EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS IN VIDEO GAME CULTURES



NICK WEBBER, EWAN KIRKLAND
& RENÉ REINHOLD SCHALLEGGER (EDS)

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Introduction

Nick Webber, Ewan Kirkland, René Reinhold Schallegger and Felix Schniz

The book you have in your hands, or on your screen, is a collection of chapters that develop on contributions to the Video Game Cultures 2023 conference, held from 7 to 9 September 2023 at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. Together, the authors critically investigate some of the many ways that video game cultures, technologies, practices, communities, texts, paratexts, and genres are developing. As digital games encompass a rapidly expanding range of highly complex and varied phenomena, leading to an overlap of conceptual layers and intersecting thematic issues, the conference and the collection we have developed from it were designed from the outset to be deeply interdisciplinary in nature. The chapters in the pages ahead address a range of questions and issues, including how designers apply mechanic, aesthetic, and narrative means beyond traditional genre boundaries, how the resulting video games incentivise and direct the exploration of virtual spaces, and how communities of practice organise around affecting play experiences. These chapters come from researchers at a variety of career stages, from students on master's programmes through to full professors, and address a range of critical perspectives, from the abstract and theoretical to the concrete and practical.

The central notions debated include narrative and time, gender and sexuality, ethics and affect, and technology and spaces; and these debates demonstrate a variety of perspectives, and negotiations between player-centred notions of video game experience, practical questions of design, and the social dimensions of communities. An important unifying idea across many of these contributions is the idea of walking, with many authors drawing on the genre of walking simulators to produce their particular insights. As this collection expands our shared understanding of video game cultures, then, space and its traversal are at the heart of our thinking, underlining the idea that this work is about exploring and pushing forward the horizons of video game studies and design.

Exploring New Horizons – a theme for a conference and now a collection

Exploration, the excitement of the new and unknown, is a core aspect of human nature and a superstructural driving force in game studies, game design, and game engineering. Yet, it is a concept of prevalent paradoxes, too, making it necessary for scholars, developers,

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and coders to navigate the fine and constantly shifting line between established ideas of investigations in key issues and the unorthodox overcoming of established boundaries. Those studying games, originating from a wide variety of disciplines, endeavour to find the right tools for analysis and critique within and between their respective discourses, or they aim to prepare their collapse in favour of a more sustainable interdisciplinarity. Those making video games facilitate and encourage exploration with designs supporting the driving sensation, or they sometimes even dare to try and discover entirely new configurations of video game experiences. Those involved with gaming hardware are softly pushing the limits of current technologies, or they usher in the next hardware sensation to literally change the game. To find out where the future of the medium lies, what we need to do is explore exploration as such.

We ultimately decided on "Exploration" as our conference theme due to the dual meaning of the term. Beyond the inherent drive for exploration shared by everyone involved in game development and study, as just elaborated, it also signified a need – or rather, a readiness for the "Video Game Cultures" network to explore its own new horizons. After a period of dormancy during the global crises of the early 2020s, VGC 2023 became our relaunch both in the literal and metaphorical sense. The conference at the University of Klagenfurt was a crucial reality check, uniting the persistent motivation of long-standing advisory board members and supporters (for which we couldn't be more thankful!) and the expressed need for new scholars, colleagues, and friends for a dedicated space for video game cultures to thrive and to identify new areas for exploration. We are delighted that the conference attracted a vibrantly curious community. It reignited Video Game Cultures as a platform for researchers and creators from all disciplines to explore the exciting possibilities ahead. Looking back at the event from the time of this book's publication, it also seems like some of these new horizons that we may explore manifest more clearly. With new crises ahead of us and the way in which they impact the making of, and the need for games, and the ever-ominous rise of AI in all areas of life, collaborative efforts are crucial to dissect these and other emerging phenomena to understand their implications for us. The need for shared and proclaimed video game cultures to deal with whatever is ahead of us is, in short, stronger than ever.

The Video Game Cultures project

As we suggest, the 2023 conference marked a reboot of an older concept. Video Game Cultures originated in 2008, when Daniel Říha of Charles University, Prague ran a Cybercultures event that saw a large number of excellent sessions focused on video games. Inspired by this success, Říha wrote a call for papers for the first conference in a series entitled Video Game Cultures, focusing on the interdisciplinary, interactive potentials of the medium. The following year, 2009, saw the first VGC event take place, following which the project – and the advisory board – started to grow. Joined by Ewan Kirkland in 2010, shortly to be followed by Monica Evans, Tim Christopher, Nick Webber and René Schallegger, and more, Říha and the team worked with Inter-Disciplinary.Net (ID.Net), a UK-based digital research hub focused on publications and conferences across Europe, until ID.Net's unfortunate demise in 2016, as a result of Brexit.

With the 2023 revival at the University of Klagenfurt, a successful 2024 conference at Birmingham City University, and a 2025 conference at Charles University currently in the works, the project clearly has a new lease of life, and the core of the old team has been

augmented with a number of new members: veteran VGC attendee Felix Schniz, originator of our theme for the 2023 conference and this volume; Charlotte Stevens, current chair of our board; Katja Aller, Elizabeth Neumann and Tan Schütz. In collaboration, this team are continuing to develop VGC to attend to the needs of a new generation of video game researchers, to support both researchers who are new to the field and those who are firmly established in their careers.

This book, then, represents the first output of the revived project – a proof of concept that, we hope, lays the groundwork for a series of publications that will develop in extent, substance and stature over the years ahead. We're very thankful to those of our first, brave explorers who have shared their work in this volume, and helped us to explore the space of video games anew.

The chapters in this volume

What, then, have these researchers tried to show us? The book opens with two chapters considering the kinds of bonds that video games can build and reflect. First comes René Reinhold Schallegger's investigation of the ways that especially Canadian AAA videogames frequently offer differentiated and politically aware experiences for the mass-market. Based on a specifically Canadian perspective on cultural creation, his overview of representations of crisis, agency, and solidarity in games of three major Canadian developers, Eidos, BioWare, and Ubisoft, focuses on individual agency and networks of solidarity, interpersonal affective bonding, and community building. Arguing that Canadian cultural logic is inherently procedural and that what counts here is not the individual agent and their empowerment but collective survival and welfare, Schallegger exposes the dominant dynamics: heroes must die, if not literally then metaphorically, as individuals only act as catalysts for collective, negotiated, procedural, and iterative change. Using affective design strategies, 'killing off' individual heroes shifts emphasis to collective, transindividual, inter-relational agencies and solidarities.

Following this reflection on solidarity, Tan Schütz aims to identify supportive structures in online multiplayer games despite the renowned 'toxicity' of current online gaming communities. Schütz gives special consideration to *Journey* (2012) and above all *Book of Travels* (2021), games that offer both, online multiplayer as well as positive player-to-player interaction. Both also place significance on the activity of walking and nonverbal communication systems, and Schütz investigates the ways in which these recent 'walking simulators' can and do incorporate online multiplayer elements. They eventually argue for the valuable hybridity of mixing walking simulators (in contrast to more established genres) and online multiplayer elements to support positive player-to-player interaction, as their generic elements benefit the creation of non-toxic online multiplayer games.

With firm connective foundations established, we turn our attention to three contributions to the subfield of Queer Game Studies. Continuing the theme of walking, the first of these, from Kseniia Harshina and Tom Tucek, uses the idea of the navigation of space, intertwined with concepts of power and vulnerability, to consider how video games function as safe spaces for various identities. The chapter shows that video games are already being utilized by minority groups as safe environments to explore and express their identities without fear of judgment or harm. Harshina and Tucek highlight how key aspects of relevant video games play a role in their creation of safe spaces, from inclusive character

customization, through sensory-friendly environments, to non-gendered communication. By examining specific games, they provide insights for developers and designers on how to create more inclusive and supportive video game environments, concluding with practical suggestions to enhance player empowerment and well-being.

Laura Arnott's chapter offers us further insight into queer identities in video games, through her examination of the way that ideological attitudes represented in games can be understood through the lens of performance theory. Here, gameplay is perceived as a process through which a style of behaviour can be understood beyond functional action, constituting an experiential practice of meaning-making. Focusing on the adaptation of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) to *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020), Arnott explores how queer identities can be experienced through the playing of the protagonist Cloud. The practice of roleplaying constitutes a temporary, performative transformation of the player's gender/sexual identity which they both enact and witness. Recognising the subject position of the player within their social and cultural contexts, Arnott distinguishes the empirical differences between games and other digital media, articulating gameplay as an experienced phenomenon, rather than as static, arranged text.

Closing the section, Nicole Kilzer returns to our walking theme, exploring the 'walking simulator' *Gone Home*. Noting the genre to be both feminine and queer-coded, Kilzer identifies a fit between the game's female-centred narrative of lesbian sexual awakening and the title's mode of gameplay. Considering the significance of music to the game's themes, the author argues the 1990s punk rock riot grrrl soundtrack provides a fitting backdrop reflecting the game's themes of teenage rebellion, political activism, and its challenge to a culture of play entrenched in masculine heteronormativity. Central to Kilzer's analysis is the level of agency players are afforded, and the extent this offers opportunities for queering, or straightening, the game experience. While *Gone Home* may subvert the tragic ending commonly afforded gay couples within mainstream culture, its gameplay and narrative may be considered traditionally linear and chrononormative in a manner which compromises its queer content.

In our third section, we move from Queer Game Studies to another subfield, that of Historical Game Studies. We open with a reflection on the suitability of video games as a venue to tackle difficult historical issues. Lydia Kleinstück argues that video games offer the chance to explore complex topics such as war, violence, and civil disobedience and the morals that go with them. In Germany, however, until 2018, the USK, the German rating board, would not provide a rating to games that showed unedited Nazi imagery, effectively banning their sale. After a review of this stance, the first game to receive a USK rating was *Through the Darkest of Times* (2020). While well received, it also sparked a debate about showing anti-constitutional subject matter in an interactive medium without additional context. Kleinstück uses *Through the Darkest of Times* as a case study to investigate the changing status and reception of video games within German culture, arguing that the new regulation offers a unique perspective for players to reflect on the country's dark past and explore what it means to resist. This is increasingly significant as the voices of Holocaust survivors are fading and far-right movements are gaining momentum within Germany, the EU, and globally.

Exploring not only space but also time, Kristina Jevtic investigates how walking simulators like *Gone Home* (2013) or *Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018) employ layered temporal dimensions within their structure. The player is here bound to a specific space

but can enter, discover, and 'play' the past. These segments function like explorable 'time capsules' within one overarching main temporality, thus creating a sense of 'stacked' instances of explorable space and time. *Gone Home*, Jevtic argues, represents this explorable past through its constructed virtual environment, where clues for the player are (interactable) objects meant to represent the past or past actions. As such, temporality is tied to spatiality and made playable by 'walking through' the virtual space as a digital flâneur, voyeur, or archaeologist, (re-)constructing histories, layer by layer. In contrast, in *Return of the Obra Dinn* these vignettes are constructed as microcosms, dioramas, working almost as segmented miniatures of the layered temporalities in walking simulators Jevtic is interested in.

Going deeper still into the past, Ubisoft's *Assassins Creed: Valhalla* is the subject of Tamara Urach's chapter, which examines the game's potential for educating players about history and representing the past in a meaningful and productive manner. Emphasising the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of the game's Anglo-Saxon setting, Urach sees the game as offering players various opportunities to engage with situations involving xenophobic prejudice, persecution and hostility between factions. With reference to the research undertaken by developers, and efforts to emphasise the series' pedagogic value, Urach notes the selective authenticity of the game's approach to history. This, she argues, combines historical accuracy in delivering representations of the past informed by scholarship, while simultaneously providing environments that accord with players' expectations of historical periods derived from media representations. The design nevertheless provides plenty of educational potential for using the series to discuss historicity in popular entertainment, alongside broader issues of intolerance and persecution.

In our final section, we turn to the matter of game design. Hermann Prossinger, Jakub Binter, Daniel Říha, Tomáš Hladký and Silvia Boschetti dedicate their chapter to the Wilhelm Scream, a sound effect used for over half a century to enhance the immersion of gamers and other media audiences. They conducted a study based on perceptual and experimental psychology techniques, testing whether the Scream's effectiveness depends (and, if so, to what degree) on the biological sex of those hearing and rating it. Using a Bayesian framework, they conclude that there is no significant difference for positive ratings, a null result determined by the Beta distribution of off-diagonal elements of the confusion matrices. Investigating the simple and choice response times of two categories of raters (male/female), and using kernel density estimations with an Epanechnikov kernel, they found that underlying mechanisms, if present, seem to be the same for males and females. These results establish the Wilhelm Scream as a reliable enhancement for all forms of media-related storytelling.

The last word goes to Christina Obmann, whose chapter defines the interaction between player and game as a sensory experience by necessity, since playing games must be understood as a deeply embodied practice first and foremost. Relying on theories of affect, she explores the complexity of game play and the role it fulfils in players' experiences of a video game. Mechanics and aesthetics especially must be considered significant moments of affective experience for players, and to showcase this, Obmann concentrates on analysing exemplary instances of impactful elements in *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), *Brothers – A Tale of Two Sons* (2013) and selected other games. What they all have in common is the exploration of a wide range of human and non-human experiences through embodied

game play – and not just as it is conveyed by narrative. Obmann concludes that similar examples of successful affective game design can offer inspiration for game designers and developers on how to fully realize the potential of video games for embodied experiences as the highly affective medium this is.

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SECTION I

SOLIDARITY AND KINDNESS IN VIDEO GAMES

Of Dead Heroes and Growing Networks: Crisis, Agency, and Solidarity in Canadian Video Games

René Reinhold Schallegger

Introduction – 'Play Canadian!'

There are many internationally successful and critically acclaimed Canadian AAA video games that provide differentiated representations of diversity and engaging meditations on human nature. Beyond the qualitative dimension, Canada's impact on the medium has been disproportionally important in quantitative terms. After the US and Japan, the country ranks third in terms of absolute numbers of employees with the highest number of employees per capita worldwide (cf. Schallegger, 2020), and while the list of Top 10 *bestselling* video games is dominated by the US and Japan (Sirani, 2023), in the last twenty years Canada has brought forth quality games that have made significant contributions to the development of the medium.

The Canadian video game industry started in British Columbia during the 1990s. Today Québec has the largest concentration of AAA companies and employees, while Ontario is home to a vibrant Indie community with developers such as Studio MDHR (*Cuphead*, 2017) or Visai Games (*Venba*, 2023). More recently, international capital has been flowing into Ontario, reinforcing this imbalance: 93% micro- and standard companies in the province only account for 24% of employment, and the remaining 7% represent 76% of active full-time equivalents (ESAC, 2021: 15). Three Canadian AAA studios, i.e., BioWare in Edmonton/AB, Ubisoft and Eidos in Montréal/QC, are all big international players and the specific focus of this chapter. Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia* (2003-2010) and *Assassin's Creed* series (2007 – present), Eidos's *Deus Ex* series (2011-2016), and BioWare's *Mass Effect* (2007-2017) and *Dragon Age* series (2009-present) have all become household names in video game culture and the focus of significant academic discussion.

AAA video games are nowadays usually created by large, *multinational* teams, a situation not dissimilar to the movie industry. Indeed, the relocation of production capacities from the US into Canada has created a 'Hollywood North' (especially in British Columbia) that has already become the object of academic attention (cf. Gasher, 2002, Spaner, 2003) in

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addition to a 'home grown' English-Canadian cinema *North of Everything*, to use the title of Beard and White's (2002) eponymous study. Still, most of the decision-makers at Canadian video game developers are Canadian, such as Ubisoft Montréal's Managing Director Pierre-Jules Tremblay or BioWare's General Manager Gary McKay. The larger studios, situated in the metropolitan areas of Montréal, Edmonton, or Québec, immerse Canadians and non-Canadians alike in specifically Canadian socio-cultural, everyday, and professional contexts.

Canadian perspectives and theoretical frameworks

Canada, a federal constitutional monarchy that borders on the US in the south and spans the North American continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and to the Arctic Sea in the north, was first established as a political body through Confederation of core colonies of British North America in 1867. It gained full independence from the UK with the patriation of its newly created Constitution in 1982, and reached its final structure of ten provinces and three territories in 1999 with the establishment of the territory of Nunavut. In academic contexts, two seminal texts that explore Canadian national identity can be considered foundational for Canadian Studies and are still frequently used to approach and establish an understanding of Canadian culture: Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* (1971) and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972).

In the first of these, Frye essentially argues that the typically Canadian, ongoing back-and-forth between the two Empires (the 'Old Empire' of the UK and the 'New Empire' of the US), the settler and aboriginal populations, the two Founding Nations (French- and English Canadians), as well as individual and collective needs requires constant re-negotiation and dynamic compromise to create and successfully maintain something like a national identity. Thus, he concludes: 'Canada's identity is to be found in some *via media*, or *via mediocris*' (Frye, 1995: 220). In the Canadian collective imagination, the frontier, unlike its US counterpart, is not a 'line of civilisation' pushed outwards, but always 'all around one, a part and a condition of one's whole imaginative being' (Frye, 1995: 222). Omnipresent and oppressive, it pushes inwards, disempowering human agents, and as a result, Canadians develop what Frye calls a 'garrison mentality' (1995: 227), an unreflected need to withdraw into enclosed, sheltered spaces that can and sometimes do take on suffocating qualities.

Atwood establishes 'Survival' as the leitmotif of Canadian culture (2004: 40-41), with Canadians constantly having to manage the internal threat of the disintegration of their federated statehood, as well as external threats to their cultural specificity, their socio-cultural differences from the two dominating Empires. As Canadian history does not lend itself to the construction of individual, 'society-saving or society-changing heroes' (2004: 203), there can be no 'Canadian Dream' of self-actualisation in rebellion against dominant power structures. The successes of Canadian heroines and heroes are frequently partially undone later or represented as ambiguous, and even their seemingly heroic deaths are for Atwood ultimately 'senseless and accomplish nothing' (2004: 199). Looking to a time before the arrival of settler cultures, she reminds us that the 'native tradition is not in the direction of individual heroes' either (2004: 206). And for the two so-called Founding Nations, i.e., French- and English-Canadians, 'collective action has been necessary for survival', while 'it may also stifle individual growth' (2004: 207).

What emerges from these arguments made by Frye and Atwood is that the collectivization of the heroic impulse in the Canadian collective imagination is both an expression of a living community *and* a garrison mentality. This specific situation is responsible for a dispersal of

heroic aura amongst the many on a synchronic level and its rapid fading on a diachronic one, such as when Atwood introduces a (fictitious) historian to subvert the veracity and achievements of Offred's rebellion at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985): the Death of the Hero appears to be a typically Canadian phenomenon.

Following such early attempts to theorise Canadian culture, Linda Hutcheon later defines Canada as a postmodern nation 'rest[ing] on paradoxes and anomalies, governed only by compromise and kept strong only by moderation' (1991: 1). Canadian culture thus inherently tends to foster systemic awareness in its participants to be able to successfully navigate the free space of movement that, to paraphrase Eric Zimmerman's definition of 'play' (2004: 159), exists because of and in spite of the complex systems that bind Canadians. Fittingly for the observed ludic cultural turn in postmodernism, Canadians therefore become 'players' in what Hutcheon defines as a 'paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique […] that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces' (2000: 11). Such a ludic involvement and engagement subsequently focuses on structures and process, not individual heroes and their solutions, since '[s]olving the problem would mean having answers, would mean stasis and product' (Hutcheon, 2012: 183). As practitioners and shapers of Canadian culture, Hutcheon explains, 'we are urged to "ing" – to see that reading and interpreting are processes in which we too participate as, equally, makers of our culture' (2012: 183). The result is a culture that is collective, participatory, procedural, and necessarily provisional. It is also deeply ludic.

The persisting we/them-divide between settler and aboriginal populations in Canada is criticised harshly (and rightfully so) by Atwood in her imaginative essay 'Post-Colonial' (2007: 100). Aiming to overcome it, John Ralston Saul recognises the essential, even fundamental contributions of Aboriginal Canadians to Canadian culture when he makes a strong claim: 'We are a métis civilization. […] [O]ur intuitions and common sense as a civilization are more Aboriginal than European' (2009: 3). Canadian cultural identity, made possible and carried by a shared sense of 'living comfortably with diversity' (2009: 4), results in a non-racial, non-linear, non-rational civilisation according to Saul. As processes of transformation are amongst the core elements of Aboriginal (Canadian) cultures (cf. Knowles, 2004: 130-133), for Saul the central metaphor of Canadian culture becomes the 'inclusive circle that expands and gradually adapts as new people join, […] becoming something more complex, an integral part of that other' (2009: 6). In these encounters, both individual and community are and remain forever changed, yet they are inclusive, not exclusive of newcomers.

Early European settlers in Canada, both French and English, for a large part depended on Aboriginal Canadians for their survival in an unknown and hostile environment. Saul argues that the partnerships that were established followed traditional indigenous ideas of fairness and inclusion, before the balance of power shifted in favour of the settlers and agreements were broken. Yet, aboriginal ideas made their way into the minds and emerging culture of these settlers, so that Canadian social cohesion is always dynamic and relational, 'maintaining the tension between individuals and groups' (2009: 315). This in turn results in a 'non-governmental form of citizen engagement' where in a 'non-loyal space' citizens become a 'bulwark of the state', driven by an 'ethical sense of purpose' (all quotes Saul, 2009: 319).

The final ingredient to understand the Canadian mind-set is the very space Canadians inhabit and its specificities. Sherrill Grace (2007: 15) defines how what she terms 'nordicity'

dominates the collective imagination of Canadians, the notion of a north that is 'not *natural*, *real*', but 'the *creation* […] of North as idea, or […] a northern *mentality*'. This north is an entirely human, not natural construct, 'like Canada itself', and 'it encompasses the entire country', permeating all aspects of Canadian culture. At the same time, this north is not a static, empty space but 'multiple, shifting and elastic. It is a process, not an external fixed goal or condition' (2007: 16). Clearly echoing Hutcheon's earlier remarks, Grace wants 'this process of openness', a Canada 'always changing, adapting, revising, revisiting its histories; […] always, and productively, unfinished – a work in progress' (2009: 154). Andrew Cohen (2008) also thoroughly investigates what he sees as an inherently and continually 'unfinished' Canadian culture, one that can be considered 'alive'. This metaphor has even found its way into the Canadian legal tradition where the 'Constitution is a living tree which, by way of progressive interpretation, accommodates and addresses the realities of modern life' (Supreme Court of Canada, 2004).

The Canada that coalesces and emerges from all these critical and theoretical perspectives is a collective identity that is diverse, relational, and procedural, an elastic and inclusive social network that favours collective agency over individual empowerment, active participation and compromise over individual heroics. These are the core values that underlie Canadian video game design, as I will explore in the following. Canadian culture is propelled by a diffuse and dynamic reverse teleology, which is not about getting somewhere but leaving something behind. Here it is the becoming that creates a sense of being, and boundaries between the self and the other are (and must be) constantly renegotiated. Several academic disciplines have worked with similar ideas in, around, and with games and ludic media for almost a century now. Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) and Roger Caillois's *Les Jeux et les Hommes* (1958) have become founding texts of the relatively new discipline of Game Studies, that puts the elements of 'explicit interactivity' (Zimmerman, 2004) and *agency* at its core, the feeling of meaningfully projecting intention into the systems we participate in. For Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), human and non-human, individual and collective agencies inter-relate in games in highly complex and dynamic cybernetic feedback loops.

Taking an even broader perspective, the shared interest in interactions between individual agents and abstract, collective systems connects Game Studies to Citizenship Studies. Democratic citizenship, according to Bernard Crick (2002: 105), entails 'a more active role for a citizen' bound by the constraints of the law and a requirement for participation based on 'a close, even reciprocal relationship between rights and duties'. Peter Kivisto and Thomas Feist focus on the 'idea of the citizen as an active agent in political decision making' (2007: 15-16) and 'the status of the citizen *qua* citizen [as] an equal', immediately raising important questions about 'who could and who could not take part in the ongoing process of self-rule' (2007: 16). Richard Bellamy agrees that 'membership, rights, and participation go together' (2008: 16), yet he warns that we are also always 'tempted to shirk our civic duties if we feel we can enjoy the collective goods and […] rights […] by relying on others to do their bit' (2008: 17). Under the ever-increasing and evermore pervasive impact of technology, James Hughes argues, we must therefore move towards a democratic transhumanism based on careful regulation as well as equal access, carried by 'a latent majority constituency for social justice, a caring society, technological progress and health and longevity for all' (2004: 216), where we 'treat one another with the kindness that comes from understanding that other beings are also looking out at the world from finite minds' (2004: xx).

Beyond a focus on individual *or* collective, the affective turn in Cultural Studies then finally takes the debate to an embodied, *interpersonal* level. For Patricia Ticineto Clough, this turn best 'captur[es] the changing cofunctioning of the political, the economic, and the cultural, rendering it affectively as change in the deployment of affective capacity' (2007: 3). Brian Massumi famously defines this capacity as the '*power* (or potential) to affect or be affected' (2002: 15), with embodied subjects responding to stimuli on the levels of intensity as well as qualification, where the former triggers 'purely autonomic reactions', while '[d]epth reactions' belong more to the latter (2002: 25). Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010: 1) argue that '[a]ffect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*' as 'a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage […] of forces or intensities'. Passing from one body to another, it is for them 'persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms' (2010: 1).

Building upon these more abstract ideas, Mark B. N. Hansen establishes his concept of 'new media embodiment' (2006: 3) based on 'the body as a center of indetermination' (2006: 4), constantly filtering and actively making meaning in a decentred universe. On a more practical level, Tynan Sylvester develops such a bodily understanding into a conception of the video game medium as 'an engine of experience' (2013: 44) determined by 'The Primacy of Emotion', as one of his chapter headings establishes (2013: 8). On a more theoretical level, Katherine Isbister writes about how digital games have more potential to 'take us into different emotional territory than any other medium' (2016: 131), 'bridging distance to create intimacy and connection' (2016: 109) in what she describes as 'compelling social and emotional experiences' (2016: 127). The inherently personal dimension of affect is expanded into a networked, inter-relational understanding by Massumi, echoing core insights of Game Studies when he postulates: 'Freedom pertains not to the individual, but to process' (2016: 215). More recently, this interest in power, affect, and ethics also echoes in postcolonial research by video game scholars. Souvik Mukherjee for example analyses how the industry uses 'lenses that privilege Eurocentric accounts of history and progress' (2017: 103). Ludic engagement and agency for him 'is a crucial factor in disrupting the centres of the structured colonial notions of progress' but at the same time we must be aware that '[t]he colonizer also plays back' (2017: 104). Still, due to their required explicit interactivity, games 'challenge the centrality and fixity of readings and offer a multiplicity of perspectives', so in them, the author concludes, '[m]eaning, instead of being the preserve of imperial "centres," is *in play*' (2017: 111; original emphasis).

Canadian video games – focusing on crisis, agency, and solidarity

Deeply affected by the ludic and affective turn, postcolonial and quintessentially postmodern (cf. Hutcheon, 2012), Canada has become home to several explorations of complex, networked, interpersonal solidarity in video games. The medium is otherwise largely defined and dominated by US-American and Japanese designs that prefer to promote heroic discourses of individual mastery, not collective collaboration, as the list of bestselling video game franchises (after *Tetris*) is dominated by *Call of Duty*, *Pokémon*, *GTA*, and *Super Mario* (VGChartz, 2024). The considerable internal impact of Canadian cultural industries, 'the idea that a Canadian nationhood could be achieved through culture' is at the core of Ryan Edwardson's investigation into the construction of a distinctly Canadian

(mediated) voice (2008: 281). He is very critical of how – especially since the beginning of the 21st century – Canadian content increasingly serves the interests of federal governments 'facing the threat of Québécois separatism […], the need to consolidate multiculturalism, and the daunting task of negotiating a transnationalization of capital and cultural policy' (2008: 281). More recently, such an interest in national cultures and identities, as well as collective questions of survival and difference, is also emerging in research dedicated to video games (cf. Mochocki et al., 2024).

In the following, I therefore trace manifestations of the phenomenon of the death of the hero, both literally as well as metaphorically, in Canadian video games. The first section is dedicated to relatively early examples and geographically centred on the traditional Canadian hub of development, Montréal (Ubisoft, Eidos). Then I claim that the approach reached a first mature, cohesive, and pervasive expression in Edmonton (BioWare), before going mainstream using the significant resources of the industry, again in Montréal. While I consider aesthetic, mechanic, and ethical dimensions, my focus is mostly on the narrative level of example games, and especially with earlier titles, endings seem to carry a lot of weight in the Canadian reshaping of traditional heroic figures and plots.

As Riccardo Fassone reminds us: 'Every game is defined by its borders, its endings, and its extremities. Often, playing a video game feels like pushing against those borders' (2017: 2). Negotiating the space between openness and closedness, play requires endpoints, and so for the author 'endings are a key to interpreting what video games are about, how they produce and convey meaning' (2017: 168). Going beyond ontological concerns, Michelle Herte looks into the phenomenology of video game endings, interested in 'understanding the forms and functions of endings and how they are affected and re-formed by media-specific affordances and in multimodal contexts' (2021: 6). Using a comprehensive typology on the levels of individual designs as well as play processes, she reveals the affective power of endings, 'their way of causing satisfaction, frustration, or (meta-)reflection' which she – rightfully – considers 'a crucial part of understanding media artefacts in general' (2021: 243-244). Supporting my hypothesis of a 'maturation', later examples, while still also employing the affective punch their endings provide show a much more differentiated, complex, and pervasive implementation of Canadian norms and values in their designs.

Early glimpses of innovation – Montréal

One relatively early example to illustrate a still rather superficial taste of such an expression of Canadian national identity in video games is *Prince of Persia* (2008), an orientalist (cf. Said, 1978) fantasy action-adventure platformer by Ubisoft Montréal. The studio, founded in 1997, is well known for several important video game series, such as *Tom Clancy* (2002-2022), *Prince of Persia* (2003-2010), *Far Cry* (2005-2019), *Assassin's Creed* (2007-2023), and *Watch Dogs* (2014-2016). Ubisoft took over the *Prince of Persia* franchise from its original creator Jordan Mechner and produced the trilogy *The Sands of Time* (2003), *Warrior Within* (2004), and *The Two Thrones* (2005).

Prince of Persia (2008) was the attempt at a reboot after dwindling player interest, and it diverged from the established formula in multiple ways. First and above all, there was a tonal shift, away from a very traditional, stereotypical and formulaic trope of the physically dominant male warrior-hero who has to save the helpless damsel in distress from the forces of darkness. This 'Prince' is actually a rogue and a thief, and his dominance is constantly subverted, beginning with the comedic opening sequence where we see him searching for

his donkey in a sandstorm, and culminating in the witty verbal challenges thrown at him by 'his' princess Elika throughout the game. Visually, the game also switched to a more abstract, cel-shaded aesthetics, breaking with the dominant drive towards photorealism in favour of a more comic-like look and feel.

The key mechanic of this Canadian iteration of the Prince is dynamic difficulty adjustment (DDA) where (the NPC) Elika saves the (player avatar) Prince whenever the player fails at combat or platforming challenges. In the latter case, this is represented in the iconic pre-rendered sequences of her reaching out to him, holding his hand, and pulling him back into safety. This 'handholding', to use a term frequently employed by members of more toxic sections of gamer culture who see such supportive structures as detracting from their autonomy or even an insult to their aspirations of mastery, means that there is no mechanical fail state in the design. An equal and partner to the 'Prince', Elika is the actual princess of her people, charged to ensure the imprisonment of Ahriman, god of chaos and darkness. Through long dialogue sequences dedicated to the building of mutual understanding and appreciation (and a romantic relationship), the player develops an increasing affective involvement and a close interpersonal bond with her. Rather than merely romantic fluff, this is a conscious design decision, because at the end of the game, the player is then presented with the opportunity to undo everything they have achieved and free Ahriman to resurrect Elika after she sacrifices herself to keep him imprisoned. Yet, if the player chooses to do so, Elika only scolds the Prince and abandons him. Individual heroism and the collapse of collective solidarity for personal reasons here lead to a *narrative*, not mechanic fail-state.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution (2011) is a genre hybrid of sci-fi action-RPG, stealth game, first- and third-person shooter created by Eidos Montréal. The studio was originally founded in 2007, later also created a reboot of the classic *Thief* (2014), continued the *Deus Ex* series for one more game (2017), and most recently released *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2021).

Human Revolution is a prequel to the classic *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000) and the less successful *Deus Ex: Invisible War* (Ion Storm, 2003), addressing the impact of technology on the self, democratic institutions, and collective structures of solidarity. In 2027, human augmentation is on the verge of mass-market breakthrough as relatively affordable consumer technology. The player avatar Adam Jensen is a security agent who is unwillingly augmented to save his life after an incident, replacing the majority of his body parts with technological components. Thrown into a web of opposing conspiracies trying to exert control over this essential moment in human evolution, Adam ponders fundamental questions about the human condition. The entire design is predicated on decision-making, the presence or absence of autonomy, and players can thus shift relatively freely between different mechanical aspects of the genre hybrid. The aesthetic leitmotif of the triangle already hints at a suspension of a binary ethics of right or wrong in favour of a logic of the 'delta', the free space of movement between such extremes determined by ambiguity but also personal responsibility.

Near the end of the game, the player is asked to 'Decide which "Truth" to broadcast' . The threshold guardian in Joseph Campbell's terminology (Campbell, 1973: 77), the entity who ensures that the hero has sufficiently grown to face his final challenge, is the AI Eliza, and her name already triggers a chain of references: ELIZA (1963-66) is a computer programme able to imitate human interaction without any understanding of human thought or emotion; G.B. Shaw's Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* (1912) is a working-class woman who creates a

respectable identity for herself by adopting the language of the higher classes; and this play is itself a reworking of the much older story of Pygmalion, the sculptor who falls in love with his creation, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Eliza's final questions clearly reveal the central issue of the game: 'Do you believe you have the wisdom to choose an appropriate future for mankind? Or do you trust mankind to find the answers on its own?'

Four choices form the first dimension that decides which of the twelve possible endings a player experiences. There are three endings where the player chooses *for* humanity, which I would like to call 'dogmatic' because here humanity is given no choice other than to submit to the player's will and to *believe* in their version of events. Eliza marks these endings with a curt 'So be it then', echoing the 'amen' of religious discourse. There is, however, a fourth option, hidden in a side room: Adam commits murder-suicide, killing all leading conspirators and himself. Here the player chooses *not* to choose for humanity, and Eliza warns: 'If you do this, the world will be left with questions, and may never reach a consensus' (Eidos Montréal, 2011a). The chosen death of the avatar is still an element considered to be problematic in AAA video games, yet it is curiously frequent in Canadian designs: *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (2011), or *Mass Effect 3* (2012) all end like this. Yet, the logic of AAA design is to maximise player empowerment, sales, and ultimately the hegemony of play. When Adam takes himself out of the picture, not knowing whether humanity will make it through this crisis, his 'noble sacrifice' might even be in vain after all. What surprises is that the designers have openly marked this ending as their preferred option, since Eliza's reaction is different from the three dogmatic ones: 'And might I say, it has been a pleasure.' The second dimension of the final decision judges the player's overall use of violence, inherently defined as 'evil' in the design, and there is even a 'Pacifist' achievement for a completely non-lethal play-through. Through the Death of the (ideally peaceful) Hero, DXHR demands a renaissance of personal responsibility for the collective, not out of a subjective need for personal aggrandisement but an objective need for a catalyst, consumed in the process or at least irrelevant to the final state achieved. Therefore, in a very Canadian manner this design establishes a collective, solidary, and meaning-making agency for humanity overall instead of glorifying the individual hero, his actions and power to change the world.

A maturity of design emerges – Edmonton

Mass Effect 3 (2012) is a hard sci-fi third-person shooter action-RPG by BioWare Edmonton. Founded in 1995 in Edmonton/AB, the studio came to early fame with video game adaptations of *Dungeons & Dragons*, most famously *Baldur's Gate* (1998), and later branched out into *Star Wars*, creating classics such as *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003). *Jade Empire* (2005), a Far-Eastern fantasy action-RPG, was their first self-originated IP, and *Mass Effect* (2007) initiated their first long-lasting proprietary game series. A highly successful epic space opera with strong elements of body and psychological horror, two sequels followed, *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). A fourth game by a different studio, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, was released in 2017. BioWare relies heavily on interpersonal relationship mechanics, and *Mass Effect* (2007) created an outcry in conservative media outlets and restrictive societies for the normalisation of diversity with its intercultural setting and representations of non-normative desire and sexuality.

The series starts in 2183. Space is vast, empty, and hostile with the exception of small islands of inhabited systems linked by mass relays that allow for FTL travel, in a set-up

strongly reminiscent of the disempowering Canadian frontier and garrisons. The player avatar Shepard has to coordinate the various species of the galaxy to save all organic life from the synthetic Reapers, and *Mass Effect 3* again gives the player agency to choose the outcome. During the final battle, Shepard encounters The Catalyst, an AI that originally created the Reapers to overcome the never-ending cycle of destruction between organic and synthetic life. The player is then given three colour-coded choices that decide what happens with the Reapers, actualized by going left, right, or centre in the game space, similar to the Westminster voting lobbies. The Destruction ending (red) is on the right, the Control ending (blue) on the left, and the middle way is the Synthesis ending (green). In the latter, *all* organic and synthetic life is fused into a new, hybrid form, and the central positioning as well as the colour-coding marks this as the intended choice.

In *Mass Effect 3*, the Canadian preference for collective agency and solutions over individual perspectives and needs is taken to the extreme in an act of *imposed* solidarity. Implicitly reassuring players that forced hybridity is for the best, the Synthesis ending appears to be a progressive and inclusive option, actually showcasing a rather dubious understanding of diversity. While *Prince of Persia* and *Deus Ex* still have *individual* agency as the clear core of their designs advocating personal responsibility, BioWare here utterly shift towards a *collective* agency as the highly valued option.

Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014) is a dark fantasy action-RPG designed by BioWare Edmonton, the third in an ongoing series after *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and *Dragon Age II* (2011), and followed by the most recent instalment *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* released on 31 October, 2024. *Dragon Age* shares the fundamental value system of its BioWare sister franchise *Mass Effect*: non-issue diversity with a focus on interpersonal relations and ethical decision-making.

A civil war between mages and templars, elite soldiers trained to control them, ravages the continent of Thedas, and the Veil between the spirit world and the physical world is torn, endangering even reality itself. An Inquisition is proclaimed, with the player avatar as Inquisitor, to reconstruct Thedosian institutions to effectively manage this crisis. At a second glance, Thedas is a very thinly veiled 'Canada Through the Looking-Glass'. The French-speaking Orlesians in the west have achieved an Empire, while the English-speaking Fereldans in the east are colonised and fighting for cultural and political survival. Directly to the north, the Tevinter Imperium, a dog-eat-dog oligarchy of ruthless mages educated in exclusive elite academies, once ruled the world, but its glory is fading fast and it threatens both Orlesians and Fereldans, as well as the world, with its aggressive policies. All of these nations, however, are 'built upon the bones of my people', as the Elf Solas explains (Schallegger, 2015a: 7:15); the Elves being the indigenous population of Thedas, nearly driven to extinction by aggressive human settlement.

The Inquisition HQ Skyhold is Frye's garrison surrounded by hostile nature, bringing people together in an enclosed and sheltered space. Solas calls it 'a place where the Inquisition can build, grow' (Schallegger, 2015a: 8:25). The move becomes necessary when the Inquisitor is defeated by the antagonist Corypheus, but as a spirit later explains: 'Without fear and pain and failure, we cannot learn, we cannot grow' (BioWare, 2014). Atwood already writes about this acceptance of failure (2004: 193-210), as Canadian culture is about going on, not triumph. Thus, the Inquisition is intended to facilitate *survival* in a time of crisis. Formed by law, its role is to question how existing institutions have to adapt in order to reflect the changing needs of the people, 'a means to preserve, as well as an agent of change' (BioWare, 2014; Schallegger, 2015b: 0:38). Echoing the Canadian

Constitution, characters in the game are obsessed with 'Peace, Order, and good Government' (Government of Canada, 2015). The Inquisition is created to 'restore order in a world gone mad' (Schallegger, 2015d: 2:40), and the Inquisitor muses: 'All of this happened because of fanatics and arguments about the next world' (Schallegger, 2015a: 3:55).

Following Frye's 'quest for the peaceable kingdom' (1995: 251), the Inquisition is like an elected monarchy based on the consent of the governed. Engaged citizenship and responsible action are subsumed in the Inquisitor's motto: 'I am not chosen. I have chosen' (Schallegger, 2015a: 12:25), to which they add later: 'I did this myself, through my actions, no Maker required' (Schallegger, 2015e: 1:35). The Inquisition's ambassador, Josephine, describes the Inquisitor as 'a beacon of law, […] as others shirk from responsibility' (BioWare Edmonton, 2014), so the Rule of Law and the social contract are confirmed as supreme principles in this society. The Inquisitor is merely the hub of a dynamic network of *interpersonal* affective bonds, as *Inquisition* is not about *individual* empowerment, the Inquisitor not a lonesome hero but more of a focus and *porte-parole* for a community of likeminded, engaged individuals. The collective here is the source of all authority, and at the end the Seeker Cassandra reminds the player that 'this was a victory of alliance' (Schallegger, 2015f: 3:00). Corypheus's quest to achieve godhood at the price of destroying the world expresses the diametrically opposed worldview, and it must be defeated.

Yet, unlike *Mass Effect 3*, this game's ending offers a much more differentiated understanding of solidarity. Synthesis creates a static, collectivised solidarity in centrally imposed uniformity. When the Inquisitor ultimately dissolves the Inquisition, a dynamic, inter-personal solidarity motivated and energised by diversity emerges. There is no triumph here, as what counts is to be sheltered in a functioning community. Diversity, order, respectful collaboration, and evolutionary growth are all central Canadian values communicated in this design. Abandoning individual empowerment, it explodes the lone hero into a heroic collective.

Recent examples of a new Canadian mainstream? – Montréal

Assassin's Creed: Valhalla (2020) is an open world, historical science-fantasy action-RPG by Ubisoft Montréal and the latest instalment in a long-running and highly successful series which started with *Assassin's Creed* (2007). Initially action adventures, the games have mechanically shifted towards RPGs since *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017). Starting in the medieval Middle East, the series follows the conflict between Templars and Assassins, who champion order and free will respectively, and their struggle to control artefacts of a pre-human civilisation in a variety of settings from Renaissance Italy to the Seven Years' War, Victorian London or Anglo-Saxon England.

In *Valhalla* (2020), the player avatar is Eivor, a Norse refugee and Viking war-leader stranded on the shores of England where they must find a new home; Eivor also happens to be Odin, as we learn later. Besides questlines that follow historical events and personalities of the Viking settlement of the Danelaw, the main mechanics of the game are the building and organisation of a diverse community in the village of Ravensthorpe. *Valhalla* elegantly engages with the frictions and potentials of intercultural contact, presenting a differentiated and complex image of its cultures and societies. The colonisation of colonisers in a land where the aboriginal population is present but marginalised is a clever, if not subtle, reflection of the Canadian situation, as is the belief in the possibility of conviviality and networks of solidarity *across* cultural differences

Unfortunately, *Valhalla* fails to create a believable and impactful experience of *interpersonal* affective bonding. The friendships between Eivor and NPCs remain merely functional, as friends become service providers when players finish their quest lines. Worse, the same is true for romantic relations that are merely relegated to scripted quest lines: once a respective plot is finished, Eivor's partner becomes an automated dispenser of repetitive and meaningless interactions. Therefore, while the conception of solidarity in *Valhalla* is very accomplished and complex on the socio-political macro-level, on the inter-personal micro-level it fizzles out.

Valhalla finds its conceptual mirror image in Eidos's *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2021), an adaptation of the eponymous Marvel comics, independent of the movies. Mechanically, this game is an action adventure with a highly linear narrative design. Its beating heart is the interpersonal affective bonding of the Guardians as a family by choice, in spite of their significant differences as being of different biological species and cultural origins.

The incessant squabbling between characters seems to hint at friction in this little community, but it always comes from a place of respect, energising relationships, keeping them fresh and dynamic. This is expertly carried through to the mechanical level of the design where the player avatar, Star-Lord, cannot control his companions directly but has more of a coordinating and motivating function, beautifully realised in the huddle-up mechanic. At critical points in confrontations, all action stops, and the Guardians come together and voice their fears and other emotions. The player must then choose interactive options that best respond to everyone's needs to give the group a massive collective boost once the flow of time resumes.

The affecting and rich inter-personal relationships and deep solidarity, however, remain restricted to Peter's immediate circle of care, and inclusive community building hardly ever reaches beyond their ship, excluding any strangers. While the micro-level is thus expertly crafted here, any notion of solidarity on the societal or political macro-level is exclusively carried by the metaplot, where the Universal Church of Truth forcefully imposes its unifying belief on the Galaxy by parasitically draining and manipulating the masses.

Conclusions – Of Dead Heroes and Growing Networks

The case studies presented in this paper showcase various Canadian strategies to handle crisis. *Prince of Persia* deconstructs individual heroism, cautioning that the collapse of collective solidarity for personal reasons implodes society. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* establishes a personal responsibility to support autonomous collective decisions in order to resolve conflicts. Heralding a high point in Canadian ludic engagements with questions of crisis, agency, and solidarity, *Mass Effect 3* suggests that the only viable strategy to deal with the Other is hybridisation, i.e., becoming the Other through inclusion and adaptation. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* adds to this rather simplistic understanding a dynamic, iterative procedurality and the essential interpersonal level, asking players to question everything, including themselves and their choices. In the more recent *Valhalla* and *Guardians*, the essential *connections* between the personal micro- and collective macro-level, conduits for a meaningful and impactful flow of affect between individuals and societies, still remain somewhat precarious. In *Valhalla*, the systemic *structures* (mechanics, game space architecture) are very effective, while in *Guardians*, individual *experience* (narrative, aesthetics) is clearly the design's focus.

However, to unleash the full, and in my opinion unprecedented, potential of video games to affect players' understanding of crises, agency, and the essential value of solidarity,

both experience and structure, intensity and qualification, must converge. At the end of *Inquisition*, the Tevinter mage Dorian talks about the 'thematically appropriate' Death of the Hero and how all that matters in the end is 'being alive and together' (Schallegger, 2015h: 0:55-1:15). In Canadian narratives of crisis, heroes must die, not necessarily literally but at least metaphorically. Individuals can only serve as *catalysts* for procedural, negotiated, collective, and iterative change. Organic growth is the cultural logic that drives a Canadian perspective where becoming is being and where no closure is available or even desired, only communal survival. So far, it is mostly Canadian video games in the western AAA sector that have tackled such issues openly and persistently, and their fundamental contribution to the maturation of the leading medium in our cultural industries therefore cannot be denied but rather must be acknowledged and appreciated.

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Cultivating kindness in the tiny MORPG *Book of Travels*

Tan Schütz

Introduction

After seeing the art and trailer of the early access game *Book of Travels* (2024) by Might and Delight, it did not take long until I played it, curious about what I saw, heard, and did not understand. Something about it kept me intrigued, trying to find meaning within the game and a clear reason why it felt so different from games I had played previously. It took me running into a few other players in the game before it clicked: Meeting them, the way we could (not) communicate, and the quiet, relaxed atmosphere throughout the interactions was what was different. The more I thought about this, the more I was convinced that this difference can partly be explained by *Book of Travels* containing a lot of elements of walking simulators.

Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to examine how kindness in players can be fostered through the rare combination of what we understand as a walking simulator and online cooperative play through the example of *Book of Travels* and argue for the value in mixing these aspects. To do so, I first outline how online interactions are often toxic and unkind, and how a game like *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012) can be designed around fostering kinder interactions. Next, I argue *Book of Travels* includes many aspects of walking simulators based on the understanding of the genre by Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon (2019). A closer analysis and explanation of what *Book of Travels* is follows, with a focus on its cooperative elements and genre, leading to a loose comparison of *Journey* and *Book of Travels*. These considerations also result in a few design aspects to keep in mind when creating game systems for more than one player. Lastly, I bring these different topics together to argue how elements of cooperative play and elements of walking simulators help in cultivating kindness in *Book of Travel's* multiplayer interactions.

Negative interactions in online multiplayer games

Within different types of online multiplayer games, for example Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs) or Massive Multiplayer Online Role Play Games (MMORPGs), players are made to play together – either against or with each other. My focus here lies on players who do not know each other prior to playing together, so strangers. Well-known example

In: N. Webber, E. Kirkland and R. R. Schallegger, eds. 2025. *Exploring New Horizons in Video Game Cultures.* Leiden: Sidestone Press, pp. 29-42.

games for players to meet and potentially compete against each other are *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), or *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017). While they all share at least some design principles, systems, and server issues due to being live service games, they also share a more social denominator: toxicity, which can be described as negative interactions between players. (Of course, the ways in which players play with others and the means to communicate offered differ from game to game, which also means the types of toxicity encountered vary.)

The fact that there is a multitude of toxic behaviours in online games is hardly news, and numerous papers have questioned their emergence (Liu and Agur, 2022), what negative consequences they can have in real life (Banaszczuk, 2019), how they are related to performance and player relations (Mesquita Neto and Becker, 2018; Monge and O'Brien, 2021) or the motivation to keep playing (Liu and Agur, 2022), and whether players realise they are being toxic (Mesquita Neto and Becker, 2018). While toxic players can sometimes be understood as just a few troublemakers, in this chapter, I assume the viewpoint that toxic behaviour may be a consequence of a game's design. Importantly, tackling toxicity in games should be understood as a responsibility of not only designers but 'researchers […] and developers' as well (Frommel et al., 2022: 264). That is not to say that all games need to be designed differently, and that playing them or developing and designing them is inherently detrimental. But there should be more awareness about the influence game systems can have on player interactions and about games that offer different ways of playing.

There are also various names for online toxicity that may change depending on the community: trolling, griefing, feeding, cheating, flaming, or BM-ing to name but a few (Arjoranta and Siitonen, 2018; Kwak et al., 2015; Liu and Agur, 2022; Mesquita Neto and Becker, 2018; Monge and O'Brien, 2021). Perhaps soberingly, these acts can also be described as cyberbullying (Kwak et al., 2015), verbal and sexual abuse, discrimination, and hate speech (Liu and Agur, 2022). The list of what toxic behaviour can include would be rather difficult to define or end, but that is not the direction of this chapter.

In many games, text chat and voice chat are the channels and systems through which players communicate. As these are based mostly on words, they can easily be used to be toxic: to call other players names, insult their family members or performance, use slurs, scream at them in an audio call out of frustration or anger at their mistakes, and so forth. However, there are also ways to be toxic without text chats. A good example for that is *Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014), an online digital collectible card game. Players cannot chat freely but instead use voiced emotes from the character that they play – 'Thanks', 'Threaten', 'Sorry', 'Oops', 'Well Played' or 'Greetings'. However, the community has established a way around these restrictions: When an opposing player makes a mistake, 'Thanks' can be used to laugh at their blunder, because the opponent just helped their enemy accidentally (Arjoranta and Siitonen, 2018; Ofner, 2021). Wordless toxicity (or near wordless, limited by word choices) can also consist of making sure a player's supposed allies lose a match or are killed multiple times with the sole reason to annoy them. Truly, the possibilities seem endless – especially when agreeing with the notion that humans will make any communicative system fit their needs (Ventrella, 2014).

Besides often-cited anonymity as a reason for online toxicity (Liu and Agur, 2022; Mesquita Neto and Becker, 2018), it is perhaps competition, not only in performing well, but in facing a declared (temporary) opponent and the plain and simple opportunity to express oneself within a text chat or through sarcastic emote-conventions that makes toxic

behaviour accessible and logical. But what about game systems that, while not necessarily promoting toxicity, do not promote positive player-to-player interactions either?

In an analysis of the MMORPG *Star Wars Galaxies* (Verant Interactive and LucasArts, 2003) Ducheneaut et al. examine the game for its ability to produce places in which sociability, 'the sheer pleasure of the company of others' can be experienced, such as cafés, parks, or bars (Ducheneaut et al., 2007: 129). Each player class is interdependent on other classes by offering or needing support, e.g., by healing or buffing, which forces players to interact in specific buildings with each other, in this case taverns (Ducheneaut et al., 2007: 133). The designers purposefully had this supporting interaction take a while, so players must wait with other players in close proximity (Ducheneaut et al., 2007: 139). At the same time, they also turned taverns into spaces of 'service delivery' and 'xp grinding' (Ducheneaut et al., 2007: 137) as players can station their avatars there while away from keyboard (AFK) and provide support with a macro function. Depending on how busy and how roleplay-oriented the tavern is, there may not only be AFK-macros flooding the text, but also advertisements for guilds, items, or in-game currency (Ducheneaut et al., 2007: 146). This makes it rather difficult for strangers to experience the 'sheer pleasure of the company of others' (Ducheneaut et al., 2007: 129), as the public chat is made uncomfortable for relaxed conversation, and the economic and professional needs of players take precedence. So, even if players are not actively insulting other players, and even if designers try to make players socialise, a game's systems and goals may not incentivise players to interact positively with each other.

Building games that cultivate kindness

How then, in an online multiplayer setting, can designers build positive player-to-player interactions? Or in other words, how can they build systems that cultivate kindness? When mentioning kindness, I mostly refer to small interactions between players in a game world. They may be done with different intentions and with different means, but they relate to positivity, generosity, gratitude, friendliness, and self-kindness, as used in a study on persuasive games by Ciocarlan et al. (2018). They found that a person's happiness is influenced by their engagement in 'positive activities', such as these 'acts of kindness', 'writing letters to express gratitude' or 'practicing optimism' (Ciocarlan et al., 2018: 312). In an online multiplayer situation, one player may express gratitude for someone's help by utilising whichever means of communication the game affords, and in turn, the players' wellbeing or happiness may increase (Ciocarlan et al., 2018: 312).

One of the games that I argue manages to cultivate kindness – because it was specifically designed to offer an emotionally positive multiplayer experience (Chen, 2013: 11:20-12:40) – is the indie adventure game *Journey* (2012), not in the sense that playing with another person is required because of puzzles or powerful enemies, but rather as something that enriches the experience. Perhaps that is also why playing together becomes special within this game: it is out of choice, not out of need. In his Game Developers Conference (GDC) talk of 2013, designer Jenova Chen describes several considerations and iteration processes they went through. Some interactions, which were cut after realising this in playtesting, would allow the feeling that a player was stealing the resources of another (Chen, 2013: 36:00-37:43), while others allowed shoving other players while climbing and thereby killing them (Chen, 2013: 23:28-41:08). He also explains that they initially tested the game for three players instead of two. However, group dynamics of 'us' versus 'them' quickly evolved,



Figure 1. Screenshot of *Journey* when reaching the end of the game. Source: Evan and Katelyn Gaming Uncut (2022: 1:35:49).

making the third player feel isolated (Chen, 2013: 32:55-33:40). Thinking back about how anonymity may enable toxicity: *Journey* is made to offer as much anonymity as possible by not allowing the customisation of avatars,[1] by not including text or voice chat nor character names. Only at the end, players may see the others' nick names or ID numbers (Chen, 2013: 31:10-31:24). With no specific gestures or animations to greet each other, the only way to communicate lies in movement and the option to chirp, both actions intrinsic to players' interaction with the game world.

As one other form of communication, players have established a goodbye greeting at the end of the game: drawing a heart in the snow by walking – a form of expressing gratitude, or friendliness as described by Ciocarlan et al. (2018). In Figure 1, two content creators have reached the end of the game after taking turns to play the game with another online player. They react by drawing the heart with the other player, exchanging a perhaps universal human way of communicating gratitude or appreciation, mixed with excited surprise at understanding another's language and being able to emulate it. They both express appreciation for the company of the other player not only at the end but throughout the experience (Evan and Katelyn Gaming Uncut, 2022). Of course, this writing method could also be used to write something negative – but to my knowledge, no such custom has emerged, meaning the game's design seems to not nudge player into this direction.

While this game offers nearly complete anonymity that could enable toxic behaviour, it also seems to have carefully cut all needs and features to make players want to behave in a toxic manner. Resources are shared, nobody has to play with one specific person, there is no chat to tell someone they are bad at the game, and there is no obvious way

1 The only way a player can change their appearance is through playing the game multiple times and uncovering its secret spots. When starting a new game, players can then choose whether or not they want their avatar to wear red robes like all other players or switch into white robes, signalling their mastery of the game.

to grief (annoy) each other besides potentially making their journey longer – which is not necessarily a bad thing considering the game's name. Also, should one player annoy the other, they can run away from the other, as sufficient distance between players will disconnect their game worlds. Interestingly, this disconnection (and re-connection to a new, other player) can also happen without players noticing it. They may think they only played with one other player, but at the end of the playthrough, they will see different nick names listed.[2] These unnoticed switches are supported by the avatars that, most of the time, look identical to one another.

So far, I have explained how toxicity in online multiplayer environments is nearly ever-present, and how some games like *Journey* offer systems that encourage non-toxic exchanges and cultivate kindness by providing systems in which unkind actions are not needed (to collect more resources than another player) while kinder ones are supported and perhaps even rewarded (playing *Journey* more often and guiding a new player through the game). Next, I want to explore the connection to walking simulators.

Elements of walking simulators in *Book of Travels*

Journey's name and its goal, which is reached by 'wandering and gazing' (Schniz, 2021: 204), makes clear why it is understood as a classic of the walking simulator genre (Kagen, 2022). I argue that another game, *Book of Travels*, functions in some parts very similarly to *Journey*, raising the question how it is connected to walking simulators. From a more traditional genre-understanding, *Book of Travels* can be described as a Role-Playing Game (RPG) in which players experience the game world through an avatar called 'Traveller'. While it is played on servers like an MMORPG, players meet others rarely, prompting the developer-chosen label 'tiny MORPG' (Might and Delight, 2022: 00:22). As the game is still in early access, there will be changes in its design and the conventions players establish, meaning my analysis might not completely fit later versions of the game.

Besides the intricately drawn landscapes and configurable player characters, its concept of meeting other players is intriguing, as mentioned in the introduction. Because only very few people can meet, and only very rarely, meetings are not an expected, thoughtless thing. Rather, they become rare occurrences, and do not include the stealing of monsters and game loot but more likely surprise upon seeing another player. The only options to communicate are emotes or waving the player character's arm in greeting. In *Journey*, players cannot talk or communicate in any other way than to chirp or move. These actions are intrinsically linked to the core game mechanics and not necessarily associated with communication or language as provided through chat boxes or voice chats in other games. In *Book of Travels*, players also have the option to utilise a pictorial emote menu that is only meant for communication with other players as shown in Figure 2.

Generally speaking, walking simulators include 'walking, scrutinizing, and reading; themes like a lone playable character reconstructing a story of disappearance; and forms including first-person view, environmental storytelling, and voice-over' on the understanding that each game may pick and choose from these elements (Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon, 2019: 3). Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon use community-generated Steam labels to find central walking simulators and argue that their

2 These nicknames are retrieved from the platforms players use for the game – either from the PlayStation Network, Steam, Epic, or the Game Center for the iOS version (Journey Wiki, n.d.).



Figure 2. *Book of Travels'* emote menu. Source: Might and Delight (2024), my screenshot.

additional labels give insights about which other areas this genre can cover (Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon, 2019).

Book of Travels' labels do not include 'Walking Simulator'. However, the accompanying labels Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon's analysis brought up (2019: 6) show that a few of the top-voted labels overlap: 'Atmospheric', 'Exploration', 'Story Rich' (Lore-Rich), 'Mystery', 'Open World', and 'Narration' (Narrative) are present in both years, while 'Adventure' and 'Singleplayer' fell off since 2023 (see Figures 3 and 4). The label 'Drama' from Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon's analysis could perhaps be the equivalent to 2024's label 'Emotional' from Figure 4.

At the same time, the labels 'Character Customisation', 'Online Co-Op', 'MMORPG' and 'Massively Multiplayer' place the game closely in relation to online multiplayer games. *Book of Travels* shows elements seen as intrinsic to what is currently understood as a walking simulator. Much of the game consists of walking: during the day, through a storm, dark nights, or in empty caverns. Players can interact with the game world's population, fulfil their requests, exchange goods and learn something similar to spells – all of these actions either help one to travel faster or are reasons for travelling to another place. As the game can mostly be played alone, it consists in large parts of walking peacefully and exploring a calm world through reading.

Numerous games are understood to include these generic elements although not considered full walking simulators (Kagen, 2022). However, a game may still be closely related to other games not because it contains the exact same feature but similar ones, through a concept called 'family resemblance' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 32; Schniz, 2020: 31). Adapting Wittgenstein's thoughts on language and games, not all games of one genre must have 'one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, [rather] they are *related* to one another in many different ways' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 31, emphasis in original). Thus, while *Book of Travels* may not completely qualify as a walking simulator, it is closely related to some of them through shared activities and community-chosen Steam labels as explored above. As long as genre elements are understood on a pick-



Figure 3. *Book of Travels'* Steam community-voted labels from 6 April 2023. Source: Steam (n.d.).

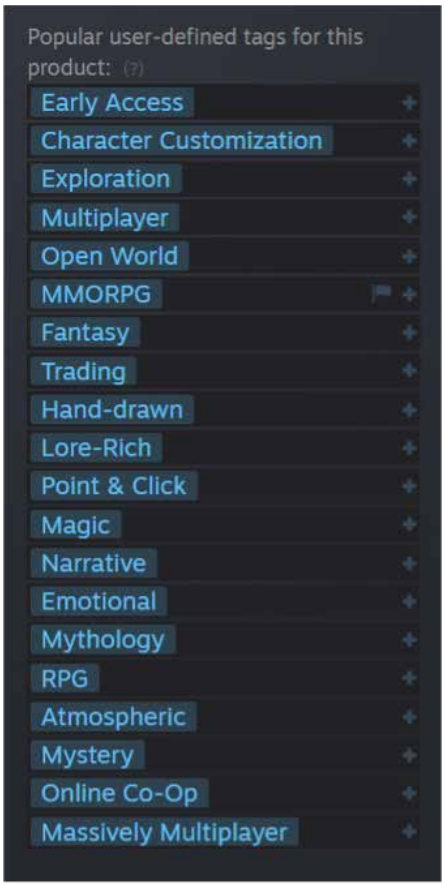


Figure 4. *Book of Travels'* Steam community-voted labels from 7 July 2024. Source: Steam (n.d.).

and-choose basis as Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon (2019) do, I argue that this game has a solid base to be analysed as part of this genre. Which is not to say I am claiming *Book of Travels* is a walking simulator and nothing else, but rather that the game carries elements of walking simulators. These generic elements should not only be paid attention to but are also an important part in examining how and why its design impacts multiplayer interactions.

To illustrate my claims about the game and to make its workings more tangible, the next part focuses on its analysis.

Analysis of *Book of Travels*

While a complete analysis of the *Book of Travels* is too long for this context, my findings and observations throughout this chapter are based on the NAME-method (Faller and Schniz, 2020) to examine the Narrative, Aesthetics, Mechanics, and Ethics of a game. I chose this method because it lets researchers become players, which I utilise by first describing an encounter with another player from the first-person perspective to illustrate the cooperative part of the game.



Figure 5. *Book of Travels*, meeting another player. Source: Might and Delight (2024), my screenshot.

After a few days of playing *Book of Travels*, I run into a player called Aras. I follow them around for a few minutes before we get stuck, unsure where the other one is going. So, I start an emote conversation with a question mark, depicted in Figure 5, answered by an arrow to the left. I reply with an exclamation mark because sure, I do not mind going into another direction than planned for my quest, if that means we can travel together. Only a couple of minutes later, though, Aras stops on the path, looks at their map, and waves goodbye with another emote. A bit panicked because I do not know the emotes that well yet, I react with a heart, as an appreciation of their presence and our encounter, and they do the same, before we walk off into different directions. I am glad about their company, and the option to respond and be understood, even in this limited capacity.

This encounter stands in contrast to the disinterest of earlier ones, and the slow understanding how the communication between players may work was a rewarding experience. In the end, it seems not that different from randomly meeting other people in the street: you would only seldomly greet them. In the real world, sitting down with strangers around their fire seems very out of place – drinking from the teapot they left behind or following them around without talking to them even more so. Then again, the social rules in a game are different, especially when the ability to talk with words is taken out of the equation. Body language, movements, and simple symbols are used instead which makes things easier and more complicated at the same time. Complex conversations are made impossible, as is most unpleasant behaviour – until now, at least.

Most of what the players do through their avatar's actions in the game is walking, resting, eating, talking to non-player characters (NPCs), exploring, reading and collecting. The narrative, aesthetic, as well as the mechanic aspects of the game nudge players to not stay and rest within cities and tea houses for too long; either because the noise becomes too much, because they are sent on an errant and would have nothing else to do in the city,

or the fact that nights take a long time and players can equip lanterns to keep travelling in the darkness. Thinking back to the description and definition of walking simulators by Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon (2019), through these aspects, *Book of Travels* shows itself to be a fit for the genre. Additionally, in the game players solve quests and mysteries but most of its design lets them be more of an observer, someone who is left to their own devices in figuring out how the pieces of a potential story fit together (Şengün, 2017).

The main influence for the art style of the game was A.J. Casson (Book of Travels, 2020), a Canadian painter and part of the Group of Seven active in the first half of the 20th century. This group wanted to create an identity for Canadian art by recreating the beauty of what they perceived as untouched nature in their works. Their intention was similar to the Hudson River School, as was their colonial and implicitly entitled perspective on and understanding of the already inhabited world (Cusack, 2021). Both have been addressed by countering the unquestioning celebration of their works – for example by Cree artist Kent Monkman (Madill, 2022) and Korean Canadian artist Jin-me Yoon (Tiampo, 2022). The art style of the Group of Seven can be categorised as Post-Impressionistic while including elements of Impressionism, Naturalism, and Art Nouveau (Weinberg, 2021). The artists of Might and Delight adapted his technique of lighting with shadows atop and lighter areas close to the ground (Book of Travels, 2020). Additionally, Casson is stated to have put an emphasis on 'graceful lines and careful composition' (Mayberry Fine Art, n.d.) and, later on, 'light broken into planes' (National Gallery of Canada, n.d.) which can be argued to be found in the style of the game as well.

Framing the game through a fixed 2D, diorama perspective inspired by Post-Impressionist art movements gives it the feel of an interactive painting, one that invites you to gaze, wander, and rest before moving on. Resting before and after walking is also supported by actions such as setting up campfires, whistling, or brewing and drinking tea. It recharges the player character's Stamina and Energy while offering a purposefully crafted audiovisual landscape, nearly unobstructed by UI elements for the players to perceive the game world. In comparison to the MMORPG *Star Wars Galaxies'* moments of forced rest (Ducheneaut et al., 2007), in this game, players can rest alone or in groups, the latter of which only saves resources. There are some events that the NPCs of the game tell players about, for example markets that open at midnight in a specific spot. Players that understand these instructions can then wait for the market to open, allowing for a bigger group to form. Other interactions that encourage players to join forces are challenges that require higher character stats or buffs received for more players in one group. However, the treatment of the environment seems questionable, as interactions with that environment only allow taking and collecting items, not replenishing them, which perhaps underlines the connection of the art style to the Group of Seven. To truly analyse this relationship, further research is needed, though.

In my next step, I utilise the elements and thoughts collected in this analysis and consider how they impact the multiplayer elements of the game.

Co-op elements in *Book of Travels*

Book of Travels, as a 'Tiny Multiplayer Online RPG', allows rare encounters of running into other players to turn into events. Most of the game aligns with a single player experience, which also means that resources are not in danger to be stolen by others. Players may

completely ignore each other, their meeting but a fleeting acknowledgement of another digital human presence. Or there may be an exchange of emotes, movements, greetings from both sides as it was with Aras. These interactions with other players highlight the fact that there is no way to chat with others besides movement and gestures. The pictorial emote menu, depicted in Figure 2, is the only way to communicate, and it is crafted and meant for communication and expression only, with no impact on other areas of the game. Of course, players could, in time, utilise this menu in a toxic manner just like in *Hearthstone*, but as the example with the heart in the snow from *Journey* may have shown, if a game is designed to promote positive player-to-player interactions, then it is more likely that a community establishes non-toxic interactions.

Still, being able to share resources and getting buffs (in this case temporary upgrades for walking speed and similar) from another player's company are incentives to stick together, at least for a while. At the same time, nobody has to stay with others and is free to just be on their way. Meeting a player more than once, however, is rather difficult – given how reduced communication channels are, there is no way to set up another meeting, or foster deeper relationships. Additionally, it might be difficult to even recognise that other players are present because their art style makes them blend into the environment rather well. Overall, the need for and option of playing against other players, as well as actions to annoy or oppose them, seems to be simply missing.

Journey and *Book of Travels* give players the option to play with random other players, but if they want to, they can easily part ways. In their online multiplayer experiences, they are rather similar, but *Book of Travels* also incorporates differences, such as bigger player groups, shorter interaction times, and a vaster, non-linear game world to traverse, which brings it closer to MMORPGs than *Journey*.

How *Book of Travels* cultivates kindness

With all of these points in mind: What exactly makes *Book of Travels* a game that can cultivate kindness? Kindness, for the context of this game and thinking back to Ciocarlan et al. (2018), I would describe as non-toxic, positive player interactions and actions. For example, accompanying someone, sharing tea or light, greeting each other, exchanging emotes in an attempt to connect and understand. *Book of Travels* does not seem to include elements that would make unkind interaction a logical step, while also erasing the option for players to express negativity in text chat.

Instead, it fits into the description of an 'exploratory, nonviolent video [game] without points, goals, or tasks' (Kagen, 2022: 1), focusing on a quiet 'experience of [the game world and its inhabitants], something that is firmly grounded in a cultural history of creating and enjoying landscapes for the sake of their aesthetic value' (Zimmermann, 2019: 30). Walking simulators, even more so when they freshly emerged, stood in stark contrast to established and expected video game genres with the missing strong feedback cycles of quests, fighting, or weapons (Kagen, 2022). This uncharted difference was partly what led to the negative reactions during #GamerGate, not only to walking simulators but any game that worked differently. Many of them were derogatively seen as games for women or casual games, in direct opposition to what affronted players called proper 'hardcore' games (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020: 228). Games such as walking simulators deliberately designed in these then-unexpected ways become subversive, and in its subversiveness, 'the genre [offers] formal critique of hypermilitant, patriarchal, late capitalism in gaming' (Kagen, 2022: 11).

If at least some online multiplayer games are understood as examples of these harmful concepts in games and their community, mixing them with their own formal critique is – or was – bound to change things we may otherwise expect to be normal within a multiplayer game, such as toxicity. Of course, should we understand a game's systems as something that does not allow players to be toxic, the question arises if the kindness of players even means anything because they are, in a sense, forced to behave positively. However, in the case of *Book of Travels*, no player is exactly forced by the game to behave in a certain way. If players choose not to interact with other players, then they can walk away from the interaction and ignore the parts of the game that require more than one player, or ignore others altogether, as was the case with most of the players I met. I argue that players are not forced to be kind within the game but that developers consciously designed the game in ways that minimize opportunities for obviously unkind behaviour and actions. In a sense, cultivating kindness within a multiplayer game is therefore at least partly about preventing toxic behaviour through the goals and mechanics of the game.

Because *Book of Travels* is in early access and the game itself and its community are still developing, it is too early to say it does everything right in cultivating positive player relations. Perhaps the missing text chat also bars players from, e.g., a positive guild experience as in MMORPGs, or the deeper relations forged when players befriend and spend more in-game time with each other. With its current design, however, the quiet traversal of the open game world relates to the contemplative, self-reflective aspect crystallised in the genre of walking simulators through 'walking, scrutinizing, and reading' (Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon, 2019: 3). Interestingly, acts of self-kindness can also mean taking walks (Ciocarlan et al., 2018), an activity in the focus of *Book of Travels*, leading to the consideration that walking simulators could be a good fit for designing or researching games for wellbeing.

Summary

Analysing these games led me to different aspects and tools to consider when designing positive multiplayer experiences: competitive and cooperative scenarios, accessibility of resources, the need versus the option to play with others, the communication channels provided by the game, the number of players that can meet at once, avatar customisation or the ability to uniquely identify another player, and, considering *Journey* has a different play time than MMORPGs, the possible length of an interaction.

Between *Journey* and *Book of Travels*, many similar aspects can be observed: Giving time and opportunity to perceive the game world on your own through walking, making resources equally accessible, taking away obvious opportunities and tools to verbally, implicitly, or physically harm others, and instead offering options for simple acts of kindness like accompanying each other. At the same time, both games offer the opportunity to simply walk away and not react to other players at all, making all player interactions voluntary. While *Book of Travels* allows for more than two players to meet at once, running into not only one but two players at random is a an even rarer occurrence, turning most of the cooperative aspects of play into a two-player interaction except for example the night markets mentioned by NPCs. Meeting another player becomes an event in *Book of Travels* because of its rarity, and a similar reception was expressed by content creators playing *Journey*, even if some of the appreciation there may come through a prolonged interaction time with the other player(s) (Evan and Katelyn Gaming Uncut, 2022). This leads to more

interesting questions: Does it make a difference if players interact with only one player for a long or short time? And do players need to know if the other player stays the same or is switched out to form attachment or build a relationship?

In my current understanding, these listed aspects, and the absence of competition (for resources), perhaps in relation to a non-verbal communication system, are paramount to designing online multiplayer experiences like *Journey* and *Book of Travels* that promote positive player interactions and relations – or in other words, cultivate kindness.

Outlook

There are many related aspects I could not delve into, such as how the setting, goals and atmosphere of a game connect and perhaps change player interaction. How much toxicity would there be if we dealt with a Zombie-apocalypse type MMORPG instead of one that we may consider cosy or wholesome? Is it even possible for players to interact positively with each other if resources are scarce? How would one design a game with competitive features so that it still highlights that the game is easier or more entertaining when playing cooperatively? How does avatar customisation change the perception of others and of oneself? Which messages does *Book of Travels* carry about the environment, also with a look at Kagen (2022)? How does pure pictorial and gestured conversation compare to text or voice chat, and can the first lead to deeper relationships than acquaintances? As for this game, I think it will be interesting to see what conventions develop to interact with others, as it happened with the sarcastic 'Thanks' in *Hearthstone* and the drawing of hearts in the snow in *Journey* to say goodbye.

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SECTION II

QUEER GAME STUDIES

Video Games as Safe Spaces: A Walking Perspective

Kseniia Harshina and Tom Tucek

Introduction

The concept of 'safe spaces' has evolved significantly since its emergence in the women's liberation movement of the late twentieth century (Kenney, 2001: 24). Originally rooted in feminist and queer activism, the idea of a safe space was associated with environments where marginalised groups could gather free from the threat of violence – not only physical but also verbal and emotional violence (Roestone Collective, 2014: 1346). The terms' safe' and 'safety' are thus defined here by the absence of all these forms of violence. The Roestone Collective categorises safe spaces into separatist ones, inclusive ones, and object-attentive ones. The separatist, highly controlled safe spaces originally functioned as sites of resistance against oppressive societal structures, but over time, the concept has expanded and been applied to various new contexts, including educational settings, online communities, and, more recently, video games (Scheuerman, Branham, and Hamidi, 2018). Furthermore, there have also been numerous misappropriations and criticisms; for example, Ali (2017: 3) highlights how critics of safe spaces on college campuses claim that people in these spaces isolate themselves from those who disagree with their ideas. Ali and the Roestone Collective both argue that safe spaces carry an inherent contradiction, as they need to discriminate against certain groups and can never be perfectly safe. This thought may apply to physical spaces, but does it also apply to video game spaces?

Video games allow the notion of safety to take on new and unique dimensions. They provide players with 'half-real' spaces (Juul, 2011), where the rules and mechanics are grounded in reality, yet the worlds and narratives they navigate are fictional. This duality allows games to serve as 'potential spaces', which are described by Winnicott (1991) as temporary spaces between the inside and the outside; spaces that are neither objectively real nor purely in our heads, but instead touch on both. This potential space can exist between individuals, but also, in the case of video games, between players and NPCs (Non-Player Characters), which means that it can also be a source of affect (see, for example, Schallegger, 2020). Video games can thus be seen as half-real potential spaces, which allow players to safely explore identities, emotions, and experiences that might be inaccessible or unsafe in the real world (Kriss, 2016: 5). While the risk of real-world harassment still

In: N. Webber, E. Kirkland and R. R. Schallegger, eds. 2025. *Exploring New Horizons in Video Game Cultures.* Leiden: Sidestone Press, pp. 45-64.

exists in online situations, for many, particularly those from marginalised groups, video games offer a space to reclaim agency and find empowerment in ways that might not be possible for them otherwise.

This chapter focuses on the 'ergodic' (i.e. non-trivial) act of navigating a non-linear medium – walking in video games – and how it can construct a sense of safety (Aarseth, 1997). Using selected games, we highlight different aspects of walking in them and use the concept of safe spaces to analyse how this activity creates opportunities and experiences for specific vulnerable or marginalised player groups. As such, we have split this chapter into five distinctive parts before combining and summarising them at the end. In the first part, we look into empowerment and disempowerment through games like *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Troika Games, 2004) and *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015). Insights into aspects of gender identity and queerness in character creators follow, looking at *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023). Then, the unexpected potential of catharsis through walking in horror games like *Silent Hill* (Team Silent, 1999) is investigated. The last two parts focus on gender identity in online games such as *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020) and *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), as well as unique aspects of walking through games for neurodivergent players by looking into *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016) and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017). We also provide comments from users of the popular online platform Reddit (Reddit Community, 2005-2024) as anecdotal evidence for some of the topics we discuss. To protect the privacy of the quoted users, we do not name or reference them directly.

Games that have been labelled 'walking simulators' are often also considered to be female-gendered or inherently queer by mainstream gamer culture (Kagen, 2022: 6) – and thus also worth less than other games. We want to note that, while this chapter deals with these topics as well, the focus does not lie on how genres or walking mechanics in games are interpreted or portrayed by players. Instead, we want to highlight how the concept of walking – which includes many types of movement – in video games of various genres can showcase how these games create or endanger safe spaces for specific player identities.

As the concept of safe spaces continues to evolve, we think that understanding its application within video games is beneficial for players, game designers, and scholars. This chapter aims to contribute to this understanding by offering analysis and suggestions regarding how video games can be designed to function as safe spaces. A summary of these suggestions can be found at the end of this chapter. We hope that these ideas continue to be included in games, thus potentially enabling players to navigate complex identities, emotions, and social dynamics in a controlled and supportive environment.

Safety and power: the empowerment and disempowerment of walking

In video games, the simple act of walking can become a powerful tool for player empowerment. Walking, especially when embodied through a powerful avatar, allows players to navigate environments that might be dangerous or inaccessible to them in real life. This transformation of mundane actions into empowering experiences is particularly evident when players take on roles that challenge their real-world vulnerabilities. For example, walking as a powerful avatar through the streets at night, a scenario often associated with fear or discomfort for many individuals in real life, becomes an opportunity to reclaim agency and assert control in the virtual world.

This section explores how video games can both empower and disempower players through the mechanics of walking. By examining *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Troika Games, 2004) and *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), we analyse how walking as an avatar allows players to engage with environments from positions of power, offering a safe space to explore identities and experiences that may be unsafe or inaccessible in real life. However, as these games demonstrate, the empowerment provided by walking can be paradoxical, sometimes reinforcing traditional power dynamics or exposing the limitations of player agency at the same time.

Walking as empowerment in *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*

In *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*, a first-person action role-playing game, players navigate the dark, often dangerous streets of Los Angeles as a powerful vampire, exemplifying how the act of walking can be transformed into an experience of empowerment. By embodying a vampire – a figure traditionally associated with power, autonomy, and fearlessness – players gain a unique form of agency that contrasts with their potential real-world vulnerabilities. As Déborah (2020: 34) notes in her exploration of female vampires, these figures provide a powerful means for women and queer individuals to reclaim agency, challenging and resisting societal constraints. Walking through the game's atmospheric urban landscapes at night, the player, especially when playing as a female vampire, experiences a sense of control and dominance that defies usual fears associated with walking alone as a woman in real life. This role reversal allows players to safely explore scenarios that might be dangerous in reality, offering a form of empowerment within a virtual space – a safe space. The empowerment is particularly resonant for women and queer individuals, as vampires symbolise strength and authority that transcend traditional gender boundaries, subverting the patriarchal norms that historically prioritise male physical dominance.

The empowerment derived from this experience is deeply tied to the player's relationship with their avatar. Klevjer (2006) argues that the avatar is not just a tool for interaction but an embodiment of the player's agency, mediating their interaction with the virtual world in a way that makes the player feel in control. However, the relationship between the player and the avatar can go even deeper. As Banks (2015) describes, in some cases, the avatar functions as a 'symbiote', where both the player and the avatar engage in a process of mutual influence and identity formation. This symbiotic relationship is not merely about projection, but about the player and avatar becoming more alike, often moving toward an ideal self. In the real world, walking alone at night, especially for women and other minorities, often involves a heightened sense of vulnerability and fear. However, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* subverts this by allowing players to experience the power dynamics from the opposite perspective – where they are the predator, not the prey. This role reversal serves as a prime example of empowerment found through safe spaces in video games.

The paradox of disempowerment in *Life is Strange*

Life is Strange, a series of story-driven adventure games, presents a complex exploration of empowerment through its protagonist, Max Caulfield, who can rewind time. While this ability initially provides a sense of power and control, the narrative quickly undermines it, placing Max in situations where her abilities are either ineffective or lead to tragic

outcomes. While walking as Max, through her life and through time, players can experience both empowerment as a teenage girl with supernatural powers, as well as powerlessness when faced with societal and personal constraints. These walking sequences often place Max in liminal spaces (e.g. school halls, empty streets, and dreamlike environments), where her agency is limited or illusory. The act of walking becomes symbolic of Max's struggle to assert control in a world where her choices are constantly undermined.

This narrative choice can be seen as a broader critique of how agency is often illusory for women, who may be granted tools of empowerment but are simultaneously constrained and disempowered by societal expectations and systemic inequalities. Despite her supernatural abilities, Max is subjected to the same fears and dangers that many women face, highlighting the limitations of agency within a patriarchal framework. Maja (2019: 49), as well as Oktavanya and Panjaitan (2019: 22), note that the game critiques societal norms that constrain female autonomy, yet it also reinforces traditional gender roles by positioning Max as a sacrificial figure whose powers ultimately contribute to her disempowerment rather than liberation. Additionally, the depiction of Max's queerness, particularly in her relationship with Chloe, has been criticised for conforming to heteronormative expectations and catering to the male gaze (i.e. sexualising lesbianism and viewing women as sexual objects) rather than fully embracing her queer identity as empowering (Oktavanya and Panjaitan, 2019: 24). This tension between empowerment and disempowerment underscores the challenges women and queer individuals face in navigating identities within dominant cultural narratives.

Both *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* and *Life is Strange* provide strong examples of how video games can empower female characters in traditionally vulnerable positions. In *Bloodlines*, players take on the role of a powerful vampire, subverting common fears associated with walking alone at night by granting the player strength and autonomy beyond the confines of gender. Meanwhile, *Life is Strange* empowers players through the ability to control time, allowing a teenage girl to navigate and potentially alter perilous situations, offering a sense of control in a narrative that often places her in disempowering circumstances.

These games present contrasting yet complementary perspectives on how embodying a powerful avatar can serve as both a mechanism for empowerment and a reflection of disempowerment. *Bloodlines* allows players to reclaim agency in spaces typically associated with fear and vulnerability, while *Life is Strange* uses its time-rewinding mechanic to explore the fragility of empowerment, showing how even those with extraordinary abilities can be undermined by the structures and narratives that surround them. Although games can offer safe spaces for players to explore different scenarios and aspects of their identities, they also have the potential to reinforce the very societal structures they aim to critique. By examining these two games, we gain a deeper understanding of how the act of walking in video games is not just about movement through space but often also about navigating an intricate balance between safety, power, and vulnerability. In the next section, we examine how players can be empowered by walking as characters that they design themselves.

Walking safely as yourself: character creators and queerness

Video games have increasingly become spaces where players can try out aspects of identity in ways that might not be possible in the real world. Aside from narrative aspects like

occupation or country of origin, more intimate aspects of identity, such as gender and sexuality, can also be explored. Extensive character creators in role-playing games like *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023), or even the absence of such, as in *Rust* (Facepunch Studios, 2018), can provide players with the tools to experiment with and embody their gender identity in a virtual space. This ability to 'walk' as one's true or desired self in a game can be particularly powerful for transgender and gender diverse (TGD) players, offering a sense of safety, affirmation, and freedom from discrimination (Kriss, 2016: 5). This judgment-free environment allows TGD players to explore gender and different appearances, experience internal and external validation, and immerse themselves in a different reality – escapism, to a perfect safe space (McKenna et al., 2024: 29). It is noteworthy that games with less extensive character creators, e.g. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020), also allow for queer self-expression and community-building – oftentimes by transforming the goals and tools provided by the game to serve them better (i.e. 'queering' the game) (Street, 2017: 35; Blanco-Fernández and Moreno, 2023: 16).

The power of character creation in *Cyberpunk 2077*

Character creators are not just about customisation; they are about the players' identities. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, a futuristic first-person role-playing game, players have the ability to mix and match features from the traditional gender binary, such as body types (see Figure 1), genitalia, and voice tones (see Figure 2), to create characters that potentially represent their personal or aspirational gender identity. Although the limitation of options to the gender binary is problematic, the flexibility of this mix-and-match system allows players to step into the shoes of a character that potentially resonates more with their sense of self, whether that reflects their current identity or an exploration of what might be possible. The game also offers romance options with various characters who have pre-defined sexualities, thus restricting which ones are available to the player in a



Figure 1. Options for body types in *Cyberpunk 2077*. Source: Walker (2020).



Figure 2. Separate options for voice tones in *Cyberpunk 2077*. Source: Walker (2020).

playthrough. However, what determines the availability of romance is not the players' chosen genitalia but their gender presentation, i.e., their voice and body type. While limiting NPC sexuality in this way can serve to make games more realistic, there are also other approaches, such as in *Baldur's Gate 3*, as discussed in the next section.

For TGD players, the ability to create a character that reflects their gender identity can be an affirming experience. It allows them to see themselves in the game world, to interact with it as their true self, and to experiment with identities in a space that feels safe and free from the judgments that often accompany real-world interactions. Furthermore, they get to experience being accepted by others (NPCs) for who they are and present as within the game world, without the constant threat of criticism, cynicism, or doubt.

Safe spaces and representation in *Baldur's Gate 3*

Baldur's Gate 3, an isometric role-playing game based on *Dungeons and Dragons*, offers an extensive character creator, which allows players to choose not just physical characteristics – such as their body type and looks, but also their character's gender identity and voice (see Figure 3). The explicit choice of identity also affects the pronouns NPCs use for the player character in conversation – in a fully-voiced video game. Players have praised *Baldur's Gate 3* for its detailed character creator, which not only allows them to create a character that looks like them but also feels like them. This deeper level of immersion is especially beneficial for TGD players who often struggle to find representation in media that aligns with their experiences and identities.

As opposed to other games with romanceable NPCs, such as *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Baldur's Gate 3* does not restrict players' romance options based on their gender, and all potential love interests are available to all player characters. This 'Avatar-Sexuality' (Lippitz, 2020: 162) of NPCs can cause issues, such as unrealistic expectations for reality. However, it can also be considered as a form of protection for players from being rejected based on their gender presentation, which can be particularly unpleasant and traumatic for TGD people. Although respectful rejection should be possible in the context of safe spaces, we consider this approach to be more graceful.

The challenges and innovations of *Rust*

Compared to the aforementioned games, the online survival multiplayer game *Rust* handles character identity very differently, as certain physical characteristics, including gender, are

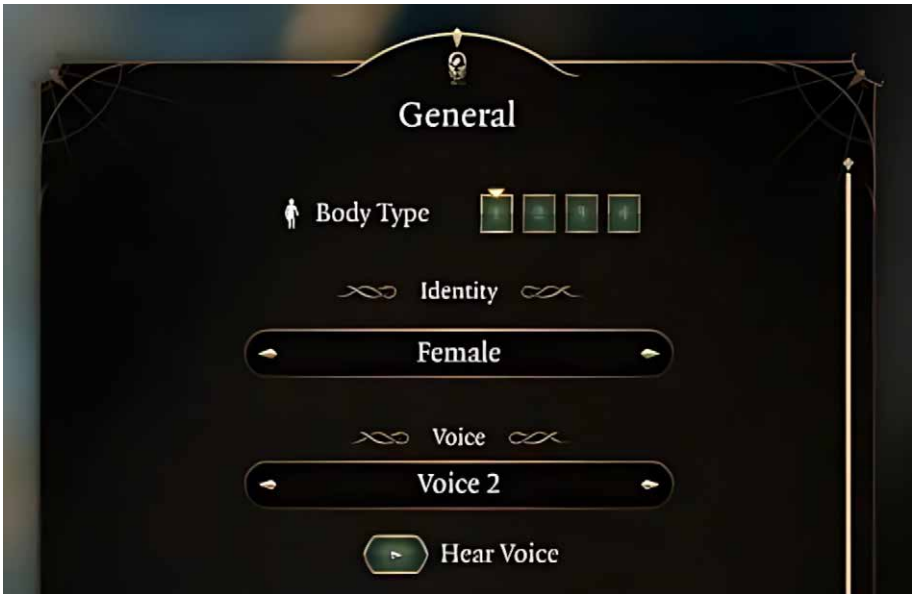


Figure 3. Separate options for body type, identity, and voice in *Baldur's Gate 3*. Source: Carpou (2023).

automatically assigned to players, randomly and permanently. This approach creates novel dynamics between players and forces them to engage with gender in a way that can be both challenging and eye-opening. The random assignment of a character's gender highlights the fluidity of gender identity, sparking discussions on identity and representation in games. The developers of the game have stated that the discomfort that players experience when playing a character that does not match their gender identity has always been felt by women playing games and that they consciously steered away from character creators for players (Donnelly, 2016). While this can enable some players to gain new insights, it also causes strongly adverse reactions (Euteneuer, 2016: 8). As new social dynamics form in-game based on assigned gender, those who have to live through such issues in real life will most likely not want to experience such harassment in video games as well. Even though it is certainly thought-provoking, this system can thus be seen as an antithesis to safe spaces for women and TGD players.

Out of the three games analysed here, we argue that *Baldur Gate 3* handles the safe-space aspects for marginalised players the best. In the next section, we shift the focus away from player characters and look at game worlds instead.

Feeling safe in unsafe environments: the catharsis of walking

Video games have long been recognised for their ability to evoke powerful emotions, serving as platforms for players to explore and process complex feelings. The *Silent Hill* series by Team Silent (1999), a psychological horror franchise, exemplifies this capacity through its evocative use of atmosphere, narrative, and gameplay mechanics. Particularly notable is the way in which the series invites players to walk through its eerie, desolate environments – an experience that can be both unsettling and cathartic, especially for those dealing with emotional challenges such as depression.

The catharsis of walking in *Silent Hill*

Silent Hill delves into deep psychological themes such as guilt, grief, and redemption. In many of the games, the protagonist, often driven by personal demons and emotional turmoil, walks through the foggy streets of the eponymous town (see Figure 4), encountering creatures and settings that are symbolic representations of their inner struggles. This parallelism between the game's environment and the protagonist's emotional state can extend to the player, especially if they are experiencing similar emotions and mental states.

For many players suffering from depression, the act of walking through *Silent Hill*'s environments can provide a form of emotional release or catharsis. According to the theory of catharsis, as outlined by Aristotle (335 BCE), engaging with intense emotional content – whether through art, literature, or now, video games – allows individuals to experience and process their emotions in a controlled manner. In the *Silent Hill* series, this is achieved by immersing players in a world that reflects their own fears and anxieties, yet allows them to confront these emotions in a way that feels safe and manageable.

Some players who have played games from the *Silent Hill* series, particularly *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent, 2001), describe the experience as therapeutic during periods of depression. Posts on this theme can readily be found on Reddit. As one user from the 'r/silenthill' subreddit noted, playing *Silent Hill 2* during a dark period in their life made them feel like they were 'on a different level of depression', yet they found comfort in the game's gloomy streets and spooky sounds. Another user shared their experience, explaining how *Silent Hill 2* became their 'go-to game for playing when I'm depressed'. They describe playing the game as 'a miserable and uncomfortable experience', but by the end, they felt 'stronger and more assured' that they could deal with their issues. The game, according to this player, does not necessarily make you feel happier; rather, 'it gives you the mental tools to deal with issues'. This sentiment is echoed by others who find the bleak atmosphere of the game calming, offering a space to confront and work through their depression in a safe environment. These perspectives allow us to see the therapeutic potential of walking

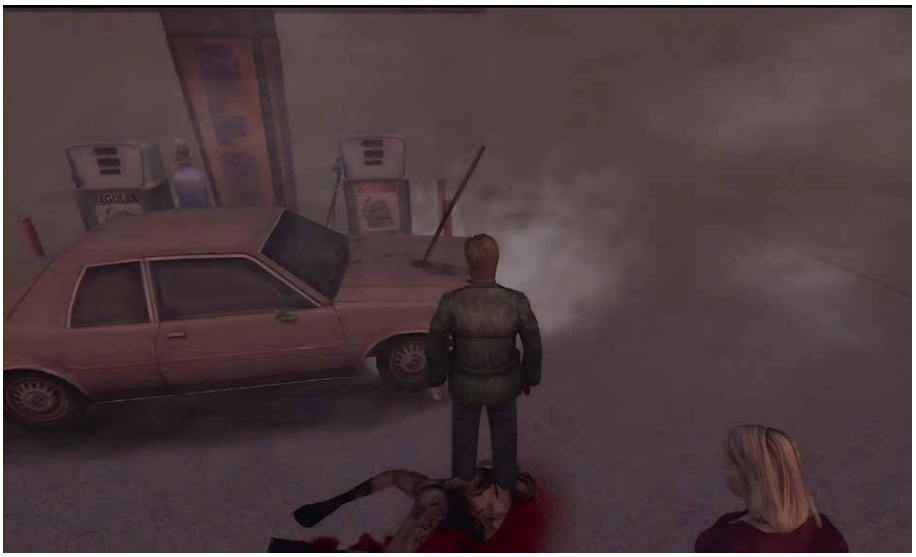


Figure 4. The foggy streets in *Silent Hill 2*. Source: Madrigal (2018).

through the streets of *Silent Hill*, not by offering escapism or distraction, but by confronting the player with (metaphors of) their fears and anxieties in a way that feels safe and manageable. After all, maintaining control and safety are considered important aspects of what makes horror media enjoyable (Bantinaki, 2012: 386; Gaut, 1993: 339).

Walking as a therapeutic experience

The cathartic experience in *Silent Hill* is not limited to narrative alone; it is deeply tied to the act of walking through the game's unsettling environments. The slow, deliberate pace at which the protagonist moves through the town allows players to engage with the environment at their own pace, reflecting on their emotions as they navigate the game's challenges. This aligns with findings by Bopp, Mekler, and Opwis (2016: 3003), who argue that emotionally moving moments in games often arise from the player's interaction with the game's environment and mechanics, not just its narrative. Furthermore, research by Gowler and Iacovides (2019: 334) suggests that horror games, in particular, can evoke complex emotions such as guilt, shame, and relief, which are critical components of the cathartic process. In *Silent Hill*, these emotions are amplified by the game's use of unsettling imagery and sound design, which potentially mirror the player's internal state and create a powerful emotional resonance. The ability to control the protagonist's movements, even in a world that feels overwhelmingly hostile, offers players a sense of agency and control over their emotions – an 'anxiety that I have control over', as one player described it.

Understanding how games like *Silent Hill* evoke catharsis could also lead to the design of games specifically aimed at therapeutic outcomes. As noted by Ferguson et al. (2014: 765), the concept of catharsis has been applied to violent video games, where it often became synonymous with power fantasies. However, its application in other genres offers a promising avenue for further research. In psychological horror, which subverts the idea of a power fantasy and often revolves around powerlessness, different forms of catharsis can be found. By harnessing the power of cathartic gameplay, developers could create experiences that not only entertain but also provide meaningful emotional support for players.

The *Silent Hill* series exemplifies how video games can serve as safe spaces for players to explore and process complex emotions. The game's environments are hostile and unsettling, including grotesque imagery, cryptic puzzles, and disturbing radio noise whenever monsters are nearby. Through the act of walking in these environments, players – especially those going through a difficult time themselves – can achieve a sense of catharsis, confronting their feelings in a controlled and reflective manner. As the field of game studies continues to evolve, we think that the therapeutic potential of cathartic gameplay offers an exciting opportunity to explore how games can contribute to emotional well-being and mental health in unconventional ways. In the next section, we explore a dimension that does not apply to the single-player games that have been analysed so far – that of interactions between players in online spaces.

Safety to interact: perceiving players' gender identities in online spaces

Online multiplayer games have become a primary space for social interaction, where players from diverse backgrounds come together to collaborate, compete, and communicate. However, these spaces are not always safe or welcoming, particularly for players whose gender identities deviate from the perceived norm (Consalvo, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Cote,

2017) – players are assumed to be heterosexual, cisgender males until proven otherwise (Lukianov, 2014: 75). The experience of gendered harassment and discrimination in online spaces is well-documented, with women and non-binary individuals often facing the most toxic behaviour. This section explores how online multiplayer video games like *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020) and *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012) attempt to address these issues, and how game design can play a crucial role in creating safer environments for all players.

In a comparatively early piece, Jenkins (2006: 213) explains how video games historically centred around 'boy culture'. He emphasises the need for developing video game spaces that are not gender-coded and claims that many related issues require changes not only to video game design but also society in general. While there was hope that the increasing diversity of video game audiences would automatically improve the situation regarding harassment issues (Cote, 2017: 137), the reality turned out to be different. We do not have any definite answers as to what causes players to behave this way, but predicting such conduct has become feasible, both by profiling in-game and offline behaviour. Research has shown that masculinity and social dominance orientation (beliefs about inequality between groups) are indicators of sexism towards women in video games, whereas time spent playing games and general empathy showed no significant correlations (Fox and Tang, 2014: 317). However, time spent playing games was shown to be an indicator of general harassment and misbehaviour (Tang and Fox, 2016: 517).

An important factor when it comes to harassment in online games is voice communication. Based on how players sound and how they are perceived, they are linguistically profiled by other players, who speculate on aspects of their identities, such as race or gender. This, in turn, often causes increased racist, sexist, and othering behaviour among players (Gray, 2020: 148). To guarantee safe spaces for marginalised players in online games, harassment has to be stopped, and while changing society is difficult, changing game design can go a long way.

The challenge of gender perception in *Valorant*

Valorant, a team-based first-person shooter, is one of many examples of games where gendered interactions can become a significant source of stress for certain player groups. The game's emphasis on voice communication for team coordination can often expose players to gender-based harassment. Similar to the experiences of female players interviewed by Lukianov (2014), women of the community have reported hesitancy to use voice chat, fearing that revealing their gender might subject them to derogatory comments, exclusion, or even targeted harassment. Another layer of stress is added by the pressure to perform well in order to avoid reinforcing negative gender stereotypes (e.g. women being afraid that their in-game performance will shape other players' perception of all women). Situations like this exemplify how the design of communication systems in online games can inadvertently contribute to an unsafe environment for marginalised players.

Aside from Riot Games, the developers of *Valorant*, having a long history of trying to stop harassment and fostering diversity in their communities (Cote, 2017: 152), the game was chosen for analysis in this section as representative of a wide variety of online multiplayer games featuring fast-paced, team-based combat. Quick communication to relay information to teammates is important for performing well, which usually causes voice-based chat to be the preferred mode of communication. However, other systems have been implemented, such as non-verbal gestures, dialogue wheels that allow for quick selection of

often-used pre-recorded phrases, and ping systems for players to place temporary markers with different meanings on the game's map. Increased use of these forms of communication has been shown to correlate with player performance (Leavitt, Keegan, and Clark, 2016), which implies the potential of using such non-verbal tools over verbal communication exclusively. Restricting oneself to non-verbal communication allows for one's identity to stay obscured, thus potentially increasing safety. Unfortunately, there are at least two issues with this approach – one is that gender identity performance can still occur non-verbally in video games (Healey, 2020). The other issue lies in minorities refusing to use voice chat, which reduces their visibility and thus ends up reinforcing hegemonic masculinity in video games. With male players continuing to use such systems, a feedback loop known as the 'spiral of silence' emerges (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), further increasing the perception of all players being male. This effect could potentially be reduced by restricting communication for all players instead – which is why we suggest that game designers look into alternative ways of conveying information between players.

Journey: a non-verbal, gender-neutral safe space

In stark contrast to the environment in *Valorant*, *Journey* offers a radically different approach to online interaction. The game has two randomly assigned players traverse a vast desert together without knowing anything about each other. Instead of fostering an adversarial relationship, the game encourages collaboration between players. No direct chat functionality is available, and the characters were intentionally designed to be genderless (Kobylski et al., 2017). Players communicate solely through movement and simple musical chimes ('chirps'), fostering a sense of connection without the need for words (see Figure 5). This design choice creates a unique safe space for players of any gender in an online game. They are free to explore and interact without fear of judgment or hostility based on their gender identity. The game presents the environment and other players as more than objects to be manipulated, changing the relationship from one of otherness to one of cooperation and mutual support, which further enhances feelings of safety and community (Plessis, 2018).

The success of *Journey* in creating a non-threatening, inclusive environment suggests that game designers can mitigate the risks associated with gendered interactions by



Figure 5. Audio-visual interaction between players by 'chirping' in *Journey*. Source: Kobylski et al. (2017).

rethinking how players communicate and present themselves in-game. While this approach may not be suitable for all types of games, it shows how alternative communication methods can foster safer spaces in online environments. For many players, games like *Valorant* add the stress of presenting oneself to others on top of the stress of competition. Game designers have the ability to counteract such aspects, e.g., by finding alternative forms of interaction that reduce the focus on gender. *Journey* demonstrates that such approaches not only have the potential to prevent harassment but also encourage a more collaborative and empathetic player experience. The game's painting-like visual style is also a good example of sensory-friendly aesthetics – which are further explored in the next section.

Safe to explore the world: walking safely as a neurodivergent player

Neurodivergent players – e.g. those with autism, ADHD, or dyslexia – have been shown to enjoy video games for various reasons, including escapism and therapeutic benefits (Zolyomi and Schmalz, 2017; Kommander, 2023). However, creating an inclusive environment requires thoughtful design choices that cater to diverse sensory and cognitive needs. For these players, navigating game environments that are sensory-friendly spaces and which reduce sensory overload while still being visually and auditorily engaging, can transform their experiences from overwhelming to enjoyable. This section looks into ways in which games can allow players to explore such balanced environments at their own pace and in a way that feels comfortable and manageable. We explore how *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) and *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016) offer sensory-friendly environments while also considering the challenges posed by certain game mechanics in titles such as *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) and *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015).

Exploring sensory-friendly environments

For neurodivergent players, environments that are visually and aurally stimulating without being overwhelming can provide a unique form of solace and enjoyment, which can be difficult to achieve in the real world. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Firewatch* are examples of games that can offer such experiences.

In *Breath of the Wild*, a third-person open-world adventure game, players explore vast, picturesque landscapes that can serve as a form of visual 'stimming' – a self-soothing behaviour often observed in neurodivergent individuals (Kapp et al., 2019). As one player on the 'r/autism' subreddit shared, 'I play botw/totk as a stim. Even just picking up items, the little sound effect and the rhythm of it, it's soothing'. Another player shared their experience, noting how the game offers a break from overstimulation: 'It's not just for taking a break from overstimulating games. It's also therapeutic in general'. The game's expansive world, filled with lush forests, serene waters, and towering mountains, invites players to immerse themselves in nature's beauty, which can be both calming and invigorating. This open-world design allows them to explore at their own pace, reducing the pressure and sensory overload that more fast-paced games might induce – a sentiment echoed on *Reddit* by users who found *Breath of the Wild* especially beneficial: 'I really like open-world games, farming simulators, cozycore games that allow me to escape from the real world and become immersed in the virtual world'. Another user agreed by saying, 'Just walking around Hyrule is really calming'.

Similarly, *Firewatch*, also an adventure game but without combat – often called a 'Walking Simulator', offers a rich, natural environment where players can navigate through a landscape of forests, lakes, and mountains. The game's emphasis on exploration and narrative over combat or time-sensitive challenges creates a relaxed pace, making it accessible to neurodivergent players who might find other games too stressful. The minimalist design, combined with ambient sounds of nature, allows for an environment that is both engaging and soothing, providing a virtual escape that is free from the sensory demands of the real world.

Unintended hurdles in game design for neurodivergent players

While some games offer welcoming environments, others present significant challenges for neurodivergent players due to certain design choices. Here, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and *Until Dawn* serve as examples of how game mechanics may inadvertently create barriers.

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, an action-adventure game lauded for its portrayal of mental health and psychosis, seemingly features a mechanic that can be especially distressing: permanent death and the loss of save game data. Although it ultimately does not take effect, the game introduces a 'dark rot' mechanic, where rot grows each time the player fails, supposedly leading to a permanent loss of progress, which can heighten stress for players who already struggle with high levels of anxiety or fear of failure. A *Reddit* user on the 'r/autism' subreddit reflects on their gaming preferences, expressing a general dislike for games in which they can die or encounter high-stress situations, stating,

> I pretty much dislike playing video games as a whole. I find almost every video game too difficult. The reasons include difficulty coordinating my hands on the controls, speed-dependent game mechanics, being unable to determine the next step, and so on. I don't like games that can scare me, which pretty much rules out anything with a sense of urgency or the possibility to 'die'.

This demonstrates how the constant pressure of potentially losing all progress in *Hellblade* can overshadow the game's immersive narrative, making it less accessible to those who might benefit from a more forgiving gameplay experience. Similarly, *Until Dawn* includes a mechanic where players avoid being detected by enemies by remaining physically still for extended periods of time, as their controller tracks their movement (see Figure 6). For neurodivergent players and those with neurological issues, the requirement to physically suppress movement can be especially challenging. The tension created by this mechanic, while effective in enhancing the horror experience, may exclude players who find it difficult to remain still or control involuntary movements.

Lastly, certain game genres, settings, or perspectives, such as first-person shooters or games with complex graphics, can be inaccessible to neurodivergent players who may prefer simpler, less overwhelming games. Another 'r/autism' subreddit user shares, 'I love playing Jump 'n Run games such as Megaman X or Super Mario World for SNES. I also like RPGs like Pokémon, especially the old ones. I'm not able to play games with a first-person perspective (shooters etc.) and games with complex graphics'. These examples showcase different neurodivergent needs, which can be incorporated into game design. While the intention behind aspects like photo-realistic graphics is often to enhance immersion, they can inadvertently create barriers for players with different neurological makeups.



Figure 6. 'Don't Move'-Indicator in *Until Dawn*. Source: Until Dawn Wiki (2023).

To make video games more accessible and enjoyable for neurodivergent players, developers should aim to strike a balance between challenging gameplay and inclusivity. Offering customisable difficulty settings, sensory-friendly environments, and alternative mechanics allows them to cater to a broader range of players. By understanding and addressing the unique needs of neurodivergent players, the video game industry can continue to evolve into a more inclusive space where all players feel safe to explore, interact, and enjoy the virtual worlds created for them.

Conclusion: designing intersectional safe spaces

The concept of safe spaces in video games is multifaceted, encompassing various design elements that allow players to explore, interact, and express themselves without fear of judgment or discrimination. By carefully considering these elements, developers can create environments that empower players across different identities and needs, ultimately fostering an inclusive and supportive gaming experience. Furthermore, exclusion on the same level as in physical safe spaces is not always necessary in video games. By consciously designing the ways in which players can communicate with each other, harmful behaviours can be discouraged and minimised. However, in games with chat or voice communication, strict moderation is required to create a safe space akin to separatist safe spaces. In this section, we summarise our findings and takeaways for developers and designers, which can also be found in Table 1.

Intersectional safe spaces in games require a nuanced approach to game design – one that is flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse identities of players, recognising

GameDesign Element or Mechanic	Explanation or Impact	Game Examples
Inclusive Character Customisation	Allows players to create avatars that reflect their true or aspirational identities, fostering inclusivity and personal expression.	*Cyberpunk 2077, Baldur's Gate 3*
Sensory-Friendly Environments and Aesthetics	Creates audio-visual aesthetics with calming, yet stimulating effects. Avoids overwhelming neurodivergent players, and offers a sense of peace and engagement. E.g. low-contrast colours.	*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Firewatch*
Non-Gendered Communication and Interaction	Reduces gender-based discrimination by eliminating gender markers, enabling interactions that are free from preconceived biases.	*Journey*
Processing Emotions through Gameplay	Utilises narrative, aesthetics, and mechanics that allow players to process complex emotions in a controlled environment, offering relief and reflection.	*Silent Hill 2*
Empowerment through Avatar Representation	Empowers players by allowing them to embody strong, capable characters that reflect their identity. Provides a sense of agency and control.	*Vampire: The Masquerade- Bloodlines*

Table 1. Game design elements that foster safe spaces in video games.

the overlapping identities that players may hold, such as, for example, being both queer and neurodivergent. To support these intersectional identities, developers should strive to create games that offer multifaceted experiences while respecting and validating all players without privileging one aspect of identity over others. These efforts can start with diverse character creators, offering a wide range of customisation options that reflect various gender identities, body types, and skin tones. These tools can enable players to see themselves represented, thus fostering a sense of belonging and validation. This is crucial for creating an inclusive gaming environment where all players feel seen and respected. Avatars, as the player's representation within the game, fulfil a significant role in how players perceive themselves and their abilities. Empowering avatars – especially those that allow players to express their true selves – can provide a sense of agency and control. Optionality – the concept of allowing players to engage with only the aspects of a game that they wish to engage with, thus also increasing accessibility – invites more people to enjoy video games without directly excluding anyone.

Furthermore, the idea of cathartic gameplay offers another avenue for creating safe spaces. By mirroring players' emotional states or providing a sense of relief, such games enable players to process complex emotions in a controlled and supportive environment. This is particularly important for players dealing with depression, anxiety, or trauma, as these games provide a safe outlet for emotional release and healing. At the same time, neurodivergent-friendly game design is an oftentimes overlooked factor in making games more accessible to players with different needs. By incorporating elements like customisable control schemes, options for difficulty levels and time-sensitive events, and environments that reduce sensory overload, developers can create games that neurodivergent players can fully enjoy without unnecessary stress or anxiety. Lastly, we think that game design that de-emphasises the perception of gender identity online has the potential to significantly change the world of video games into a more inclusive environment. By focusing on non-gendered mechanics and interactions, developers can alleviate the pressure on players to conform to traditional gender norms. This approach can be particularly empowering for players who do not fit into conventional gender

categories, while also allowing for more novel, versatile, and open-ended experiences in video games.

We acknowledge that there are many other perspectives that deserve attention, including, but not limited to, the experiences of people with physical disabilities or invisible illnesses, plus-sized individuals, people of colour, those living in unsafe environments, displaced people, and immigrants. It is important to remember that singular safe spaces are never for everyone – they always have one or more specific target audiences. Video games are the same, and they do not need to cater to everyone at once. Nonetheless, by considering a wider range of perspectives, we can create better spaces – and better video games – for everyone. An example of such improvements can be found in subtitles, which are widely used in games nowadays, not only by those who are deaf or hard of hearing but also by players who simply prefer to read dialogue. This serves as a reminder that inclusive design benefits everyone, not just those with specific needs.

In conclusion, designing intersectional safe spaces in video games is not just about adding inclusive features – it is about rethinking the entire game experience to ensure that it is welcoming, supportive, and empowering for as many players as possible, regardless of their identity. By embracing this approach, developers can create games that not only entertain but also provide a safe space – a sanctuary for players to enjoy themselves and disconnect from reality, but also to explore their identities and emotions in a safe, inclusive, and empowering environment.

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The Performance of Queer Identities in the Gameplay of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020)

Laura Arnott

Queer game scholars have claimed that the intersection of queerness and gaming is a site of radical potential (Ruberg and Phillips, 2018), and the following chapter is no exception. The field of queer game studies is grounded in recognising how queer identities and spaces can exist in gaming, challenging hegemonic societal discourses, i.e. how games can subvert traditional narratives and norms while also enabling alternative expressions of identity and community. This interdisciplinary area of research explores the representations, inclusion, and experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals within digital games and gaming communities. Through such critical engagement, queer game studies seek to disrupt and transform the dominant cultural narratives within gaming, fostering more inclusive and equitable virtual environments that reflect the complexity and richness of queer lives. Gaspard Pelurson (2022: xii) notes that 'queer game studies distinguishes itself from the study of LGBTQIA+ content and calls for an understanding of queerness in games that goes beyond that of games as 'rule-based structures'. This has involved moving beyond text-based analysis into studies of player engagement, modding and cheating, games as sites of political disruption, and indie game development.

As such, I propose that the performance of queer identities can be seen to transform gameplay meaning through the practice of queer playing in role-playing games (RPGs). I use the term 'gameplay meaning' to draw attention to the player's performed identity and interaction with the game design, where meaning is derived from how players experience gameplay through their participation within a fictional world. To ground this argument, I focus specifically on Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), with *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020) as case studies, to explore how queer role-playing practices interact with culturally specific game designs. The *Final Fantasy* series is particularly significant due to its enduring influence on RPG design and its potential for subversive interpretations of identity and narrative. In this writing, I first include sections of textual analysis to demonstrate what the game design represents. Then, I move on to

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performative and gameplay analysis to show how the player can influence the meaning of the game content through role-playing. To this end, I seek to illustrate how queer role-playing practices not only reshape the narrative and experiential dimensions of RPGs but also contribute to a broader understanding of the potential for games to foster diverse and inclusive virtual spaces.

Bo Ruberg and Amanda Phillips (2018) argue that 'queerness is not so much a stable, clearly defined sexual orientation as it is a way of seeing and experiencing the world: aslant, askew, out of line'. In this context, queer play presents an opportunity for the disruption of heteronormative game design. Queer play can refer to both playing in a queer manner within the parameters of the game and queering the game design itself. Playing queerly might involve making choices that the game explicitly allows, such as pursuing same-sex relationships where the game design includes options for diverse romantic encounters. This form of queer play works within the game's structure to explore and affirm queer identities. On the other hand, queering the game design involves defying the expectations of the game and acting in ways not traditionally encouraged or allowed by the game mechanics. This could mean creating non-binary characters in games with rigid gender options, using mods to introduce queer content where it does not exist, or engaging in role-playing practices that subvert the game's intended narrative. Both approaches to queer play subvert traditional narratives and expand the possibilities for representation and identity in gaming. While explicitly queer game mechanics appear more often in high-budget game titles – such as through the romanceable options in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), *Hades* (2020), *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), *Greedfall* (2019) – they are still uncommon, particularly in terms of main narrative progression. Therefore, in my research, I am concerned with possibilities for what I term 'radical player identification' (RPI) and how this may support the existence of queerness in gameplay where it may otherwise be sidelined.

RPI refers to the deep, transformative engagement of players with their characters, allowing them to infuse their own identities and experiences into the gameplay, even when the game lacks explicit support for these identities. This concept highlights how players can subvert game design limitations by bringing their personal and often marginalised perspectives into the game world, thereby creating spaces for queerness. Judith Butler (1993: 18) highlights that '[t]he term "queer" emerges as an interpellation which raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, within performativity'. Thus, the performance of a queer identity is a form of challenge to hegemonic ideologies through which sexualities and 'genders are divided and hierarchised under constraint' (Butler, 1993: 21). By engaging in RPI, players enact a form of performativity that disrupts and resists the normative structures embedded in game narratives and mechanics. This not only validates those with queer identities but also challenges the exclusionary practices of some game designs. In this way, RPI becomes a powerful tool for asserting queer presence and agency in digital spaces, transforming the gaming experience into one that can reflect a broader range of human experiences.

The notion of queerness disrupting game structures resonates with a broader exploration of the cultural and ideological underpinnings in game design, particularly in games originating from Japan. Rachael Hutchinson (2019: 3) proposes that the relationship between a Japanese game and Japan can be analysed in the same way as an association between a text and its context. Hutchinson suggests that the prevailing assumptions and ideological concerns within these games can be seen as representations

of the social unconscious of Japan, rooted within dominant attitudes toward Japanese culture. The term 'social unconscious' is referred to by Terry Eagleton (2016: 49) as 'that vast repository of instincts, prejudices, pieties, sentiments, half-formed opinions and spontaneous assumptions which underpins our everyday activity, and which we rarely call into question'. It is concerned with the way in which ideology in its most potent form becomes part of a 'common sense' understanding of specific regimes rather than being recognised as a set of subjective ideals. In this way, understanding how queerness and RPI interact with Japanese cultural ideologies provides a critical lens through which to examine not only the subversive potential of queerness in games but also how these games reflect and challenge broader cultural narratives. By situating this discussion within the context of Japanese games, such as JRPGs, the intersection of queer play and cultural frameworks becomes a vital part of exploring the potential for these games to function as spaces of resistance and reimagination.

The notion of 'social unconscious' aligns closely with the concept of hegemonic societal discourse, which refers to the dominant narratives and ideologies perpetuated by a society's most influential groups. These ideologies shape public perception and maintain existing power structures, often through media, education, and cultural institutions. Such discourse reinforces norms and values that sustain hegemony, marginalising alternative viewpoints and legitimising the status quo. The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1985) provided a critical framework for understanding how power and control are maintained in society through cultural and ideological means, rather than just through direct political or economic domination. Central to this theory is the concept of 'cultural hegemony', which explains how a dominant group can project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'common sense' and natural. Thus, the social unconscious, as reflected in Japanese games, can be seen as part of this broader mechanism of cultural hegemony, subtly influencing social behaviour and thought through the pervasive acceptance of dominant ideas.

In relation to identity and sexuality, Gramscian theory illuminates how 'heteronormative hegemony' (Varela, 2011: 45) – the presumption that heterosexuality is the default or normal sexual orientation – becomes ingrained in societal institutions and everyday practices. Through hegemonic discourse, media, education systems, and cultural narratives predominantly promote heterosexual and cisgender norms while marginalising and stigmatising queer identities. This process naturalises these norms, making them appear as the inherent, unquestioned ways of being. As a result, this leads to the internalisation of these norms even by those who are disadvantaged by them. Queer individuals experience social pressures to conform to heteronormative standards and face discrimination or exclusion when their identities do not align with these dominant narratives.

This ingrained heteronormativity and its pervasive influence on societal institutions and everyday practices have profound implications for how queer identities and experiences are represented and engaged with in various media, including role-playing games. RPGs, by their nature, invite players to explore and embody diverse identities, but they are also shaped by the dominant cultural norms that reflect and reinforce hegemonic discourse (Cassar, 2013: 332). Players step into the shoes of their characters, embodying roles that often require a level of personal investment and imagination. Even when a game does not offer customisable characters or explicitly support diverse identities, players bring their experiences, perspectives, and politics into their gameplay. This interplay between

player identity and character can create a rich, if sometimes subversive, narrative space where personal politics come into play, consciously or unconsciously. Players often project aspects of themselves onto their characters, infusing them with their values, beliefs, and desires. This can manifest in various ways, from choosing dialogue options that reflect one's real-world principles to interpreting a character's backstory through the lens of personal experience. Therefore, even in games with rigid, non-customisable characters, players inevitably contribute to the narrative through their individual modes of engagement.

Representations of queer identities in RPGs

Many RPGs offer extensive character creation systems, where players can personalise the visual qualities of their avatar, such as their physique, skin, hair, facial structure, makeup, scars, clothing, and other individual aspects of their design, such as name, voice, and gender. These games offer the opportunity to design a character as the player intends, thus choosing a specific form through which they may reaffirm or experiment with a chosen identity. However, when presented with a non-customisable avatar role, players face the challenge of manifesting a queer identity through gameplay. In numerous RPGs, protagonists are pre-designed with overt personality traits and established appearances, leaving players to find alternative ways to express queerness and navigate their identity within the constraints of these predetermined characters.

Within RPG gaming, one of the most notable non-customisable avatars is Cloud Strife, the main controllable character in *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020).[1] The more recent game, being an adaptation of the first title, encompasses the first third of the original narrative, involving the same characters and environments. In both mentioned games, the player is introduced to the brusque, reticent Cloud, who as a former military soldier, is hardened to battle; strategic and confident in a fight, he is cautiously distrustful in social situations and often reacts defensively when asked about himself or his personal history. While it is heavily implied that Cloud is heterosexual, having at least two potential female love interests, Tifa and Aerith, various fans and scholars have chosen to label Cloud as queer, owing to his androgynous masculinity and complex relationship with the game's antagonist, Sephiroth. In fact, there are numerous forum threads of fans of the series debating the characters' sexualities. For example, on the subreddit *r/FinalFantasy*, a post by *moonfox58* asks, 'Why Has the Internet Spent Nearly 20 Years Begging These Boys to Kiss?' exemplifying how Cloud and Sephiroth's relationship has inspired ongoing discussion and imaginative interpretations within the fandom (Reddit, 2023). There is also a great deal of fan-produced media showing them in a romantic relationship through fan art, fan fiction, fan manga, and even fan videos of Sims wearing *Final Fantasy* skins, where players explore the relationship on their own terms. While their queer relationship is embellished through these peripheral creative fan practices, it can also be interpreted through the game narrative.

One of the game's main themes, highlighted to a greater extent in *FFVIIR*, is how much mental space Sephiroth occupies in Cloud's mind; how Cloud is tormented and teased by the conjured memory of him. In the adaptation, Cloud's apparent encounters with Sephiroth emerge much earlier in the narrative and more frequently than in the original game. Many of these meetings are sudden and brief and often see Cloud pursuing

1 These games are hereafter referred to as *FFVII* or original, and *FFVIIR* or remake respectively.

Sephiroth, who is always just out of his reach. Their encounters are characterised by an underlying homoerotic tension and longing, shown through their dialogue (which plays along the border of desire and possession), fixed cutscene camera angles (where Sephiroth demonstrates a dominating, almost possessive position) and physical interaction (during which their faces are intimately positioned and gazes meet). In a scene towards the end of the remake that does not exist in the original, Sephiroth stands with Cloud against a celestial backdrop at what he claims is 'the edge of creation'. In this monumentally sacred place, Sephiroth proclaims before the cosmos that neither he nor Cloud will ever end, before asking that they 'defy destiny… together'. In this moment, the player is asked to understand their relationship beyond sexual or even romantic means, that a spiritual connection has been forged, even against the will of fate. It is not difficult to see the allusion here, to two queer individuals whose relationship, however unhealthy or flawed, exists as a challenge to the regulatory regime of heteronormative ideals.

Similarly, Juan Fransico Belmonte (2017) compares historical identity discourses of the Japanese Meiji period (1868-1912) to the portrayal of male sexuality and gender roles in contemporary JRPGs. He exemplifies this through a discussion of the relationship between Cloud and Sephiroth. Their relations, Belmonte (2017: 907-908) contends, reflect representations of homosexual relationships in Japan throughout history by way of their master-pupil dynamic, the transitory and temporary nature of their encounters during their formative years, and the portrayal of their homosexual identities as implied and derivative. Alternatively, and perhaps more provocatively, Eric Andrew James describes the relationship as 'a conflict based on trust and betrayal, hidden desires, and a whole lot of long-sword penetration', suggesting that their dynamic is distinctly queer in nature (James, 2018). Interestingly, the portrayal of their relationship differs subtly between the original game and its remake. When Belmonte (2017: 908) examines the original game, he reveals a tension between the characters' morality and preserving a defined form of gender and sexuality, as their heroic actions not only condemn villainy but also those who may not pursue the identity norms of the lived society. In a crucial part of the narrative, Sephiroth assassinates Cloud's female love interest, effectively drawing Cloud's attention and the central narrative back to their tacit homoerotic feud, thus presenting not only a physical threat, but also something that Cloud must 'overcome' to retain his validity as a masculine protector and heterosexual individual. Belmonte (2017: 907) contends that in defeating and 'punishing' the villainous signifier of homosexuality, the dominant ideology of a heterosexual identity is implicitly reinforced through the game's narrative.

Alongside the implied corrupting influence of queer identities, other representations of homosexuality in the original game are treated as a source of comedy through the depiction of homophobic microaggressions. If Cloud chooses to explore the 'Group Room' at the Honey Bee Inn, he encounters a group of heavy-built men wearing swimsuits. His reaction is one of extreme uneasiness, indicated by the parlay, 'this could be dangerous' and '…could you go do someone else?', while the leader of the men, Mukki, is assigned stereotypical 'gay character' dialogue, referring to Cloud as 'bubby' and asking, 'Why don't you stick around and play a bit? Daddy's so lonely…'. Mukki also reveals that Cloud is less than half his age, suggesting a predatory nature to his attention. During the party's second plot-related visit to Gold Saucer in 'Secret Date', the player can choose for Cloud to take one of four side characters (female characters Aerith, Tifa and Yuffie, and hyper-masculine character Barret) on an evening date to an amusement park. To choose a particular companion for the date, the player has to respond

to certain dialogue choices in a specific way up to this point in the narrative. The probability of having made the correct decisions to allow the player to choose Barret is much lower than the other, female characters, indicating his route to be of lesser importance. Additionally, the 'date' between Barret and Cloud is shown to be distinctly awkward: as they ride a ferris wheel there is a sequence of prolonged silence followed by a conversation concerning which female character Cloud should have invited instead, invoking a frustrated Barret to yell, 'Why the hell do I gotta be here with a foo' like you…!'. The structural design of this scene reflects the societal and gaming expectations of the time of the game's release, where the possibility of queer relationships was not widely accepted or explored in mainstream RPGs. Unlike more recent titles such as *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), where players may 'accidentally' find themselves in queer relationships due to the game's more inclusive mechanics, *FFVII* presents homosexuality as a comedic, clumsy diversion rather than a legitimate narrative thread. The lack of positive queer representation in this instance can be understood as a reflection of the era's limited discourse surrounding LGBTQIA+ characters in video games. This was shaped by the cultural climate and industry standards of the 1990s, which prioritised avoiding conflict with conservative markets over inclusivity (Látal, 2022).

FFVIIR, though only covering the first third of the original narrative, features many of the same characters and inter-character relations. In terms of its representation of masculinity, though, there appears to be a move towards less stereotypical depictions. While references to sexuality are more subdued and largely limited to the tentative romantic interactions between Cloud and his female love interests, the game delves more deeply into the concept of gender as a fluid and non-structured entity. This is exemplified by the character Andrea Rhodea, owner of and dancer at the prestigious members-only cabaret Honey Bee Inn. During the level in which he appears, Cloud and Aerith attempt to gain an audience with Don Corneo, the self-appointed mob boss of the Wall Market entertainment district. In order to approach the mafioso, the protagonists must first gain the favour of a high profile figure in the Wall Market community so that Aerith may be put forth as an applicant for the Don's 'bridal auditions'. Despite the auditions only being open to women, Cloud is also dragged into the situation. Andrea, being one of those who may endorse a suitable applicant, scouts Cloud and requests his invitation to the Honey Bee Inn. At the nightclub, Andrea urges Cloud to impress him further to earn his approval, requesting Cloud join him on stage for a dance performance. To pass this sequence, the player must press a correct sequence of buttons in the rhythm of the action on screen. Opposing the more complex nature of the battle play, this periodic button-pressing is much less taxing, and the player's focus can easily shift between the basic play format and the corresponding scene. By making the dance sequence accessible and engaging, the game ensures that players can fully experience and appreciate the narrative's exploration of gender without being hindered by challenging mechanics.

The space that Andrea occupies is a far cry from the clandestine nature of the brothel that was depicted in the original game, with many members of the Wall Market community now seemingly integrated patrons, who are enjoying the performance at the glamorised, boudoir-esque club. Cloud, who up to this point in the narrative has been depicted as a socially reluctant and emotionally stunted individual, is initially shown to be out of his depth in such a loud environment. However, he soon recovers as he commits to his objective to win Andrea's endorsement, matching the host's flirtatious and flamboyant dance style, and following him in a playful and sensual performance. Satisfied, Andrea agrees

to approve Cloud as an auditionee, costuming him in drag in order to fool Don Corneo's guards with his female appearance. The reaction to Cloud's overtly feminine appearance, adorned with jewellery and makeup, and wearing a frilly dress, is celebrated by the Honey Bee Inn – Aerith gasps in wonder and others applaud – and accepted without ridicule or Cloud's humiliation. The lyrics of the accompanying music track, 'Stand Up', mirror the support of Cloud's cross-dressing:

> Stand up, cast your fears aside,
> Stand up, bare your soul with pride [...]
> Doesn't matter if you're different,
> Or if you break from the norm
> When you're on the stage with us
> You've got to dance up a storm.

Andrea also offers his perspective on the moment through a quiet word of advice to Cloud: 'True beauty is an expression of the heart. A thing without shame to which notions of gender don't apply. Don't ever be afraid, Cloud'.

The gendered inclusivity suggested in this sequence is partly contributed by the theatrical depiction of masculinity portrayed through the character of Andrea and his ideals. Andrea's appearance is of a well-groomed and athletically slim middle-aged man dressed in a silken, rich purple and gold stage costume, complete with a ruffled feather collar and polished dress shoes. His strict posture, elaborate gestures and smooth gait carry an air of showmanship and confidence. He is also shown to wield social power and influence through his position as one of the influencers of the Corneo auditions, as the respected owner of the Honey Bee Inn and as an astute performer. His questioning of heteronormative ideals of beauty through concepts of gender performativity and fluidity accompanies his intense search for perfection, which he declares to have found through Cloud's drag appearance and limber dance moves. Though this interaction is only a small part of the game's main narrative, these values directly challenge the representation of queer identities that appeared in the original game. There is no reluctance in Andrea's admission of where he finds beauty, and the elaborate display of his attitudes to Cloud's make-over and dance performance are received positively by audience members who do not exhibit queer identity attributes. Further, Cloud's reaction to these attitudes, which previously resembled a veiled repugnance to any male-male relations beyond fraternal bonding, is much more accepting as he consents to his drag transformation and enthusiastically collaborates with Andrea's dance. The player is encouraged to observe the acquiescence of the spectacle, with this sequence requiring little input other than the supportive button-pressing accentuating the rhythm and pageantry of their movements.

Much like the original game, Cloud's romantic interest oscillates between the two main female leads, Tifa and Aerith. The corresponding representation of major male-male relationships are, again, restricted to fraternal bonding and the teasing homoerotic encounters with the nefarious Sephiroth. Though the hostile micro-aggressions of *FFVII* are notably absent from the remake, there is also little representation of non-traditional gender performance outside of the sequence with Andrea and his brother, Jules. A minor character introduced in the Wall Market level, Jules offers a non-traditional depiction of masculinity. As the head gym trainer at the Wall Market Gym, he presents a striking combination of

traditionally masculine physical traits – heavily muscular with tight workout wear and high laced boots – alongside an effeminate demeanour. Furthermore, his well-groomed appearance, including a carefully styled hairstyle and makeup, challenges conventional gender norms by blending traditionally masculine traits with elements typically associated with femininity. His role in the game is limited to overseeing a mini-game where Cloud, and later Tifa, compete in squats and pull-ups. Though his time in the narrative is brief, Jules challenges conventional notions of masculinity by occupying the hyper-masculine space of the gym while presenting himself in a flamboyant manner. His serious attitude towards his work, combined with his non-normative expression of gender and sexuality, shows that professionalism and competence can coexist with diverse identities.

In contrast to Jules' confident, unapologetic expression, Cloud's own engagement with gender performance is more tentative and filled with discomfort. His cross-dressing sequence culminates in an awkward moment when Tifa acknowledges his appearance. Cloud quickly brushes off her recognition, responding with, 'Nailed it, I know. Thank you. Moving on.' As soon as he is able, he swiftly returns to his usual attire without further comment. This starkly contrasts the earlier acceptance of his transformation, underscoring his reluctance to engage with non-traditional gender roles. Moreover, the Honey Bee Inn being specifically located in the Wall Market area serves as another layer to this dynamic. Described by Aerith as an 'entertainment district,' the inn's location within a corrupt, crime-ridden area of Midgar (the main location of *FFVIIR*) suggests that, while the inn is celebrated within the community, it is also part of a space the city's authorities prefer to ignore. This marginalisation aligns with Cloud's discomfort with his cross-dressing, highlighting how non-traditional gender performances remain outside broader societal structures.

While analysing game design through a queer lens offers valuable insights into the representational and textual elements of a game, it only partially captures the full player experience of *FFVII* or *FFVIIR*. The player's engagement with these games goes beyond merely interacting with predefined content; it involves performative role-playing. How a player chooses to role-play Cloud can infuse the character with personal meaning and potentially subvert or affirm traditional gender/sexuality norms in ways not anticipated by the game's design. The performative aspect reveals how individual experiences of queerness are constructed not just from the game's text but also through the player's active participation and interpretation.

Performance and queer gaming

When a player takes control of an avatar within a game, they engage in a dynamic relationship that encompasses both performance and affective embodiment. This relationship is more than an interaction with game mechanics; it involves a layered negotiation between the player's identity and the avatar's persona, wherein the player may project, experiment with, or reshape aspects of their self. Scholars such as T. L. Taylor (2006) and Tom Boellstorff et al. (2012) have explored how digital avatars function as mediators of identity, facilitating embodied experiences that blend the physical and virtual. For instance, Taylor's work highlights how the player-avatar relationship involves embodied practices of engagement, where players navigate and negotiate their real-life identities through the expressive affordances of digital worlds. Similarly, Jenny Sundén (2003) has discussed the tactile and affective dimensions of inhabiting a digital avatar, emphasising the bodily sensations and emotional responses that arise from such interactions.

In the case of non-customisable avatars, the negotiation of identity is particularly pronounced, as players must inhabit pre-established traits and narratives. As Jamie Banks (2015) discusses, this process often involves reconciling the player's own sense of self with the avatar's prescribed role, leading to emotional investments in the avatar's relationships, challenges, and choices. These emotional connections can evolve into a deeper form of engagement, where players treat the avatar as a genuine companion. As players navigate shared experiences and moments of emotional intimacy, they may experience vulnerability and a sense of connection with the avatar. Banks (2015) emphasises that such relationships can lead to transformative experiences, reshaping players' perceptions of themselves and others through their interaction with the avatar's journey. Ultimately, these relationships between players and avatars can take on qualities akin to intimate social bonds, where players invest emotionally, nurture, and engage with the avatar as they would with a real social other. Poppy Wilde (2023) further argues that these connections underscore the mutuality of affective exchanges, wherein avatars act not merely as vessels for role-playing but as co-constructors of emotional and narrative meaning. In this context, the avatar is not a static entity but a site of embodied affectivity, one that fosters emotional investment and encourages players to navigate the boundaries between their identity and the avatar's. The immersive nature of this relationship creates an alignment that bridges the player's subjectivity with the game world, amplifying the affective stakes of narrative decisions and character interactions. This interplay of performance and affect, therefore, positions digital avatars as pivotal to the player's embodied and emotional experience.

Performance, as described by Richard Schechner (2002; 2013: 89), is 'ritualised behaviour conditioned and/or permeated by play.' The 'ritualised' element of performance stems from the process through which a style of behaviour can be understood beyond functional action and constitutes an experiential practice of meaning-making. In the same sense, role-playing can be understood as an activity that exceeds the practical engagements needed to progress through a game. In playing a role, the player is involved in a process that Schechner (2002; 2013: 72) conceptualises as 'transportations', where the 'actor' temporarily leaves their reality by means of performing and 're-enters ordinary life' once the performance concludes. In relation to role-playing in video games specifically, performance has previously been likened to a form of 'pretend play' (Harviainen and Lieberoth, 2012). In this sense, identity performance is more likely to be adaptive, rather than integral to the individual. Like Schechner's concept of 'transportation', the practice of role-playing is a temporary, performative transformation of the player's identity. However, the player is not 'fully' transported so much as they not only perform as an actor, but also as a spectator of their own 'transformation'. They are simultaneously aware of both the virtual and non-virtual elements of play; their active presence within the fiction of the game world, and their physical form inputting directives. Therefore, we might consider that the experience of role-playing encapsulates a form of embodied, performed storytelling, as like a theatrical audience, the player is witness to gameplay as an 'event'.

I refer to gameplay as an 'event' to emphasise the characteristic of temporal liminality that permeates the experience. Gameplay occurs as an interaction between game and player, and as such, when this interaction ceases, so too does the gameplay event. The event exists in those specific conditions, at that specific moment in time, and thus, cannot ever be replicated in the exact same manner. Though, this does not mean that the performance has entirely vanished because the player-spectator is also present as a receptive witness;

they are a 'first-person audience' to their own performance (Mackay, 2001; Sandberg, 2004; Stenros and Montola, 2010). On the subject of theatrical performance, Erika Fischer-Lichte (2010: 37-38) describes that the audience is not merely observing the performance but actively involved in shaping it, while also being influenced by it. The audience's focus shifts between two key aspects of the actors' bodies: their phenomenal bodies (the physical, real presence of the actors on stage) and their semiotic bodies (the actors' roles as characters in the story). This dual perception creates a dynamic and participatory experience, where both the audience and the performance influence each other. Similarly, in RPGs, the player's perception of self is often in a state of flux within the transitive space between these two positions, as they continually shift between focusing on themselves as the character and the avatar-character as a separate entity. In other words, the player oscillates between a subject position within the boundaries of the game's fiction, and distanced observation where they reflexively perceive their fictional subjectivity. It is through this process of continual 'transportation' that a method of queer resistance may emerge.

According to media scholar Rune Klevjer (2006: 31), when the player acts as a fictional subject, 'fictional worlds are autonomous [...] because when we engage with them imaginatively, they enforce unto us a new ontological position, from which the fictional world becomes an actual world'. Thus, when the player takes on the role of a non-customisable avatar, they not only ascribe to a character identity, but also the fictional virtuality in which the character's values, beliefs and goals exist. However, as a spectator of their own virtual presence, the player's real self is never fully immersed by the fiction; they are fundamentally aware of the game as a simulation. As Klevjer (2006: 31) explains, 'the actual possible world is the absolute reference world for the judgement of truth-values of the propositions put forward by characters in that world'. As such, the player's approach to situational environments and character interactions, specifically, how they perceive, compare and react to the fiction according to their own real-life worldview, becomes a site of radical potential. The player can choose to resist cultural narratives as prescribed by the game design and imagine alternative meanings of gameplay through overlaying their values of queerness or allyship onto their role performance. In this sense, role-playing with a non-customisable avatar is less about self-identification and more akin to a form of identity projection. While the player is required to take on an established character role and adapt their play approach to fit within the boundaries of the game 'script', they may also transform the meaning of this gameplay through this 'performative role-playing'.

Queer performative role-playing

To clarify this concept of performative role-playing, I return to the original *FFVII*. In the Wall Market sequence, Cloud and Aerith approach Don Corneo's mansion where Tifa has been taken as a 'bridal applicant'. Upon trying to enter the house, one of the Don's lackeys approves Aerith, but rejects Cloud, informing them that, 'the Don's not into men'. To get past the guard, Aerith suggests that Cloud wear drag, and the player then embarks on a series of side missions to gather all the pieces of Cloud's feminine outfit. While undertaking these tasks, there are several interactions that condition the player's experience of preparing to dress Cloud in drag. Firstly, when asking the costume maker to design a dress for a man, he is alarmed and only complies at Aerith's private request. Secondly, Cloud is asked to compete in a squatting competition, a macho show of strength, which he must win in order to receive a blonde wig from the gym trainer. Lastly, as I mentioned earlier, in the private

setting of a brothel bathhouse, Cloud has an uncomfortable encounter with a group of men, and only after an awkward conversation where Mukki propositions a very uneasy Cloud, does he finally gain the last 'required' part of his drag costume: some underwear (which adds to the implied licentiousness of this scene).

At this stage, the player has gone through a series of narrative moments imbued with an inflated reassertion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005: 77), and an insinuated homosexual encounter turned non-consensual. During this sequence, the game design reaffirms dominant heteronormative culture through the perpetuation of harmful stereotyping and micro-aggressive attitudes toward representations of queerness. However, if we re-examine this sequence with attention to the player's role performance, the gameplay meaning may be transformed to challenge this 'fixed' and derogatory perception of queerness. If we consider, for instance, that the player has chosen to role-play Cloud with the intention to experiment with gender presentation, their performance of this sequence can be understood quite differently. For example, the way the player must perform these tasks is somewhat overly taxing. Where one might simply buy a dress in a retail store, Cloud is asked by the store assistant to fetch her father, who then must be convinced to make the dress with the correct specifications, before returning to the store to retrieve the item. To gain the wig from the gym trainer, the player has to complete a potentially challenging mini-game successfully, and so on, for four more items. Additionally, it is not hinted at where Cloud might find these items, rather, the player must approach random NPCs to instigate the tasks.

While the player's performance in this instance is restricted, in that the game design presents a linear series of objectives, this does not necessarily define the narrative of actions, as in fact, queerness can be perceived despite these restrictions. In the pursuit of Cloud's feminine attire, the player is met with resistance, but they must forge ahead, and ultimately, Cloud does put on a dress, and they are permitted into the Don's mansion. In terms of the performance of actions, the player is rewarded for their effort of completing these tasks by dressing Cloud in full drag, in spite of the antagonistic attitudes of the NPCs. The difficulty and effort required to complete the tasks and the resistance faced can be seen as a subversion of the negative framing of drag. The act of persevering through these challenges to achieve Cloud's feminine appearance – despite the surrounding antagonism – transforms drag from a source of ridicule into a symbol of resilience and agency.

This transformation can be explored through Judith Butler's (1993: 178-179) discussion of drag and gender performativity, which highlights how drag critiques and disrupts heteronormative gender norms. Cloud's drag performance in Final Fantasy VII reveals the constructed nature of masculinity and femininity by playing with gendered appearances. By adopting a feminine presentation, Cloud demonstrates what Butler (1993: 171) describes as the repetition of gender norms – acts that shape and define gender while also exposing its instability. Drag, in this sense, challenges the idea of gender as an internal truth or fixed identity, instead showing it to be something performed and continually negotiated. Cloud's performance disrupts conventional ideas of gender while maintaining a temporary stability within the act itself, reflecting the tension Butler (1993: 178) identifies between the inner psychic life and the outward appearance of gender. Players engaging with this moment in the game experience a playful yet critical exploration of gender identity, where they see how societal norms shape gender and simultaneously challenge these rigid boundaries, creating space to explore alternative narratives of identity and representation.

In the remake, the same sequence is portrayed as a more celebratory moment on the Honey Bee Inn stage; there is no sense of ostracisation. This signifies a move toward inclusivity and acceptance, a notable departure from the original's more problematic framing. However, this shift comes with a trade-off in player agency; the streamlined narrative design of the remake reduces the player's involvement in actively constructing Cloud's drag look, thus limiting opportunities for personal agency and resistive play. Additionally, now that the player can observe the detail of Cloud's appearance as more than several polygons, they can see that at no point does Cloud acknowledge or accept his surroundings' urge to let this be a moment of identity. His face shows no sign of enjoyment, he cannot be moved nor vocally respond to what is happening. Cloud's passive reaction and lack of engagement with his surroundings further constrain the player's ability to infuse the moment with personal meaning or resistance. There is very little opportunity for actively playing a role *per se*. Consequently, while the remake offers a more progressive and celebratory depiction of queerness, it simultaneously curtails the depth of performative agency that was present in the original game, reducing the player's role to a more passive observer rather than an active participant in the narrative's reconfiguration of gender presentation.

Conclusion

Queer role-playing challenges conventional assumptions about gameplay and the standard use of non-customisable game avatars, blurring the line between prescribed narrative and player engagement. This approach highlights how seemingly fixed narratives can be reinterpreted to embrace the queer potential embedded within a game's script through the player's embodied performance of a character's identity. Even when constrained by linear narratives and limited mechanical agency, queer play reveals that resistance is not solely about opposing game design but can emerge through deliberate motivations, intentions, and the imaginative engagement of the player. This perspective underscores the transformative power of participatory storytelling in RPGs, where the act of playing and interpreting stories can open up liberatory spaces for players to explore and affirm diverse identities. By focusing on the fundamental experience of engaging with narrative in RPGs, we see that these games have the potential to impact players' real lives positively, offering opportunities for self-expression and resistance that transcend the boundaries of the game itself.

Future research or integrated practice could explore how alternative game design techniques, such as procedurally generated content and adaptive narrative systems, influence players' ability to engage in queer role-playing and subvert traditional representations of sexuality and gender. A notable example of this can be found in *The Sims 4* (2014), which introduced a 'Romantic Boundaries' system in a patch released on 25 July 2024. It allows players to set low or no jealousy levels for Sims, enabling multiple consenting Sims to engage in relationships simultaneously. With the high level of player agency in the game, players can adjust their Sims' sexualities, gender presentations, and polyamorous relationship statuses, shaping their Sims' identities in ways that align with their personal preferences. These changes can be made at any time, offering a dynamic and inclusive approach to character development. To push this concept further, games could employ procedural algorithms to create characters whose identities are fluid and responsive to player interaction. For example, a character could begin as a cisgender

heterosexual and, through relationships and experiences, explore different aspects of their gender or sexuality. As these changes unfold, the narrative would dynamically adjust, offering new plotlines or altering existing ones to reflect the character's evolving identity. Additionally, non-playable characters could be designed to respond to shifts in gender identity, sexuality, and relationship status. Players could alter their avatar's presentation or sexuality, and NPCs would react in diverse ways – some might be accepting, while others may express confusion, curiosity, or resistance, reflecting the complexities of real-world social structures. A dynamic approach to character and narrative development could significantly expand the possibilities for queer representation in games, allowing players to engage in more personalised explorations of identity. By integrating fluid, player-driven character evolution, such games could foster a more inclusive environment for storytelling, where sexuality and gender are shaped through experience and interaction.

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Queering the Walking Simulator: The Legacy of *Gone Home*

Nicole Kilzer

Content warning: This chapter includes discussions of racism and misogynistic and homophobic harassment.

The term 'walking simulator' is often contested and controversial, delineating video games that are not 'real' games because they seemingly lack an appropriate amount of challenge and complex mechanics (Kagen, 2017: 277). As their name suggests, walking simulators focus on movement through determined spaces and the exploration of environments; they do not necessarily have a plot or narrative structure, and are accessible through simple control mechanics. Kagen, for instance, argues that 'the rise of walking sims is part of a long tradition of gendered walking, of coding certain kinds of exploration as manly and others as (unacceptably) feminine' (278). The mere act of walking in a game is read as gendered. If an avatar walks in order to fulfil a quest, i.e. something productive to further the game's main objective, walking is seen as a normal, even integral part of video games. However, if walking itself is the goal, it is considered inherently feminine and, thus, trivial and unimportant (278). Walking simulators, as a gendered game genre, do not seem to fit into the masculinised 'mainstream' industry.

Queer video games, too, are not widely accepted in many gaming communities. Despite the comparatively low number of canonically queer characters in games (Maas, 2024), some players still find issue with any queer representation at all, which can make it difficult for LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other identities) individuals to exist in these spaces. Queer identities seem to stand directly opposed to the image of the Gamer – cisgender, straight, White young men (Shaw, 2012: 230). For instance, options to customise the player character's pronouns or entering a same-sex relationship with an NPC (non-playable character) are frequently seen by Gamers as disrupting the established norms within video game culture and furthering an 'agenda' (Lewis-Iles, 2023). The harassment campaign #GamerGate in 2014 saw online 'trolls' – often anonymous agents who seek to cause chaos – attack players, scholars and journalists who called for more inclusivity in gaming spaces. This issue persists to this day, making it difficult for games to provide what could be seen as 'realistic' and nuanced diversity and representations of marginalised communities (Chess and Shaw, 2015: 208; Ruberg, 2019: 160).

In: N. Webber, E. Kirkland and R. R. Schallegger, eds. 2025. *Exploring New Horizons in Video Game Cultures.* Leiden: Sidestone Press, pp. 79-90.

One of the games affected by both critiques mentioned above is the queer walking simulator *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013). In *Gone Home*, the player character Katie returns to her family's new home after a year-long backpacking trip in Europe, only to find the house empty and full of clues that gradually reveal what happened while she was away. Through notes, voice messages and diary entries, Katie figures out why and how her younger sister, Samantha (or Sam), has disappeared. The game's setting – a wealthy suburban area in Portland, Oregon in 1995 – informs both its aesthetic appeal and the plot itself. Sam participates in the subculture of punk, specifically the smaller, female-centric movement of riot grrrls, to rebel against her surroundings of a more traditional suburban neighbourhood. She is introduced to punk through Lonnie, a girl whom she befriends at school and later enters a relationship with. Katie discovers the secret relationship as being the reason Sam left – Sam and Lonnie cannot exist as a lesbian couple in their conservative environment, so the girls decide to run away to be together.

This chapter explores *Gone Home*'s legacy as both a queer video game and a walking simulator, as well as a combination of the two. It is situated in its socio-political context of the 1990s and its revolt against 'white upper middle class sterility' (Tulloch et al., 2019: 340) by centring women's experiences and choices. The riot grrrl movement, in particular, serves as a backdrop for Sam's rebellion against her family and her journey of discovering her queer identity throughout the game. By discussing how the game deals with concepts of player agency – the control that the player has in making choices – as well as the historical background and how the game can be 'queered' or 'straightened' through different kinds of play (Ruberg, 2020: 633), *Gone Home*'s impact becomes clear. Despite the oftentimes harsh backlash – which includes, but is not limited to, misogynistic and homophobic reactions – *Gone Home* paved the way for many of the queer indie games and walking simulators that have been published since its release (Carpenter, 2019).

Gone Home as a walking simulator

Although *Gone Home* was not the first walking simulator to exist, it has had an enormous impact on this genre of video games. Selected high-budget, AAA games, as well as many indie games in particular, have been influenced by *Gone Home*'s focus on in-depth narratives, compelling characters and slow, deliberate exploration of a virtual space. Titles like *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) and *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019), both of which centralise the mechanic of walking for the purposes of exploration and resulting plot developments, have arguably received more critical acclaim and commercial success than *Gone Home* (Carpenter, 2019).

As mentioned above, walking – in virtual as well as real spaces – is a gendered process, seen as feminine particularly when there is no apparent goal to achieve. Although it is an essential part of the human experience, walking (or even just getting from points A to B through movement of some sort) can be both intentional and purely pleasurable. For instance, there is a difference between someone who walks to get to work and someone who takes a walk to enjoy nature. In video games, walking may be a fundamental mechanic in order to complete quests and make progress but is typically not seen as the main purpose of gameplay. Even in open-world games, in which players have to guide their avatar through the world in order to find items and storylines, 'walking is […] ostensibly pointless but made productive and useful, since exploration and aimlessness are written into gameplay' (Kagen, 2017: 278). Walking simulators, then, as the term suggests, focus on the act of walking for the

purpose of exploration. Many of them offer compelling characters and affective storytelling but, because they do not provide a combat system or complex mechanics, they are not seen as 'real' games, or even 'boring' (281), by some players.

As a result, *Gone Home* has been criticised – mostly by right-wing, reactionary gamers and the aforementioned trolls – and was one of the main targets of #GamerGate despite its (mainstream) critical acclaim. Due to the game's focus on a queer protagonist and its slow, deliberate path through the house for the sole reason of finding clues, it is considered a 'nongame' (Kagen 2017: 289) or 'anti-gaming' (Bohunicky and Milligan, 2019: 53) by some of its loudest critics. Queer games – or any games that make an effort to represent marginalised communities in a nuanced manner – are still often the target of online attacks like #GamerGate (Ruberg, 2018: 160), making it difficult for (primarily AAA) developers to balance inclusivity and financial success when trying to cater to what they perceive to be their target audience.

Referring specifically to #GamerGate and the instances that led up to it, Phillips (2021: 28) suggests that, 'historically, critics have read these incidences as a result of turbulence introduced by the sudden appearance of women (and other Others) in spaces that are traditionally boys' clubs'. Though the proposed solution often consists of 'normalising' the Other, the author argues that 'this places responsibility on the mismatched bodies themselves for disturbing the peace rather than the rigid systems and social dynamics that fail to accommodate their differences'. In other words, unless the industry itself changes dramatically in terms of meaningful diversity, both within studios and in games themselves, already marginalised individuals will continue to carry the burden of inclusive representation and the (reactionary) consequences thereof.

Restricting (player) agency

Another reason for the vilification of *Gone Home* (and other games like it) is the limited amount of agency that is awarded to players, i.e. the amount of control they have in terms of making decisions and freedom of movement. According to Murray's seminal text *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997: 123), agency in games is 'the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices'. To many players and developers alike, making choices and seeing their consequences is considered a vital part of the gaming experience, as it differentiates video games from other media, such as novels and films (Muriel and Crawford, 2020: 139). Each action causes a reaction; for instance, when the player presses a button on their keyboard, their character moves forward or swings their sword. Players feel 'closer' to their avatar than, for example, a character when reading a novel, since they have a direct impact on them (Shaw, 2014: 94).

Agency is not just about actions themselves but, according to Muriel and Crawford (2020), about the transformations a player's actions can cause. As opposed to a far-removed observer, the player becomes an active and interactive participant; they feel as if they are inside the game instead of merely playing it (148). The authors link agency in games to the neoliberal politics that prevail in many Western societies, in which the individual is always responsible for the consequences of their actions regardless of the wider societal structures that might impact them (154). For example, the player is at fault if their choices lead to a fail state; maybe they have not yet mastered complex mechanics or chose an 'incorrect' dialogue option, thus making it the player's responsibility to act according to the game's rules and excelling at this task.

Regardless of how essential player agency appears to be, it is impossible to give players full control over any game due to technological and narrative restrictions. For the most part, it is important for players to experience a *sense* of agency, i.e. a feeling of being in charge of character and plot developments. For developers, it is important to find a balance between letting players believe that they have an impact on the game and not exhausting the borders of design possibilities, in terms of both narrative and technological design. Bódi (2022: 28), for instance, argues that agency is 'designed' and therefore always limited in one way or another. This also has an effect on inclusive representation – most of the time, when developers want to make sure that players have enough agency to be satisfyingly engaged with the game, purposeful diversity can suffer due to a lack of explicit representations of marginalised identities. When it comes to queerness, for instance, 'players are made responsible for making their game characters go against male, heterosexual norms in game representation' (Shaw, 2014: 33) by pressing a 'gay button'. Diversity is treated as 'aesthetic pluralism' (36), i.e. marginalised identities become a purely aesthetic choice instead of a nuanced and meaningful part of the game. This creates an imbalance of queerness being relegated to the margins, whereas the Western hegemonic ideal of White, straight, male protagonists is prioritised.

In *Gone Home*, the player's main objective is to explore the family home to find hints and figure out what happened to Katie's family. This premise would suggest that players have a lot of agency to decide where to go, what to look at and which clues to follow. However, this is not the case – the player is not only guided on a straight path through the house, finding Sam's messages and other pieces of information in a specific order, but the game also prevents them from looking at Sam's diary at one point. When Katie finds it, she quickly realises that Sam recounts her first sexual experiences in this document, and she puts it down. The player is unable to pick the journal up a second time, meaning that they have to move on without knowing the most intimate details of Sam's romantic life – a choice that is made deliberately by the developers in order to protect Sam's privacy from outside spectators and their presumably voyeuristic gaze at someone who is Othered due to their sexuality. Sam's story is told in a sensitive and nuanced manner, through the eyes of her older sister, and these details would not impact the rest of the story. In this instance, the player is prohibited from enacting their agency due to the game's designed limitations.

As discussed above, a pronounced lack of agency can result in players being frustrated by a game's design and can even lead to them quitting a game before finishing it. *Gone Home* comments on the notions of agency entrenched in the industry – it establishes resistance of norms in video games, mirroring the story of Sam being rebellious and falling outside of hegemonic norms and (gender) roles. It also ties into the punk subculture of the riot grrrl movement, which will be discussed in more detail in the next sections. The punk mentality is present both within the story, as Sam becomes interested in its music and art through her girlfriend, and in the game's method of storytelling.

Resisting stereotypes

Interestingly, *Gone Home* subverts genre expectations by undermining the common horror elements that are presented from the beginning. Upon starting the game, without having garnered any knowledge about the characters or the plot, players are transported just outside an empty house, the entering of which is their first task. A storm is brewing outside, and the only piece of information the player receives is that the avatar's family is gone for

a mysterious reason. Immediately, this is designed to evoke feelings of dread and fearful anticipation; *Gone Home* skilfully teases the player with horror tropes (Kagen, 2017: 288). The eerie silence, with subtle noises echoing through the house at times, continues throughout the game; many players would not be surprised if it had a tragic ending, particularly since the focal character, Sam, is revealed to be queer. There are several instances in which the house is described as haunted, with a history of violence and murder as well as rumours of ghosts. Players familiar with the 'Bury Your Gays' trope (Hulan, 2017: 17), in which queer characters are killed off for seemingly no reason, are likely to infer that Sam's story does not end happily. This trope has a long history in media, particularly in film and television, in which the only queer characters allowed to exist on screen necessarily had to die in order to protect the heteronormative societal standard (Cover and Milne, 2023: 811). More recently, though, the 'Bury Your Gays' trope is seen as a problematic way of framing queer stories and garners a strong, negative audience response (817). *Gone Home* is not so much a (supernatural) horror game as it is an intimate exploration of young queer love in a restrictive, homophobic environment. The subversion of genre expectations – or, at the very least, expectations that are set by the premise and aesthetics of the game – is paired with the explicit restriction of agency, as discussed above.

Gone Home's primary focus lies on the avatar's younger sister and her personal journey of exploring her identity as a lesbian, falling in love and taking charge of her future by running away with her girlfriend. This matches many other queer narratives in various media, from novels to movies and television series, with one key difference: they both live in the end. Although they face hardships and have to keep their relationship secret, neither girl is subjected to excessive violence or even death because of their queerness. Though the player does not find out where the girls end up, they can safely assume that nothing bad has happened. The aforementioned 'Bury Your Gays' (Hulan, 2017: 17) trope is subverted by giving Sam and Lonnie a happy ending and thus providing a more positive framing of a queer story.

The video game industry relies heavily on the ideals prescribed by a hegemonic masculinity that reigns supreme in most societies and cultures. Connell (2005: 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'. In other words, a society's preferred version of masculinity dictates its acceptable gender norms. Hegemonic masculinity is not stable but is ever-changing and plural, meaning that, in order to maintain patriarchal structures, this system finds ways to adapt and continually establish its dominance.

In the game industry, specific power structures concerning technology, production, culture and consumption make it difficult for those who do not fit the prevalent 'gamer' identity to engage with these spaces. Fron et al. (2007: 1) argue that this 'hegemony of play' determines 'which technologies will be deployed, and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported'. Money, cultural norms as well as access to technology and education (2007: 2-3) are all factors that decide who is at the top of this hierarchical structure. When it comes to inclusive representation, characters who do not fit hegemonic norms are more closely scrutinised and (often unfairly) criticised because they seemingly pose a risk to the established norms. As discussed, the demographic of gamers, in particular,

feels that the inclusion of women and queer people in the industry and in games themselves is actively making the culture surrounding them worse. A game like *Gone Home*, then, which focuses on young queer women, is a disruption to these norms. By centring a nuanced, female-centric, queer coming-of-age narrative, *Gone Home* provides a break from the hegemonic, male standard, particularly during #GamerGate in which non-hegemonic identities in gaming spaces – both real and virtual – were the main target of harassment at the hands of gamers (Phillips, 2021: 28).

Riot grrrls, rebellion and racism

In many ways, *Gone Home* defies the status quo. Not only does the game prevent players from invading Sam's privacy by reading her diary entry about her first sexual experience – a subtle act of resistance to the player's agency, preventing a voyeuristic glance at queer experiences – but it also explicitly highlights the importance of the aforementioned riot grrrl subculture to both the plot and to Sam and Lonnie specifically. The movement has its roots in the 1990s in the Pacific Northwest of the United States (where *Gone Home* is set), combining feminism, politics and punk music and art. As these elements would suggest, the primary focus of riot grrrls was resistance and rebellion against normative society from a distinctly female perspective. The movement also 'challenged the sexism, homophobia, and growing commercialism' of the punk rock and grunge scenes (Tulloch et al., 2019: 340). Common themes, which would typically not be discussed as frequently or as bluntly in the mainstream, included the patriarchy, (sexual) abuse, sexism and misogyny, abortion rights as well as equality and (queer and women's) liberation.

Not only does *Gone Home* incorporate several songs from popular riot grrrl bands into its soundtrack – activated by interacting with Sam's tapes, which the player can find throughout the house – but Sam actively becomes involved in the subculture, from attending parties and concerts to writing and distributing her own zine (a self-published magazine) with Lonnie in which they criticise the patriarchy. The aesthetic, music and items found around the house are in stark contrast to the pristine, 'white upper middle class sterility' (Tulloch et al., 2019: 340) of the family home, thus acting like another, aesthetic piece of evidence of Sam's rebellion against her environment. The diegetic inclusion of riot grrrl artefacts and music makes the gameplay experience immersive; the backdrop of angry punk and the imagery of feminist action makes players more aware of the socio-political context the main characters exist in, hence deepening the players' understanding of these characters. Other references, such as posters depicting popular media and old-school video game consoles, enhance the almost nostalgic 1990s atmosphere.

As established above, masculine hegemony is deeply entrenched in the video game industry, and agency is considered a vital part of every gameplay experience to make players feel as if they are fully in control of the action. *Gone Home*, then, disturbs these norms through a deliberate act of resistance. The player is not allowed to know about Sam's most intimate experiences, as Katie – through a design choice deliberately made by the developers – closes her diary once she realises what is written on its pages. This act of disrupting the norms and refusing the player's gaze can be seen as a distinctly feminist choice. The diary was not meant to be found and read; Sam has not given consent to anybody to know about her experiences (Tulloch et al., 2019: 341). The game returns the agency that is usually awarded to players to the queer teenage girl character, an intentional decision that resists the typical neoliberal politics of choice in games (Muriel and Crawford, 2020: 154).

While the riot grrrl movement set out to 'normalise women's anger, and celebrate sexuality' by creating (feminist) art and centring female experiences and issues that had been left disregarded in traditionally male spaces like the punk scene (Hunt, 2019), it failed to meaningfully address one of the most important aspects of oppression and inequality – racism. From the very beginnings of feminist movements, there has been a distinct lack of intersectionality in the fight for equal rights and liberation (Olufemi, 2020: 2). Collins and Bilge (2020: 2) provide the most common definition of intersectionality as follows:

> Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class [sic], nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences.

In other words, intersectionality refers to an individual's interwoven identities as informing one another and shaping the experience one has while interacting with their surroundings, which, in turn, are structured by hegemonic ideals and standards. Intersectionality is not a quantifiable and stable metric by which to measure oppression, but rather a system to understand the complex ways in which humans experience their (immediate and global) social and political environment.

While the riot grrrl movement worked to dismantle sexism and, to a point, homophobia, women of colour, especially Black women, were generally ignored by most activists in the scene. In feminist circles at the time, the intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality were primarily a topic in legislative and academic contexts (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989), meaning that the 'mainstream' had not yet caught up. Olufemi (2020: 2), for instance, argues that 'black women were locked out of womanhood as defined by white supremacy' and 'anyone outside of those accepted boundaries did not exist in the eyes of mainstream feminism'. The power structures that affect *all* women were favoured in punk activism, whereas those that do not affect women who fit other hegemonic ideals (White, cisgender, straight, able-bodied) were ignored. The stereotype of the 'Angry Black Woman', for instance, was and still is a big contributor to Black women being unable to voice their anger and frustrations and being taken seriously, both in fiction and in our material world (Motro et al., 2021: 142).

This specific kind of oppression has been labelled 'misogynoir'. Bailey (2021: 1), who created the term in 2008, defines misogynoir as, 'the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization'. This phenomenon is often pervaded through popular media and within society (2021: 1), upholding a White supremacist patriarchal system that disadvantages most. In activist circles, too, the hegemonic structures are justified; White feminism – a type of feminism that focuses on White, cisgender, straight, middle-class, able-bodied women – is still the most pervasive and domineering kind of feminism, entirely ignoring the need for meaningful, intersectional action.

Although women of colour were sometimes included in the riot grrrl movement, they often did not have a space to explore and express themselves through anger, which is a central component to both punk and feminism. Black women, in particular,

'were turned into cultural capital and instrumentalized by White feminists to appear radical for embracing something as provocative to the establishment as blackness and queerness' (Mphuthi 2022). Contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) also exemplify these tendencies – BLM has been regarded as excessively violent and even dangerous, particularly by conservative and right-wing groups as well as governments and law enforcement (Chaudhary and Richardson, 2022: 97), despite the movement's mission being to end police brutality and to ensure liberation and equality for Black people. The justification for anger being a response to oppression and injustice highly depends on an individual's skin colour, gender, class, sexuality as well as the intersections thereof.

The same criticism of highlighting only White women and their anger at oppressing structures such as the patriarchy can be made of *Gone Home*. The game heavily centres young White women who, despite having to keep their sexuality secret, are privileged in many other ways. Both Sam and Lonnie come from middle-class families who are relatively comfortable in their financial capital; they are allowed to express themselves through music, clothing and art, without the risk of ostracisation. They have advantages and opportunities that, if one or both were women of colour, they would not be awarded. *Gone Home* is a story about White, middle-class young women; players experience the cultural context – the Pacific Northwest in the 1990s as well as the riot grrrl scene – through a specific lens that does not provide the full picture. Historically speaking, people of colour have been left out of these narratives, despite often being originators or contributors to many of the most important (popular) cultural movements throughout human history (e.g. Hall, 2006: 469). This argument does not imply that the developers purposefully excluded entire communities for the sake of it. *Gone Home* is a deeply intimate narrative, telling the story of two young women in love rebelling against their homophobic environment and taking their futures into their own hands. However, it can also be considered a starting point, to tell other stories like it, to examine the history that lies beneath and give a voice to other disenfranchised communities.

The limits of queer representation

Not only does *Gone Home* neglect to address racial issues that persist in the United States (and elsewhere), it also highlights the limitations of queer representations in video games. Ruberg (2020: 633) argues that the main gameplay element – wandering through the abandoned family home in order to piece together the narrative – is a straight path, instead of letting players wander freely and 'queerly'. Even though the game includes explicit queerness – which, as mentioned, is limited because of the characters' otherwise hegemonic identities – the mechanics, including player movement, are rather straightforward. At first, the path does seem to be random, as Sam's story is not told in entirely chronological order. The player finds hints and small pieces of information as they navigate the house, exploring various rooms and circling back to them later. The path of exploration is deliberately slow, and players are encouraged to take their time and not rush through the story. However, as mentioned, the order in which players find notes, tapes and artefacts is not random at all; it is a set path, designed to be experienced in a certain way, once more undermining player agency. The possibility exists that messages may be missed, since players are not required to find every detail to experience the story, but careful exploration is still the favoured method of gameplay.

The narrative potential of *Gone Home* is not as queer as it may seem at first glance. Despite its explicit queer representation, the game's narrative is rigid and 'straight' (Ruberg, 2020: 633), and the player is not given opportunity to make meaningful choices that impact the plot development. Players cannot (easily) jump ahead in order to glean details that are supposed to be revealed at a specific point, and they frequently run into physical and metaphorical walls, such as locked doors, if they try to walk where they are not supposed to (yet). The potential for 'queer' movement – movement that does not follow a specific path, that appears aimless and almost frivolous – is highly restricted. Agency is, thus, further stripped from players. This clashes with the expectations that players may have: due to the aforementioned path that is seemingly random but actually 'straight', the game's linear narrative and the player's limited agency, the game design does not allow for a 'queer' gameplay experience, at least not one that is easily accessible.

At the same time, *Gone Home* is surprisingly popular among speedrunners. There are countless videos on the Internet of speedrunners trying to finish the game (by finding Sam's last message) as quickly as possible by discovering a glitch through the game's invisible walls and therefore foregoing the intimate, emotional experience of the narrative (Ruberg, 2019: 143). For some speedrunners, it only takes seconds to take advantage of the bug and finish the game without having gone through the experience of becoming emotionally involved in the story and characters. Speedrunning itself can be seen as queering games by not playing them 'correctly', or as intended; players can disrupt the structure of a game by actively choosing to play the 'wrong' way, such as finding these glitches to achieve goals quicker or even failing on purpose (Ruberg, 2019: 143). However, it is questionable whether this is the intention of speedrunners who neglect to immerse themselves into the queer walking simulator experience of *Gone Home*.

Speedrunning 'straightens' the game through its reception by a primarily straight, male audience (Ruberg, 2020: 644). The intentionality of subversive queer play is missing – these players might do it to beat records, or to prove that they have enough skill to finish the game as quickly as possible. Speedrunners typically do not concern themselves with a game's narrative, representation and impact; efficiency and speed are key. They may be entirely uninterested in *Gone Home*'s impactful story, compelling characters and interesting connections to the realities of the riot grrrl movement and queer experiences in the 1990s. This might also suggest that the 'goal' of the game – the endpoint that players should strive for – is to finish it, rather than to enjoy and dwell in the experience itself. From a design perspective, *Gone Home*'s lack of freedom of movement and the intentions behind the latter make it 'straighter' than its status as an impactful queer game perhaps suggests.

Conclusion

Although, as indicated, *Gone Home* is in many ways lacking in queer and 'queering' potential, its impact on the video game industry cannot be understated. Many games that have been published since its release – including, but not limited to other walking simulators, such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) – have taken inspiration from *Gone Home*'s focus on careful exploration and intimate storytelling, as well as its nuanced and sensitive depiction of young queer love. The resistance against popular stereotypes, such as the 'Bury Your Gays' trope, mirrors the realities of the riot grrrl scene, in which (primarily White) women rebelled against patriarchal norms and accepted societal pressures. Through more acceptance, both for queer individuals and for the walking simulator as a legitimate

or 'real' type of video game, in the last decade, the industry has been and is still changing for the better. Latál (2022: 158), for example, finds that, while not perfect, the inclusion of queer characters in games is now more widely accepted by player audiences, and much of the (constructive) criticism of games that centre queerness is about issues regarding characterisation and stereotypes. Players now have more choice than ever before, with indie games having gained immense popularity (as well as financial success), making games as a whole more diverse.

Gone Home does not provide players with a lot of agency – the game is highly structured, leading players through the house and the story on a straight path, and they are prevented from knowing the most intimate details of Sam's life. While the latter can be seen as a deliberate act of rebellion, both in design and in the characters' personalities, the former demonstrates the game's general rigidity and linear storytelling style. The lack of (meaningful) intersectional depictions of queer women of colour, too, is indicative of both the video game industry and the cultural context – namely, the riot grrrl movement in the 1990s – the game is based on. By not allowing players to move through the house freely, the potential for queer play is also restricted, meaning that *Gone Home* is 'straightened' despite being an overtly queer game. *Gone Home* marks a turning point in the landscape of video games, and its impact both as a walking simulator, prioritising exploration over action, and as explicit queer representation in a medium that has not been famous for its diversity, can still be observed today.

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SECTION III

HISTORICAL GAME STUDIES

Playing Resistance without Restrictions: Nazi Germany in *Through the Darkest of Times*

Lydia Kleinstück

In video games, especially American first-person shooters and strategy games, Nazis have had a long history. Often, they are part of enemy armies to be fought with ceaseless gun fire – they are an obstacle that needs to be overcome with violence and the military power of the player character. While in the USA and many other countries, Nazi imagery, like swastikas, was always included in video games, it used to be a different story in Germany. German law prohibits showing anti-constitutional subject matter. The only exception to this rule was – and still is – so-called 'socially adequate' use, meaning that anti-constitutional symbols are displayed for educational or artistic purposes only, without glorifying the Third Reich or the Holocaust. Historically, while the Holocaust and Nazi rule could be explored in other media released in Germany – like TV shows, movies, or theatre productions – interactive digital games had been exempted from this privilege. Being largely considered media for children and young adults, and not as works of art, they did not fall under what German law deemed socially adequate (Heck, 2020: 122). In 1998, the regional high court in Frankfurt eventually decided in the case of the first-person shooter *Wolfenstein 3D* – where the player has to escape from the fictitious titular Nazi castle by shooting their way through multiple dungeons full of swastikas, Nazi officers, and even Adolf Hitler himself – that a socially adequate use of anti-constitutional imagery in video games was not possible and that it should therefore be prosecuted as a felony (Schwiddessen, 2015: 92-93).

This decision was important, as it meant that the USK, the German Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body, would not provide a rating to any games showing National Socialist (NS) iconography. This effectively banned these games from stores within Germany, as no game can be sold without a USK rating.[1] By extension, this 1998 ruling also cemented the status of video games as (children's) entertainment only, incapable of

1 The German USK is quite unique, as most other European countries follow the PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) rating system, introduced in 2003 (Video Games Europe, 2003). This means that even in Germany's neighbouring countries like Austria, Poland, France and the Czech Republic, the rating system allows the depictions of NS iconography.

In: N. Webber, E. Kirkland and R. R. Schallegger, eds. 2025. *Exploring New Horizons in Video Game Cultures.* Leiden: Sidestone Press, pp. 93-110.

providing a serious, 'socially adequate' benefit to the German culture of remembrance. The consequences of this court ruling on subsequent German video game releases were immense: alternative versions without any NS iconography were created specifically for the German market in order to receive a USK rating and be eligible for sale.

This method, however, was controversial both within and outside of Germany. In the case of the German version of *Wolfenstein 2: The New Colossus* from 2017, swastikas were replaced with a triangular symbol, Adolf Hitler's moustache was removed, and even the German audio was altered to change 'Führer' to 'Kanzler' (meaning 'chancellor') and 'Jews' to 'Verräter' (meaning 'traitors'). This, according to Eugen Pfister and Martin Tschiggerl (2020: 56), led to '[t]he industrialized, racially motivated murder of 6 million people thus bec[oming], in translation, the murder of political opponents. This removal of the Holocaust, in the German version, led de facto to a rewriting of history'. Examples like these led to decreasing support for the ban and a call for a reform of the guidelines in the German media (Pfister and Tschiggerl, 2020: 56). In 2018, the USK eventually decided that the social adequacy clause would now also apply to video games showing Nazi symbols and that they could receive a rating after undergoing a case-by-case review by the USK (USK, 2018b).

My brief introduction of the history of the German ban on Nazi symbols underlines the importance of perspective – both within and outside of the game. What is or isn't portrayed in video games and what the player can do within a game about World War II varies across time and place. What had been taboo before may be an acceptable part of an interactive game when told from a different perspective. In video games, perspective matters because players are meant to immerse themselves in the world of the game for a longer time and may empathize with their player character. This is of particular importance for video games that emulate times gone by. The significance of perspective also carries over into real life, as video games transmit their perspectives to a global audience, affecting how players remember and reflect on their own history, what they learn about the history of other countries, and how they judge their own present times. Video games can also present their perspective in multiple ways; as John Sharp (2014: 107) puts it,

> It [perspective] encompasses a means of constructing images with the illusion of dimensionality; a set of literary conventions relating to the point of view from which stories are told; the visual perspective from which players see a game; a player's perspective for seeing and interfacing with a game; and to the rhetorical perspective embedded in a game's design.

Following this definition, the perspective of a video game can be present on multiple levels: in its presentation of the game world, in its narrative, in the visuals presented to the player, and within the rhetoric of the game. The term 'rhetoric' points to Ian Bogost's (2007: 29) concept of procedural rhetoric, which states that a game's 'arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, [and] the construction of dynamic models' which 'afford a new and promising way to make claims about *how things work*'. For example, regarding the narrative, visual, and procedural perspective in most American shooter games set in World War II, there is often a focus on (re-)fighting major battles. For this purpose, the player character is often an American soldier dropped into Germany or German-occupied territory. Frequently, these kinds of narratives are supported by a first-person perspective, where the player

only sees the weapon in their player character's hand, preparing them to act fast and shoot the enemies. The player character is encouraged by the game's procedural rhetoric, its processes, to neutralize the German army. Additionally, buildings where enemies are hiding can be easily identified by using Nazi flags and banners.

This repeating narrative in video games centred on World War II has been explored before: one explanation is grounded in actual history; another is grounded in video game history. As D-Day was a critical turning point in World War II, many video games from the USA also start on the Normandy battlefield. As Jörg Friedrich has noted: 'There is probably no other historical battle as well covered in digital games as D-Day […]' (Friedrich, 2020: 261). The focus on the battles of World War II in games is also connected to the structure of many first-person shooter (FPS) and strategy games, with Jeff Hayton (2015: 250) writing that '[t]he first video games to feature Nazis were war games simulating the battlefields of the Second World War' because 'FPSs function best when they pit a righteous hero against an unredeemable foe, because gamers need to overcome the morally reprehensible fact that as players, they must kill countless enemies en route to victory' (2015: 254).

Another explanation for centring the battles of World War II is that in recent years, AAA video games have become global products, with large, multinational teams working on a game. This increasing globalization of video game development also makes development studios reach for stories that are easily understood by a large global audience, with violence and warfare being one of them. As Stephen Kline et al. (2005: 251) write: 'From the point of view of marketers, violence is a cultural idiom that requires no translation within increasingly transnational entertainment markets […]'. For many players from Germany (and many other countries), however, this perspective is in stark contrast to the history they are taught, as the Holocaust receives far more emphasis in schools than the battles of World War II. The rise of the Nazi party, the restructuring of the Weimar Republic into a dictatorship, and the subsequent systematic murder of 6 million Jews are all more strongly emphasized in history lessons than the military defeat of Nazi Germany. This focus in German education and memory culture also affects how these games are received within Germany. Pfister and Zimmermann (2020: 110) aptly summarize the significance of video games for cultural memory in their German article 'Erinnerungskultur', writing that 'History always depends on the society that produces it', and that it 'is a part of our culture of remembrance and our popular culture and consequently part of our cultural identity'.[2]

But if the Nazis and their symbols are depicted often, why are the Holocaust and resistance against the regime often omitted or only hinted at in most AAA video games? This question is all the more pertinent as historians like Pfister and Tschiggerl (2020: 67) note that '[t]he taboo of depicting the Holocaust in digital games […] serves to protect a romanticized notion of the Second Word War which reduces it to only the strategic warfare of the battlefield'. This focus on battles and military conflicts further obscures the beginnings of a fascist regime and the resistance from within. If games take up 'the motif of resistance' they do so as 'an "opposition" working against the Nazis', which serves only to 'authenticate their storylines' with 'opposition groups [that] are painted

2 German original: 'Sie [die Geschichte] hängt immer von der Gesellschaft ab, die sie produziert. […] Geschichte […] ist auch Teil unserer Erinnerungs- und der Populärkultur und damit unserer kollektiven Identität'.

as “good Germans” in contrast to “evil Nazis,” a binary whose existence underwrites the moral order of gameplay’ (Hayton, 2015: 258). Even in the few cases where civil resistance against the Nazis has been depicted in mainstream video games, it is often still portrayed superficially.[3] For example, Pieter Van den Heede (2024: 194) writes that the 2009 open world game *The Saboteur* ‘represents the wartime occupation of France and the French resistance in a strongly romanticized and gendered manner, by emphasizing exciting, heroic, and male-dominated violence against the Nazi occupier as a mythological rather than a historical enemy’. This idea of the Nazis being a mythological rather than a historical enemy is also emphasised by Hayton (2015: 262), who explains that elements like ‘Nazis dabbling in black magic, the occult, and the supernatural’ in video games – a common trope also popular in comics and cinema from the 1940s to the 1990s (Hayton, 2015: 249) – are often introduced as a substitute for the actual Holocaust and as a justification for the ensuing warfare against the Nazis. This supernatural treatment unfortunately lets online neo-Nazi games exploit the real Holocaust, for example by giving the player the ability to ‘replay’ the Holocaust (2015: 262). Hayton (2015: 265) summarizes his thoughts as follows:

> By arguing that the supernatural ‘accounts’ for Nazism by making Nazism ‘sexy,’ by using the occult to ‘explain’ Nazi evil, video games remove any complexity in our understandings of Nazism and why it became so attractive to so many. Rather, it is on the level of the irrational, the illogical, and the improbable that Nazism is explained, thus removing the need to look closer at contemporary society. The focus on one-dimensional digital Nazis makes the world safe from real Nazis […]. Once video games begin mobilizing the Holocaust, neo-Nazis will lose their hegemony over the past, which […] controls the future.

Following Hayton’s ideas, the often-mythical depictions of Nazi characters in video games cover up the still relevant threats to democracy today. According to Pfister and Zimmermann (2020: 114), another reason for omitting controversial history from games is that AAA developer studios might want to avoid a backlash[4] and subsequent loss of revenue; and while the authors concede that mainstream games do not have to pursue an educational purpose, their success and influence on cultural remembrance affects what is sayable and showable within society. Thus, they (Pfister and Zimmermann, 2020: 114) propose that independent games with a smaller audience can focus on different priorities and use the interactivity of the medium to teach history.

This is also where the lifting of the ban on anti-constitutional subject matter in video games becomes important once again: before, video games were required to substitute

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3 However, more recently released video games like *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios, 2014), *Attentat 1942* (Charles Games, 2017) and *Svoboda 1945: Liberation* (Charles Games, 2021) demonstrate that the civilian perspective on war and its lasting effects as well as the Holocaust can be meaningfully explored in the medium.

4 Apart from causing backlash for the developer studios, Chapman and Linderoth (2015: 149) also emphasize that video games as a medium turn controversial material “into a playable unit within a system of rules [which] opens up different meanings that compete for the attention of the player”. This is also a concern for game developers from other countries that follow PEGI or ESRB ratings when it comes to the depictions of atrocities of World War II, even if the rating systems technically allow these depictions.

NS iconography for the German market no matter what the game's storyline or attitude towards the Nazis might be. Now, with the ban lifted and the first games from Germany addressing topics like the Holocaust, developers in other countries also take notice and understand that a game about civil resistance and even the Holocaust can sell, although it might at this point be on a much smaller scale and for a much smaller audience.

Such a game is *Through the Darkest of Times* by German developer Paintbucket Games (2020). In 2018, it was the first video game demo to receive a German USK rating despite depicting anti-constitutional subject matter; the complete game would eventually also receive a USK 12 rating in 2020 (USK, 2018a). *Through the Darkest of Times* is a single-player, turn-based strategy game that is interspersed with visual novel elements where the player can make decisions that will impact the course of the narrative. For example, the player might choose to help innocent people by intervening when Nazis are verbally or physically abusing them. However, this decision might expose the group and put the members at risk of being arrested. In the game, the player controls a civil resistance group in Nazi Germany, starting in Berlin in 1933, shortly after Hitler's appointment as chancellor. The goal is to keep the group together until the end of the war and resist the Nazis for as long as possible. Jörg Friedrich, co-creator of the game, has mentioned that *Through the Darkest of Times* was inspired by the real-life events he and his colleague Sebastian St. Schulz saw in the mid-2010s, namely Brexit, the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016, and the protest marches against refugees in Germany. All this made them see 'the possibility that the current path of the societies we lived in might lead into darkness again' and they asked themselves 'what digital games had to do with all of this and if there was a way to contribute in a positive way by making a game' (Friedrich, 2020: 260).

Even before starting the game proper, the player is presented with a short introductory video, explaining the motivation of the group to resist the Nazis, with a female voice stating that 'we knew that the Nazi threats were not empty. That those people meant what they said. We had to do something; we couldn't just stay silent. But we also knew that it could cost us our heads' (Paintbucket Games, 2020). After this video introduction, the main menu appears on screen. The menu echoes the bleak setting with its dark colour scheme, consisting mainly of black, red, and white – colours also associated with the swastika flags of the Third Reich. However, the game's title is written in white, with only the word 'darkest' appearing in red paint and dripping from a paint brush into a paint can. Apart from the red in the title, the menu selections also appear in red (see Fig. 1). This design reappropriates the red, white, and black colours of Nazi symbols for resistance against them. Additionally, the game menu does not show any swastikas but a mostly black image of Alexanderplatz in Berlin, the capital of Germany, that is only illuminated occasionally by a passing train in the background. This menu design points to both the mundane setting of the game and the emerging darkness of the looming Nazi rule without showing any NS symbols yet.

Through the game's late depictions of the Nazi symbols as well as their historical contextualization, *Through the Darkest of Times* makes Germany's path into darkness visible while also showing that even a little bit of resistance and defiance can go a long way. The game itself has two modes: 'Resistance Mode' and 'Story Mode', with the first offering only one save while the latter lets the player save more frequently (see Fig. 2).

While providing a choice of difficulty for the player, these two modes also signal to the player that playing this game might not be manageable on the first try. After the player



Figure 1. Game menu of *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.

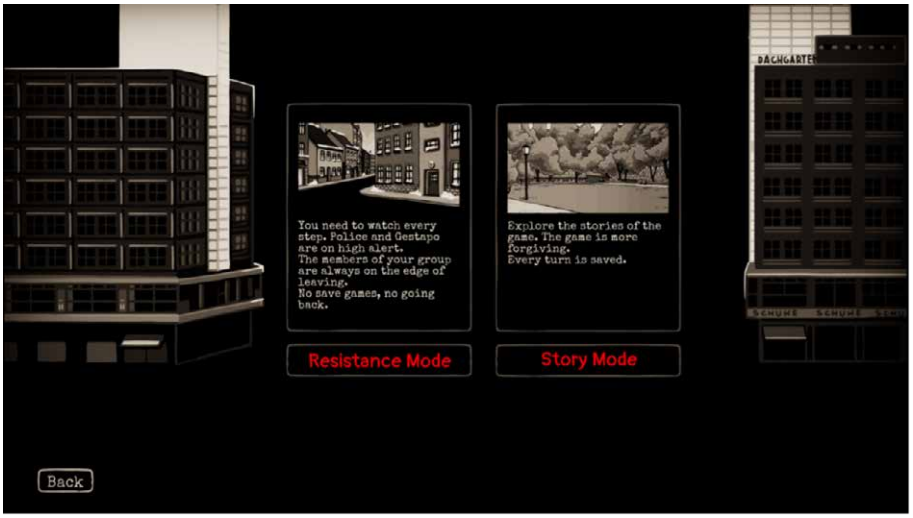


Figure 2. Resistance Mode and Story Mode in *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.

chooses their difficulty level, they can then select their player character, who is always a German person with varying political beliefs and general traits (see Fig. 3).

Here, perspective matters again, as the player cannot select a Nazi supporter or a member of the Jewish community. Once the player has chosen their character, a loading screen introduces the general aim of each chapter (see Fig. 4).

In *Through the Darkest of Times*, collaboration both inside and outside the resistance group is the key to resisting the Nazis and their propaganda for as long as possible. For example, each round, the player needs to decide which member of the group might be best suited for dealing with a specific task – recruiting new members, collecting money for the



Figure 3. Character editor in *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.



Figure 4. Chapter loading screen in *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.

group, talking to professors, priests, and workers. The game here presents the player with a choice: certain traits, professions or convictions of members might help them achieve a task much more easily and without attracting too much attention. However, sending these 'well-suited' members on other missions alongside their fellow resisters might also provide the group with an overall better outcome, as they stand to gain more money, followers, or objects helping them in their efforts (see Fig. 5).

Visually, the game imitates German Expressionist art styles popular in times of the Weimar Republic and features swing music that was outlawed by the Nazis. This is because the developers did not want to reproduce common Nazi aesthetics they saw reflected in movies, games, and comic books on the subject (Friedrich, 2020: 265). As Friedrich (2020: 265) explained: 'Art was used to make people feel insignificant and weak, compared to the ideal "Übermensch", the superhuman who is presented to them'. The significance of art and music also affects the gameplay, as there is sometimes the option to take your fellow group members dancing or see an art exhibition which boosts morale all around and gives everyone a sense of hope – to have something left to fight for, even if times might be getting bleaker (see Fig. 6).



Figure 5. Mission planning in *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.



Figure 6. Visiting an art exhibition in *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.

The colour scheme of the game primarily features combinations of black, grey, and white for both characters and background, while red is mostly used for Nazi flags and badges. The anti-constitutional symbols like swastikas cannot only be seen on Nazi uniforms, but also on buildings and civilians: neighbours, former friends, and children (Fig. 7).

This variety communicates the gradual dissemination of Nazi thought into the general public and shows the player 'why there is no alternative to resistance' (Huberts, 2020)[5].

5 German original: 'Ohne Effekthascherei verdeutlicht das Spiel, warum es keine Alternative zum Widerstand gibt.'



Figure 7. Swastika flags on French buildings in *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.



Figure 8. Comparison between the eyes of Nazis and resistance members in *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.

The necessity of civil resistance against the Nazis is also reflected in the character design. While members of the resistance groups, their allies, and prosecuted people are always pictured with colourful eyes (Hiller, 2020), Nazis and their sympathizers are shown with hollow eyes that blend into the background or with completely obscured faces (see Fig.8). This serves to put the focus on the resistance members, their allies, and the prosecuted people instead of the Nazis.

Although the visual novel elements allow the player character to ignore a Nazi command and disagree, by doing so they risk being uncovered and endangering the whole resistance group. As time under the dictatorship marches on, it becomes increasingly difficult to voice open dissent – which is also visually emphasized by the growing amount of NS-iconography. While the group can plan missions to resist, the Nazis and their symbols do not disappear. This is in stark contrast to the aforementioned shooter *The Saboteur*, where swastikas and other Nazi-installations can be destroyed, removing them permanently from the game to be used for in-game currency, which 'represents the Nazi occupation of France as a superficial material presence that players can straightforwardly remove through physical violence and spatial conquest' (Van den Heede, 2024: 190). Thus, in *Through the Darkest of Times*, the anti-



Figure 9. Red dots next to the group members depicting their risk of being caught in *Through the Darkest of Times*. Screenshot, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.

constitutional imagery is not merely used as a backdrop but is rather visually integrated into the game to convey a growing sense of danger in the player while also serving as their call to action. Moreover, intertwining these real historical events with the fictional life of the player character provides players of *Through the Darkest of Times* with a sense of agency, as they are confronted with the crimes of the Nazis through the experiences of their player character, moving them to act firmly against them.

Considering the gameplay, the player character is a fictional German citizen wanting to resist the Nazis because of their beliefs. Depending on the conviction of the selected player character – Social Democrat, Communist, Monarchist, and so on – the conflicts within the group and the visual novel elements might be different, prompting the player to think about the make-up of their group. Certain convictions help with recruiting certain people and their resources to the cause, so the player is presented with a choice to either create a homogenous group of like-minded people that cannot reach as many people outside their social circles, or experiment with a diverse group where it might be necessary to solve disagreements. When the player sends members on missions in *Through the Darkest of Times*, they might attract unwanted attention, resulting in red dots next to their portraits (see Fig. 9), indicating that their risk of being caught has substantially increased.

This feature was added after players had complained about their group members being arrested frequently and without warning. Friedrich explained that, while this fit well into the narrative, it made some players hesitant to plan any missions. This is also why the ever-decreasing morale bar (see top left corner in Fig. 9) was eventually added, to provoke the player to take action rather than remaining passive throughout the game (Budian, 2020: 495).

Interestingly, the course and outcome of the war and the impact of Nazi rule on German society cannot be changed by any of the missions carried out. In this way, the player is confronted with the reality that resistance might not change the system, but that it is still meaningful to try. One way this message is integrated into the game is by showing a short paragraph for each member of their group after their break-up, explaining their fate and

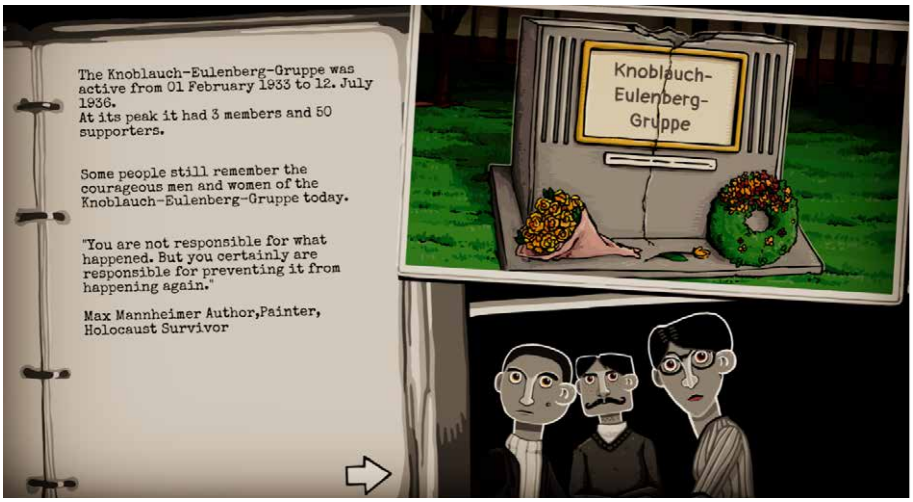


Figure 10. Memorandum of a dissolved Resistance Group. Screenshot *Through the Darkest of Times*, courtesy of Paintbucket Games, ©2020.

praising the impact of this group. Friedrich commented in an interview that this feature was integrated 'to convey the message [to the player] that what has been achieved is still impressive' even if a group might not make it to the end of the war (Budian, 2020: 493). This decision by Friedrich and his team avoids the conundrum a video game about Nazi resistance might face, namely that one needs 'to achieve a goal or overcome an obstacle' in order to get 'a measurable result' (Budian, 2020: 493). If Friedrich and his team had decided to only honour groups that had successfully concluded each and every task, then there would have been a 'ludonarrative dissonance', as the procedural rhetoric and the message of the game would have been at odds with each other. In other words: if the game conveys the message that every action, however small, matters, then it cannot punish the player characters for failing while resisting the Nazis.

Although *Through the Darkest of Times* was praised in the national and international press for its depiction of wartime resistance against the atrocities of the Nazis, the sudden decision by the USK to allow NS iconography was also met with criticism by the DGB, i.e. the German trade union, and representatives of The Central Council of Jews in Germany. A member of the trade union feared a 'gradual and uncritical establishing' of these symbols online and on social media platforms (Buntenbach, cited in DGB, 2018)[6] and Abraham Lehrer, vice-president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, disapproved of the lack of public debate on the subject before the ban was lifted (Kauschke, 2018). While the concern about missing public debate might be understandable, Pfister (2020: 280) has pointed out that '[t]o ban Nazi symbols does not automatically ban the whitewashing of the National Socialist regime in digital games, it just supports the utopia of an apolitical conflict of equals [...]'. The reception of *Wolfenstein 3D* in the US, where none of these restrictions existed,

6 German original: '"Wir haben erhebliche Zweifel, ob eine Anwendung der Sozialadäquanzklausel im Bereich der Computer-Software in der Praxis ein schleichendes und unkritisches Etablieren von NS-Symbolen auf allen digitalen Plattformen verhindern kann", schreibt DGB-Vorstandmitglied Annelie Buntenbach in dem Brief an Barley'.

serves as an example of this whitewashing. As *Wolfenstein 3D* developer John Romero (cited in Kent, 2001: 458) has said:

> With Wolfenstein, the shock was only half of the attraction. The main draw was the super-fast 3D rendering engine and movement. Most of the raves came from the pure adrenaline rush of speeding at 70 frames per second through corridors and mowing down Nazis.

Romero here emphasizes that the Nazis were essentially decorative objects to immerse the player into the new first-person shooter perspective. Echoing Romero's assessment, *Computer Gaming World* magazine described the world of *Wolfenstein 3D* in a 1992 review as follows,

> The castle is decorated beautifully with textured walls, and loads of Nazi paraphernalia. Beautiful murals and stained glass [sic] windows of der Fuhrer, the German eagle, swastikas, are liberally hung about; chandeliers, columns, coats of armor and vases decorate the officers' quarters; while blood stains, torture cages, prison cells with the skeletal remains of POW's still clutching the bars and other gruesome sights attest to the brutality of the Wehrmacht. The inhabitants of the castle, as well, are depicted in detail (Lombardi, 1992: 50).

The realistic-looking environment is here largely attributed to Nazi symbols and objects. Interestingly, the quote also hints at something else; while the symbols of the Nazis 'are liberally hung about', there are merely 'skeletal remains of the POW's', meaning these victims of the Nazis are simply included to raise the stakes for the player and emphasize the point that the Wehrmacht will not hesitate to make the player character suffer the same fate. Hayton (2015: 259) also points out that '[s]ettings like castles, catacombs […] and swamps all feature prominently adding to the magical architecture of the games' and that they 'play up stereotypical Nazi obsessions with the Middle Ages, which reinforces the occult and Nazi associations'. In this case, rather than using the NS iconography to illustrate the very real crimes of the Nazis, symbols like swastikas are instead reinforcing the already existing 'occultisation' of Nazi crimes.

In contrast to these occult depictions, *Through the Darkest of Times* has shown that the inclusion of NS iconography in (German) video games does not have to lead to their glorification. Rather, they can be used to effectively contextualize the story and convey a feeling of unease in the player, as they are 'bombarded' with the red swastika badges, armbands, and flags that seem to cut through the dark colours of the game world, exposing these symbols for what they are: decoys to cover up the truth about mass genocide and persecution inside and outside of Germany. By portraying Nazi imagery accurately rather than altering or omitting it, *Through the Darkest of Times* demonstrates that it is possible for a video game to tackle a serious topic with care and compassion. The game is also set in 1930s Berlin with the player character taking trips to foreign capitals like Paris. These settings make the Nazis seem less mythical and more real, as they occupy everyday spaces, like train stations, parks, and shops – not just battlefields. In this way, *Through the Darkest of Times* strives to do the opposite from many seemingly innocent games online that often use far-right iconography and subject matter to recruit players into extremist circles (Herwig and Vollmer, 2023).

The concern, however, seems to be more around the potential for this imagery to migrate out of the game context onto social media platforms and much less on the portrayal of this imagery within the game context. This might be because each game given a USK rating is still checked to see whether its message justifies showing NS imagery. If it is glorifying Nazis, Hitler, or the Holocaust, it will still not receive a rating. These concerns seem much more justified as knowledge about the Holocaust among younger generations in the US and Europe is decreasing (Claims Conference, 2020), and a lot of far-right radicalization today happens online within seemingly apolitical games and on Discord servers (Lanser and Schülke, 2019: 2; Herwig and Vollmer, 2023). Therefore, AAA studios should take notice of independent games like *Through the Darkest of Times* and their unique perspectives on World War II memory. While including controversial topics in a more mainstream video game might result in a stricter rating or more backlash, it can also show a wider audience where far-right politics have led in the past and what living under a fascist regime can mean, a message that needs to find its way into video games as well, as survivors of the Holocaust and the Nazi-persecution are passing away.

Future video games may create new opportunities for younger (and older) generations to engage with their own country's darkest past – or see Germany's darkest times as a reminder of how important it is to resist and to stand united against fascism, even if your personal political affiliations might differ from those of your fellow resistance members. An offline, single-player game like *Through the Darkest of Times* might not reach the masses like a first-person shooter, but it and other games like it can help start a conversation by making the crimes of the Nazis visible, and resistance to them playable. As Linda Schlegel (2022) writes on serious games with a focus on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE):

> Currently, many existing P/CVE video games could improve their entertainment value. Many of these games rely almost exclusively on a serious, educational story rather than entertaining gameplay. They often employ relatively simple game mechanics, are heavily text-focused, and frequently afford players only binary choices. This suggests that there is room for improvement to make P/CVE games more fun, increasing the likelihood that players spend more time engaging with the P/CVE content within the game and, in turn, making the persuasive impact more likely.

It has been six years since the German ban on anti-constitutional subject matter in video games has been lifted. While there was some backlash against this ruling within Germany when this decision was first made public, the majority of Germans seem to have accepted these changes. This might also be a testament to the changing status of digital games within German culture. Gone are the days where games were only seen as a hobby for teenagers or children, who were in need of protection from the messages within video games. Today, games are seen as equal or even superior to the medium of film, that has long been deemed socially adequate, and it speaks to the changing standing of video games within German society that there has not been more of a discussion around the court decision. It seems to be the case that smaller productions, especially those coming from Germany or Eastern Europe, receive more attention from the press, since these are the nations of the perpetrators or victims. Many international

outlets did cover *Through the Darkest of Times* when it was first released, praising the game for its innovative perspective and authentic storytelling[7]. It remains to be seen if bigger developers and production companies start to include more controversial material within their games – since they may still fear too large a backlash from their heterogenous player groups – but the fact that the attention is there seems to suggest that the time is now ripe for these stories to be told.

However, the depiction of the Holocaust in video games remains a controversial topic in many countries, as evidenced by the recent report of the Digital Holocaust Memory Project (Walden and Marrison, 2024), that, despite acknowledging (Walden and Marrison, 2024: 6) 'the [video game] medium's potential to offer new modes for engaging with the past' (2024: 6), recommends 'that knowledge exchange of expertise must take place between Holocaust organisations, stakeholders and memory institutions and the creative industries' to ensure a responsible game design process as well as accountability for each step (2024: 20). Digital games like *Through the Darkest of Times* seem only to be growing in importance when the current multiple crises in the world are considered. As new wars are waged, video games can offer new and engaging perspectives on civil resistance and cooperation to try to prevent history from repeating itself.

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7 Among these were articles from the *New York Times* (Schuetze, 2020), *Forbes* (Kain, 2020), *Polygon* (Campbell, 2019), *Gamesindustry.biz* (Taylor, 2019) and *PC Gamer* (Lane, 2018).

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Playing Time Capsules: Layered Temporalities in *Gone Home* and *Return of the Obra Dinn*

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Digital games can represent, take place in, or make playable different temporalities. Their narratives and settings can be ancient and/or historical, or far-removed, sci-fi futures alike. Game worlds are most notably sought after because of their ability to transport the player into other dimensions, universes and timelines and make these interactable. To play a game means to enter a game world, and furthermore, to play a game means to make a game world playable. This chapter aims to further concretise these ideas by highlighting games' temporalities as part of their world-building and gameplay features, for which I will introduce two terms, eponymous to this chapter: 'playable time capsules' and 'layered temporalities'.

To do so, the chapter analyses games in which two or more temporalities are represented at the same time. The term temporalities, in this case, specifically refers to the (spatio-) temporal setting of games and knowingly excludes the extensive theories surrounding the discussion of the existence – or rather lack thereof – of time. Instead, the presupposed theory of temporality and games is closely linked to the analyses of scholars such as Federico Igarzábal (2019: 9), who writes: 'Video games are temporal artifacts. [...] they are also interactive artifacts in which action culminates'. This notion of games as playable temporal artefacts can be closely linked to the proposed idea of playable time capsules – of artefacts that the player interacts and engages with. Similarly, Melissa Kagen's (2019) work on 'archival adventuring' games echoes this mode of play, which puts the discovery and *playing through* of a spatiotemporal narrative first.

Therefore, the focus here does not lie on the types of temporalities that are represented with(in) the game, but rather on answering the questions of how they are mediated, and to specify further, how they are in many ways 'layered'. The term layered temporalities, which I propose here, specifically encompasses two realms – or entities – regarding digital games: *temporalities*, as I examine them, are therefore always linked to a specific *spatiality*. This approach is in essence connected to concepts that link the interaction with(in) a game to an interaction with a historical (Chapman, 2016), archival (Kagen, 2019), or archaeological (Reinhard, 2018) space, but also strives to engage more precisely with games' temporal

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dimensions and representations of temporalities. Not all historical games represent time and temporality as layered, and not all games of layered temporalities employ history and historical settings.

The 'layering' can thus more precisely be described as a representation of two or more temporalities within the same spatiality. To specify this approach further with my selected game examples, the represented, ludic temporalities of *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and *Return of the Obra Dinn* (hereafter also shortened to *Obra Dinn*; Pope, 2018) are each layered upon their spaces – an Oregon family house in 1995 and a merchant ship in 1807, respectively. This layering, and by extension the playful and ludic exploration of these temporalities, allows the employment of several gameplay mechanics, and with them many different challenges to face, obstacles to overcome and rules to follow. *Gone Home* and *Obra Dinn* therefore employ what I would like to describe as playable time capsules: specific and spatiotemporally defined planes of interactivity restricted *by* and *with* temporality. Within playable time capsules – as represented by *Gone Home* or *Obra Dinn*, for example – the player engages with 'an environment empty of people but filled with objects that speak to the characters and events that used to exist here' (Kagen, 2022: 30). Unlike the games analysed by Adam Chapman, for example, these time capsules and their ludic discoveries are however not linked to a study of historical games, which 'in some way represent the past' (2016: 16) or construct some semblance of 'historical narratives (both popular and academic)' (2016: 10), but rather use a (not necessarily historical) narrative construction of *a* past to transport meaning and mediate a story. A time capsule, I am arguing, is a temporally disconnected, or 'frozen', 'spatiotemporal bubble' (Kagen, 2019: 1), which the player can freely move within and traverse through to engage with the presented internal narrative of a game.

In the following pages I will further develop the terms surrounding layered temporalities and playable time capsules, and analyse the circumstances regarding them with the two game examples at hand. *Gone Home* will be examined first, in order to lay the groundwork for the coming analyses, as well as to begin a close reading of the way the game mediates its specific temporalities. Later, I will use an analysis of the gameplay and game design of *Return of the Obra Dinn* to further develop the terms by applying them to another game example.

Both examples, categorised by Steam as indie-adventure games, are carefully chosen to explore these concepts. In more closely resembling what Melissa Kagen argues to be a 'wandering game' (2020), they feature the layered temporalities I have described, and represent multiple temporal realms within the same restricted spatial plane. Both games also have the player 'wander' through their constructed time capsules – spatiotemporal microcosms that allow for both narrative exploration and ludic interaction within each game. While these time capsules are represented in differing manners in both games, their inherent qualities – functioning as archival spaces that charge explorable (non-human) 'objects with potential narrative' (Kagen, 2019: 2) – remain constant.

Furthermore, the family house in *Gone Home* and the eponymous ship in *Return of the Obra Dinn* function as the game world and place of specifically represented temporalities equally. With each spatiality also always representing other temporalities and (specifically) past occurrences within them, temporalities hence become layered. As a next step within this analysis, the proposed concept of layered temporalities will be more closely inspected and described.

To enter a game means to enter different temporalities

Time in games and time outside of games function differently. Jesper Juul, for example, most notably argues in his essay on game time how playing a game evokes a duality of worlds and times. Juul (2004: 131) writes: 'This duality [being both 'yourself' and another role] is reflected in the game time, which can be described as a basic duality of *play time* (the time the player takes to play) and *event time* (the time taken in the gameworld [sic!])' (emphasis in original). The idea that Juul here proposes is that game time deviates from 'real world' time in some way. It functions differently: it is, in many ways, stretched or compressed and passes differently, oftentimes due to the impact, manipulation and agency that the player and player character have within the game world.

Temporal progression in digital games can therefore often be linked to the progression of gameplay and the player's actions, or it can, on the other hand, be set to a timer that binds the player as a strict rule or regulation. Similarly, play is cyclical: it is inherently repetitive to partake in a game, both digital and analogue ones alike. Players follow a certain gameplay loop that consists of specific actions and mechanics that are repeated again and again – be it in single or multiplayer settings. This concept of variation and repetition is one that will come up in the close analysis, but it yet again points out the specifics of ludic temporalities as opposed to non-ludic ones. To enter a game therefore means to enter, interact, and partake in different temporalities and spaces, that have their own inherent logics, rulesets and specifications.

By understanding this first proposition – that entering a game(world) means entering different temporal and spatial realms – the link to the concept of layered temporalities is then made easily. The term 'layers' allows us to visualise different worlds or realms as stacked on top of each other. This visualisation functions similarly to Johan Huizinga's (1956: 18) concept of the magic circle: a game world is erected within/on top of a 'real world'. It is in that sense functioning as a foundation on which other (ludic) worlds are established. Juul echoes some of these thoughts in his book *Half-Real* (2005: 164) where he explains the following: 'In sports or board games, *the game space* is a subset of the space in the world: The space in which the game takes place is a subset of a larger world, and a magic circle delineates the bounds of the game'. Game worlds are thus separate from the real or – in the words of Juul – 'larger world'. They are delineated and specifically established through game rules, and the intention of the player to follow them and take part in the game world. While, indeed, game worlds are part of the 'real' world and are only understood through our relation of them to real world events and experiences, the present argument remains; namely one that describes the establishment of a (mostly) separate world, with other rules and relations. While, as also shown by the vocabulary that Juul uses, the world outside of the game is larger and thus of higher hierarchy, all rules within the game space are elemental to keeping the game space intact. In fact, Juul (2005: 164) continues by writing that rules are the sole reason for this separation of worlds: 'Rules separate the game from the rest of the world by carving out an area where these rules apply'. To uphold the existence of game worlds, the player must therefore follow the rules. The mode of action for the player is therefore one of 'playing'. Bernard Suits similarly writes of the 'lusory attitude' (2014: 40) that a player must adopt in order to play a game and partake in the world as established by a magic circle. 'To play a game is […] where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity (lusory attitude)' (Suits, 2014: 43). While the overarching socio-cultural and moral rules of the world in which the game takes place must still be followed

(see Suits, 2014: 28: 'game rules as not ultimately binding'), the game rules are of the highest order within the game space. Suits (2014: 29) therefore proclaims:

> [I]n addition to being the kind of activity in which rules are inseparable from ends, games are also the kind of activity in which commitment to these rules is never ultimate. For the person playing the game there is always the possibility of there being a non-game rule to which the game rule may be subordinated.

These analysed worlds – the real world and, in addition, the game world – therefore fall under a certain hierarchy. The real or 'larger' world establishes a foundation of temporality, spatiality, and rules, that the game world is superimposed upon and adds to. The erected game world thus adds to the basis set by the real world. It issues additional rules, (re-) presents time and space differently, and requires specific modes of action. While, as mentioned before, the player must partake in the action of playing in order to take part in the world as established through the magic circle, their action within the game world is specified yet further. Playing thus means different things in different game spaces. It can be running, jumping, shooting, exploring, and a myriad of other things.

In his dissertation 'Games without Frontiers: Theories and Methods for Game Studies Design' (2007), Aki Järvinen argues that game mechanics are best described with verbs, and that performing these modes of action is what constitutes the game in the first place:

> In everyday experience, performing game mechanics are what playing a game is about, as they imply player action and performance – in other words: play. Therefore game mechanics are best described with verbs: Choosing, guessing, moving, aiming, shooting, collecting, kicking, trading, performing, bidding, etc. Thus the nature of a game mechanic, i.e. the action it conducts or simulates, might come to define the game experience for the player (2007: 72).

In *Gone Home* and *Obra Dinn*, the player has to play in order to enter the game world and once in it, they have to walk, explore, and investigate. The player's mode of action thus changes depending on what spatio-temporal realm of the game(space) they are currently acting on. To enter a game therefore not only means to enter a different world, it also means to (inter-)act within them accordingly. This is specifically realized here in the form of time capsules, as these modes of interaction are here linked to the 'archival', 'wandering' acts that Kagen (2019, 2022) describes.

Furthermore, this layering of spatio-temporalities can be examined not only from an extradiegetic point of view, concerning real world and game world ties, but also intradiegetically within the game. In what follows, I will therefore take a closer look at the layered temporalities in *Gone Home* and *Obra Dinn* specifically.

About gameplay with temporal layers: *Gone Home*

Richard McGuire's book *Here* (2014) is something between a picture book and a graphic novel, and shows on dozens of brightly printed double pages a home through the passing of several centuries. *Here* uses the space that two pages of the book provide as a spatial pane to show specific moments with and within the home and marks each of these apparent snapshots with a date in the top left corner. This achronological portrayal of time throughout

the book is however superimposed by smaller sections or cut-outs, that show other events, during other time periods, as layered on top of the other portrayed temporalities. The space of the 1915 living room is occupied by a bison-like mammal in 10,000 BCE, while in 1970 a young girl is similarly lying on the now-carpeted floor (McGuire, 2014). All these images appear on top of each other on the same double page. The timelines are thus visualised as stacked or layered. McGuire's work mimics in essence the spatio-temporal structures of detective-like – archival adventuring (Kagen, 2019) – games and brings events in different temporalities into relation by showing them off within the same spatiality. This layering that McGuire employs within his art not only shows the passage of time but also has the recipient bring events, spaces and times into relation and connection to one another. To, for lack of a better verb (echoing Järvinen, 2007), *read* Richard McGuire's book, means to inspect and deduce different temporalities and their relation to one another – to (try to) understand in what relation the bison and adolescent girl stand. Actions, actors and things in space become witnesses to and evidence for (past) events alike, especially when represented in this layered manner. These represented (non-)human objects functioning as witnesses will be also analysed more closely in later parts of this chapter.

Similarly, to *play Gone Home* means to inspect and deduce spaces, things, and their meaning (in time) and in relation to one another. *Gone Home*, like *Here*, takes the spatiality of a family's house to be the foundation of the game world and gameplay. All represented events and actions played-out by the player take place here. The home thus becomes the spatial foundation to all actions, actors and things. The game begins by having the player assume the role of Kaitlin (Katie) Greenbriar, a young woman returning to her family's home after a year abroad. During this year-long stay, Katie's family moved house, making the game space foreign to both the character Katie and the player assuming her role. As a player, we are immediately faced with the specific date and time at which the game takes place. It is 'June 7th, 1995. 1:15 AM' (*Gone Home*), as the typewritten text states before we take control of Katie as the player character, placed before the entry doors of a house. This is not only a historical date from the player's perspective – making the entry into the game an entry into another temporality altogether – it also marks the empty family home as specifically represented during this date and time. With no family member currently occupying the house, we are entering a time capsule. The dishevelled furniture and items strewn about are a concrete testimony to everything that has happened in the home until then: 'the house exists as a core-sample of one year in the life of your family' (Veale, 2017: 659). Fittingly, Kagen describes 'Lived-in spaces, in that sense, [as] heterotopias – overdetermined locations which layer association on top of association, like a geographic palimpsest' (2019: 4). A palimpsest, like McGuire's *Here*, or *Gone Home* and *Return of the Obra Dinn*, similarly features what can be described as layering of writing, thus becoming witness to prior processes and their effects on paper.

The first sequence of *Gone Home*, set on the patio of the estate, therefore in the space that introduces the home itself, also introduces the player to the core game mechanics of the game. The verbs are comprised of walking, interacting (with objects), reading and inspecting. Everything that the player can gather and understand in the game world is therefore specifically linked to their role as an onlooker in and of it. Here, the player and Katie both enter a different temporality – the early hours of June 7th, 1995 – as someone foreign and alien. The player's modes of action, the rules they have to follow, are what comprise the mechanics of *Gone Home* as a game and representative of its specific subgenre,

colloquially (and often derogatorily) referred to as a 'walking simulator'. Within this first tutorial space of the game, the player learns that one way of gathering information and thus navigating the space of the home is to inspect items, combine clues, and with them progress through the architecture of the home. *Gone Home*'s main mechanic – walking – not only functions as a way to explore the spatio-temporal environment of the game world, it is also how the player accesses the game's story. As also pointed out by Kagen (2022: 3), walking, or more specifically 'wandering', games incorporate '"wandering" as a theme, a formal mode, an aesthetic metaphor, or a player action'.

The game world of *Gone Home*, like any game, is one of a specifically constructed environment; an environment that in this case invites the player agent to explore, traverse and walk. The player's secondary task, however, goes beyond the imminent spatiality of the family's home and is instead focused on the deduction, reconstruction and excavation of the constructed history of the environment. This delineation is therefore representative of the temporal layers, as I analyse them. The constructed environment of the family home, and the represented past world within it, practically exist within the same spatiality but represent different temporal realms. As mentioned previously, the home that Katie visits in the present functions primarily as a time capsule to past events. *Gone Home*'s temporalities thus become layered.

Through the role of Katie, the player not only walks through this time capsule of a home; they also walk through its narrative. In his 2017 essay '*Gone Home*, and the Power of Affective Nostalgia', Kevin Veale argues that the narrative itself becomes architectural: 'Exploring the house is the same thing as exploring the story, because the narrative is architectural, […] because the story is distributed throughout its structure' (Veale, 2017: 659). The walking through the home therefore functions as the navigation of a game space as much as it does the gathering of a story. *Gone Hom*e's spatio-temporality, then, acts as the unifying agent between gameplay and storytelling; as the link between ludic and narrative elements. Henry Jenkins (2003) echoes these sentiments when arguing on the relevance of 'spatial stories and environmental storytelling' in digital games. Game spaces are thus as crucial to gameplay as they are to storytelling: 'Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces' (Jenkins, 2003). With Jenkins' approach, we learn that games 'fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken forms from hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives' (Jenkins, 2003), meaning that the traversing of a spatiality mirrors story beats in many ways. The world of a game is thus often linked to the story it tells. Tutorial spaces, for example, constitute the preface, from which the climax of the story is reached. *Gone Home* similarly works this way and specifically guides the player through the house in a predetermined manner, with plot lines and story arcs chronologically tied to rooms and routes. In fact, while the player might feel as though their route through the home was freely chosen, *Gone Home* cleverly locks rooms, and thus story beats, behind puzzles and literally locked doors.

Henry Jenkins furthermore alludes to the idea of environmental storytelling through 'evocative spaces' (2003) in particular and links his argumentation to his observation of theme parks. Like theme park designs, games similarly 'create[] an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with' (Jenkins, 2003). They are specifically constructed and evoke meaning and thus narrative through the associations that the viewer, or player, draws. *Gone Home* therefore serves as a great example to describe the close link between the (literary) figure of the flâneur and Katie as the player character.

With no true quest line presented, or tasks to fulfil, the game not only received harsh criticism for being 'a walking simulator' rather than 'a game' (see Reed, Murray, Salter, 2020: 118), but also has the player move through the home rather slowly, in an observant and, as mentioned previously, seemingly free and aimless way. Criticisms regarding *Gone Home*, however, must be framed within the larger context in which they took place. As primarily 'gendered female' (Kagen, 2022: 2) in its playstyle and following the narrative of a queer love story between Katie's sister Sam and her girlfriend Lonnie, *Gone Home* was caught in the midst of #Gamergate's misogynistic malice (Kagen, 2022: 12), a backlash that *Obra Dinn* never faced, despite their core 'walking' mechanics being similar in principle. The now reappropriated genre description of a walking simulator, while being fitting in many ways and used as a key term in this chapter, must always be taken and understood in consideration of this context.

Within *Gone Home*, the player, and thus Katie, wander through the time capsule that constitutes the game world in their role of – quite literally – an onlooker. The (past) events of the home cannot be changed anymore, and only the observation of them through this instance of layered temporalities is possible. The player of *Gone Home* can therefore spend as much time as they wish in the constructed game world, constituting the 'walking' done within the walking simulator game as a compilation of all its mechanics, puzzle-solving, and objective-oriented gameplay. The thoughtful and introspective but similarly also aimless and open-ended wandering through the game's environment is encouraged and – beyond that – the winning condition. Movement through the game is both a way to 'solve' the game, as well as movement for movement's sake. Like a flâneuse, Katie partakes in aimless movement (see Neumayer, 1999) and the observing of the game spaces becomes one of the main game mechanics: 'By framing the player as the configurative agent of the story, these games recall the flaneur […]. By enunciating an individual path and counterwalking the established narrative of the city, the flaneur becomes a configurative agent' (Kagen, 2019: 5). One's movement thus configures and establishes a narrative in this sense.

The player therefore walks through the architectural, spatiotemporal narrative and remains without agency to change past events. Instead, their method is one of a detective, or to mirror Andrew Reinhard's (2018) terms, one of an archaeologist: they cannot actively change past events, but are implored to dissect and deduce them. Storytelling in *Gone Home* is thus multifaceted: first, it is architectural, with the environment itself telling stories and becoming a story; second, the environment functions as an archaeological site, that the player interacts with to exhume written, or otherwise concrete records. This observation closely links *Gone Home* to the two theories analysed here: to the idea of (aimlessly) walking like a flaneur would, while painting the player as an archaeological actor. Reinhard argues in his book *Archaeogaming* (2018) that the player can assume the role of an archaeologist with their player character through the observation of game worlds. These worlds, and especially *Gone Home*, as I argue, feature three specific instances, or elements, to be archaeologically exhumed. Together with Reinhard, one can analyse *Gone Home* to have the following: its game world functions as a 'site' (Reinhard, 2018: 88), which has 'artifacts' (Reinhard, 2018: 29) and records within it. In the case of *Gone Home*, the player can find all three of these elements. The 'sites' are each of the home's rooms. The 'artifacts' are any of the items the player can pick up and interact with. The 'records' are any letters, and most notably the ones read aloud to the player character Katie, by her sister Sam. All of these elements guide the player in their understanding of the represented past of

the game world and interact with each other to tell the story of *Gone Home*. The elements are, however, all witnesses and evidence to the time capsule that constitutes the game. The game is 'composed of ludic repositories of material [...] which the player turns into a narrative' (Kagen, 2019: 2). These are in essence what make *Gone Home* a game of layered temporalities. The sites of *Gone Home* most directly constitute what one might understand as environmental storytelling. The living room of the house is cluttered with pizza boxes and empty soda cans, the furniture is dishevelled, the TV has been left on, and the couch cushions have been rearranged. While these items themselves are constructed as set pieces, they can be used to reconstruct the history of the home. Someone here has built the pillow fort, eaten fast food and watched TV. With the knowledge we as players bring to the game, and the knowledge the game provides us at other points of its architecture, we can draw from these narrative, archaeological, and archival conclusions. *Gone Home*'s artefacts, its interactable items, similarly gain meaning beyond their immediate materiality. The game's things become meaningful and disclose information about their history. In fact, this active perception and 'looking through' things is intended. Steve Gaynor, one of *Gone Home*'s creators, describes in the Developer Commentary (2013) of the game:

> A lot of *Gone Home* is about pointless interactivity. [...] Not because it's going to add a whole lot to your understanding of this world to be able to look at the underside of a cup, but [...] to say to the player, [...] you could pick up that cup and look at it [...]. It's for you to decide and understand and figure out what has significance.

This sentiment once again echoes the presumption of the player of *Gone Home* not having agency in changing the past but being able to interact with it in its role as a time capsule. Similarly, the idea of 'looking through' an object described earlier is closely linked to Bill Brown's 'Thing Theory' (2001). Brown observes that 'we look *through* objects' (2001: 4; emphasis in original), but we only ever look *at* things. Objects thus carry and convey significance, and make us aware of this meaning, while things have no such relevance. In the act of deducing what 'things' mean – or, in Gaynor's words 'to decide and understand and figure out what has significance' (2013) – the player makes them 'objects' in Brown's terms.

> [W]e look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture-above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window (Brown, 2001: 4).

Boxes full of the family father's books therefore disclose a history of unsuccessful publishing, despite only being a singular 'thing' in the larger scheme of the game. Daniel Livingstone, Sandy Louchart and Stuart Jeffrey use Andrew Reinhard's term 'archaeogaming' in their essay and expand on it by introducing the idea of 'Archaeological Storytelling' (2016: 1), which describes the term as 'storytelling through the exploration and investigation of objects and the process of attaching meaning to artefacts and inference about their significance and the societies and stories behind them' (2016: 5). Here, the authors similarly describe how items in a game like *Gone Home* bear meaning as they pertain to the historical past of a game world. In this sense, interactables become objects and artefacts through their active

perception and the attachment of meaning to them through the player. Lastly, *Gone Home* also includes the presence of records: certain items are linked to one of Sam's letters as they are addressed to her sister Katie and play a voice-over as they are picked up. The physical letters can be found at the end of the game; until then, they are only ever immaterial. These letters are the most concrete evidence in *Gone Home* and literally spell out Sam's feelings and troubles to Katie. Differently from an item with written text on it, these narrated letters are explicitly addressed to Katie and explain Sam's circumstances and past incidents to her. While an item like a postcard might seem to fulfil the same role as these 'records', a player still has to deduce its surrounding meaning themselves. Sam's letters, on the other hand, lack this ambiguity. Nevertheless, these letters, or records, yet again explicitly mark the game world as a past world and *Gone Home* as a game of layered temporalities. Sam has written them to her sister in the time she has been gone. The letters themselves thus become (evidence of) time capsules: they are artefacts specifically tied to an already passed moment of time, thus becoming explorable archives that convey emotions, thoughts and desires, all anchored by their temporality and medium into a fixed and unchangeable state.

With *Gone Home*'s setting and storytelling, the player can learn of a narrative deeply ingrained into the very fabric of the game's spatiality: it is the past of all of Katie's family that is presented and represented through the space of the game. These spaces – compiled of sites, filled with artefacts, and enriched by records – all invite the player to think beyond their superficial appearance and instead reconstruct their linked narrative on their own. The game mechanics and the game's affordances thus mostly revolve around this willingness of the player to exhume and understand its constructed past. *Gone Home*'s ending can be reached by only solving some minor puzzles, and the game does in fact not have to be analysed or understood in order to be completed mechanically. Its 'true' or intended gameplay, however, lies beyond these initial interactions with the game and is linked to these internal thought processes of the player and their willingness 'to decide and understand and figure out' (Gaynor, 2013).

Return of the Obra Dinn, on the other hand, needs to be understood to be completed and a thoughtless brute forcing of the game is much more unlikely than it is with *Gone Home*. These differences in mechanics and modes of progression are the most striking divergences between the two games, and many of the other elements analysed here can also be applied to *Obra Dinn,* which I will explore in the following section.

About playable time capsules: *Return of the Obra Dinn*

> 'In Walking Sims, you're cleaning up the story with your feet. And often, you're doing the memory work involved in emotionally tidying up the story of a corpse's life' (Kagen: 2022, 10).

As hinted at before, *Return of the Obra Dinn* seems dissimilar to *Gone Home* in many ways. The game, presumably because it has not been caught up in #Gamergate disputes and the undermining of feminine gaming practices, is much less often referred to as a walking simulator – despite not employing many more game mechanics – and is more frequently referred to as a puzzle or adventure game. In *Return of the Obra Dinn,* the player assumes the role of an insurance officer of the East India Company in charge of reconstructing the events that led to the demise of the 60 crew members and passengers of the Obra Dinn, a

merchant ship that was 'Lost at Sea, 1803' (Pope, 2018: title screen). The player is tasked to visit the ship, which has reappeared, in a game world set strictly in 1807. This, very similar to *Gone Home*, yet again marks the game as a historical setting for the player themselves. It is furthermore again an intradiegetic historicisation of its setting. With the Obra Dinn being lost at sea for multiple years at the time the game takes place, the player and player character are both visiting the game's locale as a temporal outsider and onlooker. Here, again, the game's temporalities are twofold and layered from the start. This layering is taking place in a constricted spatiality, with the ship acting as the setting for this layered temporality. The idea of (the) *Obra Dinn* being a playable time capsule, however, is in many ways even more clearly marked by its inherent gameplay loop. As mentioned earlier, the task of the player is to figure out what happened to all 60 passengers of the eponymous ship. This is done by figuring out the fate of every person on-board and adding that information to a list consisting of every passenger's name. These inputs, or player's assumptions, are confirmed in sets of three, making a random guess very unlikely to be successful. Understanding the events of *Obra Dinn* – and with them, the events that took place on the Obra Dinn – thus becomes crucial to progress and finishing the game.

Yet, the way the game offers this information to the player is different from *Gone Home*. In *Obra Dinn*, the player is in possession of a pocket watch, making time – or rather, the switch between different temporal planes – an instrumentalised part of game play. This supernatural watch, called 'Memento Mortem', can be used to interact with the lifeless body of any of the ship's passengers. Doing so causes the pocket watch to rewind itself backwards to the supposed time of death of that person and, with it, the player is also transported to a moment frozen in time, depicting the final moment of that passenger's life. It is here that the playable time capsules, as I analyse them, come into play. *Return of the Obra Dinn* presents these moments of death at a standstill: they function like a temporal vignette that the player can freely move within and observe from any angle as everything around them is frozen in time. By giving out information in this manner, none of the events surrounding the fate of the Obra Dinn are ever examinable in their entirety at once. Unlike in *Gone Home*, where all of the information and history in the game are available at any time, within *Return of the Obra Dinn*, these temporal vignettes, or time capsules, must be accessed separately from one another and one at a time. This further strengthens the argument made to describe the game as one of layered temporalities: a body is found (most often) at the same place it has died, but only through a rewind back in time, at this exact spatiality, is an examination of its circumstances possible. These vignettes are temporally layered microcosms utilising the same spatiality that the frame narrative and gameplay does.

Return of the Obra Dinn thus functions like McGuire's *Here* yet again. As in *Here*, the playable time capsules of *Return of the Obra Dinn* are similarly superimposed onto the base spatiality and show fragmented instances of time as separated and atemporal at once. Within these vignettes, the player is once more only able to assume the role of an onlooker and passive recipient. The Obra Dinn and its passengers already met their fate, and the player can only inspect these multiple moments of death through these scenes where neither time nor movement occurs. In his text regarding the narrative architecture of games, Henry Jenkins writes of 'micronarratives' (2003), a term that can be also applied to this feature of *Return of the Obra Dinn*. Jenkins analyses these narratives and links his thesis to an observation of 'Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*' (2003), where he describes the mode of storytelling for a larger narrative to

consist of 'short narrative units' as 'localized instances' (2003). These micronarratives not only serve to embellish the larger story but also add to the overarching narrative itself. Similarly, *Return of the Obra Dinn*'s death scenes each constitute part of the grand narrative of the fate of the Obra Dinn and therefore function together and in relation to one another. Understanding all of *Obra Dinn* and successfully finishing the game thus means finding a specifically localised deceased body, using the 'Memento Mortem' watch, analysing the scene linked to the moment of this passenger's death, finding another body, and repeating these prior steps.

The gameplay loop of *Return of the Obra Dinn* is in many ways, as hinted at in earlier parts of this chapter, explicitly repetitive; a constantly reoccurring act of returning to and within the Obra Dinn and its numerous states of existing in time. While the game employs the concept of micronarratives or -cosms I have described, its time capsules are presented separately, but only ever function narratively in relation to one another. This form of storytelling is, in many ways, a serialised form of narration. *Obra Dinn*'s micronarratives are episodic in nature and serialised in their arrangement, yet not sequential in your discovery of them. Each death and adjacent scene in the game bears connections to others and to different plotlines and the player is tasked with the objective to untangle this achronology set by the game and document, categorise, and detail its history. The player is in a sense straightening the non-linear temporality of *Obra Dinn* (and *Gone Home* alike; see Kagen, 2019: 9; 2022: 30). Simon Parkin (2018) describes it as follows: 'Once the scene [the flashback] has played out, you are placed, momentarily, within a frozen diorama, free to walk around, examine and deduce who is present, how they met their end, and, by cross-referencing other gathered clues and identities, at whose hands'. Repeating, rewatching and re-entering the scenes is thus a necessity in *Obra Dinn*'s gameplay. Through recognisable scenes, objects and storylines – or, to bring the earlier established terms up again – sites, artefacts and records – *Return of the Obra Dinn* builds its narrative through scattered information and sprawling narrative hints. The player is therefore required to deduce the game's narratives through what Don Carson calls '"cause and effect" elements' (2000).

Carson's background is in theme park design, which he uses to conceptualise the way environmental storytelling works in digital games. He proclaims that these cause-and-effect elements are 'bits of storytelling' (2000) and 'staged areas that lead the game player to come to their own conclusions about a previous event or to suggest a potential danger just up ahead' (2000). Any constructed environment, be it digital or theme parks, can thus arrange its assets in order to convey a story. The player of *Obra Dinn* is therefore yet again implored to reconstruct the game world's constructed history through active perception and deduction. Don Carson furthermore also writes of the explicit 'arrangement of props that suggest something unfortunate may have just happened' (2020) within these cause-and-effect storytelling elements. *Obra Dinn* is, due to its narrative setting and plot, filled with these unfortunate events that are alluded to through its environment. A loose cannon below deck in one vignette, and a blown-up wall in the next, therefore not only link to each other, but also to the death of one, or more, passengers of the ship. Similarly to how 'things' become 'objects' with Brown (2001: 4) in the case of *Gone Home*, with Carson and *Return of the Obra Dinn*, environments become a story (see Carson, 2020).

With *Return of the Obra Dinn*, storytelling therefore is 'indexical' (Fernández-Vara, 2011), rather than concrete. Unlike *Gone Home*, for example, *Obra Dinn* does not utilise records as concrete information. Instead, the player is encouraged to, to an extent, write their own

records by filling out the ship's logbook. The player's understanding of the game world is therefore not only the winning condition, but its recording and capturing is also one of the game's main mechanics. In this way, the player is assumed to understand the time capsules they enter and retrospectively substantiate the game's environmental storytelling through their in-game notes as a way of untangling the game's achronologies. Furthermore, this gameplay act again exemplifies how *Obra Dinn*'s temporalities are layered: it is the deducing and exhuming, the concretising and writing of its constructed history, from a (temporal) outsiders' perspective, that here becomes the mode of action. The game's microcosms, accessed through the 'Memento Mortem' pocket watch, thus become separated and playable instances of time. Within *Return of the Obra Dinn*, the non-human, or rather, no-longer-human objects – the corpses of the 60 passengers – thus serve as the game's presented evidence and witnesses. The lifeless bodies are the archival *things* that become significant *objects* (see Brown, 2001: 4): '*Obra Dinn* begins each encounter with a corpse-as-thing, but the puzzle mechanic nudges the player into an encounter with the corpse-as-formerly-alive' (Kagen, 2019: 39).

The aforementioned gameplay loop in *Gone Home* and *Obra Dinn* furthermore consists of similar actions repeated again and again. Within both games, Adam Chapman's proposed concept of 'reading' and 'doing' (2016: 31) is followed equally. Chapman describes *reading* a game as activities, that 'involve the consumption of representations' (2016: 31), while *doing* includes 'activities in games […] that involve interacting with the game rules' (2016: 31). Acting and interacting within the playable time capsules erected by *Gone Home* and *Obra Dinn* require the player to *read* the temporal space as an archive or archaeological site, while *doing* so under the restriction of the game rules. Continuing this string of arguments from Chapman, and understanding the games as ergodic literature following Aarseth (1997), the player becomes 'both the narrator and the audience' (Chapman, 2016: 34). They are producing the story for themselves, through the scattered hints and objects laid out by the game and its (re)presentation through them as temporally layered. Within *Gone Home*'s and *Obra Dinn*'s time capsules, the stories of the games already exist. They are in a sense both already conceptualized by the writers and producers of the game, as well as strategically placed within the game world. The player thus reproduces this preexisting story by reading, doing, and reconstructing it through their 'own life experiences' (Chapman, 2016: 35; Ricoeur, 1981).

A conclusion

Playable time capsules, and by extension, layered temporalities, as I analyse them here, function both as a ludic mechanic, as well as a narrative form of storytelling in games like *Gone Home* and *Return of the Obra Dinn*. The concept of playable time capsules primarily describes the ability of digital games to represent one, or more, temporal realms within themselves. In the case of the game examples analysed here, it describes the intradiagetical historicisation of a game world's setting, and the act of entering a different temporality as a playing field. As this chapter has shown, the temporalities of these games thus become layered and their storytelling in many ways achronological and tangled. Gameplay and progression in and within these games are thus linked to an understanding and active untangling of them. It is both a 'straightening' of its story, as well as a processing of the archives that the games represent.

Furthermore, the narrative in *Gone Home* and *Obra Dinn* can be analysed as strictly linked to the games' respective spatio-temporalites. It is bound to the games' spaces –

making narrative architectural and archaeological – and only perceivable through the close consideration of the games' temporalities. The layering of temporalities thus makes relevant both *how* and *when* the game's objects-as-witnesses are (re-)presented.

Playable time capsules can therefore be understood as microcosms or sub-levels of certain games, that a player enters and traverses through. They are made to be playable segments of time, but similarly only ever exist as disconnected from the frame narrative and temporality of the game – making them, paradoxically, atemporal instances of time. This marks the player character, as well as the player, as an onlooker and temporal outsider in these games and game worlds, constituting the layered nature of their temporal realms. *Gone Home* and *Return of the Obra Dinn* here served as the main examples to visualise these theses, but they are by no means the only games that function in this way. As entering any game means entering a different (game) world, the arguments and suggested vocabulary set out here can be applied to many more examples.

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‘Watch for fairies, fen-folk, and fiends’. An Authentic and Didactic Approach to Historical Xenophobia in *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*’s multi-cultural world of the 9th century

Tamara Urach

Introduction

Technological progress and the increasing accessibility of technical equipment means that young people today grew up playing video games and continue to do so, which makes the medium a vital part of life in the 21st century (Jones, 2018). Video games are a great tool to give people an understanding of a variety of themes and can be used as introduction to certain topics, and this is also true for the Norse world and the Viking Age, which have become increasingly visible in popular culture over time. In the 1970s, twenty years after the first video games emerged, they became generally accessible to large audiences, but it took another couple of years for the first Viking-centred video games to be released, e.g. *The Saga of Erik the Viking* (Level 9 Computing, 1984) and *Viking Raiders* (Lukas, 1984). In recent years, this theme became all too common and popular in the video game industry (Lasausse, 2024: 147), including Ubisoft’s 12th instalment of their *Assassin’s Creed* franchise – *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* (Ubisoft, 2020a). Released in 2020, the game focuses on Anglo-Saxon Britain and Norway and picks up on not only stereotypical Viking topics such as raiding, fighting, and drinking, but also historical xenophobia towards pagans. Thus, there are a number of questions that need to be considered regarding the historical context and accuracy of the game and whether or not it is a suitable tool for an educational environment. This article thus not only provides sections on the historical period and location(s) presented within the game, but also comments on the idea of xenophobia, adding two case studies from the main game *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* as

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well as the DLC[1] *Wrath of the Druids* (Ubisoft, 2021a). It concludes with my final verdict, in which I argue that the game's use in an educational context can in fact be authentic and meaningful, especially when it comes to engagement of students.

Assassin's Creed: Valhalla – setting the (historical) scene

Ubisoft's 2020 video game *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, the 12th instalment of the franchise, is set in medieval England. The plot of the main story takes place at the end of the 9th century CE in Anglo-Saxon England, at a point when Viking settlements and emigration from Scandinavia to today's England peaked (Ubisoft, 2020b). In the role of the main protagonist Eivor,[2] the player can '[e]xplore a beautiful, mysterious open world where [they'll] face brutal enemies, raid fortresses, build [their] clan's new settlement, and forge alliances to win glory and earn a place in Valhalla' (Ubisoft, 2021b). In creating a virtual representation of a world within 9th century England, Ubisoft consulted historians in order to implement the historical backdrop of the so-called 'Dark Ages' in Anglo-Saxon England (Ubisoft, 2020b).

Historically, the British Isles have long been a melting pot of different cultures and peoples, as also represented in the game. Initially inhabited by Celtic tribes, Roman influence increased drastically around 55 BCE when Julius Caesar arrived, culminating in a full conquest in 43 CE. The Romans continued to rule 'Britannia' until the 5th century, creating a Romano-Celtic society, but ultimately withdrew control as the Roman Empire faced external pressures during the migration period. They left a power vacuum in Britain, which was filled by the Germanic Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (Anglo-Saxons) around 450 CE, tribes that pushed the Celtic population north and west and brought their pagan beliefs with them, challenging the Christian faith that was already predominant at the time (Naismith, 2021: 58-63, 218).

By the late 8th century, Britain had to face yet another wave of invaders: the Vikings. As mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, they decided to settle in Northumbria after their raid on Lindisfarne in 793 CE (raiding unprotected monasteries in Britain proved to be lucrative business), once again reintroducing paganism after Pope Gregory I successfully Christianised the Anglo-Saxons. Even before the establishment of the Danelaw (the area under Viking rule), conflicts between the two culturally and religiously different parties broke out, especially during the leadership of King Alfred of Wessex. By the 9th century, Britain had become a complex tapestry of Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, and Roman remnants, who all contributed to a rich cultural and religious heritage (Naismith, 2021: 137, 416, 436-437).

Similarly to Great Britain, Ireland had already been Christianised before the Anglo-Saxons settled in England. Despite consisting of five Gaelic kingdoms, Ireland was ruled by one High King, who was crowned at the Royal Hill of Tara. After the Vikings' orientation West from their homeland, they also started to settle in the area of today's Dublin and were subsequently called 'Dublin Norse'. Often hired as mercenaries by the Irish, they

1 Downloadable Content.

2 The player can choose for the avatar to be female (Eivor Varinsdottir) or male (Eivor Varinsson) at the beginning of the game and even change this throughout (Ubisoft, 2020a). For the purpose of continuity, this paper will refer to Eivor as a male character.

were part of the in-fighting between the Irish kingdoms, becoming more and more powerful while staying in close contact with other Viking settlements outside of Ireland and especially in their home country Norway (Donnelly, 2004: 155, 165-166, 344-348). This means that both Britain and Ireland at the time consisted of a multitude of people that displayed differences in culture as well as religion, leading to not only in-fighting for power, but also disputes that can be ascribed to xenophobia.

Xenophobia – a definition and history

Xenophobia is defined by dictionaries as 'strong and unreasonable dislike or fear of people from other countries […] or of their politics or culture' (Collins Dictionary, n.d.) and 'fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign' (Merriam Webster, n.d.). Etymologically speaking, the term 'xenophobia' originates in ancient Greek and derives from the terms *xenos* meaning 'guest' or 'stranger', and *phobos*, translating to 'fear' or 'flight' (Merriam Webster, n.d.). It is interesting to see that the Collins Dictionary (n.d.) lists the words 'racism', 'nationalism', 'bigotry', as well as 'isolationism' as synonyms for xenophobia.

Throughout history, xenophobia has been present in many different forms of violence and discrimination. Hateful attacks on ethnic and religious groups or minorities as well as genocide are commonly known to have happened in different parts of the world in different time periods (beyond the Middle Ages), most tragically during the Holocaust. Even today we can see forms of xenophobia in hate towards refugees or Islamophobia. Due to transfer and mutual influence of cultures, humanity has been dealing with 'the Other' for thousands of years. It seems to lie somewhat in the nature of humans to try and look for differences between each other while still practicing cultural exchange. Starting in antiquity, the term 'Barbarian' was used to isolate oneself from 'the Other' (Gehler & Müller, 2016: 16-18), in a period when there were clear cultural differences and territorial separation between Asia and Europe. This division even resulted in the Persian Wars of the 5th century BCE (Cartwright, 2016) where, from a Eurocentric perspective, Hellenistic freedom fought against Asian obedience (Schulz, 2016: 63-64).

Although much of Europe was connected by Christian belief during the Middle Ages – the High Middle Ages in particular – the question of 'What is Europe?' was not necessarily considered at the time. In addition, other cultural influences had been and were present within the European context, such as those of the Germanic peoples, Celts, Greeks, Etruscans and Illyrians, and these influences are not only responsible for the culturally multi-faceted Europe we experience today but could also be seen in England during the 9th century (Gehler & Müller, 2016: 23-24). This diversity provided not only opportunities for the exchange of culture, goods, and language, but also room for hostility and conflict.

Conflict of this kind is visible in medieval England. Through the arrival of the Danes in the 8th century, as mentioned above, the cultural landscape changed from a predominantly Christian one to a multi-cultural world. As Kastoryano (2018: 1-2) notes, multiculturalism is a challenge to national unity since it has connotations of 'groupism' and 'tribalism', raising problems between 'opposing' groups of people. On the other hand, transculturality does not see cultures as fixed frames and does not necessarily distinguish between them, highlighting the fact that the lines between cultures are blurry and supporting intermingling between cultures (Benessaieh, 2010: 11). A certain division can

be seen in Christian European literature, which highlights, or even creates, a split between paganism and Christianity, especially visible in medieval works that justify hostility towards other religious groups[3] (Otaño Gracia & Armenti, 2017: 176). This animosity is not limited to different religions, but can also be seen towards different practices and strands within a single religion, as evident in the English invasion of Ireland during the 12th century, during which the Irish were referred to as bestial, savage, and subhuman people (Heng, n.d.: 3).

Hostility towards pagans in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*

When examining *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, both the historical context and the term xenophobia prove to be vital, since they are at the centre of the (artistic) portrayal of the historical period and prominent throughout the game. Despite there being a number of different episodes suitable for analysis of historical xenophobia, the game provides two instances in which the portrayal of these concepts is especially noticeable, namely the Glowecestrescire episode within the main game, and the storyline from the DLC *Wrath of the Druids*. Both sections offer a Celtic setting in addition to the Viking one, picking up on the cultural differences present throughout the Middle Ages, and presenting the player with several problems while also offering them the opportunity to resolve xenophobic issues within the community while following the storyline.

Glowecestrescire

The Glowecestrescire episode is one of the final regions in the main game and introduces a storyline based on religious differences and prejudices. The quest takes Eivor to the equivalent of the real-world Gloucestershire, an area close to today's Wales and thus still rooted in Celtic culture. Eivor is tasked to accompany and protect Tewdwr, the future Ealdorman of Glowecestrescire and devout Christian, who does not share his precursor's love for pagan culture and who intends to be rid of the old ways once he is in charge. This attitude is clearly visible in the dialogue of their very first encounter with each other (Ubisoft, 2020a):

> Gunnar: Tewdwr! This is Eivor, my chieftain.
> Tewdwr: Ah, yes. The way Gunnar speaks, I expected --
> Eivor: Me to ride in on a winged horse? Cure the sick, the blind? His compliments are as blunt as his hammer.
> Tewdwr: Ah, more pagans crowding our table. Just lovely. What brings you here?
> Eivor: *Have I wronged you? I am here only for the wedding. Where I come from, we do not poison the well of friendship so swiftly.
> Tewdwr: And what has Dane friendship done for Christian Mercia? Unseated God-right kings for puppet rulers?
> Eivor: *So-called puppet kings keep your lands safe and your bellies full. I ask no thanks, only hospitality (Gamer's Little Playground, 2020: 18:10:10-18:11:01)[4]

3 Hostility towards pagans can be seen as a precursor of modern racism (Otaño Gracia & Armenti, 2017: 176). Against common belief, race and racism are considered to be phenomena that have existed for a long period of time instead of being a modern-day emergence. Although originally defined as a biological term, race is now typically understood as a social construct (Heng, n.d.: 1).

4 Asterisks in dialogues indicate that this particular line is only one of the options available for the player to choose from in terms of dialogue.

The dialogue highlights Tewdwr's aversion towards pagan people and he clearly displays prejudices towards non-Christians even though he has never met Eivor before. He instantly assumes Eivor believes in the Germanic Gods, based on to the words Eivor uses – 'winged horses' and 'hammers' play an important part in the Germanic myths (see e.g. 'Valkyries' and 'Mjolnir'). The statement '[…] more pagans crowding our table. Just lovely' (see above) suggests that Tewdwr is neither happy with the multiculturality of the area he lives in, nor with the fact that there are (seemingly) a good number of people left living in line with the old ways, which makes sense near an area characterised by Celtic remnants. Even though Eivor does not seem too offended by Tewdwr's remarks, he does voice his slight discontent over the comment, stating that he has not wronged the future ruler in any way.

However, throughout the storyline both the player and Eivor soon realise that Tewdwr is 'a kinder man than the mask [he] wear[s]' (Gamer's Little Playground, 2020: 18:14:35-18:14:38), seeing through his façade. Even though Tewdwr continues to be unreasonable, belittling the Celtic festival Samhain and mentioning how the current ruler '[…] humors these Pagans too much. It is the first thing gone when I am ealdorman. Fires and magic, spirits in the air, Glowecestrescire has strayed from God's light' (Gamer's Little Playground, 2020: 18:13:18-18:13:28), he admits to being happy to see the joy on children's faces, which suggests that he is beginning to think about whether his attitude and prejudices are justified or not.

Upon further getting to know him, Eivor realises that Tewdwr's rejection of the old ways is rooted in his upbringing. While getting drunk, Tewdwr opens up to Eivor and apologises about being hostile towards him. The two bond and start to understand each other better when Eivor learns that Tewdwr had different plans for his life and future, mentioning how he 'wanted to be a cardinal, but the men who raised [him] said [he]'d serve God better as an ealdorman' (Gamer's Little Playground, 2020: 18:29:53-18:30:00). With empowering and assuring words, Eivor manages to get through to Tewdwr and convinces him that he is his own man who can make his own decisions, triggering the future ealdorman to even further reflect on his attitude: 'Perhaps I judge too much … truths I half-believe. Foolishness sometimes takes my tongue' (Gamer's Little Playground, 2020: 18:31:18-18:31:29). This can be seen as a major turning point of the episode and a definitive step towards Tewdwr being more open and understanding towards non-Christian peoples and cultures, even though some prejudices remain to be overcome. Nevertheless, Eivor supports Tewdwr and even saves him from being killed by Modron, a healer and priestess who follows the old ways and who wants to protect her daughter's future in Glowecestrescire. Here, Eivor wholeheartedly supports the claim that 'Tewdwr is a changed man' and that he 'embraces Christ and Cernunnos alike' (Gamer's Little Playground, 2020: 18:37:31-18:37:47).

Throughout, the Glowecestrescire episode highlights how the non-Christian part of the population is considered to be 'lesser' than people who worship the Christian god, even in an area where cultural intermingling is 'inevitable' near the Celtic border. This can not only be seen in the comments towards Eivor, but especially in those made against the population worshipping the old gods and exercising ancient pagan practices. Eivor can be seen as a mediator who is able to convince Tewdwr that the Celtic population does not pose a threat – not with power of persuasion, but simply by getting to know each other, through communication as well as cultural exchange: a skillset he is also able to use in the Ireland episode, where, as we will see, he assumes a similar role.

Wrath of the Druids (2021)

As the first major expansion of *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, the DLC *Wrath of the Druids* is set in medieval Ireland towards the end of the 9th century. The game emphasises similar problems to those in Glowecestrescire and introduces Ireland as a new playable world, as Eivor seeks to explore its mysteries, creatures, and culture. Arriving in Dublin to aid his cousin Bárid, Eivor soon witnesses hostility towards Dublin Danes, many of whom are partly Christianised, worshipping both the old gods and the new Christian god. This can especially be seen from the attitude of Ireland's High King Flann towards Bárid, and to a certain (different) extent also towards Ciara, the king's pagan poetess. Despite respecting her as a person, his distaste towards her beliefs is clearly noticeable.

Flann's distrust against Norse pagan beliefs, despite many of the Dublin Danes also following the Christian god, is clearly seen in his address to Bárid. Early on in the game, Bárid himself mentions how Flann is 'a bit suspicious of [him], in fact. But he needs [Bárid's] army, so he holds his nose' (Rino, 2021: 00:53:33-00:53:39). His hopes to gain Flann's trust seem to be in vain, since the king continues to distrust him despite Barid's repeated efforts for his cause. On the contrary, Bárid is accused of treachery after the Irish part of the army is poisoned while Dublin's Vikings remain in good condition.

> Flann: Only the Irish were poisoned. Your Danes are hale and hearty.
> Ciara: My lord –
> Flann: Flattering words and servile gifts, all to mask treachery.
> […]
> Flann: Ciara, I chose to place you at my right hand because you see clear. Still, I cannot trust this Dublin Dane.
> Bárid: My king, I have faithfully served you!
> Eivor: Trust him better, lord.
> Flann: I said silence! Danes often fight for either side. Bárid, stay within these castle walls while I consider your position. I must first find care for my soldiers.
> Ciara: You well know, my king, I have a friend who can heal most any malady.
> Flann: Argh, one of your scattered coven of forest-dwelling pagans? (Rino, 2021: 00:59:20-01:00:29)

This interaction highlights the continuous mistrust Flann displays towards Dublin Danes and especially Bárid, accusing them of being two-faced and dubious. Nevertheless, Flann is willing to put his trust into the hands of Eivor and Ciara, who not only find a cure for the soldiers, but also unveil the Children of Danu, a cult opposing Flann, as culprits. Flann apologises with the words 'I regret my earlier distrust. But I've seen too much Irish blood spilt by Danes to give trust easily' (Rino, 2021: 01:11:12-01:11:20), revealing that his suspicion towards non-Christian people(s) is rooted in past negative experiences. As the plot continues, however, it becomes clear to the characters and the player that these negative experience(s) had too great an impact for Flann to abandon his views, and he continues to ignore both Bárid's council and his warnings of a plot against the high king. The plot ultimately results in the Viking's death, and only after this does Flann realise his misjudgement, and he then offers support to Bárid's son and heir Sichfrith, as well as Eivor.

Another advisor of Flann's who is affected by his prejudices is Ciara. Despite mutual respect for each other, Ciara knows that Flann does not have a personal love for her (Celtic

pagan) beliefs and throughout the game she realises more and more that he wants to build a new, Christian Ireland. One early example can be seen in the conversation above, where Flann accuses Bárid of poisoning the Irish army. Ciara proposes to seek aid with a healer she happens to be close to, but Flann discounts her suggestion and doubts 'one of [her] scattered coven of forest-dwelling pagans' (Rino, 2021: 01:00:26-01:00:29) might be able to help.

Although Flann pledges that Ciara's people will be part of the future of Ireland, she is unsure that she can trust his words, confiding in Eivor:

> My hopes are placed in him, but am I a fool? He has no deep love of the past. He hopes to build a new Ireland. He pledges that my people will be a part of it, but once he's king, storms will come. I cannot know where he will take refuge (Rino, 2021: 01:09:18-01:09:33).

Ciara's reservations turn out to be correct in the end as Flann, after the destruction of the Children of Danu, discusses ridding Ireland of the druids in order to preserve the land under a Christian god. He explains that he needs to 'launch an inquisition. Every druid will face a choice. Reform or exile. The future of Ireland is a wholly Christian one' (Rino, 2021: 01:40:35-01:40:45). He does this despite feeling love and respect for Ciara on a personal level, as he does not feel any love for the old ways she follows. Again, his decision has serious consequences when Ciara vows to destroy the Christians in Ireland in order to protect her own people, activating the Lia Fáil with her ancient druidic powers. After Eivor manages to stop her with the help of Flann, the latter retracts his decision and vows to be a king for everyone in Ireland, recognising his mistrust to be wrong.

Eivor is met with more trust and respect in Ireland than he is in the earlier episode in Glowecestrescire. It seems that king Flann mainly distrusts Bárid for his dual religious beliefs in both the old gods and the Christian god, presuming a ruse from the ruler of Dublin. Although he mentions how he is not able to trust Danes, he repeatedly puts his faith in Eivor and does not voice any doubts against the clan leader, even though he, too, comes from a culture worshipping the old gods. Surprisingly, however, the player does witnesses the sort of taunting that Eivor does not receive, here directed against Ciara by Flann. Although she is a poetess and his 'good friend', he repeatedly makes the point that her old pagan and druidic ways are nothing he is fond of or appreciates. In a manner similar to the Glowecestrescire quest, Eivor can again be seen to act as some sort of connection and mediator between the two sides. In the end, and again, he manages to unite the two parties and overcome their differences to a great degree.

These two episodes serve as excellent examples inviting reflection on xenophobia within the game and how to overcome it. That alone does not necessarily mean that such a game might be suitable in education, posing the question of how it can effectively be used to encourage meaningful discussions in class and whether it is even appropriate to incorporate commercial video games like *Assassin's Creed* into teaching, questions that will be answered in the following section.

Assassin's Creed in education

Due to the ever-growing importance and popularity of video games, especially among younger people, scholars have been investigating their didactic function in education. Video games are well-established in today's media landscape and can engage millions of people for a longer period of time than either movies or TV shows. This is especially true for

franchises like *Assassin's Creed*, which has received extensive academic attention (e.g. the recent edited volume *'Assassin's Creed' in the Classroom: History's Playground or a Stab in the Dark?* by Erik Champion and Juan Francisco Hiriart Vera). The question of realism and authenticity in video games is an essential one: asking ourselves 'what is real?' and 'what is good?' not only plays an important role in entertainment, but also from an educational/didactic perspective. In the case of new media like video games, movies, and TV shows we thus have to ask the question about how authentic the production is (Enseleit & Schade, 2020: 174-175) and whether it can then be used for educational purposes.

Authenticity is one of the key factors mentioned in connection with history education. The word comes from the Old Greek word *αυθεντικός* and is translated with a view to the idea of the 'author' in the sense of an originator or creator of a certain object. Authenticity is difficult to define, especially when it comes to 'true' or 'correct' depictions of the past in popular cultural historical productions. A museum exhibiting original items might generally be considered to be the epitome of authenticity, but the concept itself is a relative rather than an absolute notion. Consequently, it is not only originals that can be authentic, but also replicas and reconstructions, as they bear witness to our sense of the past, and in any case historical sites are hardly ever preserved in their original form (Grebe, 2020: 227; Grossmann, 2020: 23-24, 33; Enseleit & Schade, 2020: 175). There is, of course, no way to find out what historical reality looked like, since finding traces is difficult; the only option we have is to reconstruct past realities by looking at what is available to us today and interpreting it accordingly, creating something we believe to represent the past (Enseleit & Schade, 2020: 198-204; Copplestone, 2017: 417-418). Authenticity and video games are thus not mutually exclusive. Crew and Sims (1991: 163) argue that '[a]uthenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do', emphasising that it is actually people that assign meaning to objects and other things. Important in terms of authenticity are not only knowledge and conceptions of history, but also emotions and aesthetics, as well as the visual and ludic habits of players (Enseleit & Schade, 2020: 176).

The portrayal of history in the *Assassin's Creed* series is deeply connected to selective authenticity (Salvati & Bullinger, 2013), focusing not only on accuracy, but to a large part also on audience engagement. Selective authenticity is a narrative tool that blends historical representations with the audience's expectations. Rather than simply striving for strict historical accuracy in their games, the developers mainly focus on an immersive experience for the player that blends factual with fictional elements and narratives, as can be seen in several historical settings throughout the *AC* series (such as Florence during the Renaissance or Egypt in Antiquity). Accurate elements from the time are interwoven with fictional stories, which highlights the importance of player engagement over factual precision in ensuring that players 'feel' and 'experience' the world, evoking a feeling that they are actually there. This is probably the biggest advantage of video games: they provide the technology that makes it possible to display 'reality', depicting a simulation of it and giving players the opportunity to find out what could change if something in the storyline is altered, as well as showing the choices 'historical' agents might have had to make (Salvati & Bullinger, 2013: 153-157; McCall, 2016: 518-525, 530). It is important to understand that, in the end, it is approachability and entertainment over historical accuracy that is the focus, and even though the latter might be a key factor, common stereotypes might be used to make characters recognisable (Lasausse, 2024: 142-146, 148-149).

Despite the fact that the *Assassin's Creed* series' authenticity is rather about perceived realism than strict historical details, it can be used as a valuable tool in education. The games feature anachronisms and omissions, as well as compressions and additions, in order to work as games, shaping their world(s) in terms of modern understandings and biases. Players perceive those anachronisms as real; yet the series still has potential uses in a classroom setting. This is not only true for the main games, with which students need to engage critically, but also for one of the features that was incorporated in the newer games of the 'Layla Saga[5]': the 'Discovery Tours', an educational mode within the games that provides accurate information about historical events and society (Vandewalle et al., 2023: 644-649; and see below). Here, Ubisoft not only attempts to create an entertainment-driven narrative, but also approaches a more scholarly representation of history. This can be seen, as well, in curricula and lesson plans provided by Ubisoft[6], which were co-developed with McGill University and published online (2023: 650; Wright, 2022: 172). Despite this oversimplification of complex historical worlds, *Assassin's Creed* can be used to engage students with the subject and might even trigger learning outside of the classroom, engaging the players (students) emotionally and intellectually (Grufstedt & Houghton, 2024: 68). This is exactly the reason why *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* is also a useful tool to introduce students to both the ('historical') world of Anglo-Saxons and Vikings, and the topic of xenophobia.

Didactic considerations – *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* and xenophobia

In the contemporary media environment, historical awareness is often developed by engaging with popular culture during one's free time rather than by consulting primary and secondary literature in a scientific context. The *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* trailer promises that the player will be able to live, fight, conquer and think like a Viking, allowing them to take on the role of a 'real' Viking in Anglo-Saxon England. A certain familiarity with the setting is almost required due to the lack of background knowledge provided in the (semi-) historical and mythological storyline, expecting the target audience of the game to have watched productions such as those from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or *Vikings* (2013), the latter of which heavily influenced the development of *AC: Valhalla*. Through these cinematic experiences and exposure to the Norse world through popular culture, players develop a set of markers they identify with Vikings or even the Middle Ages in general, such as clothing, weapons, tattoos and landscapes, as well as music. Acoustic markers are subtly incorporated in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*. Composition of the game's soundtrack was assigned to Einar Selvik, who founded the band *Wardruna*[7], and was also employed as composer for the TV show *Vikings* before working with the developers of *AC* (Enseleit & Schade, 2020: 178-185; Lasausse, 2024: 142, 148). These markers offer a great starting point for discussion and exploration by the students in a classroom setting, presenting an opportunity to consider whether these aspects are represented accurately in the game or not. In addition, this also provides a great way to review how historical reality is not reconstructable as such, and that it is people that give meaning to objects.

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5 The 'Layla Saga' is the fourth cluster of the game and features the instalments from 2017-2020 (Vandewalle et al., 2023: 649).

6 Lesson plans are accessible under: https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/assassins-creed/discovery-tour/curriculum-guide/curriculum-guide.

7 A Norwegian band creating and composing music according to Nordic traditions (Wardruna, n.d.).

Besides letting students get to know a version of a historical world, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* might also be considered for educational purposes when it comes to giving students an understanding of xenophobia and racism. It is a great tool to introduce students to the topic and to include in a historical outline of racism and xenophobia, while making sure they reflect on how the game portrays different forms of racism towards people from different backgrounds. As can be seen above, the game is full of instances in which hatred towards dissident people is visible. Showing gameplay videos on YouTube or even bringing a console, if available, to the classroom can be implemented relatively easily, depending on the resources that are available to the teacher and/or the school. Certain episodes mentioned in section four ("Hostility towards pagans in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*") can be used to create a lesson plan here, with *AC: Valhalla* providing a great introduction to the topic and offering a starting point to walk through historical instances of hostility towards 'the Other'. Following this, the course instructor might continue with a chronological outline up until the more recent Holocaust in the 20th century, or even today's hatred towards refugees or Islamophobia. Students would not only be able to explore these concepts from a historical perspective in a guided environment but could also be asked to find solutions and ideas of how to overcome these societal problems. The scenes provided by the game, as seen above in section four, can be used as examples, with instructors asking students to reflect on how xenophobia is represented in these episodes/scenes. Guiding questions can help students to fulfil their task and reach a certain goal, e.g. questions about which religions could be found in England and Ireland at the time and what the main difference(s) were between them, how (and if) hatred between the different groups manifested, or even if there were differences between non-Christian groups.

An undeniable love for the past is clearly demonstrated by the producers of *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*. The game tries to offer an experience of 'I was there when it happened' and this experience of the past is one of the biggest advantages offered by the game franchise. This is especially true for games that, in addition to the gameplay, introduced the museum-like 'Discovery Tour' that guides the player through historical sites and events without having to experience threats and fights (available for the Layla Saga of *Odyssey*, *Origins*, and *Valhalla*, as noted above). With this feature, the franchise tries to even further introduce ways of portraying and transporting knowledge through their games, although it has been criticised for its lack of interactivity – the 'Discovery Tour' mode resembles a non-interactive museum. In fact, the only way to actually interact with the world, as the tagline 'history is our playground' promises, is through play mode, via assassination and killing people, raising the question of whether devastating conflicts such as the Anglo-Saxons versus the Vikings should actually be portrayed as a playground (Politopoulos et al., 2019: 319-322).

This 'Discovery Tour' can also be used with the supporting curricula and lesson plans already mentioned. This online curriculum, co-developed with McGill University (Wright, 2022: 172), offers 76 different activities under a 'curriculum map' focusing on a variety of subjects, such as 'the 21st century', 'social sciences', 'language and literacy', and more. Different filters allow teachers to make sure they use the right lessons for the right learner level (the curriculum offers tasks for elementary, medium, and advanced learners), and to select from a great range of topics such as 'religions and popular culture', 'ways of thinking', 'media literacy', or 'comparative religion'. These might be interesting

Learning Objective	Instructional Recommendation(s)
Appreciate and accept diverse value systems, religions, and ethnic groups.	The game can be used as a rich source of knowledge and diverse perspectives on both medieval Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon cultures. Students can have a focused experience comparing and contrasting the two religions and value systems.
Analyze and evaluate ways in which ancient Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon history, religions, beliefs, and traditions are interpreted and adapted within popular culture.	Students play the game to learn medieval England's history, religions, and culture. They reflect on their personal experiences or conduct further research to identify and describe how popular culture (e.g., movies, comics, fiction) uses ideas and elements from history. Students then analyze the effects/consequences of popular culture adapting historical events or cultural/religious elements (e.g., Is there any bias or prejudice elicited because of pop-culture representations of religious beliefs?). Eventually, students form critical arguments on the issue of importing history, religion, and belief traditions into popular culture. Since the above task requires sufficient background knowledge, this card is recommended for use after students have completed playing most of the game content. Teachers can use this card as a long-term inquiry project, where students choose their topics, make investigations, synthesize information, and build conclusions with essays or research papers as the final product.
Compare and contrast ancient Scandinavian religion with Anglo-Saxon Christian religion.	This card is better used after students have taken lessons on Norse religion and Anglo-Saxon Christian religion with related game content unlocked and explored. Students compare ancient Scandinavian religion with medieval Anglo-Saxon Christianity. They identify and illustrate differences and similarities from multiple perspectives, including deities, the conceptualization of humans, central tenets, rites/rituals, daily practices, and roles/responsibilities of adherents.

Table 1. Three example lesson plans as provided by Ubisoft (n.d.).

in connection with the topic of xenophobia, providing a variety of different lessons, as can be seen from the three examples in Table 1.

Conclusion

In education, then, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (and video games in general) can be used as a tool that sparks students' interest for a certain topic, as a medium they might be more comfortable to engage with than traditional historical resources (Urach, 2024: 18). The game can be used effectively in a classroom environment to introduce students to topics like racism and its precursor historical xenophobia. *AC:Valhalla* captures something of the tumultuous history of the British Isles, when, following Viking settlement, the area became even more multi-cultural than before and different belief systems started to clash, fighting for influence. In the examples of both the Glowecestrescire episode and the DLC *Wrath of the Druids*, this historically evidenced hostility against non-Christians is targeted at both Celtic pagans and Norse pagans on multiple occasions. Several scenes portray how Christians find it hard to trust people worshipping old Germanic gods and/or following the old ways, judging them hastily on their beliefs. In both occasions, however, Eivor serves as some sort of connector that aims to clear up misunderstandings and bring people closer together. Although he is pagan himself, he takes over the function of a mediator between cultures in the game, inviting players – and thus students – to learn from his inclusive diplomacy.

Since games like *Assassin's Creed* are increasingly one of the main contact points with historical events and the past, it is, however, important to reflect on the problems that come with them. For educators, it is necessary to consider its claims to authenticity, and build a reasonable and functional lesson plan around certain scenes and episodes from the game that then need to be reflected on by students with the help of primary and secondary sources, or guided questions provided by the teacher. It should be kept in mind that 'historical authenticity' is a difficult concept and that we do not know what

the past looked like, so we can only portray assumptions based on our (scarce) findings. Like many other portrayals that might even be regarded as 'more historical', *AC* is only a simulation or representation of what the past might have looked like and cannot be regarded as historical fact. Although *Assassin's Creed* allows the player to be a 'virtual heritage tourist' who is able to gaze at the breath-taking visuals of the past, it is also a story about a murderous assassin slaughtering their way through a historical landscape, a fact that should be kept in mind at all times and needs to be communicated to as well as reflected on by students (Politopoulos et al., 2019: 322).

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SECTION IV

GAME DESIGN PERSPECTIVES

Simple and Choice Response Times of Females and Males Rating the Wilhelm Scream: An Important Null Result for Gaming Sound Engineers

Hermann Prossinger, Jakub Binter, Daniel Říha, Tomáš Hladký and Silvia Boschetti

Introduction

The Wilhelm Scream is one of the easily identifiable sound effects used for over half a century to enhance the immersion of gamers and other media consumers. Although it contributes to storytelling effectiveness and intertextuality, its purported effect has rarely been scientifically studied and evaluated. Therefore, we have conducted a study based on perceptual and experimental psychology techniques to allow an evaluation. We test whether its effectiveness depends (and, if so, to what degree) on the biological sex[1] of the raters. We find, using a Bayesian framework, that there is no significant difference for positive ratings. This null result has been determined by a modern approach. We construct the confusion matrix derived from comparing two (non-Gaussian) distributions. The off-diagonal entries determine significance levels. In the case(s) of repeated sampling, these off-diagonal entries are Beta-distributed, and we can use the machinery of uncertainty intervals of Beta distributions to quantify uncertainties in the significance. We also investigated the simple and choice response times of the two categories (male versus female) of raters to evaluate putative underlying mechanisms. Using kernel density estimations with an Epanechnikov kernel, we find that their distributions are indistinguishable. Underlying mechanisms, if present, seem to be the same (as determined

1 In this study, we were concerned with responses to auditory stimuli that might be connected with physiological factors, and thus we focused on biological sex rather than gender.

In: N. Webber, E. Kirkland and R. R. Schallegger, eds. 2025. *Exploring New Horizons in Video Game Cultures.* Leiden: Sidestone Press, pp. 141-158.

by significance uncertainties) for males and females.[2] All the above results ensure that the Wilhelm Scream is a reliable enhancement for all forms of media-related storytelling, which includes game programming.

Narration and the environment – a storytelling of the efficacies of some screams

Since ancient times, various effects have been used for immersion purposes as an enhancement for the effectiveness of storytelling (Grau, 2004). Ancient Greek and Roman theatres used simple devices like trapdoors and pulleys to create illusions. These mechanisms allowed for the appearance and disappearance of characters and objects – and even gods! – thereby adding a sense of wonder and surprise to the performances (Hunt et al., 2022). Elements in this suite of devices undoubtedly included screams; for these we currently have no documentation, as sounds are ephemeral, and they were not listed in the surviving written forms of the dramas.

We present a brief synopsis of three screams in two operas to elaborate on the characterization of these scream implementations, contrasting them to what we then portray below as a non-music-related sound effect, namely the 1951 Wilhelm Scream. The goal of this section is not to create an exhaustive overview, due to both space constraints and the need to maintain a focused progression towards the chapter's main point, but rather to present the most significant examples that can aid in understanding the text's foundations.

The first two screams occur in the W.A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (first performed in Prague in the *Gräflich Nostitzsches Nationaltheater*, which still stands in its original state with very minor adaptations – notably electric lighting – and has since been renamed the *Stavovské Divadlo*). In Act 2, Scene XIV, Donna Elvira screams (bars 352-353) and so does Leporello slightly later (bars 366-367). Both screams occur offstage; they express fear, shock and surprise. All these reactions are due to the unexpected encounter with the (huge, about to walk onstage) graveyard statue commemorating the Commendatore, who had been stabbed to death by Don Giovanni in a duel taking place in the first scene of the opera. Later, on stage, the statue's appearance initiates Don Giovanni's imminent downfall into hell.

Richard Wagner's revolutionary postulate was that (opera) music should dramatize, rather than accompany, what unfolds on stage, as he repeatedly argued in his theoretical essays. During his stay in Zürich, he became infatuated with Agnes Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of his financial patron (as well as intellectual endorser) Otto Wesendonck. Whether Richard Wagner's romance with Mathilde Wesendonck remained platonic or turned into a sexual affair is an ongoing debate among Wagner biographers (references in Maschka, 2013). During her lifetime, Mathilde repeatedly emphasized – according to surviving accounts by her contemporaries and in those of her still extant letters – that it was never

2 By extension, then, we might expect division by self-described gender, or even hair colour, to have a similar null result.

more than platonic. Noteworthy is one aspect of this romance in Wagner's biography. He discontinued his work on *Der Ring des Nibelungen* to compose *Tristan und Isolde*, which is arguably his most sexually charged opera. Wagner biographers, relying in part on the letters exchanged between Mathilde and Richard, use their penchant for allusions to love and romance (platonic and/or sexual) in these letters to explain why Wagner composed *Tristan und Isolde* then (rather than continuing his work on the *Der Ring*) and the corresponding allusions to sexuality expressed in this opera.

Here we focus on a scene (Act 2, Scene II, shortly before the transition to Scene III) in which Isolde and Tristan, as illicit (by the morality requirements of the Middle Ages) lovers, are engaged both emotionally and corporally. They make love at the base of a turret on which Brangäne, behind a parapet, is on the lookout for any disturbance threatening their love-making activities, which remain invisible to the opera-goers. It is Wagner's intent to use his composition to portray a far-from-conventionally-acceptable activity with music (namely that part of the activity that remains unseen and unsung), in a musical anticipation of the famous *Liebesduett* in (the final) Act 3. Sure enough, Kurwenal, Merlot (with drawn sword), and König Marke (Isolde's husband) appear too soon for the lovers' engagements to be completed. It is night, and Tristan has extinguished the only torch so as to signal his waiting for Isolde and to ensure their subsequent intimacy remains hidden. As a result, Brangäne barely sees the entourage's approach in time. She screams, conventionally interpreted as due to both the threats implied by the appearing entourage of men as well as the drawn sword.

We note that Brangäne's scream is only one of two screams in all of Wagner's oeuvre. The other – arguably more a shriek of surprise than a scream – is in *Der Fliegende Holländer* when he, accompanied by Senta's father, surprises her with his appearance. Brangäne's scream is not incorporated in the music – leaving room for speculation whether originally Wagner intended Isolde to scream rather than Brangäne – albeit then for a different reason. As it is genuinely Brangäne's scream in the completed opera (we have the detailed libretto comment in Wagner's score as documentation), it is, by necessity, one of fear and shock.

In both *Don Giovanni* and *Tristan and Isolde*, these screams can be considered precursors of the Wilhelm Scream, as all three convey fear and shock. Conventional opera libretti would be wont to include other forms of surprise or plot enhancements (and there exists a plethora of these). For this reason, we do not include Don Giovanni's cries of anguish while the demons pull him into hell; they can only be regarded as a far cry (pun intended?) from being a further example of a theatrical scream; furthermore, his cries are set to music.

Foley effects

We subscribe to a distinctly technological determinist perspective, viewing technological advancements as some of the primary drivers of societal and cultural evolution especially when related to topics that explicitly depend on technology such as gaming or theatre. Also, our belief in quantitative science and data-driven decision-making is evident throughout this chapter, often drawing upon evolutionary and neuroscientific research to support the claims.

In recent years, the complexity of the tools at sound engineers' disposals has become enormous and extraordinarily varied. These tools are the consequence of the march of technological progress and they constitute the technology available at both ends of a cinema product – the preparation of the soundtrack in studios, and the playback during the showing of the movie. Since the end of the 20th century, even home-cinemas have adequate means for high-quality playback in both acoustic power output (loudness) and quality (frequency range).

As human perceptual ability is not adapted to technology, cheating it is one way to trigger the perception that originally distinct visual or auditory stimuli are connected to a specific perceptual experience. For example, the human eye can be tricked into perceiving a series of distinct pictures as a connected sequence (cinematic effect). In the same manner, a sound accompanying those visuals is perceived as matching even though in the real world the two never occur together (Boschetti et al., 2023). The human mind can even be tricked by one sense affecting the other in a phenomenon called cross-modality (Marks et al., 2003).

This leads to a movie specialty called Foley effects. The eponymous descriptor 'Foley' derives from Jack Donovan Foley, a sound effects pioneer who worked with Universal Studios in the early 20th Century. Foley and his crew would project the film on a screen while recording a single track of audio that captured live sound effects that they were producing. They had to synchronize these sounds, such as footsteps and closing doors, with the actors' motions in the film. Only then could a perceptually realistic (although fabricated) audio experience become possible.

However, with advancements in technology and the availability of high-quality sound effects, the term 'Foley' is now often used to describe off-the-shelf sounds (also called 'stock sound effects'), which could be ordered from a catalogue and then, upon receipt, edited and mixed into the film content according to the demands of the director.

From opera screams to the Wilhelm Scream

The occurrences of screams are rare in the performing arts, most notably in opera, perhaps because their use is tainted with the odium of a perceived lack of ingenuity on the part of the librettist or dramatist. (A librettist might fear the question, 'Did you introduce a scream because you ran out of other imaginative ways of developing the plot?') When screams have been used successfully, however, their rarity has become an added bonus. We claim that this is so in the two aforementioned operas, and we argue that the use of the Wilhelm Scream is a continuation of this tradition.

We take a more detailed look at the two screams in the opera *Don Giovanni*. The main character, Don Giovanni, is at his table, enjoying the sumptuous food served by his cook. Leporello, his servant, cannot withstand stealing a bite of pheasant, and Don Giovanni chastises him for his thievery by requesting him to whistle a tune just being played. It is one of several that accompany the meal; the most famous one is an aria from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Loperello comments that it is well known to him (and, for that matter, would have been to the audience of the performances at the time). The joke not only exhibits

Mozart's self-irony, but also prepares for the screams (not anticipated by the audience). The boisterous atmosphere during dinner accompanied by Mozart joking about himself makes the occurrences of the screams especially dramatic. The screams take place offstage, and occasionally doubles are engaged to scream, avoiding overloading the vocal cords of the singers. Such a stage production precaution is reminiscent of an item in a Foley effect catalogue. Arguably, the trick of using off-stage effects in a stage production can be considered a prequel to catalogues of sound effects that have become available for game programmers.[3]

Game effects and the Wilhelm Scream

Although the trend of audio use in game design, specifically in the independent game industry, might be moving away from proliferating sounds like the Wilhelm Scream in favour of newly produced and original sounds effects and loops, the production of these elements is often costly or time-consuming. As a result, Foley effects from audio-banks are still frequently used.

The Wilhelm Scream originated in the extended soundtrack for the 1951 movie *Distant Drums*. It occurs when a supporting character, who – while fleeing into the Everglades from a military skirmish during the 2nd Seminole War – is bitten (but not mauled – a single bite causes a single scream) by an alligator. His scream of pain, shock, and anguish stands out as a unique iconic sound effect, resulting in its subsequent presence in hundreds of movies and games. Incidentally, its name does not derive from its use in this film, but after its re-use in the 1953 film *The Charge of a Feather*, when the character, Private Wilhelm, screams in pain after being shot in the thigh by an arrow. Hence, the *origin* of the scream (1951) does not match the date of its *naming* (1953). The Wilhelm Scream's distinct tonal qualities and its exaggerated nature are so easily identifiable that it provides an emotional impact on the majority of listeners – or so it is claimed. We stress: if the sound is accompanied by a visual stimulus, the perception of the scream changes (eerily reminiscent of Wagner's compositional strategy of Brangäne's scream). In this chapter, we address how large this putative majority is. We consider the Wilhelm Scream's stand-alone qualities as comparable to the immersion-enhancement triggered by the stand-alone screams of Donna Elvira and Leporello in *Don Giovanni* and by Brangäne in *Tristan und Isolde*. We also, therefore, (scientifically) test whether the Wilhelm Scream is indeed so easily identifiable by the listeners. We proceed to investigate the validity of this claim by using tools of virtual ethology and Bayesian statistics.

Interestingly, historically, this single sound effect (the Wilhelm Scream) has captured the imagination of well-nigh innumerable audiences and film creators, becoming an indispensable part of popular culture. Even though – arguably due to its ubiquity – there exist many popular articles that deal with it (if one googles 'Wilhelm scream' one obtains

3 These catalogues are now readily available, and the databases are growing still. Freesound (freesound.org), Soundsnap (soundsnap.com), Soundly (getsoundly.com) and AudioSet (research.google.com/audioset/) are a few examples.

over 1.3 million hits/results as of 13 Nov 2024), scientific research about it is, alas, limited. Its presence contributes to the comedic and nostalgic appeal of media by using audio continuity and leveraging the familiarity of the sound during storytelling. It can create a sense of intertextuality and shared cultural references, foster a connection between media consumers and creators to enhance the intended immersion, on occasion providing comic relief (rarely), and pay a perhaps undeclared homage to cinematic traditions (albeit often lost on those who hear the Wilhelm Scream in the oeuvre they are consuming). That is, of course, for those who are aware of the presence of the effect and pay attention to it. To those who are not familiar or lack attention to this at the time, it may just provide a psychophysiological response to such a highly intensive stimulus.

The Wilhelm Scream as a notorious sound effect has been used not only in many movies and franchises like *Star Wars* (200+ uses) but also in numerous computer game designs like *Mass Effect*, *Superhot*, *God of War*, *Assassin Creed: The Ezio Collection*, *SAW II*, *Mafia III*, *LEGO Star Wars*, *Tales of Monkey Island*, *Tom Clancy*, *Dragon Age*, *Deus Ex*, *Spider Man*, *Star Wars*, *Gang Beats*, *Last of Us*, *Call of Duty*, *Resident Evil VI*, *GTA IV* and *V*, and many other highly recognized AAA game franchises.

Sounds used in game design not only support the emotional and immersive aspects of gaming and storytelling, but our research adapted this topic also to include navigation/mis-navigation and the easing or confusing of pathfinding. Such a development is also related to recent technical innovation in sound studies and in hardware, such as spatial 360° audio or spatial multi-directional audio.

The role of media and population studies

There are only a few natural populational studies (that mainly relate to social media or body image) but one study stands out in providing an insight to the impact of media on perception, processing and even imagery production – dreams.

Eva Murzyn (2008) conducted a study that provides interesting insights into the impact of media exposure during childhood. Her study explored the link between media exposure and dream colour, or rather the colour scale in dreams. Participants from two age groups with varying black-and-white media experiences reported the colours in their dreams via questionnaires and diaries. Those with early exposure to black-and-white media reported more grayscale dreams. Dream colour reporting methods (questionnaire vs. diary) yielded similar results. These findings align with Murzyn's suggestion of a critical period of media influence sensitivity on dream formation. The decrease in black-and-white dream reports coincides with the rise of colour use in the media in the 1960s. If media exposure impacts something like a colour palette of dreams, can we test the impact of exposure to specific sound effects on understanding the meaning via learning? We argue that the answer is 'yes', as long as we use the proper scientific approach derived from perceptual, experimental psychology and what some (including us) call *virtual ethology*, in combination with reliable, rigorous statistical methods. In the following sections, we discuss these methods and the theories underlying our study.

Simple versus choice response times

Psychological and behavioural research often involves measuring response time as a valuable indicator of cognitive processes and subsequent decision-making. This practice, used since the second half of the nineteenth century, has become systematized. Two commonly employed measures in this domain are simple response time (SRT) and choice response time (CRT) (for comprehensive description of both designs we refer to De Jong, 1995).

SRT refers to the time taken to respond to a single stimulus using a simple behavioural response (for example, pressing a key or a button) to confirm that its presence is recognised by the participant in the absence of competing alternatives. It measures basic cognitive processing – attention, perception, efficiency of information processing, response inhibition, and rapid motor response,

Unlike SRT, CRT includes decision-making processes that are contributors to the measured response time because of the presence of several (multiple) alternatives. Cognitive and affective judgments complicate the completion of the task (in our case, a rating, see below) – thus allowing the researchers to investigate the rapidity of decision-making and the factors that influence the choice of a particular response (Ratcliff, 2008). In our case the participant decides between three options – a) positive, b) neutral and c) negative – based on valence rating.

In particular, response times enhance our understanding of the cognitive processes underlying Wilhelm Scream ratings: faster response times suggest stronger implicit attitudes towards, or preferences for, the stimuli being rated (Fazio et al., 1995). Indeed, CRT offers insights into deliberative decision-making evaluations. Longer CRTs may indicate more careful consideration or greater cognitive effort (Ratcliff and McKoon, 2008).

Distinguishing between null results in frequentist and Bayesian frameworks

A null result refers to the absence of an effect (or of a finding of interest) that is (statistically) significant. The interpretation and implications of null results differ between the frequentist and Bayesian frameworks (Fenton and Neil, 2019). In a frequentist framework, a null result is typically interpreted as inferring that the data is consistent with the possibility that the true effect size is zero or that any observed differences are due to (random) chance only. In the Bayesian framework, prior probabilities of the parameters of interest are updated (based on the data) to obtain posterior likelihood functions of the probability. Formally: $L_{\text{post}} = \textit{evidence} \times L_{\text{prior}}$. If for example, one assumes that the flipping of a coin is unknown (and neutral), then $L_{\text{prior}} = 1$. Subsequent flips will be the evidence, so $L_{\text{post}} \neq 1$. L_{prior} has acquired the contentious (contentious for traditional, orthodox 'frequentists') label 'belief'. It is indeed a belief (Fenton & Neil, 2019), but not in the humanistic or theological or other similar sense. Because orthodox 'frequentists' associated L_{prior} with this latter sense, they rejected the Bayesian way of approaching statistics, as it is not, they claim, objective and/or scientific. The sometimes acrimoniously delivered arguments against the

Bayesian approach have mellowed in recent years, because all statisticians have (honestly) acknowledged that L_{prior} is indeed the prior assumption (the formal definition of belief in statistics and the natural sciences) before data has been gathered. More on the mathematical properties of L_{prior} is elaborated below.

> However, it turns out that subjective measures of uncertainty are irrational. Specifically, the primary objections are: (1) The subjective measure cannot be validated. (2) Different experts will give different subjective measures. They are irrational because, if you scratch the surface just a little, you will find that in most situations these *objections are equally applicable to frequentist measures* (Fenton and Neil, 2019; italics in the original).

In their attempt to disqualify Bayesian statistics because of its apparent subjectivity, frequentists have repeatedly overlooked the fact that they base their methods on subjectivity as well, albeit not so readily apparent (hence the phrase 'scratch the surface just a little'). Frequentist statistics relies not only on the repeatability of trials, but the *belief* that the trials can be made independent. This belief is certainly subjective. It has long been known that frequentist approaches cannot be applied to singular events, such as the outcome of an election or the crash of a bank (for example, that of the Lehman Brothers in 2008, as Fenton and Neil suggest).

Bayesian analysis *inherently* quantifies uncertainty (which the frequentist analysis does not and cannot – despite frequentists' protestations to the contrary). If two data sets result in overlapping likelihood functions (see below), we conclude that there is a null result whenever the overlap is above a certain threshold – thereby negating the need for a 'true effect size' finding, even if a frequentist approach finds such an effect size. Put more stringently: Bayesian statistics doesn't actually care about an effect's *size*, but rather whether the overlap in uncertainty intervals (which need not be symmetric about the mode) indicates the absence of an effect. Such an insight cannot be achieved in frequentist statistics, because there is no 'natural' uncertainty measure. The often used interval (the standard deviation) is simply invalid as an uncertainty measure (Lambert, 2018), because standard deviations are not informative about the uncertainties of estimated parameters. Meaningful, despite its severe limitations, is the standard error of the mean (inversely proportional to $\sqrt{n}$, where n is the sample size). This uncertainty measure is, however, only useful if one restricts oneself to a 5% significance level and has at least 100 *independent* samples (Lambert 2018). More generally: the uncertainty in frequentist statistics is very difficult – actually: impossible – to estimate (Fenton and Neil, 2019).

Perception of highly intensive states

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that the (biological) sex of the person assessing (facial) expressions can have a systematic impact on the ratings given (Rotter and Rotter, 1988; Thayer and Johnsen, 2000; Hall and Matsumoto, 2004; Hampson et al., 2006). One evolutionary perspective suggests that the recognition of anger expressions may be

more easily performed by males, as it was advantageous for them to be able to identify potential threats and provide pre-emptive protection (Rotter and Rotter, 1988). On the other hand, females have been found to exhibit superior abilities in perceiving other – positive – facial expressions, which are believed to have adaptive significance and emerged during our (human) evolution. While some researchers have attributed this superiority to the caregiving role of women, arguing that successful assessment of the facial expressions of those under their care is considered crucial (Rotter and Rotter, 1988, Proverbio, 2023), it has been found that these responses were due to guesswork in intensive cases (Boschetti et al., 2022).

Perception of vocalizations

Our recent research (Binter et al., 2023a), using a similar design and data collection approach to this study, investigated the ability of humans to accurately rate the difference between vocalizations of affective states. In other words, the proportion of respondents who correctly or incorrectly rated the stimulus as being positive, neutral or negative. The results support the 'emotional paradox effect' (Barret, 2006): whenever the vocalizations are highly intense affective states, then the rating accuracy of the vocalization valence (positive or negative) would be low. Perhaps surprisingly, the outcomes (Binter et al., 2023b) for the Wilhelm Scream supported the opposite: the ratings were highly accurate with such an intense stimulus. One suggested, plausible interpretation was the presence of a learning effect caused by years of repeated exposure to media associating sounds (notably the Wilhelm Scream) with unpleasant experiences (such as those that are portrayed in films, and now in games).

The current study

We tested not only the reliability of rating the Wilhelm Scream but also whether there are differences in the rating distributions if (biological) sex is a confounding factor. To do so, we employed the well-researched psychological tool of response time testing and, in addition, the statistical analysis of the outcomes in the Bayesian framework.

Materials

Participants

The data set consists of 526 females and 376 males, all of whom rated the Wilhelm Scream twice on a scale from 'negative', via 'neutral', to 'positive'. Ratings did not take place in isolation, however, but in an admixture with another 50 auditory stimuli, with 25 voiced by each sex. We measured SRT as the time that elapsed between the beginning of the audio signal and the participant registering it (which the participant communicated by clicking the 'K' key) and the CRT as the time that elapsed until the participant entered a rating by pressing either the 'P' key for a *positive* rating, the 'K' key for a *neutral* rating, or the 'N' key for a *negative* rating. If the rater rated the negative stimulus as negative, that would be counted as correct rating, no other combination would be considered correct (e.g., neutral

rating of positive stimulus or vice versa). Technical mishaps occasionally occurred, so ratings by 525 females and 372 males were used for the analyses.

The Wilhelm Scream stimulus

The Wilhelm Scream stimulus was obtained from a free databank which provided a download option. All stimuli presented were controlled for loudness using dedicated professional software to avoid confounding effects. Further detailed descriptions of the procedure can be found in Binter et al. (2023a).

Methods

Data collection

The data were collected online using a Java Script extension of the Qualitrics® online data collection platform.

Statistical methods

The number of female raters was larger than the number of male raters, so, for some statistical comparisons, we needed to randomly choose a subset of the female raters of the same size as that of the male raters (because both Beta and Dirichlet distributions are extremely sensitive to sample sizes – as they should be). We used a random number generator (from WOLFRAM Technologies®) to ensure that there are no repetitions in each of the randomized subsets. This contrasts with the bootstrap method, where it is obligatory to replace a member after randomly drawing one (Efron and Tibshirani, 1998). In this study, we did not use the bootstrap method, but 20 randomized subsets as described above.

We compared the number of incorrect ratings by the male participants versus the number of incorrect ratings by the female participants drawn from one random subset. Bayes' rule (Lambert, 2018) is used to estimate the *pdf* (probability density function, which is the likelihood function $L(s)$) of a Beta distribution: $L(s) = pdf(\mathrm{Be}(n_\mathrm{M}+1, n_\mathrm{F}+1), s) = \frac{\Gamma(n_\mathrm{M}+n_\mathrm{F}+2)}{\Gamma(n_\mathrm{M}+1)\Gamma(n_\mathrm{F}+1)} \times s^{n_\mathrm{F}} \times (1-s)^{n_\mathrm{M}} \times L_\mathrm{prior}$ where s is the probability of the females rating incorrectly and $\Gamma(\cdots)$ is the gamma function[4] (Abramowitz and Segun, 1968). We assume a Bayes' prior (namely $L_\mathrm{prior} = 1$).

We also analysed the distributions of the doubly correct ratings by the male and female raters. We first used the DBSCAN clustering algorithm (Ester et al., 1996) to identify those time pairs (SRT and CRT) of male and female raters that are not outliers (i.e. not 'snow'). We use the machinery of KDE (kernel density estimation) to compute the *pdf*s of these non-outlier clusters and thereby justify that they are indeed not 'snow'.

In order to determine whether the KDEs of the male and female raters in the clusters without 'snow' are significantly different, we implemented Bayes' Rule and

4 The gamma function is used widely in probability theory as a way to generalise.

used the machinery of confusion matrices. For the doubly correct ratings SRT and CRT, the confusion matrix is $\begin{pmatrix} pdf(\mathrm{KDE_M}, \{x_{\mathrm{SRT}}, x_{\mathrm{CRT}}\}_{\mathrm{M}})_{\mathrm{True}} & pdf(\mathrm{KDE_M}, \{x_{\mathrm{SRT}}, x_{\mathrm{CRT}}\}_{\mathrm{M}})_{\mathrm{False}} \\ pdf(\mathrm{KDE_F}, \{x_{\mathrm{SRT}}, x_{\mathrm{CRT}}\}_{\mathrm{F}})_{\mathrm{False}} & pdf(\mathrm{KDE_F}, \{x_{\mathrm{SRT}}, x_{\mathrm{CRT}}\}_{\mathrm{F}})_{\mathrm{True}} \end{pmatrix}$ when we compare the $\mathrm{KDE_M}$ distribution of the male (M) ratings versus the distribution $\mathrm{KDE_F}$ of the female (F) ratings. The notation $pdf(\mathrm{KDE_M}, \{x_{\mathrm{SRT}}, x_{\mathrm{CRT}}\}_{\mathrm{M}})_{\mathrm{True}}$ means that $pdf(\mathrm{KDE_M}, \{x_{\mathrm{SRT}}, x_{\mathrm{CRT}}\}_{\mathrm{M}}) > pdf(\mathrm{KDE_F}, \{x_{\mathrm{SRT}}, x_{\mathrm{CRT}}\}_{\mathrm{M}})$ ((i.e. it is more likely that the male ratings were drawn from the M distribution than from the F distribution). The values $\{x_{\mathrm{SRT}}, x_{\mathrm{CRT}}\}_{\mathrm{M}}$ are randomly generated realizations of the random variables using the distribution $\mathrm{KDE_M}$. The other entries in the confusion matrix are cyclic. Further details are in Binter et al., (2023a).

Because we generated 20 clusters of female ratings, we calculated 20 confusion matrices and determined the distributions of the off-diagonal elements of these 20. In Fig. 2, we illustrate the Beta distribution of one of the clusters of female ratings, superimposed on the of the male ratings.

Because, for the off-diagonal elements, $0 \leq pdf(\mathrm{KDE_F})_{\mathrm{False}} \leq 1$ and $0 \leq pdf(\mathrm{KDE_M})_{\mathrm{False}} \leq 1$, these off-diagonal elements are Beta distributed (Fig. 3). This method for determining a null result by computing inferences based on the Beta distributions of off-diagonal elements of confusion matrices is novel (to our knowledge), as we have combined it with random sampling.

A more detailed look at L_{prior}: We have assumed $L_{\mathrm{prior}} = 1$, which we now write as $L_{\mathrm{prior}} = s^0 \times (1 - s)^0$. Generally, we write $L_{\mathrm{prior}} = s^z \times (1 - s)^z$, where it is possible for $0 \geq z \geq -1$. These other choices of z infer beliefs about whether an effect can even exist. Very popular in this respect are the Jeffrey prior $z = -\frac{1}{2}$ and, as an extreme, the Haldane prior $z = -1$, because both have a direct interpretability. We need not dwell on the choice or interpretation of which prior to use in this paper, because we have $n_{\mathrm{M}} = 321$ (and for each of the 20 randomly chosen clusters $n_{\mathrm{F}} = 321$ as well). Even if we choose the most extreme prior (the Haldane prior), then $n_{\mathrm{F}} = 320 = n_{\mathrm{M}}$, which, for such a large number of categorical variable realizations, will not cause any significant shift in our determination of the confusion matrix (not shown).

Results

Age distributions of participants

The age distributions are so flat that we can assume that all effects we analyse here are age-independent (Binter et al., 2023a). The age distribution of the female raters who rate doubly correctly is not significantly different from that of the male raters who rate doubly correctly (Binter et al., 2023a).

Correct versus incorrect ratings

The probability that the female raters rate both Wilhelm Screams incorrectly versus the male raters rating both incorrectly is $s_{\mathrm{ML}} = 0.385$ with an $\mathrm{HDI}_{95\%}$ (highest density interval at 95% significance level, which is the standard Bayesian estimator of uncertainty;

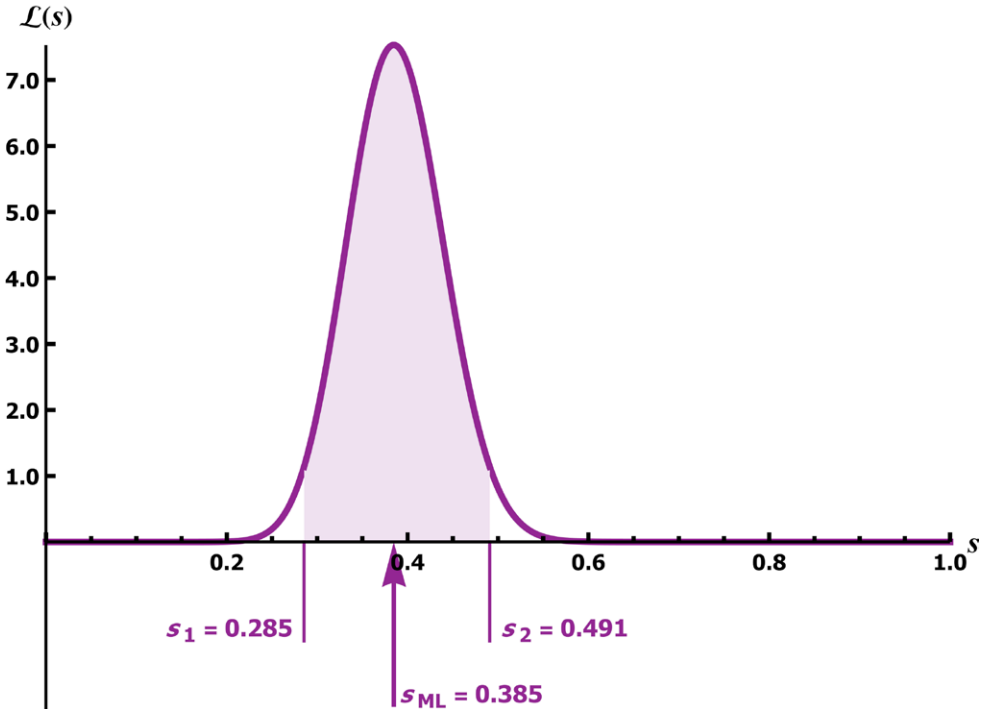


Figure 1. The likelihood function of the probability (s) that the female raters rated the Wilhelm Scream twice incorrectly versus the males doing so as well. The likelihood function is a Beta distribution and the interval $\{s_1,s_2\}$ is the $HDI_{95\%}$ (Kruschke, 2014) – the 95% interval of the uncertainty of the mode s_{ML}. Observe that the interval $\{s_1,s_2\}$ is asymmetric about the mode. The graph shows clearly that, at a 95% significance level, the female raters erred with a lower probability than the males to identify the Wilhelm Scream incorrectly twice. The shaded area is 0.95.

Kruschke, 2014) $0.285 \leq s \leq 0.491$ (Fig. 1). Because this probability uncertainty interval does not include $s = \frac{1}{2}$, this result is significant at 95% significance level.

The *pdf*s of the cluster of the incorrect ratings versus the doubly correct ratings are significantly different, both for the male raters and for the female raters (not shown); the women rate more (consistently) accurately.

Why accuracy matters in the case of the extreme vocalizations

In two previous publications (Binter et *al.* 2023a; Binter et *al.* 2023b), the exact same statistical methodology was employed as it is in this case, but there it was focused on naturally occurring stimuli of extreme affects. In those two publications, we found that all the ratings given were due to chance. In other words, once the participant heard some extreme affect vocalization and was asked whether the vocalization was positive, neutral or negative, neutral was very scarce while the positive and negative ratings were assigned without consistency and with extremely low accuracy. Here, for the Wilhelm Scream, the converse is true; the consistency and accuracy are very high (perhaps surprisingly so).

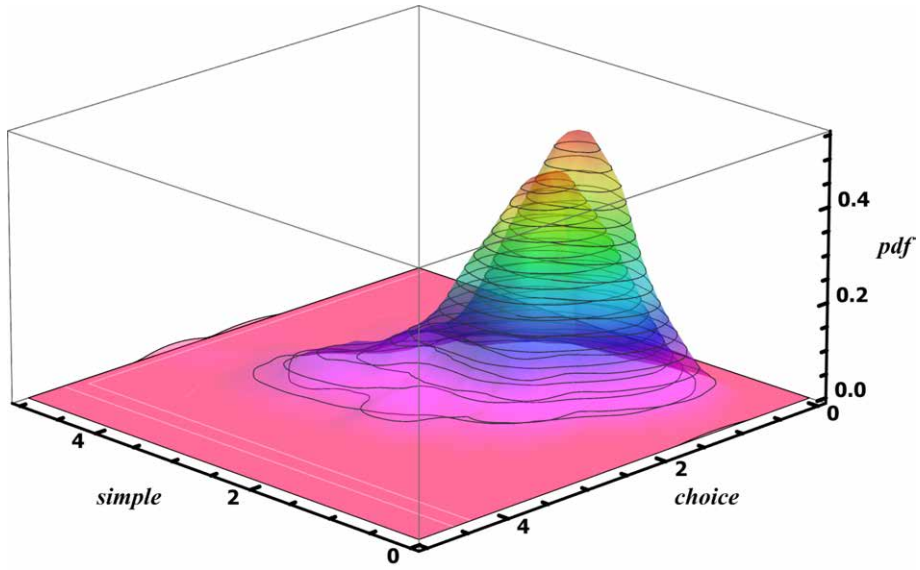


Figure 2. The two *pdf*s (probability density functions) of the highest density clusters of the registrations SRT versus CRT. These *pdf*s have been estimated using a KDE (kernel density estimator) with an Epanechnikov kernel. Contour lines are in $\frac{1}{15}pdf_{\max}$. The female cluster in this graph is one randomly chosen cluster with an equal number of registrations as the cluster of male raters. Further details are in the text. The *pdf* with the 'higher' peak is the one for the male raters. Units of the variables 'simple' and 'choice' are seconds. The significance of a difference between the two *pdf*s (if there is one for any of the 20 female rater clusters) is determined using confusion matrices, as described in the text and in more detail in Binter et al. (2023a).

Distributions of SRT and CRT

An example of the *pdf*s of the distributions of doubly correct ratings (male raters versus one of the randomly chosen subsets of the female ratings) in the 'non-snow' cluster (321 females and 321 males) is shown in Fig. 2. Although a difference between the two *pdf*s is apparent, it is not significant.

For all 20 clusters, the off-diagonal elements of the confusion matrices are much larger than the 10% significance level (Fig. 3). For confusion matrices, the 10% threshold equals the 5% conventional significance level (Caelen, 2017; Binter et al., 2023a).

Discussion and conclusion

Virtual and augmented ethology

Virtual world experiences are increasingly common, in some cases overtaking real-world experiences (which – arguably – have been repeatedly attempted in performing art forms such as opera over several centuries), and nowadays the majority of information in everyday life is second-hand (that is to say, experiences shared with someone else via text, video or gaming). Some of the properties of virtual worlds have thus become entangled with real-world experiences and underpin some learning mechanisms considered unique

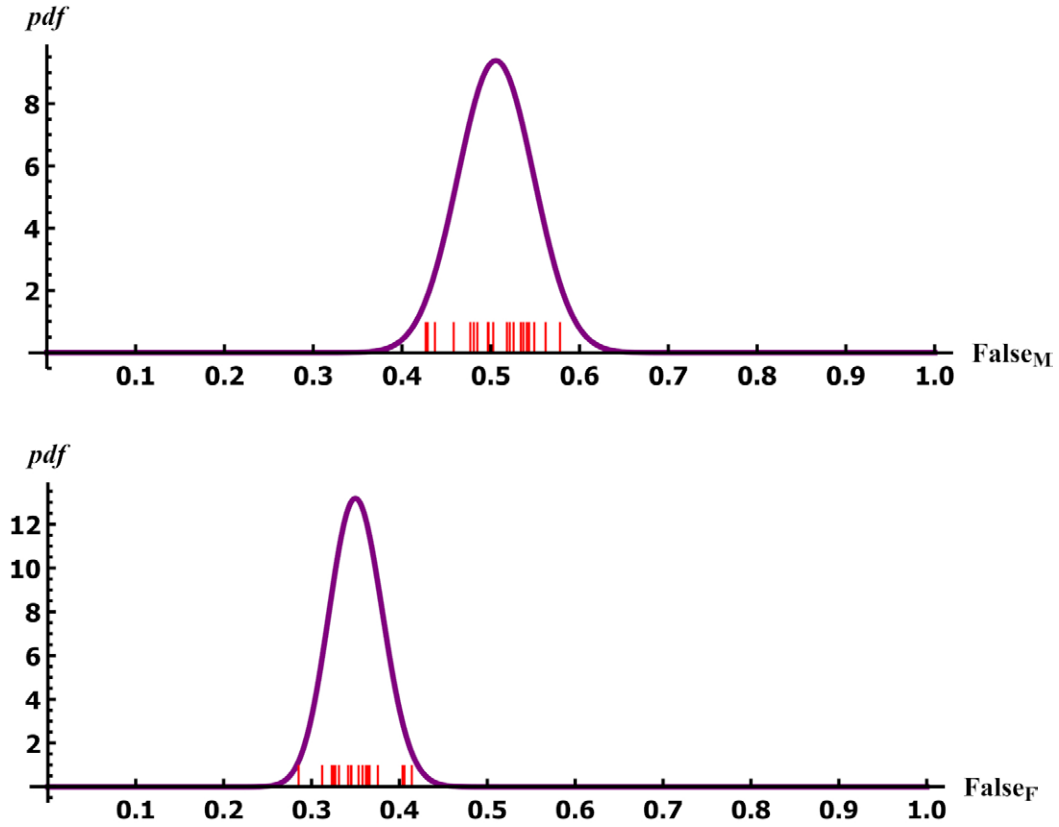


Figure 3. The distributions of the off-diagonal entries of the confusion matrices when testing for the significant differences between the distributions of the *pdf*s (probability density function) of SRT versus CRT (Fig. 2). As shown in the text, the off-diagonal entries are Beta-distributed. The short, red, vertical lines are the rug plots of the 20 entries (of the 20 clusters – as described in the text). We note that both off-diagonal entries are far from 0.1 = 10%; in fact, the probability p that $\text{False}_\text{M} < 0.1$ is $p < 9.2 \times 10^{-27}$ and for $\text{False}_\text{F} < 0.1$ is $p < 1.3 \times 10^{-33}$. These results show that the (Bayesian) distributions of significant differences are far from being significantly different. We note that this novel approach makes traditional, fallacious significance tests (and effect size estimations) obsolete.

to evolutionary cognitive processes. As opposed to the gaming industries' professed *original* aims – creating virtual worlds that are as similar to reality as possible – *current* virtual worlds show adequate leverage to not only shape themselves but also the *real world of gamers*: their experiences when they are not gaming. Several presenters (e.g. Grammer and McCall) in ethology conferences have addressed the topic of *virtual ethology*, and some of this work was later published (e.g. Croissart and Schoffield, 2023). For us, the next logical step is to address how augmented ethology investigates these two worlds – the real and the virtual – in order to (empirically and statistically) assess outcomes of their interactions.

The underlying mechanism involved in processing the Wilhelm Scream, in contrast to other vocalizations of high intensity (Binter et al., 2023a), is compatible with describing

it as a learning effect (Binter et al., 2023b). Here, we found that the Wilhelm Scream was identified with very high accuracy and consistency, both by the males and the females.

In addition to collecting the ratings of the Wilhelm Scream, we collected SRTs and CRTs of the raters' responses, because they play crucial roles in psychological research about the assessment of cognitive processes, decision-making, and preference formation. Most features of the Wilhelm Scream ratings by the female raters are not significantly different from those by the male raters; only the incorrect ratings are significantly different – women being better able to accurately and consistently estimate the valence of the vocalization.

Because the number of female raters was larger than that of male raters, we created randomly chosen female raters to form subsets without replacement. For every (female) subset of correct ratings, no significant difference between males and females was observed. We conclude that there is no difference between the response times of the members of each (biological) sex.

We conclude that there are at least three implications for game designers and augmented ethology researchers:

1. Video game design can benefit from the use of pre-tested and validated tests that use established empirical toolkits provided by psychologists.

   The design of video games requires consideration of many factors, from gameplay mechanics to user experience. As video games have become increasingly widespread, it is ever-more critical that game designers have access to rigorous, empirically-validated tools in order to assess and optimize the gamer experience. To identify some of these, pre-testing procedures, as suggested in this manuscript, are ideal. It should be considered standard to apply Bayesian statistical approaches because such methods allow for more flexible modelling assumptions, such as incorporating prior knowledge or beliefs about the parameters of interest (and their uncertainties). This is particularly useful when only a limited (small) sample is available. Researchers can make an inference about the probability of a hypothesized outcome, given the observed data – the classical conditional probability $P(\mathrm{H}\,|\,D)$ that is, alas, often confused with $P(H\,|\,\mathrm{D})$, which leads to the Prosecutor's Fallacy. Bayesian analysis also provides a comprehensive way to quantify and propagate uncertainty throughout the analysis – explicitly defining some outcome being due to chance.
2. Testing the likelihood of any claimed psychological effect (either supporting or rejecting it, based on data, *viz*. whether $\int_0^{\frac{1}{2}} pdf(s)\,ds$ or $\int_{\frac{1}{2}}^1 pdf(s)\,ds$ is very small) is beneficial when looking for a generally functional influence such as a sound effect.
3. Testing the likelihood of psychological effects, whether supporting or rejecting a claimed influence, is highly valuable whenever assessing the functional impact of design elements in video games. For example, when evaluating the use of sound effects, rigorous psychological testing can help determine the extent to which these auditory cues shape gamer perception, cognition, and emotional response. By employing

established empirical methods from psychology, such as controlled experiments and validated measurement tools, game designers can gather objective data on the true influence of sound effects on factors like attention, memory, and immersion. This evidence-based approach allows designers to make more informed decisions about which sound effects to include and how to optimize their implementation when attempting to enhance the overall gamer experience. Rather than relying on intuition or anecdotal feedback, testing the likelihood of psychological effects provides a scientific foundation for understanding the functional role of game design elements like sounds. Embracing this analytical mind-set will lead to video games that are more thoughtfully crafted and better aligned with gamers' cognitive and emotional needs.

Our finding that the reliability of the intentionally induced negative connotation associated with the Wilhelm Scream does not depend on the (biological) sex of the gamer is an interesting one. Certainly, this conclusion would benefit from further empirical investigations, because the Wilhelm Scream is such a well-known audio clip that has been used extensively in various media, including video games, and has become associated with a sense of cliché or irony due to its ubiquity. It would therefore be valuable to apply our approach to less-recognisable audio clips, especially in light of our previous work on naturally occurring stimuli discussed above.

From a psychological perspective, the impact of the Wilhelm Scream on gamer experience could be influenced by a variety of factors beyond just (biological) sex, such as cultural background, familiarity with media tropes, and individual differences in audio processing and emotional responses. That said, the effectiveness of any game design element, including audio cues, is likely to be highly context-dependent and influenced by factors such as the specific game genre, the gamer's familiarity with the content, and the overall design of the game experience. Even after half a century of use, and despite the emergence of virtual reality and augmented reality, along with interactive media, the future prospects of the Wilhelm Scream in an ever-evolving media landscape (not only new technologies but also new storytelling techniques) show no signs of abating.

Ethics statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Science, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic (protocol code 2018/08 approved on 2 April 2018).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

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Embodied game play: Exploring human and non-human experiences through affective game design in *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Brothers – A Tale of Two Sons*

Christina Obmann

It is commonly accepted, if not bitterly lamented, that video games affect their players in various, meaningful ways. When media or even media theorists talk about video games affecting players, what is usually implied is a causal relationship of video games exerting their power over the player, almost like a hypodermic needle. In the past, this has most often been the subject of debates (or media panics) around video game addiction or first-person shooters as culprits for increasing youth violence and thus evaluated rather negatively. Game designers stand out with extreme statements as to the impact of games as well, like Sylvester's realization that '[we are] the games [we've] played' (2013: 376).

On the other hand, players would certainly affirm their own perceived power of 'affecting' through their interaction with and practiced agency within video games by the mere act of playing. This has been especially the case for games featuring choice-based mechanics, meaning that players are able to influence or choose the trajectory (narrative) or ending of the game. Indeed, the active and (more or less) impactful affordances of players should not be underestimated, with game studies' formative question centring on the medium's interactivity. Due to this capacity to actively initiate change in the game state, which Zimmerman established as 'explicit interactivity' (2004: 158), video games have long been considered a deeply affective medium. Albeit accurate, the statement seems too vague and open to different interpretations. Nowadays, it is becoming increasingly clear that video games affect their players – and vice versa – in much more complex and subtle ways.

In this chapter, I would like to explore this affective nature of video games and the kinds of experiences it enables, especially in the moment of player interaction. What is more, with the interaction between player and game being a sensory experience by necessity,

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playing games must be understood as a deeply *embodied* practice. Relying on the concepts of affect and embodiment as they pertain to the specific experience of playing video games, I argue how game mechanics (i.e. the control mechanisms to interact with a game via input devices) and to a lesser degree game aesthetics (i.e. visuals and sound effects) are significant moments of affective experience for players.

In order to showcase how this embodied game play can be strategically used for affective player experiences, I present an in-depth analysis of two video games – *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) and *Brothers – A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013) – that serve as exemplary instances. What they have in common is the exploration of a wide range of human and non-human experiences *through* embodied game play. Such examples of game design might offer inspiration for game designers and developers to fully realize video games' potential for embodied experiences as the highly affective medium they are.

Affect, embodiment, and video games

Before any analysis of game titles for their affective mechanics or theorizing on the affective potential and embodied nature of game play, it is essential to establish a foundational understanding of the concepts of affect and embodiment, both in general and pertaining to video games specifically. The concept of *affect* in particular remains ambiguous, which is unsurprising, given its complexity and the lack of a singular, universally agreed upon definition or theoretical framework. Instead, multiple, sometimes contrasting, overlapping, or converging interpretations of affect exist. For the purpose of this argument, affect is a 'full-body, multisensory experience' (Shinkle, 2005: 3). It is often conflated or used synonymously with the term *emotion*, and while these phenomena are closely related, they are not identical. To be more precise, affect can be understood 'as the forces that *inform* our emotional states' (Anable, 2018: xvii; my emphasis). Massumi makes a similar distinction between emotion and affect, asserting that the former is 'qualified', owned and recognized, while the latter is 'unqualified' (2002: 28). In this context, unqualified refers to affect as a primary arousal, a physical sensation, one that we are not necessarily aware of. And exactly because it is below consciousness (Sylvester, 2013: 18), it is not always possible to attribute a concrete label to it. It might indeed be 'inarticulable', remaining unexpressed (Anable, 2018: xviii). This characteristic complicates the understanding and research on affect, not only in the context of game studies but also across broader academic disciplines. Of course, the more-or-less strict distinction between emotion and affect does not imply that video games cannot also elicit emotions in players. Rather, with an understanding of affect *preceding* emotion, the former ultimately *becomes* or gives rise to the latter. For example, as Sylvester asserts in his lessons on game design, the primary arousal elicited through game play is only perceived as a concrete emotion once it is labelled cognitively, i.e. connected to the narrative of the game (2013: 41). By connecting the initial, physical stir to its immediate context, we give meaning to it and qualify it as an emotional sensation proper.[1]

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1 This labelling of arousal is sometimes colloquially referred to as the 'Suspension Bridge Effect', related to a study by Dutton and Aron (1974). By having male study subjects interact with an attractive woman after crossing an anxiety-inducing suspension bridge, they aimed at proving the context-dependant misattribution of arousal (from anxiety to sexual arousal) that can take place.

Another essential aspect of affect theory is its relationality. The forces of affect should not be understood as a unidirectional influence but rather, in Massumi's terms, the intertwined forces of 'affect[ing] and be[ing] affected' (2002: 15). This concept bespeaks a relation of mutual impact – a feedback loop, essentially – wherein individuals are not only subject to various stimuli affecting their physical and emotional states but simultaneously influence the environment around them.

The other, (arguably) even more fundamental concept that is central to both affect theory and this argument is *embodiment*. Embodiment can be understood in two ways: on the one hand, as 'the human body as physically existing […] entity'; and on the other hand, as 'our experience of ourselves as embodied beings' (Gregorsen and Grodal, 2008: 65). From this perspective, our biological embodiment is the most fundamental condition for experiencing the surrounding world. Any experience we make must by necessity be perceived and mediated by our physical, i.e. bodily senses – including audiovisual, somatosensory (touch and temperature), and proprioceptive (posture and body position) senses. It is perhaps exactly because of its elemental nature that the role of embodiment often seems to be overlooked or taken for granted. There is, in a literal sense, no 'out-of-body experience', even if debates about 'virtual worlds' occasionally might suggest otherwise. Thus, when discussing the forces of affect, it must be understood as '*a body's* capacity to affect and be affected' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 2; my emphasis), just as affect can only be perceived on a physical level.

The significance of affect and embodiment is far from being a recent realization in the study of games, but rather an evolving area of inquiry. In *Playing with Feelings*, Anable (2018: xiv) explicitly centres 'the player as a feeling and acting subject', while Keogh's *A Play of Bodies* (2015; 2018) puts the attention on video games as embodied activity. In this approach, video games are seen as 'affective systems' (Anable, 2018: xii), game play as 'fully embodied, sensuous, carnal activity' (Crick, 2011: 259). Game play involves the formation of a relation between player and game, which 'engage[s] and entangle[s] us in a circuit of feeling' (Anable, 2018: xii). In short, the affective potential of video games can be understood as the emotions and physical engagement of players that are registered at the very moment of game play (xviii).

The interactivity of video games, which is at the core of the medium and experience, naturally aligns with the relational feedback loop of affect. The capacity to actively effect changes in the game state, defined as 'explicit interactivity' (Zimmerman, 2004: 158f), operates within the same framework of mutual influence, of affecting and being affected. Players might be able to make choices on how to act within a game, but the underlying code already constricts and shapes the player (Keogh, 2015: 28), while any input generates a response or reaction from the game's systems. This dynamic is not limited to choice-based games, as even rigidly linear video games always involve a continuous *inter*action, a *play* between player and video game. In the context of interactive media, players are agents (active participants) as much as they are patients (receptive subjects; Gregerson and Grodal, 2009: 65). More specifically, affect is not confined to the player alone – it also arises as *relations* from the moment of game play, of interaction between player and game, and thus between 'sensing and affective corporeal and technological bodies' (Nørgård, 2016: 90). Nørgård further poetically describes this *affective game play* as 'where affective player and affective game design meet, melt, and merge into each other' (2016: 96). Keogh similarly captures the embodied nature of this interplay by conceptualizing 'play as a convergence

of eyes-on-screens, ears-at-speakers, and muscles-against-interfaces' (2015: 11). The very language used to describe this interaction underscores the primacy of embodiment.

It could be argued, therefore, that video games are per se *affective* or at least have intrinsic affective potential. The process of both affecting and being affected is arguably their most distinctive quality as a medium. Moreover, due to the nature of human physicality, all game experiences are necessarily embodied. Keogh contends that the core qualities usually associated with video games, such as immersion or agency, originate from 'the player's embodied engagement' (2015: 17). The following section focuses on the importance of game play mechanics as the primary site for affect and embodiment. Since mechanics represent the point of physical interaction and the means by which players experience games, they are a critical factor for understanding the embodied and affective dimensions of game play – for the study of games in general and the two case studies in particular.

Affective and embodied game play

Building upon the premise that video games inherently facilitate affective and embodied experiences, Dovey and Kennedy (2006: 107) identify two critical elements: Firstly, players are bound to time and place in a physical (or rather primary) reality, including the operation of technical devices like controllers or game pads. Secondly, the player not only exists as an embodied entity in their physical reality but is also re-embodied in the game world's avatar and interface. This dual embodiment effectively extends the physical body into the virtual. Before concentrating on these two aspects though, it is relevant to also address the (ongoing) debates surrounding the precise nature of a game experience.

A central question emerges: does the affective quality of a game, the distinct 'feel' or 'intensity' (Shinkle, 2005: 3), derive solely from the player's interaction with the controller, and thus game code, or must other components also be considered? This mirrors the narratology/ludology debate, only played out on the field of representation/configuration. While playing video games, players have the 'tactile and kinaesthetic experience' of manipulating technical devices (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006: 107), with kinaesthetics, or the related term proprioception, referring to the perception of body motion and the sense of the position of our body, respectively. Thus, game play can be considered a hands-on exploration in the most literal sense of the word and a sensorimotor experience above all. Newman (2002) also argues that the pleasure of video games is first and foremost kinaesthetic in nature, emphasizing the 'interface-level control loop' over visuals. According to this view, immersion does not primarily result from the visual perspective or viewpoint of the avatar or player character (e.g. first-person vs. third-person) but rather from the sensory connection established through (physical) controls. Swink refers to this as *game feel*, defined as 'the tactile, kinaesthetic sense of manipulating a virtual object' (2009: xiii). However, audiovisual impressions or a game's narrative can also affect players viscerally. After all, the embodied experience of game play (usually) also involves eyesight and hearing – not just hands on controllers. This 'primacy [of] the haptic/kinaesthetic' has recently been questioned (Keogh, 2015: 37), while the important role of audiovisual cues, i.e. representation, in conveying action and thus enabling a game feel in the first place has been highlighted (2015: 154; Gregorson and Grodal, 2008: 70). Swink refers to such enhancing effects as 'polish' (2009: 6) and regards them as tools for game designers to *emphasise* 'the player's perception of the physicality' of game objects (Keogh, 2015: 158). Anable advocates for an even more nuanced approach of considering the intimate ties

of game mechanics with their representation (2018: xvi). Accordingly, it is not all about code and software but the interface that connects those with the player. Thus, the most encompassing understanding of 'game feel' would be the interplay of the players' bodies, the game system and the controller as medium, as well as the audiovisual information gathered from representation (Anable, 2018: 44; Shinkle, 2005).

While the representational interface undoubtedly plays an essential role in the experience, this present analysis focuses on the affective potential of mechanics, specifically the interaction with game controllers and avatars.

Getting a feel for controllers

In the study of games, the term 'mechanics' often appears imprecise, having been used with varying degrees of specificity by scholars or designers alike (cf. Sicart, 2008). For this argument, mechanics are defined not merely in the sense of underlying rules or code but as 'the various actions […] and control mechanisms afforded […] in a game context' (Hunicke et al., 2004: 3). According to Salen and Zimmerman, the (core) mechanics of a game are 'the essential nugget[s] of a game activity' which ultimately create the concrete game experience for the player (2004: 317). Simply put, mechanics are 'the player's abilities in the game' (Swink, 2009: 70). They enable players to interact with (i.e. to affect) the game world, thereby providing embodied and affective gaming experiences.

Understanding this interaction necessitates a closer examination of game controllers. Video game players usually engage with a specific technical input device – like a gamepad, mouse and keyboard, or joystick – by pressing buttons or moving sticks. This input is simultaneously translated into corresponding in-game actions. In this sense, the game controller 'acts as an extension of the player's body' (Crick, 2011: 266). It is 'the umbilical' connecting the player with the game (Keogh, 2015: 118). Blomberg (2018) emphasizes the (according to him, underexplored) 'dual character' of both the tangible, embodied presence *and* the link it provides to the virtual action of the video game. To describe the relationship between actions performed on the controller and their virtual counterparts, Blomberg (2018) relies on semiotics. Most prominent are the dimensions of resemblance and convention.

Resemblance refers to the degree of visual/functional similarity between input action and in-game action (how 'iconic' is it?). When the movement of so-called 'primitive actions', i.e. actual body movements in relation to a physical input device like pressing a button (Gregerson and Grodal, 2009: 70), resembles or corresponds to the movement of the in-game action, they are essentially 'mapped' onto virtual bodies or environments (2009: 66). In the simplest expression this can be an analogue stick pushed for motion into the indicated direction (2009: 71), or a shoulder button pressed with index fingers to pull the trigger of an in-game gun. On the other end of the spectrum are motion-sensitive controllers which require the player to mimic the desired in-game action, exemplifying the greatest degree of what Gregerson and Grodal (2009) call 'motor isomorphism'. Many in-game actions are governed by conventions. When players need to 'press X to jump', for example, the mapping might seem arbitrary as it does not inherently resemble the act of jumping. To an extent, game play with controllers is highly conventionalised and habitualised (how symbolic or established by convention has an action become?). Nowadays, industry standards are pretty much set with certain conventions of control. As players begin their journey with whichever model of game controller as initiation point, they must first learn what each button or stick

does in relation to the game and will then infer this knowledge onto all following games. It can be understood as acquiring a language, a 'controller syntax' (Kirkpatrick, 2009: 135).

Despite the often minimal affordance of movement, it would be a fallacy to 'equat[e] less bodily intensive game play with disembodied game play' (Rambusch, 2016: 82). Even when seated, (seemingly passive) players experience physical sensations such as an increase of the heartbeat, rushes of adrenaline, or unconscious and intuitive urges to lean forward (Crick, 2011: 266), especially those preferring more ilinx- or agôn-based games (cf. Caillois, 2001). E-sports athletes (!) even go through vigorous training to cultivate reflexes and eye-hand coordination. Regardless of professional level, though, game play *is* a real-life activity (Shinkle, 2005: 5).

The influence of mechanics can also manifest physically: the repeated performance of specific control schemes can result in players producing so-called 'body memory' of that movement (Nørgård, 2016: 99f). Especially when players spend longer periods 'mastering' a game, they can effectively acquire muscle memory of that game's control scheme, inscribing the game in the body of the player. Ash describes this tacit knowledge as somatic or analytic 'attunement' (2013: 36), wherein players 'open the body to sensory feedback', thereby enabling progress within the game (2013: 45). Being (physically) affected as a player thus seems inevitable. For Keogh, as players gain what he terms 'embodied literacy', they are no longer making conscious decisions on how to operate the respective game pad but have incorporated the mechanics into their hands and thus themselves (2015: 119-23). Interestingly, the more immersed or invested players are in game play, the less conscious they seem to be of the controller in their hands – a phenomenon which Kirkpatrick terms 'repression' (2009: 127). Regardless of the terminology used, it can be agreed that video games affect the human body, with mechanics as the site of interaction. A game's design will have players move and act in specific ways, thereby 'playing' them just as much. In the moment of game play, the game can even (quite literally) leave traces in the human body.

Avatars and the body

After exploring game play mechanics and the situation of the player's body, one final aspect to consider is the avatar-player relationship. In games research, avatars are far from being neglected, often discussed in relation to representation, diversity, and identity (Szolin et al., 2022). For the sake of this chapter, the focus lies on avatars' roles in affect and embodiment.

Avatars can be defined as 'a visual, kinetic […] and sometimes auditory digital representation of a user […] within a virtual environment' (Tymińska, 2021: 28); they facilitate physical immersion, serving as an 'embodied manifestation of the player's interaction with the game system' (Schröter, 2016: 32), or 'exclusive intermediary' (Crick, 2011: 261). Avatars effectively act as the player's vehicle to make game play come alive.

A game character – just like a controller – becomes an extension of the player, for which they develop a certain sense or *feeling*. Considering descriptions such as 'first-person' or 'third-person *view*', it is also important to acknowledge that the connection between players and avatars is not merely through visual but rather through sensorimotor capabilities (Rambusch, 2016: 76). Wilhelmsson here introduces the term 'point of being' instead of 'point of view', to express this identification in terms of proprioceptive senses, meaning the 'body's sense of its own physical position in the world', rather than just visual processes (Rambusch, 2016: 77). Likewise, according to Newman (2002), characters are to be seen as

mere 'sets of available capabilities and capacities', thereby putting less importance on their physical representation and the need for identification.

However, the virtual re-embodiment as avatars does not entail a virtual or 'out-of-body' experience. On the contrary: '[G]ames actually anchor our experience and subjectivity firmly in the body or in an ambiguous boundary between the body and technology' (Lahti, 2003: 158). Ultimately, affect theory also lets us rethink the boundaries between body and technology. Lahti fittingly describes this fusion as the 'cyborgian promise of games', imagining the player as a hybrid being 'through the corporealization of the experience of playing' (2003: 158). Keogh also conceptualizes game play as a 'cybernetic assemblage of human and nonhuman bodies' (2015: 43), impossible to separate during the 'intimate coupling of bodies' (2015: 68) – which adds a sexual connotation to the sensual experience. In this light, the human body is not only extended and hybrid, but the affective connection (or convergence) of bodies is also particularly highlighted.

Having established the crucial components and framework for analysis, the subsequent section focuses on *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) and *Brothers – A Tale of Two Sons* (2013) as exemplary instances of affective game design. While both games have been viewed as narratively compelling, it will be shown that their potential for affective experiences and a particular 'game feel' lies primarily on the mechanical level.

Embodied avatars in *What Remains of Edith Finch*

What Remains of Edith Finch (2017), an independent adventure game, has garnered critical acclaim and favourable reviews for its innovative narrative design and emotional experience. While its gameplay emphasizes storytelling and linear progression, often placing it in the category of walking simulators or interactive dramas, such classifications risk understating its ludic and affective potential. Although the game's linearity is evident, its game play still has movement and spatial navigation as guiding principles, which is widely regarded as 'central to videogame play' (Keogh, 2015: 26). This chapter contends that *What Remains of Edith Finch's* immersive narrative, when coupled with its mechanics, enables a profoundly affective and embodied experience for players.

The narrative centres on 17-year-old Edith Finch, returning to her childhood home to uncover her deceased relatives' past and secrets. She is the only remaining member of her family, supposedly due to the so-called 'Finch-curse', the fate of an early and tragic death that seems to befall any of the Finches. Edith's (and the player's) exploration of the whimsical Finch house is mediated through her melancholic, visualized diary entries, which serve as narrative signposts. All rooms of the deceased in the house have been sealed off and remain untouched after their deaths, essentially creating shrines to memorize their lives and deaths. The family home thus functions as a spatial archive for the player to traverse and explore. At the same time, the mementos in these rooms are also an entry point for the player to 'relive' the final moments (and thus deaths) of each person in distinct vignettes.

Gameplay actions mainly consist of navigating the game space through a linear and highly sign-posted path and interacting with objects, most notably to play out the deaths of all family members in chronological order. The player mostly navigates the game with the analogue sticks to move and look around via control of the camera perspective, which can be considered its own 'game body' (Crick, 2011: 262). Players can also interact with in-game objects by pressing the shoulder button.

While the game's mechanics might seem reductive at first glance, they play a significant role in creating an embodied and intuitive connection between the player and the game world. Without an explicit tutorial, all the controls need to be figured out by the player while playing. This moment of realization is what Rush terms 'an embodied metaphor', as it makes visible the link between command and representation (2011: 245). In this case, most of the movements are very intuitive, though, both due to familiar conventions and the design of interactions to mimic real-world motions, albeit being situated on the less-isomorphic side of the spectrum. For example, moving the analogue stick in a rotational manner will operate a music box, while moving it to the left or right in specific interactions will open or turn the pages of a book. Moreover, in certain moments the game also features haptic feedback, which further enhances the tactile experiences of the player. Through these interactions, *What Remains of Edith Finch* establishes a connection between the player's physical body and the virtual environment, creating a certain 'game feel', and rendering the narrative deeply tactile and affective.

A key element for the game's feel is the shifting avatar-player relationship. The narrative vignettes are mechanically distinct minigames, each providing the player with a different avatar to re-embody. The individual family members and their unique circumstances also shape game play, then. For example, in Barbara's vignette, the player reads and interacts within the panels of a comic book, while the death of Sam lets them take pictures of his final hunting trip. Throughout, the player engages with the game environment from the (first-person) perspective of different characters. At the same time, hints about the physicality of the avatar are mainly gathered through their specific movement patterns and the representation of hands – or their lack of hands (cue tentacles). What is more, the different avatars can further be distinguished by the different game play that arises from their individual situation. Going back to Wilhelmsson's concept of 'point of being', players connect with avatars not merely through visual or narrative identification but through proprioceptive and kinaesthetic engagement (Rambusch, 2016: 77). This allows a unique game feel for each character.

For example, one of the first vignettes recounts the final dream of eight-year-old[2] Molly on the night of her death, as she recorded it in the form of a diary entry. Having been sent to bed without supper, her dream revolves around herself embodying different animals. Molly starts as a cat, only to mid-jump transform into an owl, then shark, and finally gigantic kraken, all preying on other animals. The player embodies Molly embodying different animals, thereby 'becoming-animal' even if just for a moment (Fuchs, 2021: 265). All the while, the different non-human bodies afford different control mechanics tailored to the animals' specific physiques. As the cat, the player climbs tree branches using analogue sticks and jumps at its prey with the release of the shoulder button – mimicking the concentrated held position of a feline predator just before the attack. Embodying the kraken, analogue sticks are used to slide a tentacle across the floor in the intended direction, while the shoulder button 'pulls' the animal's body towards that direction (again mimicking the type of locomotion) – all accompanied by the sound of slimy digits sliding across the floor. These visual clues and sound effects emphasise the perception of motion as it is related to

2 The fact that players are – knowingly – about to witness (or rather, be complicit) in the death of a child, sets a context for the game play that is likely to elicit very different emotions from the initial pleasure of game play.

controller input, thus creating the *feeling* of sliding across the floor. Such mechanics give a very particular game feel that relates closely to the avatar and thus provides players with an embodied experience. Especially the 'sensorimotor flow of inhabiting an animal body' (Caracciolo, 2021) promises a novel, affectively rich game play moment.

Another vignette similarly shows how embodied mechanics can (physically) affect players. The player controls Calvin, a child, as he sits on a swing, and upon testing controls may realize that each of the legs is assigned to one analogue stick of the controller (left and right, respectively). In order to get the full momentum to swing higher and higher, both sticks need to be synchronized, mirroring the coordination required in real-life swinging. The player might 'feel' the adrenaline as the movement of the swing is simulated and enhanced by polish effects, i.e. audio-visual effects to 'emphasize the physical nature of interactions' (Swink, 2009: 5), like blurring eyesight and the rush of the wind as the swing goes faster. This moment, seemingly simple in design, can evoke a visceral thrill while also prefiguring Calvin's tragic death, as his attempt to 'swing all the way around' leads to his fatal fall.

The vignette of Lewis Finch, then, epitomizes the intriguing interplay between narrative and embodiment. Working in a fish cannery with the mundane task of beheading fish on a production line, Lewis escapes the boredom of his job (and life) through vivid daydreams of a fantasy world where he – as a video game enthusiast – experiences an exciting journey in the form of a video game reminiscent of classical RPG adventures. As he manages to continue his work next to imagining a different life, the controls are likewise split between left and right (analogue sticks), with the left manoeuvring Lewis' RPG avatar, while the right side continues to behead fish in a simple movement of grabbing the fish and holding it under a cutting machine. This split mechanic mirrors Lewis' dual existence, forcing the player to embody his divided attention. On screen the 'game world' – beginning as a simple 2D labyrinth but soon developing into a more sophisticated but stylized 3D representation – is juxtaposed with the view of Lewis' hand and the incoming fish on the line, both actions effectively overlapping. In an act of coordination, the player performs both simultaneously. At times, the act of beheading the fish is even directly integrated into Lewis' games. As the player continues beheading fish, the mundane movement becomes an automation for the player, just like it does for Lewis. At the same time, the fantasy world slowly starts to dominate the screen and thus focus until the task of beheading fish finally vanishes completely. The final act, then, when Lewis' imagined crowning as a king aligns with his real-world suicide (i.e. the act of laying his head under the guillotine at work), delivers a powerful narrative twist that is deeply felt through the player's embodied engagement. By physically performing Lewis' monotonous labour at the production line, players can gain an affective understanding of his despair, blurring the boundary between virtual and real-world embodiment.

What Remains of Edith Finch demonstrates how video games can harness a variety of embodied mechanics to create profound affective experiences. The embodied engagement with the game world in different contexts creates an (unconscious) arousal, which is given emotional value by matching with the narrative (cf. Sylvester, 2013: 41f). Moreover, as all vignettes end with the death of the character (and in that moment, avatar), players will most likely be emotionally affected – especially since the shift in human value regards the shift from life to death (2013: 12). Moreover, the game's intuitive controls and diverse avatar perspectives foster an embodied connection between player and game world. Each vignette exemplifies how 'game feel' emerges not only from sensorimotor interactions but

also from their integration with audiovisual and narrative elements. As players navigate the Finch family's stories, the interplay of mechanics, embodiment, and affective resonance underscores the potential of video games as a medium for storytelling that transcends traditional narrative forms.

Coordinating hands in *Brothers – A Tale of Two Sons*

Brothers – A Tale of Two Sons (2013), an independently-developed single-player co-op (!) video game is highly regarded for its innovative mechanics. The story follows two brothers on a perilous journey to find a cure for their ailing father (and only remaining parent), striving through fantastical landscapes and overcoming various obstacles and hazards. Dialogue is minimal and delivered in a fictional, incomprehensible language, leaving the storytelling to environmental context, visual clues, but also game play mechanics.

The game's unique feature lies in its control scheme, where the player simultaneously manoeuvres both brothers using a single controller: the left side of the game pad for the older brother, and the right side for the younger. With the respective analogue stick, each of the brothers can walk, climb or make other movements in the indicated direction. At the same time, the shoulder buttons trigger interactions with the environment in various ways. During these interactions, the brothers' specific physicalities and character traits come into play: the elder brother, stronger and more mature, handles tasks requiring physical strength or authority, such as operating large mechanisms or lifting the younger brother. In contrast, the smaller and more playful younger brother is adept at crawling through tight spaces or engaging NPCs with humour. The player has to recognize and learn when and how to use both best – especially in combination. Many challenges and activities demand their cooperation, emphasizing teamwork and coordination. A memorable example occurs during a climbing sequence where the brothers are tied together with a rope, and any misstep risks both their lives.

The simultaneous control of two different avatars might well require some getting used to from the unfamiliar player. Moving both characters in the same direction (e.g. letting them run along the same path next to each other) creates little difficulty. However, if their movements are supposed to be asynchronous, i.e. independent from each other or with a differing direction or movement, controls can present a cognitive and physical challenge. Similar to the difficulty of patting one's head while simultaneously rubbing the stomach, players might make mistakes and lead one or both characters in the wrong direction, or they might only be able to execute the movements and actions while alternating with breaks in between. This challenge arises from the neural structures that underlie our bimanual coordination: when a task requires different directions of movement, both hemispheres of the brain are activated and (due to the conflicting directions) interfere with each other (Gazzaniga et al., 2009: 296). Here, the game design cleverly (ab)uses a natural neural limitation of the human body for a core mechanic to create a specific experience and impose challenges on the player. The difficulty of coordinating the two halves of the brain brings players to the limits of their own ability of control. It offers an embodied exercise that matches the characters' challenges, thereby enhancing the player's connection to the characters' experiences.

Brothers also integrates (reduced) isomorphic movements, for example, by using the analogue stick's ability for rotational movements to draw up bridges and operate other instruments. Holding down the shoulder button replicates the younger brother's need

to cling to the elder brother during swimming sequences, himself being unable to swim after witnessing the traumatizing drowning of their mother. Just as the character holds onto his brother so as not to get lost and drown, the player also has to 'hold on' and keep the shoulder button pressed at all times while swimming. These tactile mechanics are complemented by occasional haptic feedback, such as vibrations signalling environmental instability (e.g. when paths start to collapse), further heightening the player's immersion and emotional engagement.

The culmination of these mechanics (and the experience they enable) occurs in a pivotal moment near the game's end. Throughout the game, game play demands the mastery of using both brothers in teamwork (and thus also exercises brain coordination). However, there comes a moment when the elder brother is mortally wounded by a damsel-turned-monstrous-spider and finally succumbs to the inflicted injuries. The player, now controlling only the younger brother, experiences the loss both narratively and physically. As the left side of the controller becomes unresponsive, players can no longer utilize the left hand, symbolizing the elder brother's absence. This embodied loss intensifies during a heart-wrenching scene, when even the Water of Life is not able to revive the dead body. The youngster (and thus the player) buries their brother with their own hands – all in a painfully slow pace and with only the use of the remaining controls. In the final moments of the younger brother's journey home, he is tasked to overcome obstacles he formerly could only manage with the help of his brother (e.g. swimming, operating large switches, climbing up a high cliff). Here, the game reintroduces the left-hand controls of the deceased brother, symbolizing the younger brother's internalization of his sibling's strength and maturity. Activating the left side of the controller now allows the player to fully utilize the older brother's abilities as well. This mechanic not only deepens the player's emotional engagement but also underscores the narrative themes of growth, loss, and resilience.

Lessons for aspiring game designers

As has been illustrated, video games inherently and by necessity offer embodied, affective experiences. However, some titles stand out for their exceptional use of mechanics to evoke a specific game feel. For example, the highly contested use of quick-time events in *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) or *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018) aims at heightening tension and creating physical sensations of urgency and stress through the fear of failure. Players might feel a similar panic as the characters are portrayed to feel, or they might feel pressured or even pushed to certain reactions, all because of an underlying physical sensation (affect) that is cognitively mapped onto the narrative of the game. Even before that, Quantic Dream experimented with unique controls in *Fahrenheit* (2005), letting players primarily interact with surroundings through indicated, imitative analogue stick movements, rather than button pressing. Like in *Brothers*, *ICO* (Team Ico, 2001) uses the mechanic of keeping a button pressed to hold onto a character's hand, physically simulating the intended action and fostering a connection. In the first instalment of the currently ongoing series, the designers of *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007) employed a rather innovative concept of assigning buttons to body parts as well as introducing different modes of the same action that players must master and activate according to needs. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) simulates the experience of schizophrenia through mechanics and audiovisual clues, thereby merging 'gameplay emotion' and 'narrative emotion' (in Fahlenbrach, 2016: 142). More recently, *Stray* (BlueTwelve, 2022) immerses

players in the perspective of a cat in an otherwise android-inhabited city, forcing them to adapt to the physicality of a smaller, agile being. The game play reflects the feline movement and behaviour, with control gimmicks such as a vibration upon purring or an inversion of control when the avatar is 'stuck' underneath a cardboard box. Finally, the horror game *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015) features a web of character relations as well as the affective mechanics of choices and consequences. A memorable sequence requires players to keep their (motion-sensitive) controller as still as possible to avoid being detected by the game's monster antagonist. Especially in horror games, designers like to play with our states of heightened arousal to simulate fear. While all gameplay is affective and embodied, these examples demonstrate how thoughtful and intentional game design choices can further amplify a game's affective capacity.

This chapter has emphasized the importance of considering embodiment and affect in analysing and designing video game experiences. Affect in video games can be described as physical, yet often unconscious, bodily reaction in the feedback loop that gameplay provides, while embodiment is a necessity of all experience. As the examination of *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Brothers – A Tale of Two Sons* demonstrates, the mechanics of a game in particular can offer affective and embodied experiences for players. While both games feature compelling narratives for which they have been praised (especially *Edith Finch*), their actual effectiveness lies in the characteristics of gameplay. Their mechanics evoke a game feel that resonates with players on a kinaesthetic and emotional level. *Brothers* gains its meaning and tells a story through (physical) interaction, whereas *Edith Finch's* narrative experience is amplified through the embodiment of the different characters and the tactile controls. In both cases, mechanics and narrative support each other and seamlessly work together – a testament to what Sylvester would describe as 'the pinnacle of game design craft' (2009: 34). With regards to tactile and kinaesthetic game feel, both games feature (minimal) motor isomorphism through their mechanics, which leads to a particular play experience. The specific mechanics of the two games allow the player to affect the game state in a way that is an embodied experience, and at the same time – by mapping arousal with the narrative (2009: 42) – they can affect the player emotionally. The fact that both games also deal with themes of loss and death, narratively and mechanically, further charges the experience emotionally. While much more can still be said about these two games (for example the intradiegetic 'affect' in the form of the responsibilities and interconnectedness between the different characters affecting each other's lives), the analysis of mechanics suffices to show that video games can be deeply affective because of the embodied nature of specific control mechanics.

The study of affect and embodiment in games, and the study of the two game examples specifically, offers valuable insights for game designers, scholars and players alike. For designers, understanding these concepts may unlock their potential to create more impactful experiences and fully realize the medium's potential. For scholars and critics, affect theory provides a lens to analyse the interplay between mechanics and narrative and to investigate interactivity more holistically. For players, the understanding – or at least awareness – of their own experience can further deepen appreciation for the medium's ability to evoke empathy and understanding. As affective machines, video games allow us to inhabit new perspectives (human or non-human), explore (trans-)human sensations, and engage with narratives in ways no other medium can. As such, the intersection of mechanics, embodiment, and affect remains a fertile ground for further exploration and innovation in game studies and design.

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Kseniia Harshina is a PhD student at the University of Klagenfurt. Her research explores video games as spaces for identity exploration, accessibility, and empowerment, particularly for marginalized players. Her PhD project focuses on developing a game aimed at empowering people with forced migration experiences. She is also the founder of Games Intersectional, a local community dedicated to supporting marginalized voices in game development and academia.

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Kristina Jevtic is a PhD candidate at the University of Konstanz, Germany. Her research in the Department of Media Studies focuses primarily on TV studies, popular culture and digital games. Within her PhD project, her interest lies in different represented temporalties in video games and analyses how cyclical, serial and layered temporalities function as game structuring and enabling entities. Kristina is closely associated with the GameLab of the University of Konstanz and is currently in charge of organising the ongoing event series 'Diversity Gaming', highlighting a variety of digital and analogue games regarding multiple, intersectional themes and topics of diversity.

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Ewan Kirkland has published extensively on video games, focussing on survival horror and the *Silent Hill series*. Exploring such issues as storytelling, gender representation, genre and concept art, Ewan's work has appeared in *Games and Culture*, *Convergence*, *Gothic Studies* and *Camera Obscura*. Routledge Advances in Game Studies recently published his study examining the influence of Gothic literature on games design, which contains chapters on *Bioshock*, *Gone Home*, *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *Night in the Woods*. Other research interests include animation, children's culture and fandom. Ewan's current research project explores UK fan conventions surrounding Hasbro's My Little Pony franchise.

Lydia Kleinstück is a PhD student and lecturer at the Faculty for Translation Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz in Germersheim, Germany. She is a member of the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies and active in the Mainz-based research group Transnational Periodical Cultures. Her PhD research focuses on multimodality, materiality, and community in US video game magazines.

Christina Obmann studied English as well as Media and Communication Studies at the Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt and is currently a master's student of Game Studies and Engineering. She is a professional (copy)writer, content marketer, and external lecturer in Literature and Cultural Studies at the English department of the Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt, the latter including introductory courses in Literary Studies as well as special focus seminars on Ethnic American literatures and history, gender in science-fiction or media fandom. Her research interests in Game Studies span avatars and representation, ethics, educational game design, game production, or player and fan cultures.

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René Reinhold Schallegger was trained in English and American as well as French Studies, with a focus on literary and cultural criticism at the University of Klagenfurt (Austria), Anglia Ruskin University (UK), and Birmingham City University (UK). He is Associate Professor at the University of Klagenfurt, and his main areas of interest are media cultures of the fantastic, normative ethics, affect theory, Citizenship-, Gender-, Queer-, Canadian-, and Game Studies. He is President of the *Gesellschaft für Fantastikforschung* (Association for Research in the Fantastic), and his most recent publication is the monograph *A New Virtual Ethics: Interconnectedness and Interrelationality in Videogames* (2024).

Dr **Felix Schniz** is co-founder and director of the Game Studies and Engineering master's programme at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. An interdisciplinary game studies scholar at heart, Felix has drawn on – and cooperated with colleagues in – philology and literary studies, theories of modernity and cultural studies, philosophy, and psychology. He currently operates from the Department of Information technology at the University of Klagenfurt. After asking 'What is a Videogame Experience?' in his dissertation, his current research focuses on the meaning of experience, genre theory, and the importance of subjectivity in research on video games, analogue games, and virtual worlds.

Tan Schütz recently finished the master's programme in Game Studies and Engineering at the University of Klagenfurt. Their research usually combines theoretical, activist, and therapeutic approaches to understand how video games affect us, and how we can affect them as systems and worlds. When their cat is not sitting on their keyboard, they can be reached via tan.y.schuetz@gmail.com.

Tom Tucek is a doctoral student at the University of Klagenfurt and is teaching and researching video games. His research interests cover the use of generative AI in the context of serious video games, representation, identity, ethics, Japanese games, and

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Tamara Urach is a Pre-Doc Assistant in English Didactics at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. With a background in English and history education, her diploma thesis explored Germanic influences on J.R.R. Tolkien's works. Focussing on teacher education, her PhD research examines simulation games in EFL classrooms, particularly teaching environmentalism through *The Sims 4*. Her interests include ecocriticism, video game studies, game-based learning, education for sustainable development, and the mythologies. Passionate about modern media and cultural studies, she integrates these fields to enhance language learning and environmental awareness.

Nick Webber is Professor of Game Studies, and Director of the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, at Birmingham City University, UK. He is co-convenor of the Historical Games Network and his research focuses on (video)games, cultural history and identity. His recent work explores the historical practices of player and fan communities, the impact of games and virtual worlds on our understanding of the past, and the relationship between national cultural policy and video games.



EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS IN VIDEO GAME CULTURES

This book brings together a selection of papers delivered at the Video Game Cultures 2023 conference, held from 7 to 9 September 2023 at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. An interdisciplinary collection drawing on disciplines from literary and cultural studies through to evolutionary psychology, this book critically investigates many developments in video game cultures, technologies, practices, texts, paratexts, and genres. Through examining ideas such as narrative and time, gender and sexuality, ethics and affect, and technology and spaces, our authors aim to expand our shared understanding of video games, and the cultures and communities which surround them.

The work presented here reflects authors at different points in their academic careers, and will appeal to a variety of readers, from those wanting to find out more about academic writing on video games, through to those with a focused scholarly interest in particular fields of enquiry. With sections addressing Queer Game Studies, Historical Game Studies, and Game Design Perspectives, alongside ideas of solidarity and kindness in video games, the collection speaks to numerous subfields within games research. The chapters within offer conclusions and recommendations for academics and other educators, for established and aspiring game designers, and for anyone interested in how games can be understood as meaningful contributors to our cultural lives.

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