. [...] What Vice City does offer is the appearance of freedom by allowing the player to explore micronarratives that the player fabricates (for instance, driving around the city, ignoring the narrative site triggers, and killing any police officers until the player is killed).”*¹⁵⁹

Rachael Hutchinson emphasizes the specific role that *paidia/paideia* and *ludus* play in open world games as well, exemplified using *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004):

“Many critics do not distinguish between the sandbox play of exploring the open-ended game environment (‘paidea’) and the mission-centered objectives of the central narrative (‘ludus’). However, for open-ended environments like San Andreas, the distinction between gameplay modes is crucial. [...] The narrative whole is thus made up of different gameplay modes negotiated by the player – as Nate Garrelts observes, ‘the act of playing the game has become an act of choosing which

157 Burrill 2008, p. 78. Emphasis in italics in the original.

158 Ibid.

159 Ibid., p. 82. Emphasis in italics in the original.

content will surface.' The narrative of sandbox play is largely determined by player choice, resulting in a spectrum of activity from the socially acceptable to deranged mayhem. The player chooses whether CJ should help or harm strangers, compliment or insult passersby, indulge in random drive-by shootings or take on ambulance missions, ferrying needy passengers to the hospital. Bill Loguidice and Matt Barton argue that the element of choice in sandbox play makes the game text a mirror of the player's moral compass as well as social values [...]. In this reading, the game system acts as a critique of our own attitudes toward violence."¹⁶⁰

According to Hutchinson, *"the central missions follow a linear script involving a great deal of violence"*¹⁶¹ that players cannot bypass. *Ludus* in *GTA* is similarly violent as *paidia*, and players can only decide whether to participate in the main story or not; but nonetheless peaceful activities are rare and one mainly interacts with the virtual world via weapons. What Hutchinson also notes is the ability of linear *ludus* to frame the action in a distinctive way through the narrative and thus provide players with a *"redemptive rationale for action"*¹⁶². In a retrospective on *GTA V*, YouTuber LazerzZ says that *paidia* outside of these main missions isn't really engaging, or at least not as engaging as the linear *ludus* of the story missions before it gets boring:

*"You can rarely enter buildings outside of specific contexts and even when you can there isn't much to really do in them. The wildlife serves no purpose outside of a hunting mission chain with Trevor, and the people are ultimately just random mindless NPCs for you to kill or ignore."*¹⁶³

Sebastian Möring writes:

*"Playing only the pre-structured missions in Grand Theft Auto V [...] in which we primarily deal with the fear-structure (e.g. chasing or shooting opponents) can become boring so that a player might look for another past-time activity and start playing car races instead. In this case, however, the player is just substituting one innerworldly activity by another one which could potentially turn out to be meaningless [...] and sort of empty, too. GTA V certainly provides a lot of possible past time activities to turn to if other activities become boring. Yet, even to that [...] we need to consider the fear-structure while playing, i.e. we need to take care to not be run over by cars or to be shot in a gang war: Still, this escape from one boring pastime activity to another innerworldly (innerweltlich) pastime activity is no execution of freedom. Such pastime activities are pre-structured activities which are ready-made to choose from."*¹⁶⁴

160 Hutchinson 2017, p. 167. Emphasis in italics in the original.

161 Ibid., p. 168.

162 Ibid., p. 169.

163 LazerzZ 2023, TC: 00:26:19-00:26:35.

164 Möring 2014, pp. 9-10. Emphasis in italics in the original.

LazerzZ also complains about the rule-restrictiveness of these main missions:

“I want to be able to experiment in a sandbox. It feels like the main missions are completely at odds with the design philosophy of the actual world itself, when outside of missions you can just- [interact more feely with the game world, addition LF]. Inside missions, you have to play by a very precise set of rules to complete the missions the exact way Rockstar wants you to [...].”¹⁶⁵

To me, this gets very obvious during car racing sequences, where one necessarily is required to drive through specific (small) markers (on the mini-map and in the game world) in order to progress and to thus slowly “unlock” the finish line. If one misses one of those markers, one must turn around and drive back to it, losing valuable time or advantages over opponents. This narrowly predefined path easily becomes very frustrating:

“And yet, the agency experienced in video games is only an illusion whose fragility results from design decisions and technical and narrative limitations. On the one hand, this attempts to create immersion through visual spectacle (in this, games and films become comparable), which, however, restricts the freedom of action. On the other hand, it offers only a certain number of narrative threads and no unlimited freedom of decision.”¹⁶⁶

“In order to suppress disobedience, liberal ideology propagates the myth of liberty and agency over one's own existence. Here again lies a similarity to open-world video games, which are able to evoke a sense of freedom in us, when in fact we are actually only following the rules of the game and the intentions of the developers. Our room for maneuver is strongly restricted and yet we feel the exact opposite.”¹⁶⁷

As Marco De Mutiis points out, the game’s restrictions and the player overcoming them or succumbing to them is key in what makes a game fun:

“Game mechanics restrict the player’s freedom and structure play, reducing it to a set of predefined rules and discrete choices that are made available by the game software. The tension between play’s freedom and submitting oneself to the constraints of gameplay is one of the pleasures of playing computer games. Is it about mastering the machine or being mastered by it?”¹⁶⁸

165 LazerzZ 2023, TC: 00:34:02-00:34:34.

166 Klengel et al. 2021, p. 2. Translated by LF.

167 Klengel et al. 2021, p. 3. Translated by LF.

168 De Mutiis 2023, p. 254.

In the context of contemporary ludic-virtual violent MMOs it also seems important to mention the observation of YouTuber Arrrash that MMOs these days are a more lonely experience than in previous years, that, as I would argue, a capitalist cleanliness and flawlessness of less players using their microphone due to for example a fear of private background noise, creates alienation¹⁶⁹. And therefore overall less community, individuality and communication in these games. I personally never used a microphone in MMOs as well and remember only vaguely lots of years ago someone using a microphone in *GTA Online*. Instead, communication is rare, and in most cases very gameplay-related and as efficient as possible. Usually, people use Discord or other applications for communicating, having effectively outsourced communication. Supposedly due to the lack of measures against griefing in public lobbies, *GTA Online* also got more solo-focused with previous heists and missions oftentimes requiring at least four people, whereas more recent heists like Cayo Perico can be played solo. In 2022 it was enabled to do business sell missions in private invite-only lobbies as well, at least since then I also didn't play in any public lobby except for missions requiring more than one player. Admittedly, before that I too used kind of a "cheat" to get into a solo public lobby alone and to play in peace by disconnecting and reconnecting my internet in a specific way¹⁷⁰. Also, during the Diamond Casino Heist, I am usually using guiding images from the internet in order to solve the quite difficult hacking mini-games in (less) time.

Regarding the sandbox of the game, LazerzZ also says: "[...] [I]t's violent sandbox in a world that resembles our own, that's just twisted and satirical enough that we don't feel too bad about doing the things we do in *GTA*"¹⁷¹. I would disagree with the aspect of satire, because I don't think that satire has the power to achieve this effect here. *GTA V* is of course very flawed; it has lots of problematic characters, violence, it is actually a failure as a satire of capitalism as its gameplay and narrative aren't cohesive enough regarding this aspect in my view, it is lacking and confusing in story overall and its online mode is repetitively designed. Its sexism, misogyny and other issues like various instances of queerphobia¹⁷² are in my view not justified by it supposedly being a satire or

169 Cf. Arrrash 2022. For a lengthy introduction to the history of MMO games and especially previous MMOs as social spaces cf. NeverKnowsBest 2022.

170 Cf. for example GameSauce 2017.

171 LazerzZ 2023, TC: 00:21:14-00:21:23.

172 To briefly refer to some points and debates, there was and is for example a debate surrounding *GTA V*'s harmful depiction of trans* people and players deliberately beating up trans* people in this game, cf. for example Petit 2021. "*This phenomenon mirrors a tragic reality: Transgender people, and particularly black transgender women, are disproportionately [sic!] the target of fatal violence and hate crimes in the real world*", writes Jessica Conditt (Conditt 2020). And: "*Stereotype does not equal satire*" (ibid). "*There's no shortage of transphobia in and around games [...]*", writes Carolyn Petit (Petit 2021). At time of writing, there is also this absurd debate surrounding banning trans* people from playing chess as a professional sport, which is just transphobic and uses misogynistic

parody, as it is too ambivalent and doesn't distinguish itself enough as a text from seriously bigoted viewpoints with its lack in "*explicit interpretative clues*" as Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin writes in *Video Game Parodies*:

*"For my part, I agree with Linda Hutcheon that parody has always been a fundamentally ambivalent form, and its critical potential has always varied from one production to another, depending on whether the parody attacks the ideologies of its target or only mocks its superficial elements. There is an important difference between a sexist parody and parody of sexism, even if each targets a sexist game. While the former trivializes gender issues, the latter disrupts the status quo and undermines backward ideas about men and women. Humor can serve as a vehicle through which gender inequality is maintained and established when jokes serve as a pretext to repeat sexist representations, but humor can also function as a powerful tool for breaking down deeply rooted preconceptions of men and women when it is carefully used. Because parodies can lead to misunderstandings when their target is not identified or when their irony is not perceived, using them as a means to criticize gender stereotypes and to raise consciousness is always a risky undertaking. Some elements, however, theoretically minimize the risks of confusion such as explicit interpretative clues, direct criticisms, and reflexive devices that raise awareness of the media-making process (mise en abyme, actor's gaze into the camera, display of the filming device, direct address to the viewer, etc.)."*¹⁷³

Members of Total Refusal point out in their text *Im Spiegelkabinett des Hyperrealismus* that *GTA V* as a parodist critique of capitalism can of course not escape capitalism, which would pose the question whether any critique of capitalism can be successful, and it nevertheless still feeds into the argument that *GTA V* doesn't succeed:

*"At the same time, games like GTA V are a typical capitalist paradox – in other words, both a critique of capitalism as well as an entertainment and consumer product, and therefore part of the logic of capitalist exploitation. As an all-encompassing system, capitalism allows nothing outside itself. As a result of this, capitalism critique is not only tolerated, but is rather a deliberate part of the capitalist exploitation loop. Both the eco-movement, as well as the art scene, are two prominent examples of this."*¹⁷⁴

arguments, cf. for example Hansford 2023, BBC News 2023 and Caelan Conrad 2023. There is also harmful gay depiction present in the *GTA* series, for example the character Gay Tony has been criticized as "*an outdated and pretty much non-existent representation of the queer community*" (Johnson 2021). One of the only explicit cases of gay characters in *GTA V* was a random event with two people having incestuous gay sex – the only possible interaction here is to kill them, as they attack the player on sight. When gay characters are connected to incest and it is only possible to kill them, this definitely is harmful, as it invites homophobic player interaction. Cf. as an illustration for example Source Of Game 2020. Cf. also Campbell 2017.

173 Trépanier-Jobin 2017, pp. 91-92.

174 Klengel et al. 2020, p. 3. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

In a great video essay on *The Simpsons* as a failing parody, Jonas Čeika refers to parody as *floating signifiers* or empty shells of projection that can mean anything to anyone¹⁷⁵. *GTA V* is full of these as well, especially the online mode with its Back-to-the-Future-esk flying Deluxo vehicle and other inconsistencies that don't aim at anything but at being a reference itself. Čeika also references Fredric Jameson's writing on postmodernism in which parody is replaced by pastiche¹⁷⁶. Commodified contemporary parody-pastiche with an ironic meta distance to everything lack in critique, and as it becomes clear in *GTA*, "*ironic meta-criticism becomes indistinguishable from what it is criticizing*"¹⁷⁷.

When discussing the intersectionality of race and disability in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, Rachael Hutchinson writes about satire and parody on the character Wu Zi, who is both disabled and a person of color:

*"It has often been noted that many Rockstar games have strong satire and parody elements to make a critical point. The humor in Wu Zi's representation could be acting as satire, pointing to a society that makes others of people with disabilities, just as the open possibilities of paidea and sandbox play point to our own failings in the areas of morals and ethics when playing video games. But many players will not read the text in this way. There is thus a disjunction between the possible intentions of the Rockstar developers, who built a metanarrative of social commentary – relying on savvy and intelligent consumers to see past surface visuals to get the critique – and the vast spectrum of players who can read the text in different ways. When we talk about the whole text, then, do we look at Rockstar's presumed intentions or player responses? These questions bring us back to the hoary chestnuts of literary studies, authorial intent and reader response, but deserve to be explored anew with regard to video games as a medium."*¹⁷⁸

The concept of intertextuality in literature theory interestingly depends on specific knowledge on the side of the audience as well and can easily go over one's head too, at least without the explicitly stated interpretative clues that Trépanier-Jobin mentions. On Ian Bogost's satirical *Cow Clicker* (2010), Tom Tyler too states: "*The danger of satire, of course, is that it not be appreciated as such*"¹⁷⁹.

175 Cf. Jonas Čeika 2020.

176 Cf. *ibid.*

177 *Ibid.*, TC: 00:34:45-00:34:52.

178 Hutchinson 2017, p. 173.

179 Tyler 2022, p. 77.

In her foreword to *Gaming Representation*, Anna Everett refers to the gaming industry as the “*gaming industrial complex*”¹⁸⁰ (GIC), similarly to the military-industrial complex. She also notes the “*GIC’s replication of the film and TV industries’ white male hegemony, notably its enduring ethos of sexism*”¹⁸¹.

“[...] [G]aming’s persistent racial, gender, and sexuality problematics seem particularly disarticulated from our so-called postracial, postfeminist, and post-civil-rights existential imaginary [...]. [...] Adult women far outnumber teenage boys in gaming, and this fact complicates perceptions of the Gamergate debacle [...]. Also, African American and Latino American gamers still play more video games than other demographic groups.”¹⁸²

In a strange contrast to games’ actual audience and to what *GTA* seems to target, “*males, whites, and adults are systematically overrepresented*”¹⁸³ within games. As Jennifer deWinter and Carly A. Kocurek state in their text “*Aw Fuck, I Got a Bitch on My Team!*”:

“*A popular argument around this gender disparity is that games are for boys, and if we made games for girls, more women would enter the field. The numbers, however, do not support this claim: 45 percent of US game players are women of all ages, and the number hovers around 50 percent women players in other countries, as well. Yet women make up only 14 percent of the production side of the industry, with 11 percent working in art and design and the other 3 percent in programming. [...] This points to a problem of culture, not of education, access, or even interest. And this culture was highlighted in November 2012, when Luke Crane casually tweeted, ‘Why are there so few lady game creators?’ In response, hundreds of people who worked in the game industry, primarily women, started the #Ireasonwhy hashtag, through which they cataloged the egregious harassment heaped on women in the industry.*”¹⁸⁴

DeWinter/Kocurek point towards a review for *GTA V* by Carolyn Petit, where she mentions briefly the game’s obvious misogyny and sexism that the supposed satire is unable to account for, for which she was harassed with “*misogynistic and transmisogynistic abuse*”¹⁸⁵ even though she gave the game a very good rating of 9 out of 10¹⁸⁶. To DeWinter/Kocurek, “*defenses of misogyny or*

180 Everett 2015, p. ix.

181 Ibid, p. xi.

182 Ibid., p. x. As Randy Nichols also writes: “*In the U.S., video gamers span surprisingly diverse demographics*” (Nichols 2010, pp. 43-44).

183 Malkowski et al. 2017, p. 6.

184 deWinter et al. 2017, p. 57.

185 Ibid., p. 61.

186 Cf. Petit 2014 and also the comments under the YouTube video GameSpot 2013.

harassment [are] key components of gaming culture”¹⁸⁷ that they describe as an “anachronistic parody of 1950s works culture”¹⁸⁸:

*“The idea that gaming should be a rarified environment for men harkens backward to Victorian-era ideas of separate spheres that placed women squarely outside of public culture. [...] Women belong in a different space, separate from the presumably masculine space provided by video games. While this resonates with a Victorian sensibility – the home as feminized space – we see even more in evidence a spatial segregation more akin to 1950s America. Some male gamers embrace gaming as a last bastion of homosocial male space, fighting to protect it from a slow creeping integration of gender. For these men, women’s presence in games – as players, producers, or even characters – taints the form.”*¹⁸⁹

Chandler Pearson writes on misogyny and stereotyped depictions of Blackness in *GTA V*:

*“[...] [T]he women in GTA are largely characterized as sexual props. They wear skimpy bikinis and mini skirts. Moreover, the only real interactions players have with woman are with female strippers, escorts, and damsels in distress. Moreover, the players are encouraged to commit violent acts towards the women in the game by being provided the option to have sex with a woman (without any requirement of consent from the woman involved) and even to murder them. In addition, some of the escorts in the game are covered in bruises and cuts, therefore suggesting that the women are sites of violence and encouraging players to beat them. Without exposure to non-stereotypical representations of Blacks and females in GTA, players create harmful associations between blackness and criminality and females and sexuality.”*¹⁹⁰

And as Marco De Mutiis observes:

“The representational layer of GTA V reinforces problematic views of gender and race, depicting marginalized groups in contemporary American society using photorealistic computer graphics. Homeless people live in tents in areas littered with garbage under flyovers; transgender individuals exist solely as sex workers outside of nightclubs; and people of color in Los Santos generally fulfill “gangster” stereotypes. This layer is coupled with game mechanics that reinforce the biased representations contained in GTA V. Homeless people have no role in gameplay; they serve no purpose in the main story line and the only interaction possible is for the player to physically attack

187 deWinter et al. 2017, p. 61.

188 Ibid., p. 58.

189 Ibid., p. 60.

190 Pearson 2019.

*them. The transgender sex workers can only ‘be heralded with disgustingly transphobic lines such as ‘Hello, sir. I mean, madam.’ Black characters are more skilled at stealing cars and more likely to take out their guns if provoked by the players.’*¹⁹¹

Tell Me Why (Dontnod Entertainment, 2020) was “the first video game from a major developer to feature a playable transgender character”¹⁹², even though “*independent creators have been making incredible queer content for decades*”¹⁹³. Decolonial storytelling like in the works of Gabriel Massan or Studio Oleomingus still remains rare¹⁹⁴. Müllner observes the game industry’s “*fear of losing the approval of largely white, male consumers and investors with a policy position away from the widest possible consensus – such as the required inclusion of women and minorities, for example*”¹⁹⁵. Even though usually not even this “*widest possible consensus*” remains true for lots of games.

The invisibility of women, cis women, trans* and non-binary people and other marginalized identities can be traced back through video game history and, as we’ve seen in part 2, military technologies as well¹⁹⁶. One could make an argument that the military ideology shines through here:

*“This disparity has a very real precedent both in the history of video gaming and in the history of the underlying technologies. Computing in particular has been historically associated with men in cultural narratives, an association that effaces the real contributions of women computer researchers and programmers and serves to masculinize the field.”*¹⁹⁷

Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm referencing Adrienne Shaw, notice the presence of a “*neoliberal attitude game studios have largely taken to increasing diversity in their titles*”¹⁹⁸ by relocating the responsibility for diversity onto the players themselves and letting them choose to play as diverse characters or avoiding that entirely¹⁹⁹. As video games are, from a standpoint of

191 De Mutiis 2023, pp. 254-255.

192 Hall 2020. Emphasis in italics in the original.

193 Ibid.

194 Cf. for example Seward 2023 and Warren 2020.

195 Müllner 2022, p. 12. Translated by LF.

196 Cf. also Plant 1997.

197 deWinter et al. 2017, p. 59.

198 Malkowski et al. 2017, p. 7.

199 Cf. *ibid.* More in-depth on the “gay button” in video games cf. also the great video essay *How Bisexuality Changed Video Games* by Ada Černoša and Verity Ritchie, verilybitchie 2021.

media history, a younger phenomenon, it surprises indeed that they seem so lacking in diversity, and that they are often times associated with violence and the toxic masculinity of #GamerGate:

*“Coming to prominence, for the most part, during and after the successes of the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, and the gay liberation movement, the video game industry has nevertheless been less willing, overall, than other media industries to pursue meaningful diversity or refrain from egregious stereotyping. And yet there exists only sparse academic scholarship that addresses either the medium’s long history of failures in this area or its sparks of progress that have appeared more recently.”*²⁰⁰

Malkowski/Russworm write that critical scholarship on matters of representation only appears in the past couple of years, and *“thanks to those outside of academia”*²⁰¹, who *“help game studies catch up with and build on what has already been written online and in the popular press”*²⁰². Here too it shows that academia itself has of course issues as well with keeping in touch with contemporary phenomena and developments that outpace the strange slowness of academia.

200 Malkowski et al. 2017, p. 2.

201 Ibid., p. 4.

202 Ibid.

V

The Killjoy: Outplaying Video Games with (Online) Game Interventions and Machinima

The best feature of *GTA V* is probably its Director Mode, where one can relatively freely experiment with characters as actors for machinima creation²⁰³. And machinima can be employed for creating pacifistically intervening artifacts related to games, even though the *magic circle* doesn't allow such behaviour:

*“Refusing to fight in a game and trying to convince your comrades to do the same is an act of absurdity. And getting in their way, obstructing their gameplay, won't be interpreted as pacifistic behaviour, but as a joke.”*²⁰⁴

Freedom by Eva and Franco Mattes is “[a] performance within a popular online war videogame in which Eva pleads with the other players to spare her, because she's ‘making an art performance’. The result is her being killed again and again”²⁰⁵. Here, the performer, Eva Mattes, refuses to participate in the in-game war and just tries to raise awareness of the brutality of (real-life) war via the game's text chat. Mattes refers to something outside of the Huizingian *magic circle*, but from within the game. The result is confusion on the side of the other players and her being mocked and killed repeatedly²⁰⁶. The game doesn't allow for someone to not accept its rules. A war game cannot be deserted. But still, this performance is successful as it provokes questions and reactions from the other players, and gets very close to really deserting online. Interestingly, the recording of this performance is also a machinima, which Dirk Förster describes with reference to Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman as “[t]ransformative [p]lay”²⁰⁷, and as playing instead of gaming games: “By leaving or deliberately breaking the rules of the game, a new relationship to the formal system of the game emerges”²⁰⁸. The act of deserting then is emancipatory, as Mattes' performance illustrates, performatively:

203 Cf. also Klengel et al., p. 4.

204 *How to Disappear*, TC: 00:07:40-00:07:57.

205 Mattes et al.

206 Cf. *Freedom*.

207 Förster 2008, p. 427. Cf. also Müllner 2022, p. 18 and Galloway 2006, p. 27.

208 Ibid. Translated by LF. “The goal of playing together is no longer to win, but to successfully complete the shot” (ibid., p. 423, translated by LF).

*“In World War I, mass desertion of German forces brought the conflict to an end and prevented further unnecessary bloodshed. Collectively resisting the officer’s commands, who gave order to fight till the last man, was an act of emancipation.”*²⁰⁹

Stephan Schwingeler describes Salen Tekinbaş/Zimmerman’s concept of *transformative play* as play and *paidia* changing the more rigid rules and structures of game and *ludus*. He gives modding as an example. Referencing Jesper Juul he cites *emergent gameplay* as playing against a game’s designers, which also can lead as a creative act to new games. Mods, machinima and speedrunning are all examples of *transformative play*; speedrunning for example is transforming games of *agôn* to games of *ilinx*, according to Schwingeler²¹⁰. He also references Alexander R. Galloway’s term *Counter gaming* as a practice contrary to big game studios and akin to avant-garde movements in film that are contrary to Hollywood²¹¹. He writes that Galloway criticizes mods as only visual and superficial instead of providing actual alternatives regarding gameplay as well, only then one could describe mods as avant-garde²¹². When talking about Joseph DeLappe later, the same criticism can be targeted at these seemingly superficial online performances. I would argue, and I will come back to this in later parts of this text, that *Punk Games*²¹³, *AltGames*²¹⁴ etc. and especially “weird” things on itch.io do provide these ludic avant-garde alternatives these days. *“While appropriation is the furthest removed from the medial properties of the game, artists come closer to the medium with the production of their own independent games”*²¹⁵.

Generally, machinima and “‘game interventions’, a videogame version of performance art”²¹⁶ seem to be very suitable for consideration regarding practices of counter-play. Matt Turner gives various examples for machinima “films [that] link war-game violence with real-world realities”²¹⁷. One such example is Claire L. Evans’ *Modern Warfare* from 2010, set during the famously controversial terrorist airport attack sequence in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward, 2009). In Evans’ machinima, we can see an act of refusal to participate in the virtual violence against NPCs, instead Evans chooses to go around shooting all the screens and monitors she can find within the scene²¹⁸. Matt Turner describes this as follows:

209 *How to Disappear*, TC: 00:15:36-00:15:54.

210 Cf. Schwingeler 2014, p. 46.

211 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 121-123. Cf. also chapter 5 in Galloway 2006.

212 Cf. Schwingeler 2014, p. 123.

213 Cf. Quinn 2015.

214 Cf. Chartrand et al. 2018.

215 Schwingeler 2014, p. 125. Translated by LF.

216 Turner 2019.

217 *Ibid.*

218 Cf. *Modern Warfare*.

“By diverting the game design’s intended play-path and instead wreaking destruction on the screen-apparatus, the film seems to almost be destroying itself, the game’s first-person avatar – only ever seen as a pair of hands grasping a gun-barrel – trying to escape from the confines of [their] existence by breaking the rules of the creation within which [they] is trapped.”²¹⁹

Of course, the practice of machinima-making is, as Persia Bravin describes it, *“democratic, requiring no extensive training or years spent at film school honing your craft”²²⁰*. She also states: *“Machinima is classless, ageless and crosses the social divide more effectively and with greater power than any other current art form”²²¹*. Irene Chien offers a definition of machinima in the text *Playing Against the Grain*:

“‘Machinima’ is an awkward portmanteau that joins ‘machine’ and ‘cinema’ to describe animated movies that are shot within video games and distributed primarily online. [...] The difference between machinima and traditional computer-generated imagery (CGI) is that machinima use the interactive 3D graphics engines of existing video games as virtual movie sets in which to perform scenes on-the-fly, rather than rendering custom animation for each scene individually, one frame at a time. [...] Players discovered what game designers now build into the gameplay experience – that adding strategic editing, propulsive soundtracks, and snappy wisecracks to video game footage amplifies the affective drama of having your tautly coordinated team maneuver suddenly sabotaged by one player’s misstep, or of pulling off that perfect comeback attack while tottering on the brink of death. [...] Instead of simply playing the game to win, players started to test the boundaries of the simulation itself, using the game as a playground, laboratory, or stage.”²²²

To Chien, machinima has the potential to *“challenge the pervasive militarism of mainstream video games by unsettling them from within”²²³*: *“In the irreverent modes of gameplay enacted in machinima, the original game’s directive to kill enemies is not only abandoned but rendered absurd”²²⁴*. Chien further notes: *“Precisely because militaristic video games have moved so forcefully into the center of mainstream culture to colonize the way we imagine high-tech war, laying bare the mechanisms by which wargames work is an important form of resistance”²²⁵*.

219 Turner 2019.

220 Bravin 2012, p. 1.

221 Ibid.

222 Chien 2010, p. 239.

223 Ibid, p. 240.

224 Ibid.

225 Ibid., p. 250.

*“Machinima boosters assert that the true art of machinima will flourish only when it moves beyond its origins in gamer communities to embrace the narrative conventions and production values of mainstream film. They call for films that do not make any reference to the fact that they are created within a video game. Many machinima movies aspire to Hollywood-style action-adventure and absorb the military fantasies of the video games in which they are created. But the works discussed in this chapter actively work against the grain of the original game to critically examine the war logic that is so systemic to mainstream gaming. Because machinima makers are intimately familiar with the video games in which they stage their films, their translations of gameplay into cinema can get at the heart of what a video game is really about – from its formal grammar to its social meanings. It is precisely the remarkable self-reflexivity of machinima – the way these game – movie hybrids use cinematic narrative to challenge video game logic, and game culture to challenge filmmaking paradigms – that allows them to make such potent critiques of mediated war fantasy.”*²²⁶

What Mattes’ *Freedom* and Evans’ *Modern Warfare* do, are in both cases acts of refusal to participate in the game and to accept the rules – they are killjoys²²⁷. In *Krieg, Spiel, Spielverderber* Philipp Bojahr states that the killjoy “ideally endangers”²²⁸ the magic circle, that “in addition to its temporal duration, manifests itself primarily in the spatial demarcation of a playground”²²⁹. Bojahr describes the real-life battlefield as such a playing field²³⁰. In his 1938 publication, Huizinga described the killjoy as a figure especially within modern war, because war lost its agonal character of the past due to dehumanizing propaganda²³¹. During gameplay, the killjoy has to be set in context within the dynamic processes of the course of the game as they becomes noticeable as an incident, as a disruption that causes irritation in the other players – the breaking of rules therefore always has to be seen together with the reaction of the other players to it²³². In other words: the killjoy only becomes a killjoy if other players get noticeably irritated by them. If one breaks the rules and nobody reacts in a noticeable way, than it doesn’t become subversive, but the rules just adjust to this new situation. If one breaks the rules and nobody gets irritated, everybody breaks the rules and thus creates new rules. The killjoy then has to be situated within multiplayer games – Mattes’ *Freedom* unfolds with the other players’ reactions, whereas Evans’ *Modern Warfare* can’t be considered subversive in the sense of a killjoy, because there were no other players that could have gotten

226 Chien 2010, p. 241.

227 Alexander R. Galloway and others call cheaters in reference to Huizinga *spoilsports*, but I prefer using the term *killjoy* synonymously, maybe because I like its use in feminist theory as Sara Ahmed does etc. Cf. Galloway 2006, p. 21.

228 Bojahr 2016, p. 346. Translated by LF.

229 Ibid. Translated by LF.

230 Cf. *ibid.*

231 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 347.

232 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 349.

irritated by the diverging behaviour. Additionally, to Bojahr the killjoy becomes especially relevant for *paidia*, in order to disrupt this unstructured type of play at all:

*“Rules are thereby negotiated and administered by the game community, insofar as there is even an implicit set of rules at all: If one thinks, for example, of the kind of game that Roger Caillois captures in the term paidia, it is characterized in its original form primarily by its imaginative component, which is lived out almost completely in anarchistic rulelessness or arbitrariness. Because of this essential indeterminacy, the complete refusal of the game by a killjoy forms here almost the only possibility to undermine the gameplay from within and thus to disturb it. [...] The agreement on the mutual guarantee of physical integrity can thus already be understood as a basic rule inherent in paidia, which makes this form of gameplay immanently strive towards the rule-governed form of ludus – even before the development of other conventions and goal incentives. Or, to put it differently: the rule-guided game becomes conceivable only with the possibility of an actual rule-breaking.”*²³³

Importantly, Bojahr also references Friedrich Kittler’s misuse of army equipment regarding the *“productive consequences of rule breakings”*²³⁴. Using the academically often used example *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) he illustrates the breaking of rules as something positive, as it *“by guiding people to critically question their own media actions, has a culture-promoting effect”*^{235 236}.

An example for a game intervention that is oftentimes discussed academically is Joseph DeLappe’s *dead-in-iraq* (“game based performative intervention”²³⁷, 2006-2011), that took place in the aforementioned game *America’s Army*, which can be described with the term *advergame* (meaning a game used as advertisement) as Randy Nichols does in the text *Target Acquired*:

*“In fact, it may well represent the Army’s first and most successful major foray into such advergaming. [...] Despite its heralded novelty, the game is really the latest entry in a series of strategic moves at (re)branding the military. [...] America’s Army is an advergame, making it a specific type of serious game. Serious games are used to teach skills and responses to situations; advergames focus these gaming responses to create a positive view of the brand.”*²³⁸

233 Bojahr 2016, p. 349. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

234 Ibid., p. 348. Translated by LF.

235 Ibid., p. 358. Translated by LF.

236 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 355-358.

237 DeLappe n.d. Emphasis in italics in the original.

238 Nichols 2010, p. 45. Emphasis in italics in the original.

When games produced by the military are being monitored by it, e.g. for recruiting purposes or for getting ideas how to improve these games observed via player's modifications, "*video gamers' leisure activities are transformed into new media labor*"²³⁹. Nichols states that *America's Army* "*indoctrinates players with 'Army values' while ignoring many critical and worrisome aspects of military life*"²⁴⁰. It could be described as an act of *counter-gaming* when players modify these militaristic games by "*either expanding it or critiquing it*"²⁴¹, which then generates value for the developers, as Nichols explains in reference to Zhan Li. Li actually writes that *America's Army* abandoned its initial prohibition of modding, because of the estimated increase in value for gamers²⁴².

*"A dispassionate, electronic voice calmly reads your words aloud, only to be interrupted by the appearance of an enemy combatant in a nearby doorway who sprays you with automatic weapons fire. Your vision flickers as you absorb direct hits, finally going dark. In the aftermath of your death, you now hover over your body as if you are a spirit, seeing yourself slowly falling sideways, finally resting immobile on your side."*²⁴³

This is an extract from Joseph DeLappe describing his performance himself. But the most lengthy and in-depth discussion about DeLappe's *dead-in-iraq*, that I came across during researching, is probably by Stephan Schwingeler²⁴⁴. To him, *America's Army* is situated in the context of the military-(entertainment-)industrial complex as well²⁴⁵; he calls it "*armament waste*"²⁴⁶, as all video games are that, referencing Kittler. The target demographic of the game are young people, and it was published in 2002 as a free-to-play game²⁴⁷. Schwingeler describes it as an advertisement for war and states that it depicts war actions only positively²⁴⁸. It is impossible to kill US-American soldiers in this game, because players are always playing as them – therefore, one can't act against the US Army and it is "*unconditionally perspectivised positively*"²⁴⁹ ²⁵⁰: "*Firing shots at American soldiers is possible, but it is against the rules of the game and will be sanctioned*"²⁵¹. *America's*

239 Nichols 2010, p. 48.

240 Ibid.

241 Ibid.

242 Cf. Li 2003, pp. 134-136.

243 DeLappe 2013, p. 148.

244 Cf. Schwingeler 2014, pp. 265-293.

245 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 267-268.

246 *Ibid.*, p. 267. Translated by LF.

247 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 266-267.

248 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 287.

249 *Ibid.*, p. 274.

250 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 273-274.

251 *Ibid.* Translated by LF.

Army “conveys [...] real-world knowledge (e.g., about the theoretical use of weapons and the use of first aid)”²⁵², it thus definitely already has “real-world references”²⁵³ by default, even without DeLappe referencing the real world in his performance. Reality and virtuality seem to become even blurrier, as this game is used for real training purposes by the army, and for testing new weapons²⁵⁴. DeLappe ended his performance in 2011 on the day the US-American troops left Iraq²⁵⁵.

The context of this game is important when looking at DeLappe’s performance, in which he uses “refusal and protest”²⁵⁶ and Brechtian “alienation effects”²⁵⁷ when re-purposing “[t]he game world as stage”²⁵⁸ while, as Dean Chan writes, “social codes are wilfully transgressed”²⁵⁹. Schwingeler describes DeLappe’s performance “as process”²⁶⁰, starting when his avatar “lays down [their] weapon”²⁶¹. DeLappe doesn’t modify the game, he only works with the “layer of the game rules”²⁶². The other players become DeLappe’s audience while he “bends the rules and goals of the game in the sense of transformative play”²⁶³.

*“The performance dead-in-iraq always begins with dropping the weapon, which acts as a theatrical gesture and emphasizes the attitude of refusal. Then DeLappe begins writing the names and dates of death of the soldiers who have been killed in the integrated chat, which is extradiegetically outsourced to the game.”*²⁶⁴

Leonhard Müllner generally notes on the rare possibility of dropping the weapon in shooter games:

*“Very few shooters allow their players to put down their weapons in order to perform non-warlike actions. They are bound in their existence in the game universe to a militarily determined action corset – which means that they encounter resistance from the game's rule set.”*²⁶⁵

252 Schwingeler 2014, p. 271. Translated by LF.

253 Ibid. Translated by LF.

254 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

255 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 283.

256 *Ibid.*, p. 271. Translated by LF.

257 *Ibid.* Translated by LF.

258 *Ibid.*, p. 265. Translated by LF.

259 Chan 2010, p. 272.

260 Schwingeler 2014, p. 268. Translated by LF.

261 *Ibid.* Translated by LF.

262 *Ibid.* Translated by LF.

263 *Ibid.*, p. 269. Translated by LF.

264 *Ibid.*, p. 284. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF. Cf. on DeLappe’s performance also Jahrmann 2016, pp. 370-371.

265 Müllner 2022, p. 92. Translated by LF.

According to Stephan Schwingeler, hyper-realistic games like *America's Army* strive towards *transparency* (in the sense of the game *as a game* becoming transparent in order to increase immersion), and DeLappe as a killjoy destroys this by ignoring the rules²⁶⁶:

*"The artist is characterized in game theory terms as a killjoy who disrupts and alters the normative execution of the game by not playing the game and drawing attention to the extra-game reality of the Iraq War. In the sense of countergaming, this is a radical game action directed against the transparency striving of America's Army [...]."*²⁶⁷

It is interesting to note that DeLappe himself was described as a "griefer", as he writes in his text *Playing politics*²⁶⁸. Referencing Huizinga, Schwingeler states that the killjoy takes away the illusion of the game world; and it is *transformative play*, because DeLappe's behaviour alters the rigid structure of the game by reintroducing real-world phenomena²⁶⁹. Schwingeler describes this referencing Bertolt Brecht's alienation/estrangement effect from theatre theory, which makes sense, given that DeLappe's performance is a theatrical piece. Using these, DeLappe "*exposes [...] the conditions and the mechanisms of the computer game*"²⁷⁰:

*"Alienation effects aim at an awareness of the media conditions of the performance, e.g. by a self-reflexive thematization of the raised diegesis by breaking the Fourth Wall [...]. Alienation effects are closely related in media theory to the highlighting of the medial and apparative conditions of the computer game."*²⁷¹

To Schwingeler, lots of contemporary video games with their escapism and immediacy could then be called in theatre theoretical terms *Aristotelian* in contrast²⁷².

*"[...] DeLappe introduces a real-world element into the hyper-real game world, resulting in a rupture of the diegesis. The boundaries of the closed fictional game world are deliberately attacked by this real-world element. The reference to the extra-player reality of war, along with its consequences, disrupts the diegesis on a narrative level."*²⁷³

266 Cf. Schwingeler 2014, p. 291.

267 Ibid., p. 271. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

268 Cf. DeLappe 2013, p. 154.

269 Cf. Schwingeler 2014, p. 292.

270 Ibid., p. 288. Translated by LF.

271 Ibid. Translated by LF.

272 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 289.

273 Ibid. Translated by LF.

DeLappe with his “*staged actions*”²⁷⁴ against the game’s rules acts subversive by not playing the game, and so “[h]e *circumvents the prohibition of modification under licensing law*”²⁷⁵ (even though, as pointed out with Zhan Li before, modding actually wasn’t forbidden later on). “*Protest against the war takes place within a war game*”²⁷⁶. But Schwingeler also criticizes, as I already mentioned earlier, that DeLappe doesn’t show a gameplay-based alternative, he just acts against the gameplay without an act of protest resulting *from* or *via* playing²⁷⁷. One could argue though, that DeLappe’s use (or: misuse) of the chat for his protest is in fact such gameplay, as the chat is a regular feature of *America’s Army*, even though it is situated on a more “meta” level. Schwingeler describes the (mis)use of the chat as follows:

*“Furthermore, the artist misappropriates the chat function. He does not use it as intended to exchange with other players, it becomes a one-way communication channel and a voice calling for remembrance instead. The fact that this creates a long list of names of the dead puts the work close to war memorials that display a list of names [...]. Here, however, lies also an essential difference: chat communication is processual and temporary; the virtual space of the game exists only for a certain period of time, being constituted in the connection of servers, hardware, software, and the actions of the fellow players for the purpose of game execution, and can be ‘switched off’ again in the same way.”*²⁷⁸

DeLappe’s “*symbolic invocation and naming of the war dead [...]* *reinscribes corporeal presence into mediated absence*”²⁷⁹. Dean Chan notes:

*“As a form of digital game art activism and in-game protest, Dead-in-Iraq is the ludic equivalent of an online pacifist act of civil disobedience; and it serves as an expanded case study in this chapter to consider how issues of social, political, and artistic rights and responsibilities are spatialized in networked games. [...] Dead-in-Iraq is both a memorial to dead soldiers and a war protest.”*²⁸⁰

274 Schwingeler 2014, p. 286. Translated by LF.

275 Ibid. Translated by LF.

276 Ibid. Translated by LF.

277 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 292-293.

278 Ibid., p. 287. Translated by LF.

279 Chan 2010, p. 275.

280 Ibid., p. 272. Emphasis in italics in the original.

“Such momentary recognition of the ‘real cost’ and enforced negotiations of ‘real people’ are designed in DeLappe’s project to fleetingly rupture the surfaces of mediated realism. His insistence on recognizing the fact of corporeal physicality is mimetically inferred through the project’s methodology. DeLappe manually types the names and details, line-by-line, rather than simplifying the task using a ‘cut and paste’ technique. [...] The laborious physicality involved in this procedure in turn produces a form of embodied experience [...].”²⁸¹

In another performance work, a re-enactment of Mahatma Gandhi’s 1930 Salt March to Dandi, DeLappe even increases this corporeality by using a treadmill as a controller and thus physically walking in real-life and in the virtual online space of Second Life²⁸². Within the use of the chat function also lies a monologic nature of DeLappe’s performance that might seem contradictory:

“Yet, at the same time, perhaps one of the most glaring flaws in DeLappe’s work – and possibly one of its major contradictions – is that, for a project which essentially aspires to create critical dialogic space with and for other gamers, dead-in-iraq’s unresponsive typing (he never directly engages with any of the other players) might seem to be obscurantist and wilfully monologic.”²⁸³

As mentioned previously, the reactions of other players as this performance’s audience are a crucial part of the whole, and they mostly didn’t react well to the killjoy DeLappe: *“DeLappe’s fellow players feel bothered by his behavior, although he does not directly intervene in the game action [...]. DeLappe’s fellow players sometimes react angrily and begin to insult the artist”²⁸⁴*. When confronted with DeLappe, players emphasize that it is only a game, which strangely contradicts with the developer’s intention aiming at replicating reality²⁸⁵. But DeLappe also provoked positive reactions, as he is quoted in Schwingeler’s publication as follows: *“I even know of two players who at one point decided to stand in front of my avatar and take bullets so that I could continue my reading”²⁸⁶*. Galloway of course rightfully highlights the importance of a game being played by an audience, by players, as the necessary basis of this medium:

“Begin like this: If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions. Let this be word one for video game theory. Without action, games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book. Without the active participation of players and machines,

281 Chan 2010, p. 277.

282 Cf. DeLappe 2013.

283 Chan 2010, p. 273.

284 Schwingeler 2014, p. 290. Translated by LF.

285 Cf. *ibid.*

286 *Ibid.*, footnote 665.

*video games exist only as static computer code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed; they exist when enacted.*²⁸⁷

A different approach regarding the audience has DeLappe's *Elegy: GTA USA Gun Homicides* (2018-2019), which visualizes real-life gun violence data from the Gun Violence Archive in *GTA V*, but it uses the single-player mode without it being a performance within an MMO that one could join; instead NPCs are shooting at each other accompanied by an anachronistic musical track²⁸⁸. Similarly monological in the sense of a performance artwork/game intervention being filmed without an in-game audience except for the game's NPCs is Georgie Roxby Smith's 2014 artwork *99 Problems [WASTED]*. It consists of a rhythmical collage of an avatar killing herself over and over again with a headshot, thus allowing to be read in relation to gendered ludic-virtual violence²⁸⁹. In both of these performance pieces, the audience is only the game world and the people reached via the filmed footage shared online. "*But in an online computer game, every player is also essentially a performer [...]*"²⁹⁰, writes DeLappe. On the special role that corporeality plays in performance, DeLappe further notes:

"As a point of illustration, consider Chris Burden's seminal 1970 performance piece 'Shoot'. As a live performance, the very fact of the artist being physically wounded by a real bullet fired from an actual rifle is essential to the power of this work. Let us imagine, for the sake of argument, that rather than actually having himself shot, he had made a painting of the same content or perhaps staged the action for film using special effects. The efficacy of this work relies on the essence of the actions being rooted in reality, in a real experience. It is the very actuality of the transgressive act in a real-life situation that gives this performance and, indeed, all performance art its power. The same principle holds true in an online, real-time machinimatic performance. The function of being an unexpected participant in a live, interventionist performance within an FPS or virtual community is very different from that possible through the delayed process of machinima creation and presentation. Live in-game performance relies upon the expectation of players for a real-time, in-the-here-and-now experience. Machinima exists after the fact to exploit online ludic contexts for an experience of content that is to be engaged outside of those original contexts. To be in the context of a live in-game performance is to experience an event that is more than likely only to happen in that singular time and place, never to be repeated. To watch a machinima, or for that matter to play most computer games, is to engage in content that can be repeated ad infinitum."²⁹¹

287 Galloway 2006, p. 2. Emphasis in italics in the original.

288 Cf. *Elegy: GTA USA Gun Homicides*. Cf. also Klengel et al., pp. 8-9.

289 Cf. *99 Problems [WASTED]*. Cf. also Arvers 2021.

290 DeLappe 2013, p. 149.

291 Ibid., p. 164. Emphasis in italics in the original.

A similar “*incomprehension*”²⁹² to *dead-in-iraq* on part of the audience was sparked by the anti-war protest game intervention *Velvet-Strike* (Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre and Brody Condon, 2002), a mod for the shooter *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000), and by the way the same game in which Mattes’ *Freedom* takes place. In the mod *Velvet-Strike*, one can add graffiti-like peace messages to the environment²⁹³. Interestingly, *Counter-Strike* was already a mod of the game *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998)²⁹⁴. *Velvet-Strike* thus has an approach similar to the infamous first-person walker²⁹⁵ *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), which is said to have been founding this entire genre, and which has a more radical approach of literally disarming the ego-shooter *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004); making it a deconstructed ego-shooter without weapons, and with looking and listening to the storytelling instead of shooting²⁹⁶.

Anyways, *Velvet-Strike*, due to the incomprehension it sparked among players, has been “*commented accordingly aggressively by the gaming community*”²⁹⁷, as Schwingeler notes. In a text on protest and *dead-in-iraq*, Dean Chan describes *Velvet-Strike* as “*adding a hopscotch diagram on the battleground floor in a sly subversion of this normally hyper-masculine environment*”²⁹⁸. Chan highlights, that DeLappe’s performance is also specifically directed at *America’s Army* as an internet space:

*“DeLappe’s project directs attention to questions about the ownership of Internet space. At issue here is the increasing corporate encroachment into public and private space as highlighted in free-to-play game spaces like America’s Army.”*²⁹⁹

Additionally, as Margarete Jahrmann writes in *Newsgames, Wargames, Artgames* on public space, public expression of opinion and recruitment:

“In a grotesque medial linkage, the artist takes the concerns of America’s Army ad absurdum. Essential to this is the public staging of the game as a performance, which can also be interpreted as an anti-war protest action. In this way, the game space mutates into a protest space and becomes a

292 Schwingeler 2014, p. 269, footnote 621. Translated by LF.

293 Cf. also Köhler 2018, p. 91 and a more lengthy discussion of this anti-war protest in Jahrmann 2016, pp. 371-372. Cf. also Net Art Anthology n.d and Pederson 2021, pp. 157-160.

294 Cf. Henningson 2020.

295 Like in my bachelor’s thesis, I am using this term in reference to Rainer Sigl and Miguel Penabella instead of the misleading and pejorative term “walking simulator”.

296 Cf. Kogler 2018, p. 111 and the corresponding sub-chapter in Hawranke 2018.

297 Schwingeler 2014, p. 269, footnote 621. Translated by LF.

298 Chan 2010, p. 280.

299 Ibid., p. 280. Emphasis in italics in the original.

place of public expression. Game servers, which are visited by thousands of players at the same time every day, can undoubtedly be considered public spaces. According to media reports, the organization 'Islamic State' (IS) is now also using the computer game GTA V (2015) for targeted propaganda and recruitment."³⁰⁰

DeLappe as well as the developers of *Velvet-Strike* could be described as pacifist gamers making their own rules³⁰¹. But the question also becomes whether they, as killjoys who disrupt the rules of games, can be described as players at all. In *Ich spiele in Frieden* Stefan Köhler writes on that:

*"Fittingly, game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define the killjoy as a person who can barely be called a player because [they] deliberately fails to acknowledge the specificity of the game situation. Thus, [they] is neither interested in winning nor in following the rules. However, there are games that allow a peaceful way of playing, a so-called Pacifist Run, within their set of rules, and even honor it as a success."*³⁰²

Dean Chan points out that the rules that DeLappe broke, do include implicit social rules as well, for example him writing in all caps seemingly shouting:

*"The 'magic circle' also constitutes an unspoken social contract among players on the requisite paradigms of participation and engagement. Accordingly, DeLappe's project attracts adverse reactions by dint of its fundamental impropriety – for deliberately rupturing the perceived protocol of the 'magic circle.' Not least of all, by insistently using capital letters in all his typed entries, dead-in-iraq is persistent in 'shouting' his unsolicited message in this space. [...] Critics of DeLappe's project, and its kind, consistently question the actual impact created [...]. [...] [T]he act of being vote-kicked from the game session may itself be regarded as part of the project's performative ambit. It powerfully dramatizes the machinations and underlying precepts of self-regulating community gatekeeping."*³⁰³

All in all, according to Chan DeLappe's project "*remains at best a micro-protest*"³⁰⁴ and it is "*limited in its efficacy as an act of civil disobedience*"³⁰⁵. As a person critical of protest as an impactful political mean at all, I would describe lots of protests as micro-protests and question their actual impact, especially when just one person is the protester. I would approach DeLappe's

300 Jahrman 2016, p. 371. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

301 Cf. Köhler 2018, p. 92.

302 Ibid. Translated by LF.

303 Chan 2010, p. 282.

304 Ibid., p. 283.

305 Ibid.

performance more with theatre theoretical tools and as a merely symbolic action rather than an actual protest, and situate it alongside war memorials, but fleeting like all performance art. Chan points at protests that “*are more specifically directed at social justice concerns arising from in-game politics*”³⁰⁶ like player avatars protesting at “*in-game heterosexual weddings*”³⁰⁷ against queer- and homophobic rules in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*. Protests like this are more directly tied to the game and involves more players, resulting in presumably a more effective protest. But still, as I would argue, DeLappe’s game intervention “*decontextualizing familiar texts by inserting them in seemingly incongruous settings in order to recontextualize not only their meanings but also the meanings of the settings the texts were placed in*”³⁰⁸ definitely succeeds in challenging the *magic circle* and in employing alienation effects to make its (albeit limited, but nonetheless) audience think.

306 Chan 2010, p. 284.

307 Ibid.

308 Ibid., p. 279.

VI

Slaying Animals in the *Risen* trilogy, or: Ethics and “Reality” of Ludic-Virtual Violence and War

„And of course we all know having this power fantasy doesn't mean we will or even want to do these things in real life. It's not about wishing I could gun down innocent people in reality, it's about living in a world where you have ultimate control. It's not just that there are no consequences for your actions, it's that there are no consequences for anything.“³⁰⁹

This is how YouTuber LazerzZ describes playing *GTA* in reference to debates and concerns surrounding the supposed relationship between real-life violence and digital games.

In his dissertation *Gewalt im Computerspiel*, Christoph Bareither develops the more precise term “*ludic-virtual violence*”³¹⁰ to describe violence in digital games and its existence as “*virtual-bodily experiences*”³¹¹ and an “*embodiment relation between player and avatar*”³¹². He states:

“While psychology and pedagogy, for example, provide a wealth of studies on the possible effects of computer game violence, the extent to which violence takes place here at all is rarely questioned. [...] What exactly does ‘computer game violence’, ‘virtual violence’ or ‘video game violence’ mean? Who or what is committing it against whom or what? And to what extent is it at all comparable with actual physical violence?”³¹³

Virtual violence relates to actual violence via “*Ähnlichkeitsbeziehung*”³¹⁴/a relation in similarity, even though, as Bareither explicitly disclaims, physical violence and violence in digital games can of course only be compared very carefully, but these comparisons can be useful when examining the representation and similarity in games³¹⁵. Bareither uses the descriptor “*computer-mediated representations of violence*”³¹⁶, therefore violence as symbolic³¹⁷. In reference to Salen Tekinbaş/Zimmerman, Bareither asks what is a simulation and what is reality; and with Tom

309 LazerzZ 2023, TC: 00:22:03-00:22:21.

310 Bareither 2016, p. 10. Translated by LF.

311 Ibid., p. 12. Translated by LF

312 Ibid. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF

313 Ibid., pp. 39-40. Translated by LF.

314 Ibid., p. 42.

315 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 46.

316 Ibid., p. 47. Translated by LF.

317 Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 46.

Boellstorff and Brian Massumi he states that the virtual is not the opposite of reality. He continues to argue that the virtual and reality are actually very closely related and connected:

“However, the fact that 'virtual worlds' also require physical foundations (hardware, fiber optic cables, light waves, sound waves, the bodies of the players, etc.) is left out here. The latter is crucial, since due to these preconditions even the clear distinction between 'virtual' and 'factual' cannot be maintained in the end. [...] [A] central function of the virtual, at least in computer games, is not to separate from but to refer to the physical [...].”³¹⁸

The virtual is, as I would say, *(dis)connected* to the real, meaning connected and disconnected at the same time, and in a constant oscillation³¹⁹. Bareither emphasizes digital games as virtual practice, because computer-generated virtual things and phenomena only come to existence by interaction, only when they are accepted as equivalents of the real they exist and gain relevance³²⁰. Virtual violence therefore materializes the relation in similarity between physical violence and its artificial representations; and this similarity is actually never taken for granted nor insignificant, virtual violence is circling between both³²¹. Ludic violence means violence similar to physical violence that is implicitly or explicitly communicated as unserious playing, and this similarity and reference to serious violence evokes specific emotional experiences despite not being serious³²².

Christoph Bareither additionally makes convincing arguments that violence in games can have a therapeutic or at least relaxing effect on players, because the freedom in games compensates a lack in opportunities for dominance in real-life³²³. Marco De Mutiis observes that dominance enabled via a gun and the interaction with a game world similar to a gun is even present in games focused on, for example, taking photos:

“Photography safaris are a special kind of photographic activity. The photographer hunts a prey, the camera sublimates the gun. The subject of the image is unaware of the activity and possibly unwilling to be portrayed. [...] Photography safari games not only inherit the asymmetric power relations between photographer and subject, they also reinforce them through their mechanics and scoring systems, leaving the machinic subjects limited or no choice at all in terms of the ability to escape

318 Bareither 2016, p. 54. Translated by LF.

319 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 55.

320 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

321 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 57.

322 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 62.

323 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

photographic capture. It's an act of dominance through visibility, in a hierarchy where the human sits on top and simulated animals wait to be captured through the simulated lens."³²⁴

Historically, the culture surrounding video games has been dominated by cis male players, and still today players tend to vocalize their enjoyment of games by male-connoted sexual acts, Bareither describes this male dominance over multiple pages. When players state as a positive thing that they rape or anally fuck their enemies, this is in my view of course not only cis-male-centered and misogynist, but also heterosexist and queerphobic in general, by downgrading and dehumanizing people who get anally fucked, which are usually women and queer people³²⁵. Bareither observes that in some rare cases these sexual readings of violence has been put into the game by the developers themselves, for example the avatar Trevor Philips in *GTA V* saying when performing acts of ludic-virtual violence: *"You are fucked! I am fucking you!"*³²⁶. But also, because it is in fact virtual, video game violence has the potential to question the divide in so-called "male" and "female" behavioral rules of actual physical violence with female players (and, as I would importantly like to add, other marginalized people, fellow nonbinaries and gender-nonconforming people etc.) expressing joyfully virtual-bodily dominance in a similar way as (endo cis) male players usually do³²⁷. As Sadie Plant reminds us, after all, computer technology hasn't got the "male history" that it is oftentimes perceived to have:

*"But, as it turns out, women have not merely had a minor part to play in the emergence of the digital machines. When computers were vast systems of transistors and valves which needed to be coaxed into action, it was women who turned them on. They have not made some trifling contribution to an otherwise man-made tale: when computers became the miniaturized circuits of silicon chips, it was women who assembled them."*³²⁸

Georgie Roxby Smith writes that gender and attractiveness of an avatar do have an impact like they have in real life:

"Attractive avatars interacted more frequently with others due to a carry on effect between their appearance and the self-confidence of their operator. Research also showed that avatars were mostly designed to reflect either their own appearance or fantasised appearance. Appearance in online

324 De Mutiis 2023, p. 259.

325 Cf. Bareither 2016, pp. 137-146. Cf. also Metz 2010, p. 71, who calls these violent sexual acts a part of a *"violence history of men"* (translated by LF).

326 Bareither 2016, p. 140.

327 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 146.

328 Plant 1997, pp. 36-37.

games does not advance a user's position but socially in Second Life, as in real life, attractiveness has currency."³²⁹

And the virtual and the real are intertwined, argues Roxby Smith:

"Tom Boellstroff who conducted an anthropological study of Second Life argues that real life has been virtual life all along. There is no 'post' relationship, where one form is replaced by another, but a merging of the two. It is human nature to explore nature through culture; therefore we have always been virtual."³³⁰

"Play is becoming more and more similar to war in the wake of virtualization and simulation [...]"³³¹, Ernst Strouhal states in a talk between Thomas Macho and Helmut Lethen. Macho speculates that the discourse surrounding the war game died off because simulation technology got so incredibly good and realistic – one cannot even distinct anymore between soldiers being at war, simulating war or training war in Harun Farocki's documentary series and video installation *Serious Games I-IV* (2009/2010)³³². Macho further explains about the loss of *agôn*:

"The height of the connection and convergence of war and play was the Cold War. The Cold War had a very clear, distinctly agonal structure: there were two opponents operating at eye level, and one needed both game theory and the countless simulations to visualize the strategic possibilities inherent in the basic agonal structure. In this respect, the evolution of computer networks and complex simulation programs was also closely related to this kind of political game practice. Since 1989, this conjuncture of war and play is over, because we can no longer imagine precisely this agonal basic structure of the world."³³³

*"The disappearance of the enemy is perhaps the essential characteristic of technological war"*³³⁴, writes Karl Heinz Metz fittingly. Indeed, when one watches Farocki's *Serious Games* with the antagonistic enemies and explosives being placed by an instructor, and in another room soldier trainees imitating real-life warfare, this agonal structure comes into play again. But also Virtual Reality being used when re-staging events for trauma therapy, despite these clunky interfaces and outdated graphics, the lines between reality and the virtual blur as these landscapes are modeled

329 Roxby Smith 2011, p. 18.

330 Ibid., pp. 22-23.

331 Lethen et al. 2016, p. 15. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

332 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 14.

333 Ibid., p. 17. Translated by LF.

334 Metz 2010, p. 116. Translated by LF.

after real-life cartographic data, controlled via the press of a button³³⁵. As Chien writes on the replaceability of human soldiers by their virtual doubles:

*“Death is built into the game mechanics. Without taking risks that kill you, or learning through trial and error, you could never progress through each level. [...] Virtual war promises that the messy fragility of actual human bodies will be removed from the scene, replaced by mechanized bodies that can be commanded from a distance and swapped out at will.”*³³⁶

In episode 35 of *Studying Pixels* the podcast’s hosts state that playing violent games doesn’t train you for real-life combat in the same way as playing the *Guitar Hero* series doesn’t train its players to become a professional guitar player. The fact that games are indeed used for military training shouldn’t be overestimated³³⁷. They also point out that a lot of games are about empathy and empathetic decision-making, thereby deepening the player’s empathy. These games could be then described as having an Aristotelian cathartic effect where one engages with morally wrong actions from a safe distance³³⁸.

Under the influence of the military, video games are converging with it. With Karl Heinz Metz, one could even describe technological war as technology destroying technology, replacing human actors entirely:

*“In technological warfare taken to its logical conclusion, it becomes an activity of destruction carried out by technology, in which technology destroys technology and in which humans are secondary, quantitatively insignificant, relevant only to small elites of specialists in front of computer screens, sheltered in bunkers: a scenario that has already become experimental reality in the context of a nuclear war to be waged.”*³³⁹

Stephan Günzel exemplifies this convergence of military and video games in his text *Krieg im Computerspielraum* with the aforementioned *Military Battlezone/Bradley Trainer* that the US military developed on the basis of Atari’s *Battlezone* for military training purposes³⁴⁰. This example illustrates *“that it was not the entertainment industry that used military equipment, but rather the*

335 Cf. *Serious Games*.

336 Chien 2010, p. 246.

337 Cf. *Studying Pixels* 2022b.

338 Cf. *ibid.*

339 Metz 2010, p. 115. Translated by LF.

340 Cf. Günzel 2016, pp. 329-331.

military that made use of the entertainment industry”³⁴¹. Günzel writes: “Battlezone is thus also a milestone in the history of gamification, the extension of the game zone onto the serious world”³⁴². To Günzel, especially war drones nowadays are turning war into a game:

*“Not at last due to cyberwar, the cybernetic warfare, as it has moved into public awareness especially by the increased use of remote-controlled drones for the supposedly precise combat and killing of enemy combatants, computer games appear in a different light: Whereas until now they had either been defamed as killer games that transform mostly male adolescents into killing machines running amok, or their use had in any case been regarded only – to use Friedrich Kittler’s enigmatic quotation on World War I – as the ‘misuse of army equipment,’ it is now becoming apparent that computer games themselves are not children of war but, if not its fathers, then arguably its technical siblings.”*³⁴³

Nichols describes “that ties between the military and video game producers have only grown stronger”³⁴⁴ as the US military employs digital games in a multitude of ways and departments, and already in the 1930s simulation has been used for training.

*“The Army began deploying online gaming machines to bases overseas in 2006 as a means of boosting troop morale. [...] Such expensive systems are certainly no hardship for a defense department that spends in excess of an estimated \$4 billion annually on simulation equipment, games, and events [...].”*³⁴⁵

It doesn’t matter whether one plays games to be entertained or for other reasons, they nevertheless influence their audience with “dominant ideologies through simulation”³⁴⁶ – the military and the state can convey an agenda via games, and the developers who cooperate with the state “add legitimacy and symbolic capital to their product [...] [and] minimize publishing risks since the high cost of game development is shared with the government”³⁴⁷. Joel Penney notes in “No Better Way to ‘Experience’ World War II” on these ideological influences:

“Do they, like the rhetoric of the Bush administration, help justify contemporary military endeavors by celebrating past military successes? The idea that media texts are imbued with ideological

341 Günzel 2016, p. 331. Translated by LF.

342 Ibid. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

343 Ibid., p. 329. Translated by LF.

344 Cf. Nichols 2010, p. 39.

345 Ibid.

346 Ibid. p. 40.

347 Ibid., p. 43.

*messages – commonsense assumptions about how the world works and what is right and wrong that subtly serve the interests of the powerful – has long been a key concept in critical studies of media and popular culture [...].*³⁴⁸

Furthermore, Penney states that players of games with content simulating historical wars “*make strong connections between simulated and real-life warfare*”³⁴⁹ and are positive about the historical accuracy and depiction, feeling as if they are participating in real wars³⁵⁰. By experiencing these games as historically accurate, players bond empathetically “*with the digital soldiers whose bodies they virtually inhabit*”³⁵¹, positively influencing player’s stance towards “*real-life soldiers, past and present*”³⁵². In contrast, for example “*science fiction-themed shooter games*”³⁵³ that do not resemble reality as much, “*lea[d] to very few readings of an ideological or political nature*”³⁵⁴. As I would personally argue, games that don’t imitate the capitalist hyper-realist aesthetics and that deploy Brechtian alienation effects, have a potential to free their players from real-life capitalist, inhuman ideologies and might help in unlearning capitalism, which I personally see as a major societal task for the future.

As one can see in the previous statements, there definitely is an interconnection between the virtual and the real. Burrill as well argues contrary to the *magic circle* “*that play becomes a part of the real, a part of labor, a mode of production*”³⁵⁵. He also argues that reality definitely influences the play space and that it in fact isn’t separate from it, games are on the contrary just “*extensions of a familiar cultural logic*”³⁵⁶ as games are not “*truly interactive space[s]*”³⁵⁷, but “*the structure of the game is always already making choices for the player*”³⁵⁸. This can be exemplified by the oftentimes mandatory heteronormativity in role-playing, that cannot really be subverted as every act of counter-gaming “*falls under the same heteronormative rules*”³⁵⁹. When I for example want my avatar Jimmy Hopkins to be gay and do crime by kissing boys in *Bully* (Rockstar Vancouver, 2006), it is possible to do that, but only as an optional phenomena – canonically Jimmy is required to kiss girls regarding the game’s missions, therefore if I don’t explicitly want this character to be queer and make some effort accordingly, pushing the aforementioned so-called “gay button”, he just isn’t.

348 Penney 2010, pp. 191-192.

349 Ibid., p. 197.

350 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

351 Ibid., p. 198.

352 Ibid.

353 Ibid., p. 199.

354 Ibid.

355 Burrill 2008, p. 44.

356 Ibid., p. 52.

357 Ibid.

358 Ibid.

359 Ibid., p. 50.

The game's rules are generally having a heteronormative agenda that requires effort to be bent. I would like to further iterate on that with the help of texts that one could classify as queer game studies in a later part. To quote Burrill once again, in summary and also highlighting the importance of the culture in which games are produced:

*"[...] [A]s a playspace, the games strongly reflect the general competitive atmosphere in which the games are both produced and consumed – first world capitalism. [...] In a world where 'play' has become an operant word and war looks like a videogame, it is essential to avoid categorizing the games as simply dangerous or trivial. To do so is to marginalize a series of texts staging crises that reflect the very nature of geopolitical politics, Western imperialism, and the manufactured wars the world faces in the name of economic benefit."*³⁶⁰

What Margarete Jahrman emphasizes as well in her text *Newsgames, Wargames, Artgames* is that Huizinga's statements regarding the demarcation of games from reality have become obsolete these days, especially exemplified by military games like *America's Army*, which is used for training as well as following-up after war regarding war-related trauma, and for soldiers to better reintegrate into society again. This dissolving of separation between reality and game results in, as Jahrman further states, a potential for political participation and empowerment, a potential for the expression of opinion and a potential for giving the people activist rule-sets for (non-violent) action, resistance and protest in the real world³⁶¹. She even uses the expression "*war via computer games*"³⁶² to describe contemporary phenomena. "*Computer games reflect the emergence of a new kind of war in which ubiquitous espionage becomes technologically inclusive*"³⁶³.

*"Propagandistic board games find their continuation in a direct line in contemporary computer games. War locations are realistically modeled and replayed according to real data from combat operations and geographic topographies. War is thereby conveyed as a heroic experience in the mode of the individual combatant. Nevertheless, many such games turn out to be combat games that are recognizably different from the recruitment games commissioned by armies. Games created for the immediate purpose of espionage constitute a special case, and thus represent a form of 'real war games,' wargames in the literal sense – making Ares conceivable as a game category in its own right, pushing the boundaries of the game."*³⁶⁴

360 Burrill 2008, pp. 83-84.

361 Cf. Jahrman 2016, p. 362.

362 Ibid., p. 366. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

363 Ibid., p. 369. Translated by LF.

364 Ibid., p. 361. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

And:

*“The electronic recruiting games of numerous armies can serve as examples of wargames that function first as a means of subliminal persuasion, second as training, and finally as a means of warfare itself. Common high-score shooter games tend not to resemble the simulations of battlefields used in real life by armies around the world – in the grim reality of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, no ‘high scores’ will be scored by U.S. troops. Nevertheless, the easily recognizable goal of the propaganda shooter Americas Army [sic!] (2002) [...] is the (real) recruitment of soldiers. It links immediately from the highscore page after the game to the recruitment page of the American Army.”*³⁶⁵

Jahrman also mentions the game *Kuma\War* (Kuma Reality Games, 2004) that has been advertised as having environments that are very real to life. *“The absurdity of the game still shocks”*³⁶⁶, she writes. In very life-like replications of environments players can re-enact scenes from the real Iraq War in this game, for example the killing of terrorist Osama Bin Laden from 2011³⁶⁷. Because of their stark replication of real-life, including for example first aid, low chances of hitting targets and other frustrating and harsh circumstances of war, these military training games are not that popular among gamers, which is an indication of the previous statement that war has to be made consumable and easier in order to be fun as a game³⁶⁸. On games as tools of warfare, Jahrman elaborates further:

*“The games designed after real-life settings on the theme of the so-called war on terrorism serve not only persuasive and propagandistic purposes, but also direct electronic warfare. Networked online shooter games no longer only enable a more or less subtle form of psychological warfare, but can fulfill several data collection and surveillance functions simultaneously. Typically, data such as addresses and contacts of the players become accessible. Hidden deeper in the game, information such as that about game time and co-players form a rich field of datamining.”*³⁶⁹

Jahrman gives an interesting example from her own artistic practice for an art game that connects with processes outside of its *magic circle*, which is *Nybble-engine-toolZ* (2003) that she created with Max Moswitzer. She describes it as a *“game deconstruction, an inversion of the first-person shooter Unreal Tournament”*³⁷⁰ (Digital Extremes and Epic Games, 1999). In it, player’s actions like

365 Jahrman 2016, pp. 366-367. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

366 Ibid., p. 367. Translated by LF.

367 Cf. *ibid.*

368 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 368.

369 Ibid., pp. 368-369. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

370 Ibid., p. 372. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

shooting and moving around result in the spamming of anti-war mails to a president or denial-of-service attacks on government servers; which are “*intervention techniques derived from the hacker world*”³⁷¹. Therefore, real actions onto networks are being executed by playing, and this game links, directly and visibly to its players, game and things outside the game together³⁷².

Scott A. Lukas attests an “*unstable ground of the real and the virtual*”³⁷³ in his text *Behind the Barrel* about video game guns. Lukas argues that guns, whether real or virtual, always exist within an “*uneasy relationship in a world of violence*”³⁷⁴ and “*are ultimately connected to that violence*”³⁷⁵, even though at the same time connecting virtual with real-life violence would definitely result in “*simplistic and monocausal assertions*”³⁷⁶. Of course, despite looking similar (the aforementioned relationship in similarity as analyzed by Bareither), guns in games “*are immaterial; meaning, that their use will not generally result in injury or death*”³⁷⁷. Lukas exemplifies that with more time spent playing game versions for home consoles of previous arcade shooter games “*the identification of players with their avatars increased*”³⁷⁸. Like previously stated referencing Hutchinson and Pop Culture Detective, he too argues that games were (and mostly still are) “*primarily about, played through, and understood as a gun. For game designers the gun represented a ‘natural’ way to express competition and play*”³⁷⁹. The “*virtual gun [is] the most meaningful sign in the semiotic system of video gaming*”³⁸⁰:

*“As any element of culture, the gun signifies, but in the case of the virtual gun – especially that which is used in military-themed video games that represent the past, present, and future of war – the form of signification at play carries greater cultural significance. This significance is at once material and virtual, and, while the virtual gun does not directly result in real-life killing, the virtual weapon – interlocked in systems of cultural intertextuality [sic!] – initiates new identity politics, cultural debates, and pedagogical considerations.”*³⁸¹

To me, this significance of a gun central to culture and games weirdly illustrates the “gunification” of Electronic Arts’ *Harry Potter* game series. Even though with the whole JK Rowling situation one can and should not discuss anything related to this franchise without distancing oneself at the same

371 Jahrman 2016, p. 372. Translated by LF.

372 Cf. *ibid.*

373 Lukas 2010, p. 76.

374 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

375 *Ibid.*

376 *Ibid.*

377 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

378 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

379 *Ibid.* Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 83.

380 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

381 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

time, I would briefly like to mention it anyways: Whereas in titles like *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (EA Bright Light, 2007) players have to perform specific control move-sets, for example moving their mouse like a wand in order to cast different individual magic spells, the last two installments of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (EA Bright Light, 2010 and 2011) play like ordinary shooter games. Seemingly the developers hopped onto a trend of high-selling shooter games here instead of sticking to a mechanic that made this game series' controls unique and that fitted its narrative³⁸².

*“All video games are forms of remaking since they approximate other places, events, beings, and situations that may or may not have a reference in the real world”*³⁸³ – *“All video games remake the world in various ways”*³⁸⁴. A fitting example that I would like to give is the discussion about *Assassin's Creed Unity* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014) being used to help rebuilding the French cathedral Notre-Dame that was severely damaged by a fire in 2019³⁸⁵. *“Ubisoft made a donation of €500,000 to the restoration effort and made Unity free on PC for a week”*³⁸⁶, reports Simone de Rochefort.

*“Assassin's Creed Unity was derided when it came out for its bugs, its poor optimization, its microtransactions, its companion app, its controversy over a lack of women character models in co-op. Unity's poor reception was blamed for weak sales of Assassin's Creed Syndicate the following year. Wouldn't it be poetic, then, for the game to bring something beautiful into this world, and help restore Notre-Dame?”*³⁸⁷

Even though there are lots of high-quality scans made by academics and also Ubisoft's 2020 release of the free-to-play application *Notre-Dame de Paris: Journey Back in Time* on Steam, in which players can experience a virtual environment of the cathedral³⁸⁸, ultimately the game's cathedral model isn't as helpful as one might think. De Rochefort explains in her article and the accompanying video that due to for example level design and copyright restrictions effecting lots of parts of the building and its decorations and features, changes had to be made resulting in the in-game cathedral not being that useful for the real-life restoration³⁸⁹. In my view, like (hyper-)realism, historical accuracy is overrated as well, I'm in line here with what Jeremiah McCall notes:

382 Cf. additionally the parts about *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* for example in Flatlife 2021, RetroRaconteur 2022 and ThePrettyNerdie 2018. Cf. also Tactical Bacon Productions 2023b and Voiy 2023.

383 Lukas 2010, p. 81.

384 Ibid., p. 82.

385 Cf. Handy 2023.

386 de Rochefort 2021. Emphasis in italics in the original.

387 Ibid. Emphasis in italics in the original.

388 Cf. Ubisoft North America 2020.

389 Cf. de Rochefort 2021.

*“Some have asserted that to truly be historical media, historical video games must be more historically accurate; better still, they should be designed by trained historians [...]. This surely misses the point: historical video games (and boardgames too for that matter) are history, even when not designed by academic historians. They do the work of history, the curated representation of the past to those in the present [...]. They will continue to do so even without being colonized by academic historians [...]. And so, analyses of historical video games that are sensitive to the medium must move beyond an itemized list of the discrete atomic facts in a video game that are deemed accurate or inaccurate.”*³⁹⁰

Coming back to virtual and physical weapons, even though virtual weapons are also not exact replications of their “real” counterparts, on a societal level, the common availability of a multitude of weapons in digital games *“reflects the social values of individualism, choice, and the free market”*³⁹¹. Games and their weapons have social impact in the real world and weapons form gaming communities around them as well³⁹². *“Just like everyday life outside of video games, video game worlds reflect the disturbing tendency in which violence increasingly links together people, situations, ideas, and forms of culture”*³⁹³. Lukas also observes that in-game weapons of course don’t just reference reality, but reference other games and medial artifacts: *“As new games are developed, especially sequels, the weapons of the past and present form an interesting intertextuality”*³⁹⁴. Even though digital games *“exaggerate the violence of everyday life”*³⁹⁵, they still do *“reflect issues of the culture that produces the games”*³⁹⁶ and are thus like every kind of cultural artifact always embedded into societal values and norms. Ultimately, Lukas advocates for a *“more productive dialogue about all forms of violence in our world”*³⁹⁷, not just video games and gun violence. This definitely would benefit the medium of video games, because, as he notes: *“Many of the gamers with whom I spoke were unable to articulate a vision of the future of video games without weapons or violence”*³⁹⁸.

And then, there is the question of feeling guilty for performing ludic-virtual violence, as one experiences it differently by actively performing it, contrary to passive reception modes like reading

390 McCall 2020. Emphasis in italics in the original.

391 Lukas 2010, p. 79.

392 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 79-81.

393 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

394 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

395 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

396 *Ibid.*

397 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

398 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

a book or watching a movie³⁹⁹. Bareither distinguishes “*seriously as negative [...] interpreted feelings*”⁴⁰⁰ from fun resulting from feelings interpreted as “*humorously transgressing*”⁴⁰¹ or fun as “*humorous incongruence*”⁴⁰². He describes the infamous “No Russian” mission (see Claire L. Evans’ previously mentioned performance) resulting in these seriously negative feelings for at least some players overwriting feelings of fun⁴⁰³. Another popular example is the *GTA V* story mission “By the Book”, in which the player as the avatar Trevor tortures a person to get information, including waterboarding⁴⁰⁴. Bareither describes the actions of Trevor as “*especially [...] borderlining*”⁴⁰⁵ and “*by the narrative framed in a specific way*”⁴⁰⁶; his virtual violent actions would be perceived as shocking or negative in real-life, but as part of a game they become fun at the same time, resulting in humorous incongruities⁴⁰⁷. According to Bareither, it becomes apparent via this torture scene that these narrative framings of ludic-virtual violence can also result in (self-)critical thinking about the own ludic-virtual actions of the player and by that about real-life violence too⁴⁰⁸. He points out that players would only feel guilty about their actions if they would have had a choice and decided for a more violent/negative option:

*“A distinctive characteristic of the torture sequence in GTA5 [sic!] is that the players have no choice but to carry out the torture. In a way, the game forces them to confront negative experiences. While many of them are effectively shocked by this, one thing they don't feel is guilt. This is because guilt requires that one has a choice and chooses to engage in an activity that is interpreted as negative.”*⁴⁰⁹

At some point while recently replaying Piranha Bytes’ *Risen* trilogy, I realized that I am slaughtering the entire animal population of these virtual islands. I am playing as an avatar called “unnamed hero”, but slaughtering animals that usually do not respawn just to get experience points and to level up doesn’t feel heroic at all. The only way to resurrect the animals would be to restart the game entirely. Death is inscribed into it, you cannot play *Risen* pacifistically⁴¹⁰. My avatar killed hundreds of virtual animals for fun and profit; art accidentally mirroring the horrific reality of real-

399 Cf. Bareither 2016, p. 316.

400 Ibid., p. 305. Translated by LF.

401 Ibid. Translated by LF.

402 Ibid., p. 315. Translated by LF.

403 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

404 Cf. also Bareither 2016, pp. 309-313.

405 Ibid, p. 308. Translated by LF.

406 Ibid. Translated by LF.

407 Cf. *ibid.*

408 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 312.

409 Ibid., pp. 313-314. Translated by LF.

410 Actually, YouTuber Rime recently attempted a pacifist playthrough, but only by luring the enemies and animals and making NPCs fight instead. Cf. Rime 2023.

life meat production in its attempts to be realistic and to immerse. After a fight, the co-combating crew member stands up again, and at the beginning of *Risen 3* the main character even gets resurrected with voodoo magic⁴¹¹, but not the animals, one just eviscerates them, takes their guts and organs and flesh and trophies.

Interestingly, Tom Tyler explains in reference to *Duck Hunt* (Nintendo Research & Development 1, 1984) another meaning of the word “game” that makes digital-virtual hunting games surprisingly meta:

*“[...] Duck Hunt reminds us of a second meaning of game: during the late Middle Ages, the term came to be associated with that particular kind of entertainment that involved chasing, catching, and killing animals, which is to say hunting, and was used to refer specifically to those wild beasts who were the hunter’s quarry. Duck Hunt, then, is a game about game.”*⁴¹²

In *Hunting, Killing, Crafting: On the Use of Animals in Open World Games* Erik Van Ooijen writes:

*“As the environment is ordered according to the subjectivity of the hunter, any animal becomes a contextual object embellished with a ‘target’ tone; it exists, first of all, as a thing to be killed. Even at the most fundamental level, then, most open worlds constitute a kind of anthropocentric argument.”*⁴¹³

Van Ooijen further notes that “any confines on the number of specimens is a conscious design choice”⁴¹⁴, highlighted for example “by the fact that they [these rare and not respawning animals in some games, addition LF] are given personal names”⁴¹⁵.

“Perhaps the most significant peculiarity of the medium when considering representations of hunting, however, regards finity. Due to the algorithmic nature of the medium, life is infinite. In contemporary games, death is seldom final; when you die, you simply respawn at the latest checkpoint. Enemies, in turn, may also respawn infinitely. No matter how many individuals you kill, the world never runs

411 “They are plastic and metal corpses with voodoo powers” (Bogost 2012, p. 9), Ian Bogost similarly describes computers in general.

412 Tyler 2022, p. 12. Emphasis in italics in the original.

413 Van Ooijen 2019, p. 34.

414 Ibid, p. 41.

415 Ibid.

empty. As a consequence, the natural life of game worlds tend to be modelled in accordance with a certain industrial capitalist ideology, that is, as an infinite source to be exploited.”⁴¹⁶

In the words of Leonhard Müllner, games are “*neither disconnected from the world, nor disconnected from the society that generates it*”⁴¹⁷. “*In the field of tension between rules and images, ideologies are defined and rehearsed via the gameplay*”⁴¹⁸. Or, in the words of Alexander R. Galloway: “*Play is a symbolic action for larger issues in culture*”⁴¹⁹. Van Ooijen describes in reference to *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) the act of looting dead humans versus looting dead animals:

*“When looting a human body, you acquire their possessions: weapon, armour, money, and so on; but when looting an animal, you acquire its meat. Even at such a basic level, the game seems to model the human as subject and the animal as object. Whereas the human is robbed of his belongings, the animal is killed for its body. Whereas the human is owner, possessor, a being of culture, the animal is food, resource, a being of nature.”*⁴²⁰

*“By singling out the scalping of humans as tasteless and abnormal, the skinning of animals appears as tasteful and normal. As in the case of meat, animals are implicitly represented as fragmentary bodies of dismountable parts, whereas the human, on the other hand, is a uniform corpse, that is, an individual even in death.”*⁴²¹

An example for a game in which the human body isn’t sacred and that reverses this human-animal-divide is *Pathologic 2* (Ice-Pick Lodge, 2019). In this somewhat remake of *Pathologic* (Ice-Pick Lodge, 2005) you play, at least as of now, as the surgeon Artemy Burakh during a plague in his home town. All of the resources are scarce, and one way of making money in order to acquire overpriced food is killing and looting human bodies in order to extract their valuable organs. Still, the game shies away from the idea of human flesh as legitimate food; extracting organs is only optional and you don’t get human flesh like you would get an animal’s flesh. I mean, after all, to quote Tom Tyler: “*Humans are made of meat*”⁴²². At the grocery stores in the *Pathologic* games, there are animal meat products to buy as more expensive food items⁴²³. In the *Risen* games, meat

416 Van Ooijen 2019, p. 40.

417 Müllner 2022, p. 8. Translated by LF.

418 Ibid. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

419 Galloway 2006, p. 16.

420 Van Ooijen 2019, p. 35.

421 Ibid., p. 36. Emphasis in italics in the original.

422 Tyler 2022, p. 52.

423 On the higher value and meaning of meat in society cf. *ibid.*, p. 81.

and fish are items that restore the avatar's health as well, and in this trilogy's last installment there even is the special "Carnivore" talent to unlock which excludes meat from being thrown together with every other edible item as "provisions" and serves to further inscribe special value into meat, as it can be sold separately then⁴²⁴.

Ian Bogost writes in *Alien Phenomenology*:

*"No matter how we may feel about eating or abstaining from meat, appeals to feeling and suffering exemplify the correlationist conceit: the assumption that the rights any thing should have are the same ones we believe we should have; that living things more like us are more important than those less like us; and that life itself is an existence of greater worth than inanimacy. These are understandable biases for us humans. We are mortal and fragile in specific ways, and we worry about them."*⁴²⁵

Of course, it is clear to me that *Risen* is a fictitious game with a fantasy setting, but still this game mechanic of killing virtual animals irritates me in its prevalence and normalization within digital games and it poses the question why my avatar can't pet or cuddle the animals instead⁴²⁶. *"It has become possible to adopt a great many different species and breeds of animal as virtual pets"*⁴²⁷, writes Tyler, so why not in this game?

Slaying wild animals is necessary here in order to level up, and because they attack the avatar and are generally "in the way". But one can also note the observation that these animals are always warning the player's avatar with growling and snarling when approaching, and in most cases don't immediately attack. Also, during nighttime, most of the animals are sleeping and one could avoid combat by slowly and carefully sneaking. On the other hand, attacking sleeping animals gives an advantage, albeit it seems unfair to attack while they are unaware and therefore not in self-defense. As the AI Lara Croft states in one of YouTuber FoxMaster's videos: *"This lion hasn't spotted me yet. It means I am the predator"*⁴²⁸.

Tyler writes of a "masculinist 'master narrative' [...] in keeping with a hierarchical cultural framework in which humans are considered exceptional, both as individuals and as a species"⁴²⁹, and that humans have a default "predator perspective"⁴³⁰, which is mirrored by video games. *"No*

424 Cf. also Tyler 2022, p. 83.

425 Bogost 2012, p. 73.

426 In *Risen 2* and *Risen 3* there is a "monkey mechanic" of controlling a cute little monkey to turn levers, open chests and steal stuff for the main character. I would like to describe this mechanic as these games' pet/cuddle mechanic.

427 Tyler 2022, p. 17.

428 Cf. FoxMaster 2023b, TC: 00:01:26-00:01:30.

429 Tyler 2022, p. 52.

430 Ibid.

matter how many times they die, players always know that, in the long run, winning remains a possibility for those willing to keep replaying the game”⁴³¹. According to Van Ooijen, from the standpoint of this superior human perspective, animals then are differently hierarchized:

*“Most open world games present arguments on how various species should be morally evaluated, for example by distinguishing between classes of animals that should or should not be killed. One common distinction separates the aggressive animals, that will always attack you, from the passive animals, that will scurry away when you approach them.”*⁴³²

Games clearly transport real-life cultural handling of animals being objectified and used generating some value for humans. As Van Ooijen notes as well: *“Games direct our attention to how we tend to understand how particular aspects of the world operate”*⁴³³.

*“In hunting games proper, hunting is more of a ludic, or competitive and goal-driven, endeavour; while in open world games, it is rather a paideic, or playful, activity connected to roaming the land freely. Rather than being the sole purpose of the game, hunting is but one of the many diversions on offer. Still, although you rarely have to hunt for food in these games, the active pursuit of animals is often encouraged through various mechanics of crafting and trade, where you must gather the resources to construct new gear and items. [...] Nature, these games say, is a bountiful and unlimited source of raw materials to be harvested by the human player; and on a fundamental level, progress and personal development in these games necessitate the killing of animals.”*⁴³⁴

Further, *“the messiness (or cleanliness) of hunting serves an ideological purpose”*⁴³⁵, the separation of the meat product and its messy and violent production is one goal of supermarkets. As Tom Tyler states referencing Carol J. Adams: *“Through the act of butchering, animals are quite literally rendered absent in order for them to be transformed into food. They are made further absent linguistically by the use of terms such as ‘meat’ or ‘veal’ to refer to the dead bodies that are thereby produced”*⁴³⁶. Games who depict the messy slaughtering of an animal with all of its spilling blood

431 Tyler 2022, p. 53.

432 Van Ooijen 2019, p. 36.

433 Ibid., p. 30.

434 Ibid., p. 32.

435 Ibid., p. 33.

436 Tyler 2022, p. 74.

therefore make a statement of visualizing “*commonplace and perhaps even trivial*”⁴³⁷ acts of violence by humans against animals. Van Ooijen writes:

*“Instead of studying the most outrageous visual representations, I focus on the more routine aspects of animal violence manifested in the hunting mechanics of open world games. Taking a rhetorical approach, I consider the ideological functions implied by the procedural gameplay of the hunting element. [...] Studies on violence against animals in games have been surprisingly scarce. In the general discourse on gaming, however, accounts can be found on the reactions of individual players when confronted with depictions of such violence. For example, vegetarian players have described the troubling experience of being forced to carry out virtual acts of slaughter while playing.”*⁴³⁸

*“[...] [R]epresentations of violence against animals tend to cause little concern, as it is more socially accepted and sometimes even encouraged [...]”*⁴³⁹. Van Ooijen explains that he departs in his analysis from centering the most violent incidents as these “*violent events interrupt a status quo that is itself violent*”⁴⁴⁰.

*“By only focusing on situations that appear shocking and gruesome, then, we risk losing sight of the extensive and violent forces maintaining everyday life. In relation to game studies, this means that by only focusing on the most shocking games when discussing violence – the Postals and the Manhunts – we neglect the more subtle forms of ideological work carried out by games considered as cultural objects [...]”*⁴⁴¹

“One way of illustrating the distinction between subjective and objective violence is by referencing the outrage caused by the many recurring scandals in industrial meat production. When butchering goes wrong, and a particular factory is caught, for example, with boiling a pig alive, our attention is suddenly directed towards the otherwise mundane violence inherent to the food industry at large. Even though we are all aware that the industrial production of meat requires violence, all such scandalous instances are still presented as singular and accidental, simply because they defy our often unconscious conception of what kinds of violence are normal and acceptable. [...] Although ten billion animals are killed each year within U.S. agribusiness, this is a kind of violence that never results in headlines; it is only when something appears out of the ordinary that we react. According to

437 Van Ooijen 2019, p. 27.

438 Ibid.

439 Ibid., p. 28.

440 Ibid., p. 29.

441 Ibid. Emphasis in italics in the original.

[Melanie] Joy, *industrial violence against animals seems normal to us because of the way we establish cognitive schemas and mental classificatory systems that allow us to sort different species into various classes associated with certain values, attitudes, and forms of interaction. Cockroaches are exterminated, cows are butchered, but cats should be kept free from violence. While some species are pets, others are pests, and yet others are considered food.*"⁴⁴²

In *Risen 3*, one can even find monkeys called "innocent monkey". By deciding to kill them for some rewards, even though they don't attack and are explicitly labeled as *innocent*, Bareither's observation can be applied that this game might invoke feelings of guilt in the player by choosing the violent option of killing them despite it not being required⁴⁴³. The game might even be read as making an implicit statement here regarding real-life animal cruelty.

In *GTA V*, on the other hand, animals are just a part of the environment that can be killed without any consequences and any rewards whatsoever. Several animal characters can be unlocked by searching for and consuming peyote plants, resulting in playing as various animals for a short amount of time during a drug-induced hallucination sequence, and being able to play as some of them in the Director Mode for machinima making. Apart from that, the only prominent animal in the game is Franklin's dog Chop; players can experience the story through this dog's viewpoint during some rare missions and can otherwise take Chop for a walk when playing as Franklin. There also was an accompanying app which added some additional content for the dog, but it seems to have been discontinued by Rockstar Games⁴⁴⁴. Other appearances of animals are during Franklin's side mission "Wildlife Photography Challenge", where, as the name already implies, players have to take pictures of different virtual animals; and when hunting animals as a side-activity by Trevor. Generally, according to Hawranke, playing as animals, and real-life animals playing, are both important in games and in theories regarding play; animals are culturally ambivalent between being used and being abused, being cuddled with and being dangerous⁴⁴⁵. It seems to me that virtual animals with these various embodiments and attributions are therefore especially interesting for subversive gaming practices. Alenda Y. Chang writes that "*game animals occupy a liminal space between animal and thing*"⁴⁴⁶: "*Caring for something, whether a toy creature, potted plant, or pet rock, is a potent and evolutionarily hardwired behavior, one which [Sherry] Turkle reminds us leads*

442 Van Ooijen 2019, p. 29.

443 In episode 33 of the podcast *Studying Pixels*, the question is posed whether killing an innocent NPC could be somewhat compared to killing an animal. Cf. *Studying Pixels* 2022a.

444 Cf. Rockstar Games Newswire 2013 and Rockstar Games Customer Support 2022.

445 Cf. Hawranke 2018, pp. 20-21.

446 Chang 2019, p. 113.

children to feel compunction, even grief, over abusing a Furby or forgetting to feed a Tamagotchi”⁴⁴⁷. Similarly, Ian Bogost notes: “[...] [A]s humans, we are destined to offer anthropomorphic metaphors for the unit operations of object perception, particularly when our intention frequently involves communicating those accounts to other humans”⁴⁴⁸.

*“The means by which consciousness (or whatever term might replace it) grasps objects is itself a subject of speculation. That is, when we consider the encounter between two units, the givenness or appearance of reality for each of them is not given to us. In Lingis’s terms, the mango’s inner formula is never grasped.”*⁴⁴⁹

When writing the previous description of gameplay in the *Risen* trilogy, and generally when writing about digital games, the writing oscillates between “I” and “they/character/avatar”, hinting at the interconnection of player and their avatar when playing, and at immersive feelings and the difficulty of writing about these virtual-digital performative processes of embodiment and entanglement⁴⁵⁰. Christoph Bareither states on this, and I totally do agree with him here:

*“The description of game processes is stylistically not unproblematic, insofar as actually always a player controls a virtual body and the latter interacts with a virtual environment as a result of certain finger movements of the former. However, in order to avoid the permanent plausulation of the events, I also speak, for example, of the fact that ‘the player Sarazar shoots an opponent’ or that ‘Lara Croft has to take a hit’. I thus linguistically simplify the complicated subject-object constellations of the game process, ultimately only following the practice of the players. They, too, sometimes speak of their avatars as ‘I’, then again as ‘he[*she*they]’ [...], or they address [them] in the second person as ‘you’ [...]. I reproduce this linguistic oscillation myself through a deliberately inconsistent use of different narrative perspectives in the corresponding passages.”*⁴⁵¹

Still, it seems reasonable to be aware of this multi-layeredness of the player controlling an avatar who virtually performs the actions that the player wants. Bareither also notes on morality issues

447 Chang 2019, p. 113.

448 Bogost 2012, p. 65.

449 Ibid., p. 32. Emphasis in italics in the original.

450 I wrote about that previously, for example in my bachelor’s thesis and in an article for t*point about gender swapping and character creation: The avatar is a key concept here and has been academically discussed lots of times. Cf. Friedland 2021.

451 Bareither 2016, pp. 11-12. Translated by LF.

regarding ludic-virtual violence that a paper by Tilo Hartmann and Peter Vorderer has an insufficient definition of moral status of characters in games, because Hartmann/Vorderer emphasize player perception – resulting in the uncertainty that “*certain game processes could only be treated as computer game violence situationally, or (such as when multiple players with different perceptions play together) could be both computer game violence and not computer game violence at the same time*”⁴⁵². I looked into this paper by Hartmann/Vorderer, called *It's Okay to Shoot a Character: Moral Disengagement in Violent Video Games*, and this concept of *moral disengagement* that video games evoke in players is an interesting one. They write that virtual characters have of course no consciousness and aren't real subjects, and players know that, but still “*users perceive video game characters not as objects, but as social entities*”⁴⁵³. Players anthropomorphize things and humanoid characters while playing and they do believe a “realness” by default⁴⁵⁴. “*If a user violates [their] [...] internal moral standards by doing harm to video game characters, dissonant feelings like guilt and disgust are likely to emerge [...]*”⁴⁵⁵. Ultimately, Bareither formulates an overall definition for ludic-virtual violence, that seems very useful to include here: “*I speak of computer game violence whenever there is an audiovisual representation of intentional physical harm to people, animals, or property, and at least one human actor is playing with those representations*”⁴⁵⁶. And most games definitely do fall under this definition; and the aforementioned processes and sequences in *GTA* and the *Risen* trilogy as well. But still, as is argued in episode 35 of the podcast *Studying Pixels*, video game animals of course don't have consciousness, even though they might look like real ones, they still aren't, as all characters in video games they could be considered objects and therefore one cannot be cruel to them⁴⁵⁷. (Even though the examples of games like *Hatred* (Destructive Creations, 2015) or the *Manhunt* games (Rockstar North and Rockstar London, 2003 and 2007) are given in the podcast as cruel games, that are forbidden in Germany due to their excessive, seemingly purposeless graphical violence⁴⁵⁸.)

Another game that I recently played and that I would like to look at a bit closer is Pandemic Studios' *The Saboteur*. Because due to its narrative and specific historic setting and its drawing onto the real-world knowledge of players, the morality of its violence is a different case. It is set during the 1940s in Nazi-occupied France and players play as Sean Devlin, who is part of the French

452 Bareither 2016, p. 43. Translated by LF.

453 Hartmann et al. 2010, p. 95.

454 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 96.

455 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

456 Bareither 2016, p. 51. Translated by LF.

457 Cf. *Studying Pixels* 2022b.

458 Cf. *ibid.*

Resistance. The game world is separated into various city districts and other areas that one can “free” over time by following the main and side missions. When an area is “freed”, its color scheme shifts from black and white with only a few select colors highlighted like red and yellow (akin to the use of color in other media as well, most notably the movie *Schindler’s List* (Dir.: Steven Spielberg, USA 1993)) to full color – Nazis and their symbols are still very present in the streets, but the people have more hope due to the resistance group’s actions. The game is generally a revenge story about Devlin wanting to revenge the killing of his brother by a Nazi commander. Gameplay-wise, it plays very much like the *GTA*, *Assassin’s Creed* and *Hitman* franchises, combining various aspects of these together. It is generally an open world with lots of opportunities for *paidia* and causing mayhem just like in *GTA*; a notable difference being that there are hundreds of freeplay targets marked all over the map, consisting of watchtowers, radar systems, tanks and other military equipment and military officers, that can be destroyed/killed. Additionally, there are various perks to unlock by killing a number of specific types of Nazis in a specific way, stealing specific types of vehicles, winning street races, destroying army equipment in specific ways etc. These perks in turn unlock additional stealth kill moves, vehicles and various other gameplay conveniences. One can therefore ascertain that these two special types of implicit goals, freeplay targets and unlockable perks, with various rules attached to them, do structure *paidia* with *ludus* and also do limit any *paidia* that isn’t directed towards achieving these goals, at least in my perception it definitely was like that. This game can be an insightful artifact when wanting to exemplify *ludus* following *paidia*, structuring it again. But also the opposite is true, as phases of *paidia* follow *ludus* as well, when one gets bored of following the (very strictly linear) different story missions, or especially when one already has beaten all of the missions and in the end still has lots of freeplay targets marked on the map, still lots of Nazis to virtually fight – *paidia* that is still bound to at least some rules. “*If the rules are broken in a game, play is disrupted and can only be restored by a reapplication of the rules*”⁴⁵⁹, writes Burrill.

Because of *The Saboteur* referencing common historic knowledge of the Nazis as evil and because of their extremely brutal and inexplicably violent actions both in-game and in real-life, the killing of Nazis during these freeplay targets, especially when they threaten citizens with their weapons or are preparing executions of citizens in the streets, is definitely satisfactory and heroic instead of feeling any guilt. Here, the aforementioned *moral disengagement* is not just enabled due to narrative framing, but of course also due to historic knowledge of players. I feel great satisfaction when killing Nazi targets and over time slowly clearing up my map, denazifying the map. Most, if not all, games about fighting fascism or similar authoritarian and deeply inhuman regimes do invoke these

459 Burrill 2008, p. 77.

satisfactory feelings, as they should. Notably maybe the *Wolfenstein* franchise, which, to reference him once again, Jacob Geller also made a video essay on in 2019, describing killing Nazis fittingly as an “*ethical removal of fascism*”⁴⁶⁰.

Interestingly tho, unlike in for example the *GTA* series, ludic-virtual-violent *paidia* in *The Saboteur* is discouraged not just by having these specific freeplay targets and unlockable perks, but also because this representation of the French resistance just ultimately cannot do a lot against the virtual Nazis, which is echoed by the game’s mechanics. For example, there are various hideouts scattered around the map, including public urinals, sheds and roof hatches, but also more questionable ones like prostitutes in brothels, or just blending in by kissing (sexually harassing) random women, apparently without their consensus⁴⁶¹. These hideouts do play a central role in this game, as one can only ever carry two weapons at a time (even though there are various different types of weapons unlockable), with overall limited ammunition facing a seemingly infinite supernumber of Nazis getting more powerful with increasing resistance of the player resulting in increasing alarm phases of up to 5 (very similar to the wanted level system in *GTA* and other games).

To put this into perspective: I remember when playing *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008) in my teenage years, I as the avatar Niko Bellic had great fun with being sheltered by some car park and just battling the police with lots of weapons until death. And in *GTA V*, the only “real” hiding spot, where the police definitely won’t chase the player, is the city’s sewage system. *The Saboteur*, on the other hand, is more about stealth-killing, escaping, sneaking and hiding than it is a power fantasy. Ultimately, the influence of the French resistance regarding freeing the country from Nazis in this game is a very limited one, if at all. Also, there is a punishment for dying that is in my view more severe than paying a comparatively little amount of money as hospital fees in *GTA V*, which further discourages risky and ludic-violent play. As the game’s manual states: “*If you’re not on a mission, do try to keep yourself from taking a dirt nap. Deaths while in free play are met with a heavy price: you can spawn at the nearest HQ, but you do so with the loss of all your weapons and grenades*”⁴⁶². The loss of all the weapons and their ammunition definitely is a heavy price in this game. An example for a game that takes these kinds of punishments onto a whole new level would be *Pathologic* or *Pathologic 2*, and with their discouragement of engaging in ludic-virtual violence by having very limited resources/weapons and generally difficult combat mechanics, these games definitely would be an extremely fitting discussion for this essay as well – but given that this text is

460 Jacob Geller 2019c, TC: 00:08:19-00:08:21. On Nazis in games cf. also Pfister 2018b and on Nazi gaming communities cf. Huberts 2018b.

461 The game also sparked some controversy surrounding its depiction of female nudity. In an interview, game designer Tom French talks about that and cinematic inspirations for this game as well, cf. John 2009.

462 *The Saboteur Manual* 2009, p. 10.

already way too long and that I will discuss *Pathologic 2* more in-depth as part of my master's thesis regarding its theatricality, I will not include this discussion here.

What is interesting to add about *The Saboteur* is that this game presents the player with a nearly fully climbable city, a lot of the time players are climbing and are located on rooftops, similar to (at least the early installments of) the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. It was so similar that I oftentimes jokingly thought to myself that I would soon "desynchronize" (an in-game phenomenon discouraging violent *paidia* against citizens and being present when dying or attempting to surpass the borders of the game world, to go out of bounds, that innerdiegetically is explained by actions not matching the actions of the historic character that one plays as) and wake up as Desmond Miles from the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. Van Ooijen writes regarding *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft, 2012) on these "desynchronizing" events and the resulting restrictions of player freedom:

*"This causes a tension between being in the world and recreating a fixed set of memories. While the open world encourages free (paideic) exploration, the goal-driven (ludic) elements of the narrative forces the player to stay on track in reproducing the memories of his ancestor. If the player diverges too far from this path, the simulation 'desynchronizes' and breaks down."*⁴⁶³

When trying to go out of bounds in *The Saboteur*, one is attacked by Nazi war planes and the game warns you that you are approaching a battle zone of World War II. In *Risen*, one is attacked by a giant sea creature, a monster worm, when reaching the sea, the border of the map of this island surrounded by water. I'm not sure right now how *Risen 2* handles this, but *Risen 3* is definitely the only game of this trilogy in which your avatar can swim, but upon surpassing the border of the map, you are just spawned at the border again. I might write about invisible walls and out-of-bounds experiences somewhere else in the future, but for now it seems important to note that even these seemingly free open world spaces are usually constraint by rules and don't even allow unlimited *paidia*. At some point the freedom of *paidia* always ends, and the rules of *ludus* are foregrounded again by the game. As in life, freedom is unfortunately only an illusion. One cannot leave these virtual worlds, look beyond the intended areas of play, without quitting the game. *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013) infamously features the possibility of seemingly leaving the game's office location through a window, only to be greeted by its narrator again, thus illustrating the apparently ultimate inescapability of at least some kind of rules⁴⁶⁴.

463 Van Ooijen 2019, p. 38.

464 Cf. as an illustration Philoteos Games 2016.

“[T]he ‘realism’ resides in players’ engagement with verifiable rules”⁴⁶⁵, writes Gareth Schott, referencing Jesper Juul’s *Half-Real*. As games are, according to Schott, “rule-bound competitive spaces”⁴⁶⁶, rules are important regarding “realism” and ludic-virtual violence; games employ “rule systems as a ‘protective frame’ that contains violence when it is engaged willingly, within the playful mind-set”⁴⁶⁷. Regarding real-life violence, one can draw upon “game rules [...] in the defense of games”⁴⁶⁸: Quoting Juul again, Schott states that killing a dragon is of course still fiction, therefore real rules are colliding with a fictional world⁴⁶⁹; the rules are the real.

Definitions of real-world violence are by the way unclear as well⁴⁷⁰. In a similar way, Schott notes an “apparent lack of conceptual clarity surrounding digital games”⁴⁷¹. Schott cites a psychological study suggesting that people react differently to different depictions of violence, depending on how real they thought it is, but “people generally differentiate between the nature and quality of depicted violence, and secondly, the manner in which it is portrayed”⁴⁷². Violence in games can be things like “‘depictions of violence,’ simulations of ‘violent acts’ or playful performances in violently themed surroundings”⁴⁷³. When children play seemingly violent, it is still play, “participating in violent game play is different from participating in violence”⁴⁷⁴. Also, as he states, actors playing violence obviously doesn’t make them violent⁴⁷⁵. Interestingly, in the same way as guns in digital games, depictions of violence seem to reference each other more than any factual physical violence:

“[...] [T]he way violence is executed and represented on canvas, in prose, or as a moving image has arguably surpassed knowledge or witnessing of existent, factual, or material violence in terms of its predominance for individuals embedded within a media-saturated world.”⁴⁷⁶

In this “media-saturated world”, the borders between violence, war and game are blurring, as for example Jahrman and Lukas write. War can be a game and video games are realities, or at least part of “reality”, as well. The question would be then: What is “reality”? And, is “reality” separable from the virtual at all?

465 Schott 2016, p. 45.

466 Ibid., p. 46.

467 Ibid., p. 53.

468 Ibid., p. 58.

469 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 59.

470 Cf. for example *ibid.*, pp. 46-49.

471 Ibid., p. 49.

472 Ibid., p. 53.

473 Ibid., p. 49.

474 Ibid., p. 52.

475 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 49.

476 Ibid., p. 48.

*“Advances in technology will deliver virtual worlds that rival and then surpass the physical realm. And with limitless, convincing experiences on tap, the material world may lose its allure [...]”*⁴⁷⁷, writes Ian Sample in an article on David Chalmers’ book *Reality+*. Virtual worlds, to Chalmers, are real worlds. *“A conversation in VR is a real conversation [...]. The objects in the virtual worlds are real too [...], just made of bits instead of quarks and electrons”*⁴⁷⁸.

*“In the decades ahead, Chalmers suspects we will ditch the clunky headsets for brain-computer interfaces, or BCIs, that allow us to experience virtual worlds with our full suite of senses. With advances in computing – in the next century, perhaps – those worlds would seem as real as the physical world around us.”*⁴⁷⁹

Drawing on, among others, McKenzie Wark’s *Gamer Theory* and Liam Mitchell’s *Ludopolitics*, YouTuber The Game Overanalyser highlights the gamification of the so-called real world and Wark’s concept of the *gamespace*, blending reality and game together. In this argumentation, “reality” always has been a *gamespace*, even without digital-virtual ludic worlds. Games reflect “reality” without changing it, and they foreground the brokenness and flaws of “reality”. *Microsoft Flight Simulator* (Asobo Games, 2020) is mentioned as an example of a simulation trying to simulate the whole earth with real topologic and satellite data – but ultimately failing, as its cities are empty upon closer inspection⁴⁸⁰. By the way, there is yet another Jacob Geller video essay called *Cities Without People* that illustrates these flaws and glitches very well too, in which he calls this game *“possibly the most indulgent synthesis of software and reality anyone has ever had the chutzpah to call a ‘flight simulator’”*⁴⁸¹. One could come back here to the capitalist aesthetic of hyper-realism, that at least as of today cannot mimic “reality” one hundred percent, as also Stephan Schwingeler writes in his text *Playing with Sight*:

*“In this coherence computer generated imagery in general has been described as ‘hyper-realistic’: images depicting spaces and objects that have no reference in the space of bodily presence and therefore do not exist but seem plausible and convincing. Still, an avatar has no reflection in the mirror.”*⁴⁸²

477 Sample 2022.

478 Ibid.

479 Ibid.

480 Cf. The Game Overanalyser 2021.

481 Cf. Jacob Geller 2020, TC: 00:02:14-00:02:24.

482 Schwingeler 2019, p. 49.

And, as Michael Nitsche summarizes in his text *No End of Worlds*:

*“Against Turkle’s (1996) visionary statement that ‘Real Life’ can be ‘just one more window’ I argue that we are in the process of losing the comfort of the window ‘frame.’ Instead, Real Life and its spaces are imbued with digital media and neither of these two can be seen as separate. [...] Whether it is through the Kinect cameras, the Guitar Hero controller, or through the eye of an Augmented Reality application – digital media spaces expand in manifold ways into the physical, re-shaping, re-using them. In the form of location aware cell phones, this conquest of the physical is becoming mainstream on levels even beyond video gaming.”*⁴⁸³

A game developer studio to which I am nostalgically connected to, and therefore from time to time keep up to date with their work, is Frogwares, which is located in Ukraine and therefore was and still is directly affected by the ongoing war by Russia against Ukraine – *People Make Games* made an impressive documentary on this situation back in 2022, illustrating the intrusion of war into the developer’s everyday life⁴⁸⁴. There also was the incident that Frogwares received criticism regarding its Kickstarter campaign for the recently released remaster of their 2006 Lovecraft-inspired game *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* (Frogwares, 2023). As a reward in this campaign, people were able to buy the addition of a custom message to “*an artillery shell that will be fired at invading Russian forces in Ukraine*”⁴⁸⁵. Critics were “*accusing the studio of glorifying violence and gamifying real war*”⁴⁸⁶. The article by Andy Chalk states that the addition of messages onto military equipment has a centuries-old historic tradition⁴⁸⁷. I am definitely not in the position to criticize anything about that, but from a solely media scientific point of view, this is an interesting phenomenon, as it illustrates this intertwining of war and the reality of the game developers as well; and it is especially interesting that people criticized the gamification of war, as we have seen in this essay so far, war might already be inherently gamified, most obviously with Caillois’ *agôn*, but as aforementioned with Thomas Macho, it could be argued that war includes *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx* as well.

483 Nitsche 2019, p. 201.

484 Cf. People Make Games 2022.

485 Chalk 2022.

486 Ibid.

487 Cf. *ibid.*

There even is at least one game already that is based on the ongoing war against Ukraine, *Death From Above* (Rockodile, 2023), currently in Early Access on Steam. In this game, one controls Ukrainian war drones and has to fight against Russian invaders. An article by Roman Goncharenko describes this game as activist, “*pro-Ukrainian propaganda and [...] part of the information war raging around the conflict in Europe*”⁴⁸⁸. The game also donates at least some percentage of its revenue to Ukrainian initiatives⁴⁸⁹. This game definitely blurs the line between war and game and, at least ideologically, influences “reality”.

Surrounding *GTA V*, there are also interesting entanglements of game and “reality”. For example, the streamer Thomas Chance Morris aka Sodapoppin quit role-playing as an avatar who is a business person, owner of a burger restaurant, because the in-game job became too much work and too similar to a real-life job⁴⁹⁰. In another case, there is *mimicry* transgressing into the real world more overtly, an actual restaurant role-playing as a fictional restaurant chain from the *GTA* franchise at the San Diego Comic Con 2022, but being prevented to continue to do so in 2023 due to legal issues with publisher Take-Two forbidding such a thing⁴⁹¹. Another case could be made for in-game memorials for deceased players/fans of games, which are actually not uncommon⁴⁹².

There is also for example the YouTube channel POTUS Play, depicting the (former) US-American presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden as gamers playing *GTA V*, oscillating between the in-game universe (like robbing a bank) and real-life politics (like assassinating Russian president Vladimir Putin), and the avatars commenting the gameplay accordingly. Their voices are authentically generated by artificial intelligence and their avatars (and the presidential vehicle) have been modded accordingly⁴⁹³. These videos are strange and entertaining artifacts specifically *because* of their reliance on player’s knowledge about politics and its satirical and absurdist twisting.

An even more uncanny and fascinating use of AI would be virtual characters playing and commenting themselves, which is what YouTuber FoxMaster created and documented with a virtual Lara Croft seemingly playing and commenting *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) all by herself, with the voice of Lara Croft and as if commenting her game actions like in a Let’s Play video⁴⁹⁴.

488 Goncharenko 2023.

489 Cf. *ibid.*

490 Cf. for example Grayson 2021 and Schuhmann 2021.

491 Cf. Beverungen 2023.

492 I could mention lots of examples, but regarding *GTA V*, cf. for example a virtual funeral and mourning ceremony as a performative practice for a player that died from cancer described by Warczynski 2021. Another example for a more longer-lasting, non-performative memorial is the avatar of player Technoblade, a pig with a crown, being displayed in *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2009). This player died from cancer as well. Cf. Braun 2022.

493 Cf. for example POTUS Play 2023a and POTUS Play 2023b.

494 Cf. FoxMaster 2023a.

This experiment could be seen as *countergaming* as well, especially considering the historically sexist marketing of Lara Croft towards heterosexual endo cis male players and the discourse surrounding the size of her breasts⁴⁹⁵. FoxMaster’s video can then be seen as an empowerment of Lara Croft and as a reaction to the real-world discourse surrounding her.

Two other interesting cases I would like to mention briefly as the end of this part, because of their intriguing physicality, are a bodysuit for the upcoming entry in Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed* franchise, *Assassin’s Creed Mirage*, that will let players feel not only different kinds of being hit during combat, but also “*things like wind, stress, and free-falling*”⁴⁹⁶. The most extreme example of an impact onto physicality would be a conceptual art piece by Palmer Luckey, a VR headset that would kill the player if their avatar dies in-game. The threat of real-life consequences would definitely totally destroy the supposedly safety of the *magic circle*. This would be an incredibly concerning device and I hope that nobody is ever going to make a functioning thing like that for real⁴⁹⁷.

495 Cf. for example MarcoStyle 2023 and Romano 2018. Cf. also Peggy Ahwesh’s machinima *She Puppet* (Peggy Ahwesh, 2001).

496 Cripe 2023.

497 Cf. Gault 2022.

VII

Metagaming and Queergaming as Subversive Paidia Practices

“Games are characterized by a sense of purpose and goals”⁴⁹⁸, writes Gareth Schott. I think that *paidia* without this sense of purpose and goals is just inevitably going to become boring. Still, *paidia* definitely has a more subversive potential. I could walk around in *Risen 2* for hours, chilling somewhere at the beach of Caldera or in the jungle of Arborea, but I wouldn’t progress in the story. It is only with the side-quests and the collection of legendary items, that I can seemingly leave the path, even though these actions are still highly structured by *ludus*, and they all appear as tasks in your quest log. The path that one can leave that way consists of pirate cliches, damsel-in-distress-narratives, white saviourism and a quest to kill some First Nations People who escaped enslavement. Nothing about these things is heroic. By wandering around, I can bring other aspects of the game’s world into focus. As Rich McCormick writes in a review:

*“Risen 2 is also anachronistic – bordering on racist and sexist – in its portrayal of women and the island’s indigenous tribes. Patty is forced to work in a kitchen early on in the story, because – as your nameless hero asserts – she is a woman, after all. Attempts to protest and present the section as social commentary are undercut when you’re made to pressgang her into service in order to advance the story. Local tribes, too, are treated like characters from an early Tintin adventure. They spout nonsense words, practice voodoo, wear very few clothes, and are most commonly referred to as ‘savages.’ It doesn’t feel like the game sets out to be malicious, but the tone sat uneasily with me at a few junctures.”*⁴⁹⁹

When you leave this narrative path to explore, and for example find the aforementioned legendary items as collectibles, they aren’t marked on your map, and so you have to figure out their locations yourself and find books in which they are described. In *Risen 3*, however, these items become just another marker on your map. *Risen 1* has lots of hidden items and equipment scattered around the environment at seemingly hidden locations, whereas *Risen 3* for example added a feature called “astral vision”, with which valuable pickups around you are easier to see, even through walls.

498 Schott 2016, p. 57.

499 McCormick 2012.

Thomas Hawranke uses the term *metagaming* or *metagame*, referencing Richard Terrell, as a re-dedication of the game simulation⁵⁰⁰:

*“Here, the rule space of the computer game is questioned, extended, expanded, or even destroyed. [...] The practices involved are oftentimes not foreseeable by the designers and include both playing against the rules as well as rule extension or playing according to one's own rules. [...] Metagamers leave the pre-drawn paths, get lost within the game world and define new, off-beat paths within it through their actions.”*⁵⁰¹

Hawranke also makes use of the terms “non-immersive exploring”⁵⁰² and “non-narrative exploring”⁵⁰³ as a “*mode of a freely-exploringly playing*”⁵⁰⁴ that isn't (aimed at) progressing, but instead embraces mistakes and errors in a “*play with the game*”⁵⁰⁵.

In their text *Playing to Lose*, Bo Ruberg develops a theory of failure in video games as queerness by merging queer theoretical positions by Jack Halberstam with game theoretical positions by Jesper Juul. Ruberg's approach can definitely be thought together with Hawranke, or even as the ultimate extension of *metagaming* as playing against the game's intended paths from a queer perspective. “*It's normal to hate to fail; taking pleasure in failure itself, playing a game intentionally to lose, would be very queer indeed*”⁵⁰⁶, Ruberg writes. “[...] [C]ontrary to common assumptions, failure in video games can be pleasurable and powerful – a spectacular, masochistic mode of resistance that disassembles normative expectations in and out of the game world”⁵⁰⁷. To look at games with a queer lense seems to be generally “*counterintuitive*”⁵⁰⁸ at first glance, as “[t]raditionally, mainstream video games have shied away from including LGBT characters or story lines [...]”⁵⁰⁹. This results in games without “*any explicitly queer content*”⁵¹⁰ being received as “*by default 'straight'*”⁵¹¹, and this “*presumed straightness [...] dominates the medium*”⁵¹².

500 Cf. Hawranke 2018, pp. 33-34.

501 Ibid., p. 34. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

502 Ibid., p. 35. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

503 Ibid., p. 218. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

504 Ibid., p. 35. Translated by LF.

505 Ibid. Translated by LF.

506 Ruberg 2017, p. 197.

507 Ibid., p. 198.

508 Ibid.

509 Ibid.

510 Ibid., p. 199.

511 Ibid.

512 Ibid.

*“Queering the seemingly un-queer is a particularly touchy, and therefore particularly powerful, practice when it comes to video games, an artistic form with close ties to its historically homophobic player base. The traditional wisdom from gaming’s outspoken online community objects that when we explore queerness in ‘straight’ games, we ‘read too much’ into them, polluting the hetero safe space of queer-free play with our ‘gay’ interpretations. The pervasiveness of this homophobia has been well documented.”*⁵¹³

Ruberg also connects queerness with being and with *playing* differently:

*“More abstractly, queerness means both desiring differently and simply being differently (or, in this case, playing differently): a longing to live life otherwise, a resistance to social structures, and an embrace of the strange. [...] These modes of seeing value experience above content, a particularly important approach for video games, where player input shapes the interactive world. Any game becomes queer, in a sense, when we experience it queerly.”*⁵¹⁴

As a person with an identity consisting of double, triple, quadruple – multiple intersectional dimensions of queerness, as well as neurodivergence, this mode of *experiencing queerly* is especially suitable to me and my perception of everything. Ruberg refers to the aforementioned concepts of Jesper Juul when stating: *“Games are fictional, fantasy, but they are also always at least half-real”*⁵¹⁵. Therefore it makes sense to connect the situatedness of games within an endo-cis-heterosexist and patriarchal society with societal norms, to “[...] *think of all the heteronormative expectations we undermine when we refuse to succeed, to play along, to win. Think of the havoc we wreak on the status quo when we, under the charge of queer nonconformity, play to lose*”⁵¹⁶. In different terms, one could describe queer play and queer failure as unproductive, as wasted capital and time, as idling against the normative right way of playing. One can outplay video games by idling, and, contrary, speedrun the genre of idle games.

*“Traditionally, artistry equates to being good at something; failure equates to being bad at it. Any art of failure would be queer indeed”*⁵¹⁷, Ruberg continues to argue. *“It is a playful art, a ludic art, which makes a game of dying”*⁵¹⁸. They also describes failure *“as an inverted performance of non-skill and bravado”*⁵¹⁹. Interestingly, this art of failure and art of dying is a key component of the

513 Ruberg 2017, p. 199.

514 Ibid., p. 200.

515 Ibid., p. 201.

516 Ibid., p. 202.

517 Ibid., p. 203.

518 Ibid.

519 Ibid., p. 204.

aforementioned *Pathologic* games, making them in this reading strangely queer, without explicitly being queer. I have to think of two specific scenes in *Pathologic 2* and *The Saboteur* as well: When I am watching children playing hopscotch in the plague-ridden town during the prologue of *Pathologic 2*, or watching a German Nazi soldier play Russian Roulette against himself on one of the upper floors of the Tour Eiffel during the final mission of *The Saboteur*, losing against himself and winning at the same time, wanting to suicide himself but always winning the game, losing against his own goal. When I am watching these games within a game, I am idling, I am engaging in *metagaming* (even though not losing during these specific moments).

*“I want to stress one distinction I find particularly important for queer failure – the distinction between failing toward or against a game system. By this I mean the difference between failing in the way that a game wants us to [...] versus failing in the way that a game does not want. Determining what any given game ‘wants’ is itself tricky, but I am thinking here about what outcomes the game instructs us to strive for, what outcomes it rewards, what outcomes it punishes, what outcomes it renders impossible.”*⁵²⁰

This seems to be very crucial to me regarding the subversive potential of *paidia* play. Ruberg argues for more radical practices of *paidia*, for “*experimenting with non-goal-oriented play*”⁵²¹. Of course, thinking about that, when playing with the goal of failing against a game, one still has a goal and thus cannot ultimately escape some kind of rules and goals. But still, there is interesting potential in this counter-gaming play-style. Bo Ruberg also notes “*games that blur the line between failing toward and against the system*”⁵²² as especially interesting for queer play. Referencing Halberstam, they write of “*self-destruction [...] as a form of resistance against mainstream power structures*”⁵²³; and in this powerful failure through self-destruction, “*failure brings queerness to games with no explicitly queer content*”⁵²⁴, and “*queerness (in the guise of failure) is itself integral to all games*”⁵²⁵: “*To the extent that no game can exist without failure, no game can exist without queerness*”⁵²⁶. Failure is an art that cannot be mastered, as it cannot be fully planned, perfected, staged: “*When we replay failure, we replay toward perfection, failing more and more fantastically. [...] Perfecting the art of failure, an art defined by imperfection, abjection, and artlessness, puts us*

520 Ruberg 2017, p. 204.

521 Ibid., p. 205.

522 Ibid.

523 Ibid., p. 208.

524 Ibid.

525 Ibid.

526 Ibid., p. 210.

*back in the realm of paradox*⁵²⁷. In Edmond Y. Chang's text *A Game Chooses, A Player Obeys*, published in the same book as Ruberg's, Chang uses the term *queergaming* in reference to Alexander R. Galloway's *countergaming*. Ruberg's text definitely could be condensed to that term too, meaning "*queergaming, ways of playing against the grain, against normative design*"⁵²⁸.

A game in which players participate in chaotic animal *paidia* is *Goat Simulator*. In this game, one plays as a goat and interacts with objects and NPCs via actions like licking, kicking, jumping and headbutting to score as much points as possible. There are some specific goals listed to achieve and hundreds of achievements to unlock and things to find, but otherwise there really aren't that many rules, and not even a proper tutorial. During my playtime I was very confused regarding what I have to do, and after getting used to this game's silly weirdness, it kind of gets boring fast. I also got into the situation within the first minutes that my goat avatar both unlocked the ability to summon other goats falling from the sky and also to be a devilish goat and turn things into an orb, and also having a jetpack, resulting in this goat flying around in the air and seemingly never landing. It became frustrating, and overall, boredom set in when having explored a map and still not knowing how to walk on the front legs for one of the tasks. "*It's a title that refuses to take itself seriously*"⁵²⁹, writes Megan Farokhmanesh about this game and that embraces the "*goofy glitch*"⁵³⁰. It is not possible to queerly fail this game, because every failure and brokenness is immediately incorporated by the game. Still, in its inherent strangeness and its failings, this game could be read as queer by design.

Another game that manages to place *paidia* at its centre, but at least to me without it getting boring (maybe also because its mechanics and overall goals are way clearer), is Sam Barlow's recent FMV game *IMMORTALITY*. I am unsure here too how one could even fail this game, but for sure, there is no overtly explicit queer content as well: I definitely don't like this game for its aggressive heterosexuality, even though it might be read as a critique of the infamous "casting couch" and other problems within the film and entertainment industry, nor do I like the explicit cis-heteronormative coding of the underlying supernatural beings⁵³¹, which to me seems like a missed opportunity for queer codings. In a blog post about this game, Eugen Pfister references a review by Ashley Bardhan⁵³², who is irritated by the game's way of presenting patriarchal-misogynist

527 Ruberg 2017, p. 210.

528 Chang 2017, p. 242.

529 Farokhmanesh 2014.

530 Ibid.

531 Eugen Pfister describes these beings as embodying "*theatrical aesthetics*" (Pfister 2023, translated by LF).

532 Cf. Pfister 2023.

structures as well, stating for example that it lacks “*sharp teeth*”⁵³³ and: “*Though he draws attention off the director and onto the actress, Barlow never gives Marissa any sense of agency*”⁵³⁴. In this way, Barlow would be “*stealing his actress’ spotlight*”⁵³⁵ as did the depicted movie directors. “*Often throughout my playthrough, I wondered how Barlow expects women artists to exist at all if he can only imagine them as sexy teenagers, being chewed and spit out by a Picasso, or forgotten by history completely*”⁵³⁶, notes Bardhan.

No, what I found so fascinating about *IMMORTALITY* is not just its great performative display of intertextuality, of texts shimmering through other texts, but also the game mechanic of rewinding film. Rewinding and playing backwards, playing against the usual linear progression of film, therefore playing against the norm, getting lost in little details (*metagaming* as intended gameplay), jumping between these film clips for hours and hours and hours until finally progressing, until unlocking anything new. The act of getting distracted and lost in the material is encouraged here. *IMMORTALITY* explains the basic mechanics and just sets its players free to explore for themselves, like a sandbox game, but with film footage. It even is, as I would argue, more effective in this specific act of getting lost than Sam Barlow’s previous game *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015) by being able to navigate the clips via visuals instead of just keywords. *IMMORTALITY* plays against our understanding of game and film at the same time by employing the unstructuredness of *paidia* within a limited amount of rules, but also within a limited amount of possible interactions. Eugen Pfister situates this game within other more experimental games and media and states that therefore this game is actually made by game developers for game developers, as it might be too complex for a “regular” audience to understand its subtext⁵³⁷. I would argue that this actually fits perfectly well with theories of intertextuality and my reading of it as illustrating intertextuality performatively, because intertextuality as well relies on specific knowledge⁵³⁸. Pfister describes it as follows:

*“Cultural artifacts that are full of arcane references to their conditions of creation and their cultural language, that they offer pleasurable experiences primarily for insiders, but are closed to most others. [...] Cultural artifacts that require a high degree of experience with the medium in order to unfold meaning.”*⁵³⁹

533 Bardhan 2022.

534 Ibid.

535 Ibid.

536 Ibid.

537 Cf. Pfister 2023.

538 I wrote a long paper about intertextuality regarding the work of Polish author Bruno Schulz at the beginning of last year; I intend to publish this as part of a possible PhD publication or at some other point in the future.

539 Pfister 2023. Translated by LF.

Additionally, Pfister points out that this game doesn't have an actual ending. In his playthrough, he, like I did as well, relied on the game's achievements as the goals:

*“The actual end of the game, however, is rather a hidden final shot of ‘Two of Everything’ that is unlocked only after some key hidden sequences have been found. But even then, the game doesn't really end because there is no ending. Lacking the game's guidance, I noticed myself reverting more to Achievements and letting them guide me to what else I could discover. And eventually you have to decide for yourself to stop playing at some point.”*⁵⁴⁰

I personally would love to have more games that use replaying, rewinding and fragmentation instead of linearity. (Even though, as a completionist, I am always happy about games actually having a fixed ending, contrary to what for example MMOs do.) But of course, playing against the rules as an integral part of the intended gaming experience can only logically be found within artifacts that lie under the radar of mainstream gaming culture, and, most importantly, that aren't necessarily bound to being a profitable investment. For example within what Roxanne Chartrand and Pascale Thériault analyse using *AltGames* and similar terms: *“Artists try to ‘break’ game mechanics and videoludic norms”*⁵⁴¹.

deWinter/Kocurek make a convincing argument in favor of readings from a marginalized perspective (including queer readings like Ruberg and Chang do) for digital games and other cultural artifacts, which is that the safety of the *magic circle* constitutes a privilege that not all gamers have. If video game characters are shouting homophobic slurs at each other, it does effect me for example different than straight people. deWinter/Kocurek write: *“And we assure our readers, producing these records and doing the work of these interventions becomes demoralizing, a job that we clock into instead of the safe magic circle of play”*⁵⁴².

Another point they make, and that I would strongly agree with, is that diverse art and cultural artifacts have positive political effects, namely not contributing to the emergence of hateful ideologies like fascism:

540 Pfister 2023. Translated by LF.

541 Chartrand et al. 2018, p. 5.

542 deWinter/Kocurek 2017, p. 68.

*“In their landmark essay, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,’ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer persuasively make the case that homogenous cultural production can and does produce fascism. This cycle is unfolding in games culture as we watch.”*⁵⁴³

Applied to games more generally, this would be an argument against a dominance of combat mechanics as well, and an argument for a diverse range of different aesthetics and contents. deWinter/Kocurek also refer to phenomena like the right-wing online harassment campaign *#GamerGate*, which has had a lasting impact onto the toxicity of certain online spaces and made the internet less safe for marginalized people.

⁵⁴³ deWinter/Kocurek 2017, p. 68.

VIII

Closing Notes On Outplaying Video Games with Art Games or Software Whatever

I would like to start this last part of this essay by arguing against the prevalence of modding in scholarship. When for example Stephan Schwingeler highlights modding as a central artistic practice, it seems as if only through modding an artist can turn games into something of artistic value. This is wrong, because video games are already works of art delivering a specifically designed experience. I am taking game developers seriously as artists, and only then one can take games as seriously as any other artform. A similar approach of artists having to somehow “artistically break” games in order to create art has Miltos Manetas. “Artists after videogames don't play videogames but relate to them”⁵⁴⁴, writes Manetas in *Manifesto of Art After Videogames*. I would argue against Manetas with a more grounded perspective: Artists can *both* relate to video games and still play them. It is beneficial to know other artifacts within the medium that you are working with, even though I would also argue that this is not necessary. One can write great literature and not read a lot or at all; I personally know some people who do that, myself included, as I wouldn't describe myself as an avid reader nor gamer really, I create way more than I actually do consume, and this helps keeping a perspective fresh and not distracted too much by conventions and norms already present within a given medium. I like what Alexander R. Galloway asks: “*The first question is: Do you play video games? Then next we may explore what they do.*”⁵⁴⁵

I also would disagree with Manetas on people “playing god” when making games, because human expression and creation is independent from that, non-religious people like me do exist. And as Müllner rightfully describes modders as “*unpaid workers of gaming capitalism*”⁵⁴⁶, the subversive potential of modding seems to fade anyways.

Projects like the 2020 *The Uncensored Library* map for *Minecraft* by Reporters Without Borders exemplify what video games as a medium can achieve at the intersection of virtual space and positive real-life consequences⁵⁴⁷. But of course, art doesn't need to be tied back to the so-called “reality” or needs to have any practical benefit whatsoever. In my view, considering the capitalist

544 Manetas 1997-2016. Emphasis in italics in the original. Translated by LF.

545 Galloway 2006, p. xii.

546 Müllner 2022, p. 15. Translated by LF.

547 Cf. Reporters Without Borders 2020a and Reporters Without Borders 2020b.

striving towards market value and commodification of art, the more *unnecessary* an artwork is, the better. *Minecraft* is a creative game space that allows such creations. In a video on the lack of games in which players are given creative freedom to express themselves, Adam Millard says that genuine creativity would be hard to reward or judge for a game, and also it is difficult to get players inspired to do something with the tools that a game offers⁵⁴⁸. Creativity cannot be contained by game rules, and it needs to be encouraged to do things even though they have no concrete purpose or don't bring an advancement, don't complete a certain task. A game that gets this kind of right in my opinion is the art MMO *Occupy White Walls* (StikiPixels, 2018), which I talked about extensively in a previous academic paper. In this game, one can freely build their art gallery out of lots of architectural and decoration elements and gets the in-game currency of cubes to buy new extensions and building elements just by opening the space to the public/AI. Still, it is limited in the stuff that one can build with, and the art that one can place in the gallery.

A fitting example are photography games, in which players have to abide to certain rules as well instead of taking pictures creatively. Marco De Mutiis writes:

*“Yet to win at photography means to adhere to a specific visual regime, and to be unable to conceive images that allow no ambiguity. There are clear rules that separate successful and unsuccessful images. Photography is reduced to only one acceptable representation system – one that players have no choice but to subscribe to. [...] It's all fun when confined to Huizinga's 'magic circle' of play, but the gamification of photography is a phenomenon that has been spreading beyond computer games, for example, to shape the rules of representation of social exchange on online media platforms. Within the currency of likes and followers in the so-called attention economy, the version of photography that is most effective is the one that produces what Jonathan Beller calls 'fractal celebrity.' This idea of computational representation flattens diversity and promotes gender inequality, racism and cultural codifications by means of a restrictive notion of what constitutes successful photography.”*⁵⁴⁹

The problem of games and creator tools limiting the stuff that users can do with them is a persistent one, and it also is a problem of aesthetics. Géraldine Hohmann writes in an article on the video game and video game creator tool *Core* (Manticore Games, 2020):

548 Cf. Adam Millard 2023.

549 De Mutiis 2023, pp. 256-257. Emphasis in italics in the original.

“Core faces the same problems that development tools like Dreams or RPG Maker have faced: If you only use the pre-made standard assets, **all games somehow look the same**, sound the same and play similarly. Yes, you can integrate your own 3D models, sound files and codes into the tool. However, if you have that much expertise, you will prefer to use the Unreal Engine directly instead of taking the detour via Core and ceding the rights to your content.”⁵⁵⁰

When I tried out *Core* back in 2020, I gave it up again because of these reasons and I didn’t find the time to get into it since then. Art is individuality instead of a composable product. Art is innovation despite intertextuality, despite the re-use of assets and texts and thoughts and cultural signifiers that already existed before. Alenda Y. Chang notes on these re-used assets regarding trees: “Like stock photos or even cell phone antenna trees, digital plants are for the most part mass-produced clichés that are simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, ubiquitous enough to pass beneath notice, designed to be seen and ignored”⁵⁵¹. To me, a special potential lies in the act of artistically re-using stuff.

It is a common argument against games that they are just that, a product. Customizability and freedom are key here. Spatial.io has at the moment similar problems as *Core*, that lots of these spaces look and feel and vibe kind of similar to each other, people hopping onto aesthetic trends without it fitting their individual artworks. Maybe the addition of custom code could help there, even though this would bring its own set of problems with it. To me, spatial.io is kind of an aesthetic hellscape, the ultimate triumph of corporate cleanness and aesthetic minimalism over personality, individuality and uniqueness. One can really feel that this is a product developed for online business meetings, this ideology is incised into its ugly genericness of the interface, the avatars and the limited aesthetic capabilities.

The so-called “artistic” video games or “art games” illustrate the creative potential of the medium of video games when it is only limited by an artist’s skills. *Intimate, Infinite* (2014) by Robert Yang is inspired by the short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* by Jorge Luis Borges, which is in literary theory sometimes referred to when discussing hypertext. It displays an interesting approach to adaptation⁵⁵² and non-linearity. It features three different and loosely connected environments. One is a character picking up a gun without ammo and escaping with a train to a locked gate (which

550 Hohmann 2021. Emphasis bold in the original. Translated by LF.

551 Chang 2019, p. 123.

552 Even though Yang doesn’t view this as an adaptation, cf. Yang 2014a. Yang describes it as “a willful mistranslation” (ibid).

later can be unlocked). Here, the gun is rendered pointless, and there is no way to engage in ludic-virtual violence. As Yang writes in part one of two blog posts discussing the game:

*“At this point, players unfamiliar with my work will probably start priming themselves for some Call of Duty-like face-shooting with pithy historical details. I even used a period gun, a Colt M1911, and implemented a fake flashing ammo counter that implies you will eventually find ammo. The goal is to set an expectation and then forget about it like Borges – halfway through the story, Borges drops all this spy stuff to ejaculate over nonlinear narratives and a text that's comprehensible only as a secret labyrinth.”*⁵⁵³

Another part is an endless game of chess set in a library. The player can control both black and white chess pieces, move them in any direction, capture any chess piece and also “resurrect” them at any time onto the chess board again. This sequence only ends when one clicks on a glass of whine multiple times and thus emptying it. It is a deconstructed chess game with *ludus* effectively eliminated.

*“The **chess** section of my game is perhaps a ‘toy’, a garden that supplies pieces but doesn't tell you what you're supposed to do with them. It takes some notes from a similar system in Tale of Tales' *Bientot l'ete*, except I've managed to one-up them by implementing even less gameplay.”*⁵⁵⁴

Yang refers to having a different approach than *Chess 2: The Sequel*, as just another iteration on chess. (There also is a digital version of this game of the same name, *Chess 2: The Sequel* (Ludeme Games and Sirlin Games, 2014).) Another example that I'm thinking of is *5D Chess with Multiverse Time Travel* (Thunkspace, 2020). Contrary, Yang's version of chess as a game-in-game is definitely outplaying the rules of chess, or any rules, really.

A third sequence in *Intimate, Infinite* is a garden(ing) sequence, in which one plants hedges by clicking and can thus uplift a character to collect the key for the gate from the first sequence. When I first played this part, the character was stuck behind some wall out of my view and couldn't move,

553 Yang 2014a.

554 Yang 2014b. Emphasis bold in the original.

therefore I didn't know what to do and just played around with planting and destroying these cubic hedges – unintentional *paidia*, without any goal and unclear rules.

In a video on queer games as avant-garde, Mattie Brice puts into words my thoughts exactly:

“[...] I think with more people coming into game design you'll just literally help the industry grow, like get out of this very narrow place that it's in right now. I can only imagine the things that are possible with games that we are just not even thinking about in some random person somewhere, because they're able to make a game with like Twine or something, we'll discover something we haven't even thought of. And what more can we want with games right now?”⁵⁵⁵

Giving people access to tools, freeing technology from the military's and corporate claws, does and will bring to light whole new ways of people contributing to the medium of video games. What Chartrand/Thériault describe as *AltGames*, or more general terms like art(istic) games has the potential for artists making games that are different from industry standards and video game norms, and to bring in new ways of relating to games and of different answers to the question what a game can be or feels like or plays like or looks or sounds like etc.

In *Not a manifesto*, in which Michaël Samyn coins the term *notgame*, he asks: **“Can we create a form of digital entertainment that explicitly rejects the structure of games? What is an interactive work of art that does not rely on competition, goals, rewards, winning or losing?”**⁵⁵⁶ Even though I do agree with Rainer Sigl as well, who criticizes that terms like *notgames* or *art games* would “rob their whole medium of its *avantgarde*”⁵⁵⁷, because in the end they are all just different kinds of games that don't require such fancy new terms, I still am in line with Samyn as well. Maybe the terminology doesn't matter that much in the end, but the ideas behind these concepts. To always be open for new and unique things a medium can offer is what I am personally most interested in. I also would like to argue with Sebastian Möring for games that “do not feature a gameplay condition and no fear-structure”⁵⁵⁸. As he analyses, “games need to provide more possible activities than dealing with the fear-structure of the game”⁵⁵⁹ in order to not be boring and to increase gameplay

555 Polygon 2013, TC: 00:06:29-00:06:55.

556 Samyn 2010. Emphasis bold and italics in the original.

557 Sigl 2012.

558 Möring 2014, p. 11.

559 Ibid., p. 13.

diversity. In the end, video games are just software and therefore shouldn't be restricted by some rules, goals, *magic circle*, *ludus*, *paidia*, whatever.

In his 2012 revisiting of the *magic circle* concept, Eric Zimmerman even points it out as a misunderstood concept that really shouldn't be taken that seriously, because it just doesn't really exist: "*It is meant to clarify where this magic circle idea came from, what it was intended to mean, and to stop the energy being wasted by chasing the ghost of the magic circle jerk – a ghost that simply doesn't exist.*"⁵⁶⁰ As Samyn also writes:

*"One of the motivations for the notgames thought is the desire to explore the potential of videogames as a medium. Videogames are software. Software can be anything. There is no need for software to be games. There is no need for videogames to be games. Especially not if the games structure may be holding us back, may be limiting the potential of the medium."*⁵⁶¹

It feels weird to argue for change having referenced lots of over 10 years old texts throughout this essay, and I generally really don't want to quote old texts, but they unfortunately still remain very true regarding my arguments and the situation of the gaming landscape as a whole⁵⁶². "*Arguably, artists have always been the pioneers in pushing the boundaries of new technology and humankind has always inhabited a conceptual universe that is every bit as important as the physical world*"⁵⁶³, writes Georgie Roxby Smith. As artists and creators, we can make interesting things. We can make software whatevers – or, with Robert Yang, "*whatever space*"⁵⁶⁴. Alenda Y. Chang argues for an embrace of first-person walker games as spatial experiences, and I do heavily agree:

*"[...] I suggest that the very qualities of walking simulators that upset conservative gamers – their slowness, their lack of action, the absence of people, their spatial storytelling – indirectly indicate a path forward (pun intended) for more environmentally sophisticated game design. My proposal to refashion the game walkthrough from an expert guide for struggling players to an active exploration and appreciation of game space and place is a call to inhabit different game worlds and to inhabit game worlds differently."*⁵⁶⁵

560 Zimmerman 2012.

561 Samyn 2010.

562 Cf. on the lack of academic recognition of this medium also The Cinema Cartography 2023.

563 Roxby Smith 2011, p. 13.

564 Cf. Yang 2014b. Cf. also Souvik Mukherjee discussing games as *Any-Space-Whatevers*, Mukherjee 2019.

565 Chang 2019, p. 43.

We need games and artworks that upset conservative gamers. Art is whatever you want it to be. I don't care about how you name things, but it would be cool if videoludic norms like ludic-virtual violence and the historic entanglement of digital games with the military could be overcome. Games don't need to be played via weapons; environments, characters, animals and things can be experienced otherwise. To quote from the *Arcane Kids Manifesto*: “*fuck formalism / fuck puzzles / play with structure / bad is more interesting than good*”⁵⁶⁶.

We can resurrect all the animals that ever wandered virtual realms. We can make art, we can make games, we can make art games, we can make software whatever. We can make games, that break all the rules⁵⁶⁷. We can fill the Unity Asset Store with other things than thousands of guns.

566 Arcane Kids n.d.

567 Cf. Curious Archive 2023.

Attachments

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