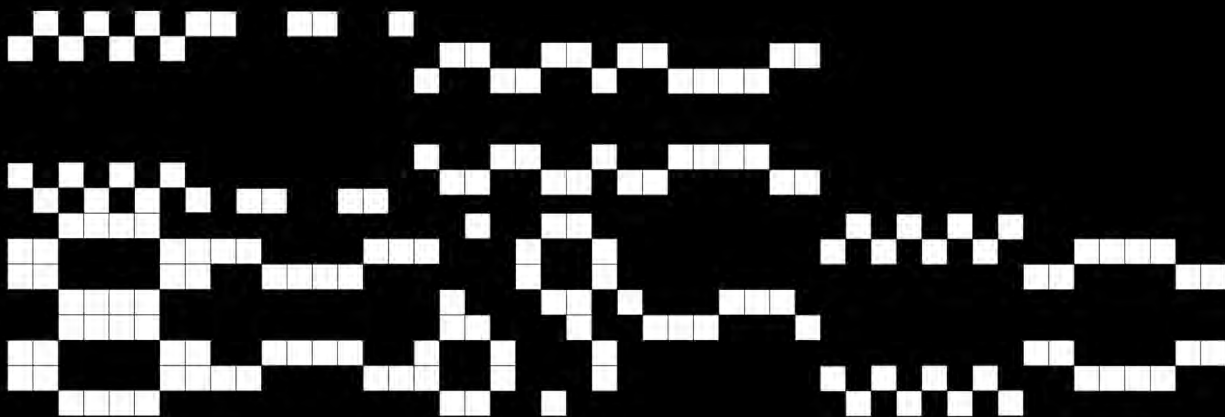
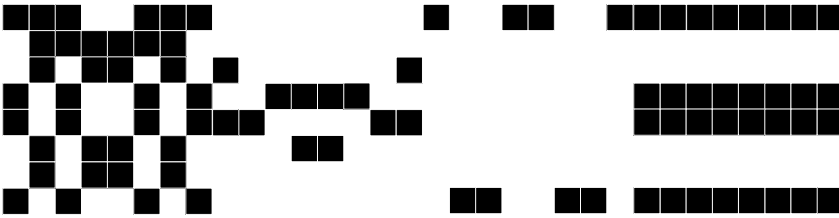


# Testaments of Interdisciplinarity in Game Studies



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# Testaments of Interdisciplinarity in Game Studies



STUDIJE VIDEO IGARA



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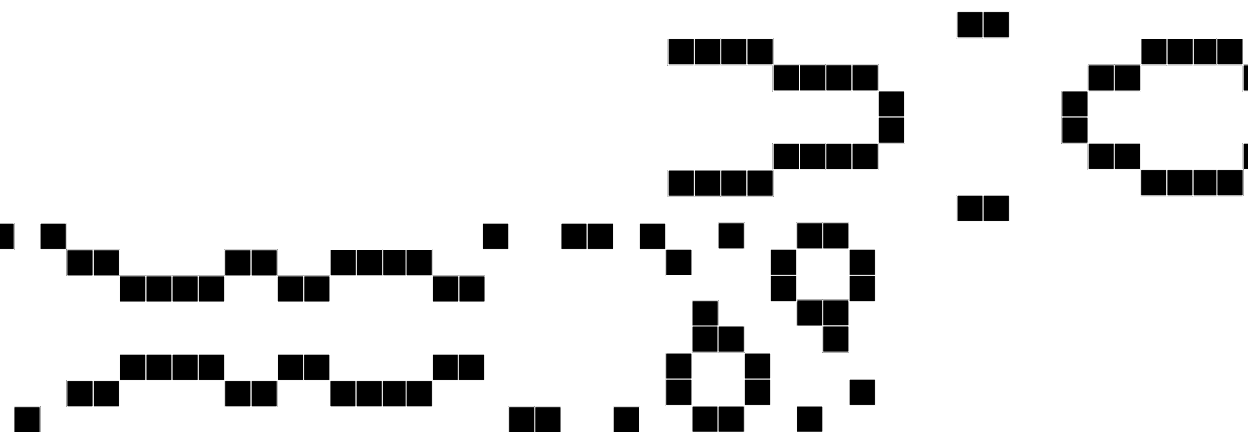
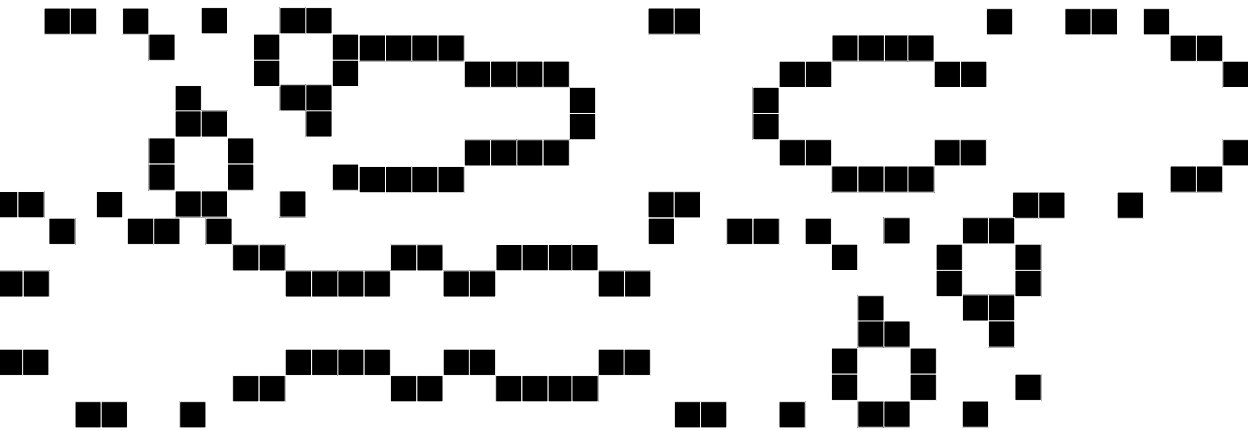
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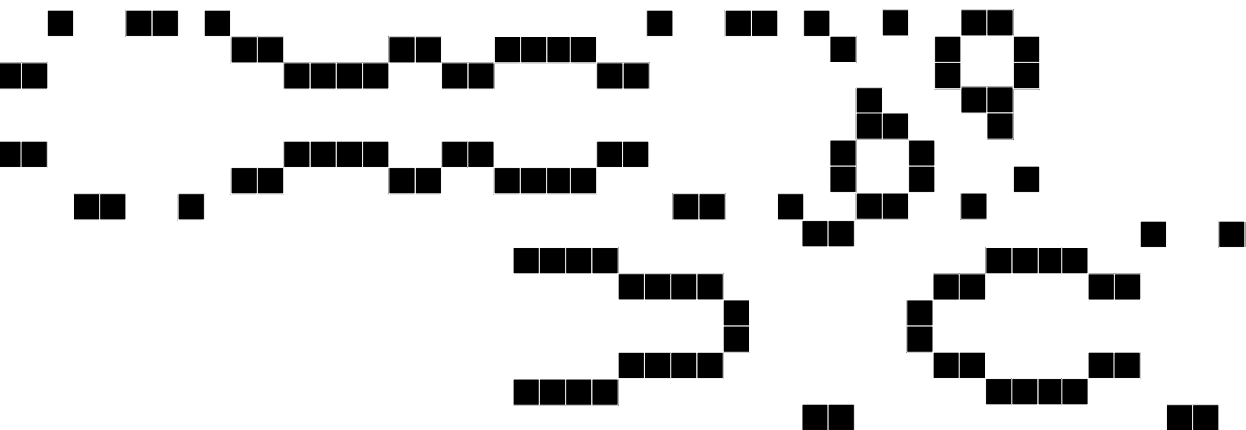
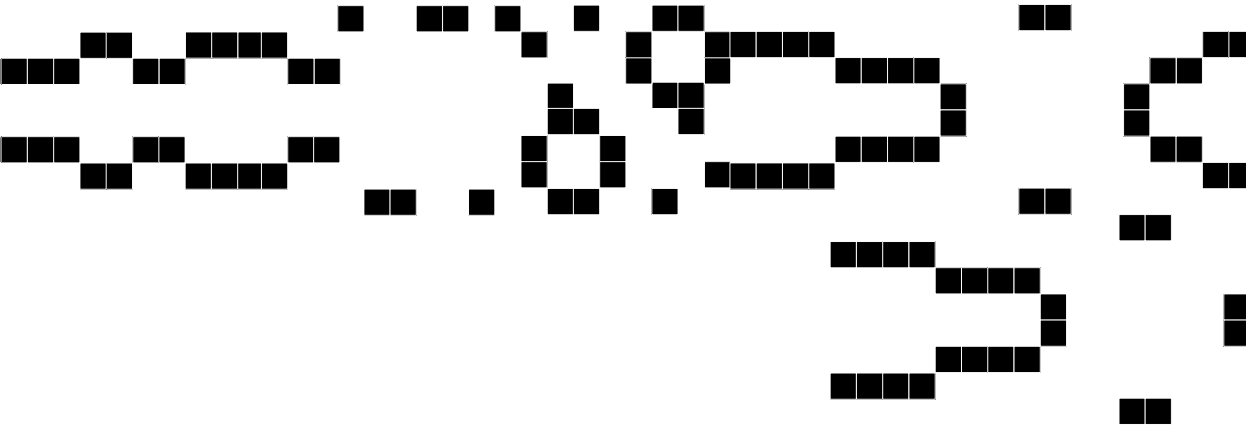
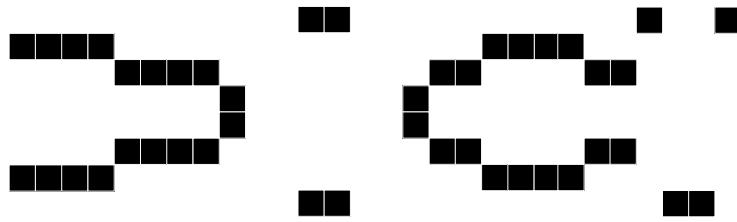
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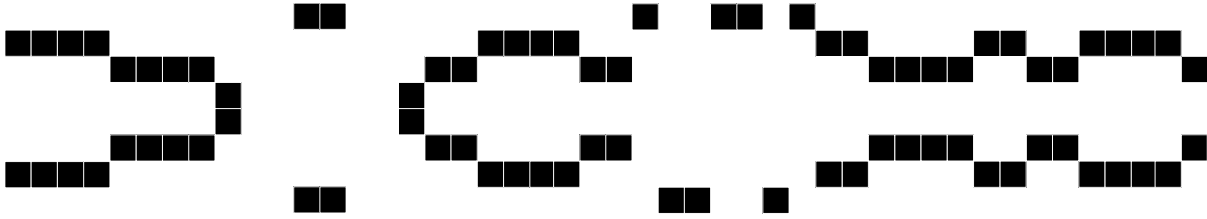
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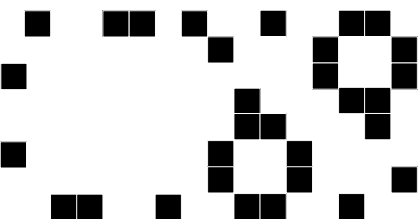
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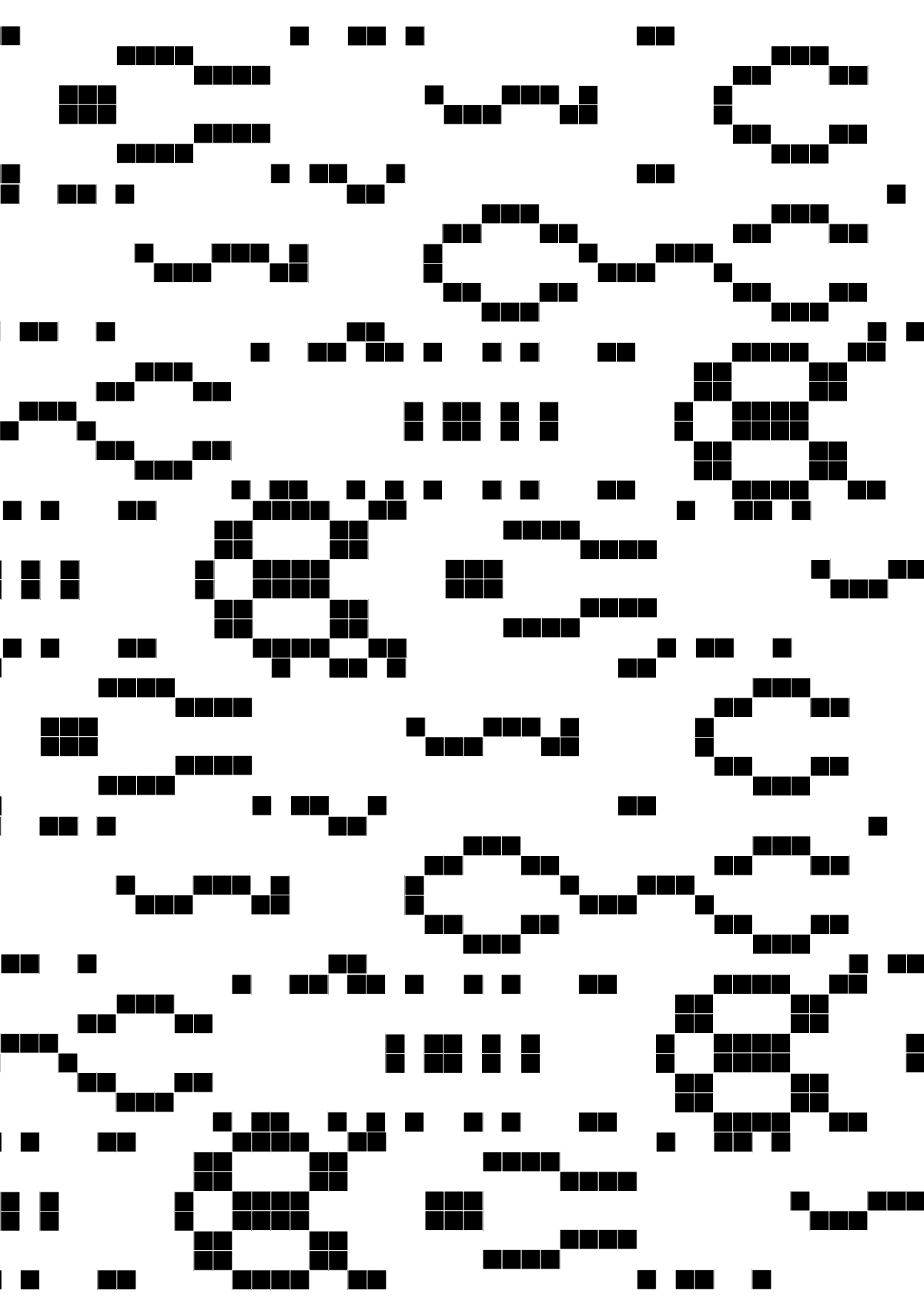
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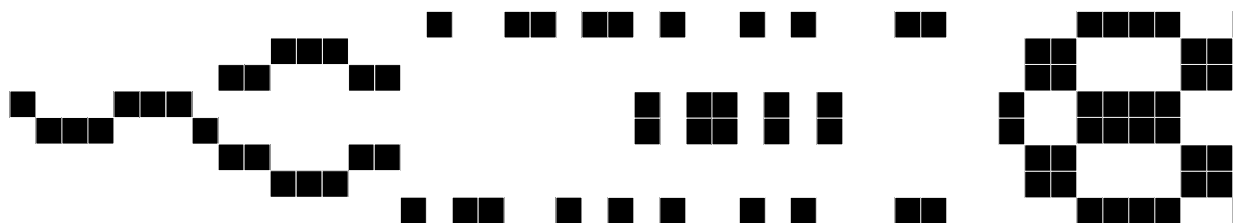
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## Introduction



UDC: 795

## Interdisciplinary Horizons in Game Studies



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### Summary:

This introduction critically examines the current state of Game Studies, highlighting growing concerns about the field's disciplinary trajectory. Addressing the risk of becoming a "narrow cultural studies multidiscipline," the text argues for a renewed emphasis on interdisciplinarity and methodological diversity. The introduction traces the field's evolution, noting the proliferation of subdisciplines and the challenges of maintaining coherence while embracing multiple scholarly perspectives. By problematizing existing frameworks and calling for a more inclusive approach, the text sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of video games across industry, academia, and criticism, emphasizing the need to challenge Western-centric assumptions and integrate global perspectives in game research. The field of Game Studies is experiencing a critical moment of self-reflection, and this text introduces a space for both a critical reflection on the discipline's current limitations and a call to action for future research that embraces diversity, methodological openness, and deeper engagement with the multifaceted nature of games and gaming cultures.

### Keywords:

Game Studies, Digital Media, Cultural Studies, Interdisciplinarity, Methodological Pluralism



In recent years, Game Studies have encountered a growing concern regarding their academic direction: having initially legitimized the study of games as a serious scholarly pursuit, the field now appears to be narrowing its scope, drifting away from its foundational interdisciplinarity and moving towards more rigid, discipline-specific approaches to video games. Deterding (2017) aptly captures this shift, warning that Game Studies risk becoming “one narrow cultural studies multidiscipline within the growing diversified field of game research and education.” This trend is not merely speculative; recent research into the state of the discipline, such as the work by Núñez-Pacheco and Penix-Tadsen (2021), underscores the gravity of this problem while still paradoxically referencing the ludo-narratological split as a framework for conceptualizing the future of the field. From its inception, Game Studies have been characterized by a continuous questioning of their own disciplinarity, encapsulated in statements like, “There is no single or necessarily enduring way of defining, mapping, or constructing games as research objects, nor game studies as a field of study” (Malazita et al., 2024).

This ongoing self-reflexivity has driven scholars to not only explore the already well-established concepts of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary but also to introduce the notion of “anti-disciplinarity”. Malazita et al. (2024) describe this as a manifestation of interdisciplinarity that resists the broader integration of critical scholarship into academic communities and game design practices, instead perpetuating a “tyranny of structurelessness” (Freeman, 1972) that protects traditional concentrations of power in both industry and the academy. This critique highlights the ideological and political assumptions underlying current notions of interdisciplinarity, which can serve to consolidate power within the frameworks of neoliberal capitalism, potentially leading to a future where Game Studies operate in isolated disciplinary silos with minimal cross-communication.

Rather than speculating on how these dynamics will unfold, this volume takes a grounded, pragmatic approach, providing a comprehensive assessment of the current state of Game Studies within three critical frameworks: industry, academia, and criticism. Similar recent efforts, such as Oli Sotamaa’s *Game Production Studies*

(2021), indicate that Game Studies are actively searching for ways to broaden their heuristic scope and analytical toolsets. Over the past two decades, numerous subdisciplines have emerged—ranging from Video Game Studies (Wolf, 2006), Digital Game Studies (Fromme and Unger, 2012), Computer Game Studies (Aarseth, 2001), and Platform Studies (Bogost and Montfort, 2009), to more focused areas like Historical Game Studies (Chapman, Foca and Westin, 2017), Game Design Research (Kultima, 2015), Indie Game Studies (Parker, 2014), Player Studies (Consalvo, 2016), Gamification Studies (Rapp et al., 2019), Feminist Game Studies (Consalvo, 2012), Queer Game Studies (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017), and Post-colonial Game Studies (Murray, 2018)—each contributing distinct perspectives to the field. This fragmentation reflects the broader, interdisciplinary ambitions of Game Studies, but it also raises questions about the coherence and future direction of the discipline.

In today's world, video games have gone beyond being just simple entertainment. They have become a unique medium capable of combining different forms of media and storytelling and conveying complex messages and themes. As a result, making video games now requires new practical and artistic skills such as programming, illustration, animation, modelling, narrative design, and sound design. This development has also led to increased academic interest from various fields, including IT, organisational sciences, narratology, semiology, media and film theory, cultural studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and pedagogy. This highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in the study of games. Conferences play a crucial role not only in bringing theory to life through the gathering of scholars and the exchange of ideas, but also in contributing to the institutionalisation and legitimization (Malazita et al., 2024) of the body of knowledge.

The conference titled *Video Games as a Challenge to Academia: 50 Years of the Gaming Industry* examined various aspects and connections between the scholarship and production of video games. It was envisioned as a chance to revisit and build upon the outcomes of the previous SVI conference, which marked the inaugural promotion of Game Studies as an emerging academic discipline in Serbia. The previous conference aimed to comprehensively outline various research domains within video games and successfully gathered researchers from the US, Russia, Germany, China, Great Britain, the

Czech Republic, and Finland. Fifty years ago, in 1972, Magnavox released the first home gaming console, created by Ralph Baer. That same year, Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney founded Atari, a pioneering game development company. Atari's success with *Pong* inspired many to join the game development industry, spreading from the US to Japan, Europe, and eventually worldwide. These milestones marked the beginning of today's largest media industry. To commemorate this anniversary, the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, in partnership with the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Philology and the Serbian Games Association (SGA), organised the second international conference on video game studies (SVI2022) in Serbia. This conference, held on December 9–10th, 2022, led to the creation of this volume through the intense collaboration of its many participants. Although the official topic of the conference was *Video Games As A Challenge To The Humanities*, a common thread quickly emerged, as it became clear that many other researchers were questioning precepts of both their disciplines and Game Studies writ large. As a result, several conference participants were invited to contribute papers and the resulting volume crystallises some of the most pressing concerns and insights of an international and diverse set of scholars that we believe reflect some of the most important issues in the discipline.

This collection was published with the support of the Provincial Secretary for Higher Education and Scientific Research of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (the Republic of Serbia), and is categorised as a thematic collection of international importance (M14). It would not have been possible without the contributions of many others who participated in various ways – as conference organisers and moderators, programme advisors, reviewers, etc. The Editors owe them all a sincere thanks.

## II ■

The starting point for this collection of essays is the recognition that for Game Studies to reach their full potential, there must be a renewed emphasis on exploring both their interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary. This requires (1) a decisive move away from the reductionist tendencies of a “narrow cultural studies multidiscipline” and towards the development of a more inclusive theoretical framework, and (2) an enhanced awareness of how institutional contexts influence the identity, status, and purpose of video games as a scholarly object.

The chapters in this volume explore how such a broadening of scope might be achieved by analysing the production, propagation, and defence of discourses on video games within three key institutional domains: the gaming industry, academia, and video game criticism. By bringing together a wide range of case studies from scholars in various academic and geopolitical contexts—spanning East Europe, China, Malaysia, France, Italy, the US, and the UK—*Testaments of Interdisciplinarity in Game Studies* aims to raise awareness of how different institutional frameworks shape the understanding of video games and point to potential paths out of the current epistemic crisis.

This usually proceeds through challenging some of the dominant assumptions about video games or paradigms within Game Studies (such as the notion that the ludo-narratological split is essential for understanding the nature of video games or the equally erroneous thesis about the presumed cultural homogeneity of video games). That being said, the global perspectives offered in this volume are crucial for developing a more comprehensive understanding of video games as a worldwide phenomenon. By including voices from East Asia, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and Western contexts, we gain insight into how different cultural, economic, and regulatory environments shape both game development and scholarly approaches. The diverse perspectives in this volume challenge the often Western-centric assumptions in Game Studies and pave the way for a more inclusive and globally aware field.

This volume offers a cross-section of perspectives and possibilities, and explores how games can effectively engage with relevant social issues (such as censorship, capitalism and culture) and dis-



ciplines (such as aesthetics, history, literary and media studies). It also demonstrates the vital importance that experience and background in different regional and disciplinary contexts bring to the understanding of video games today: from regulatory hurdles in the Chinese market to British game review magazines from the 80s, the essays in this volume are enriched by the experiences and expertise their authors brought to the table.

In the *Industry* section, Huang's examination of censorship in the Chinese gaming market provides crucial insights into the regulatory challenges faced by developers in non-Western contexts. Fantacci's analysis of "playbour" in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* critiques the integration of capitalist logics into game mechanics, while Sellakkody Mudiyansele's study on interactive in-game advertising explores the intersection of player preferences and commercial interests. These papers collectively illuminate the complex interplay between creative expression, economic imperatives, and cultural constraints in game development.

The academic section broadens the theoretical scope of Game Studies. Alidini and Dušanić's work on *Fallout 3* challenges functionalist approaches, proposing a more nuanced understanding of meaning-making in games, while Jocić's analysis of *Rakuen* on the manifestations of empathy instead of hostility towards in-game characters, and the role of empathy in the game's narrative and character development demonstrates the rich potential for interdisciplinary approaches combining literary and cultural studies. Noury's examination of historical representation in games further illustrates how the medium can contribute to academic discourse beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Finally, the *Criticism* section offers fresh perspectives on how games are interpreted and evaluated. Bootes' historical analysis of early UK video game reviews provides valuable context for understanding the evolution of game criticism. Cabezas' literary analysis of *Shadow of the Colossus* exemplifies how traditional humanities approaches can be productively applied to video games, while Ristić's critique of *Golf Club: Nostalgia* explores the potential of games as a medium for social commentary.

The methodological diversity and interdisciplinary connections represented in this volume underscore the rich potential for innovative

approaches in Game Studies. From Mudiyansele's use of qualitative interviews to explore preferences in the gaming industry, to content and discourse analysis (Boothe) and textual and contextual analysis (*Golf Club: Nostalgia*), the papers demonstrate the value of varied research methods, from empirical studies that inform game design, to explorations employing hermeneutic and culturological methods. This methodological pluralism not only enriches our understanding of games from multiple angles but also highlights the field's capacity to adapt and integrate diverse research traditions. The highlighted diversity demonstrates the potential for Game Studies to engage productively with a wide range of academic disciplines, drawing on literary theory, historiography and memory studies, social and political theory, and much more, resulting in truly interdisciplinary papers and essays. By fostering these examples, Game Studies can not only enrich its own theoretical frameworks but also contribute valuable insights to other fields, from media studies and aesthetics to sociology and political science.

Collectively, these papers demonstrate the rich potential for expanding Game Studies beyond its current limitations, and address the notable lack of methodological openness and metacritical awareness in recent Game Studies. With few exceptions, recent collective contributions in Game Studies have been much more narrowly focused, which made them attractive only to specialists in the field. In contrast, the present volume tries to embrace diversity and seeks to open the existing research to a broader academic audience, hopefully appealing to academics from a wide range of disciplines other than Game Studies, from those engaged in literary criticism and interpretation with a desire to broaden their knowledge to students of various cultural studies departments, to industry insiders eager to understand how the existing research in Game Studies and humanities may help them create better video games.

Given the contributors' diverse geographical and institutional profiles and the range of games and issues covered, we hope that this book will appeal to those scholars or professionals eager to stay updated with the latest perspectives in Game Studies, and we believe that scholars, students, and enthusiasts alike will find in this book a comprehensive and critical overview of the current state of Game Studies and their relationship to the humanities. In editing this collection, we hope to inspire future Game Studies research that is both better equipped to engage with the complexities we pointed

out, and that could also make the study of games more popular on its own. Chapters in this book are a testament to Game Studies' interdisciplinarity, and proof of an almost boundless potential.

More than twenty years since the inception of Game Studies, fundamental epistemological questions regarding the identity of the discipline are still being raised, and scholars around the world continue to enthusiastically research games, video games, gaming communities, the video game industry, game design, game narratives, gaming hardware, game interpretation, the relationship between art and games, the phenomenology of play, the psychology of play, gamification, semiotics of play, serious games, etc. Ultimately, this volume serves as both a critical reflection on the state of Game Studies and a call to action for future research that embraces diversity, methodological openness, and deeper engagement with the complexities of games, gaming communities, and game development across different contexts. In doing so, it aims to inspire scholars, students, and industry professionals to rethink the boundaries of Game Studies and contribute to a more dynamic and inclusive interdisciplinary field.

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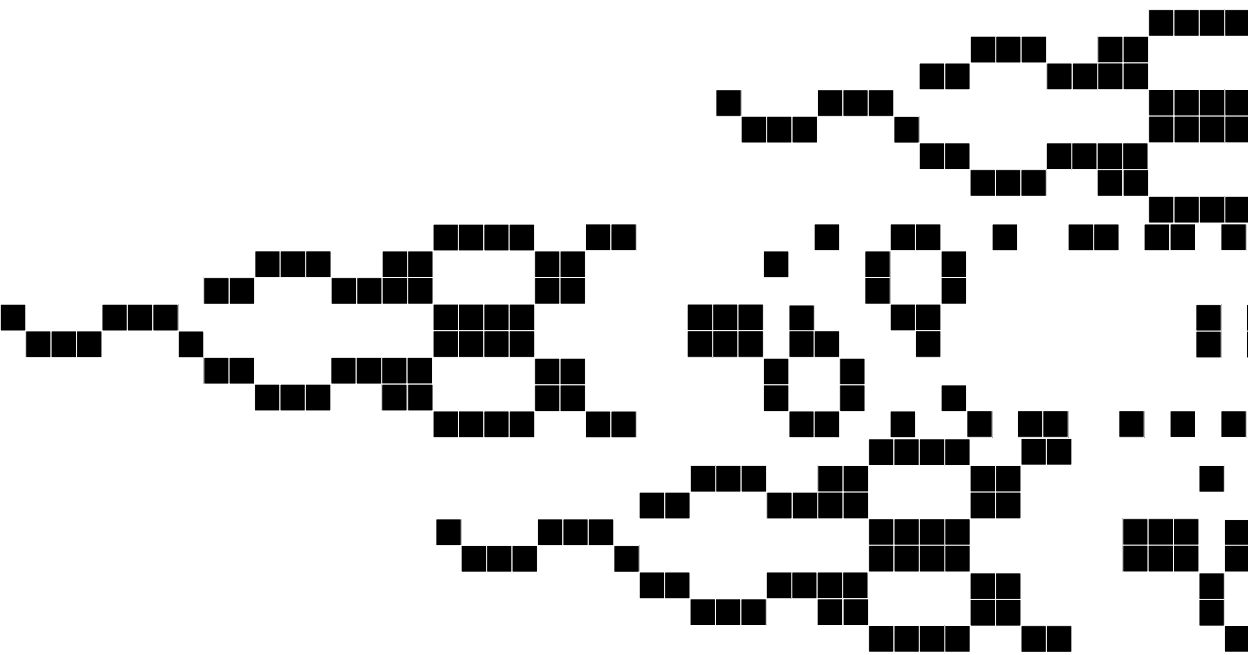
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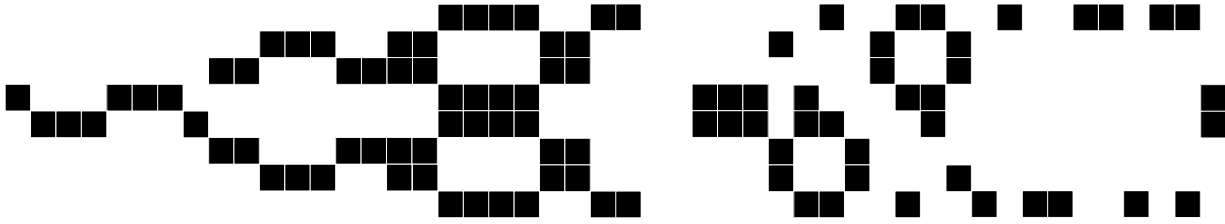
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## Industry



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## The Unwilling Fight in China

**A Brief Introduction to the  
Effects of Censorship and the  
Responses of Relevant Participants**



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### Summary:

The Chinese video game market is well-known for its success in the economic aspect. Nevertheless, its success should not become a reason to neglect the effects of censorship and the suffering of local participants, such as those agents who are in charge of introducing video games from overseas markets to China. As an unavoidable process for receiving a license and operating in China, the need to pass the censorship has affected local participants in many ways: from the choice of in-game content and systems, to developers, to which games agents should introduce to Chinese gamers. It also impacts the gaming experience of Chinese gamers, as there is a certain number of 'red lines' that limit the content and system of video games, and the work of local participants, as they need to compromise and be pragmatic in selecting overseas games to be imported. This study will briefly introduce the effects of censorship on foreign-made games—single-player games in particular—in China and focus on the responses of domestic agents to censorship. Understanding them allows people to know better what difficulties domestic agents, as an unignorable part of participants in China, face and what efforts they need to devote to ensure survival in the Chinese market.

### Keywords:

censorship; video games agents; foreign-made games; console games; single-player games

## 1. ■ Brief Introduction to Effects of Censorship

Nowadays, the influence of video games developed in China is increasing in both domestic and foreign markets. Thanks to the efforts of the Chinese government, which uses neo-techno-nationalism strategy to promote the innovation and autonomy of Chinese developers (Jiang and Fung, 2019), Chinese games have shown significant success in the economic aspect. For instance, because of the strengthening of Chinese games, the revenue generated from China's video game market is becoming increasingly well-known worldwide. The revenue of this market reached \$45.5 billion in 2021 (Rousseau, 2022), and it is expected to grow to \$57 billion by 2027 (Dealessandri, 2023). In addition, their success can be seen in foreign markets likewise, as the revenue achieved by Chinese games sales overseas increased to \$17.3 billion in 2022 (Liao, 2023).

Nevertheless, the success of the Chinese market and Chinese games does not mean that games from foreign markets and developers can share the same success in China. The current and crucial reason of their unsuccessful journey in China is the existence of censorship and, consequently, the lack of approved licenses for these games. Licensing is both significant and essential to video games in China. It has an enormous influence that can determine the very existence of a video game in the Chinese market. When six different administrations jointly issued *The Method of Strengthening Import Regulation of Cultural Products* in August 2005 (State Council, 2005), it not only clarified the duties of each administration, but also closed the publication loophole in China's video game market, requiring firms to obtain a license before they introduce their games there rather than simply passing the censorship checks by publishers—as a book would do, without referring to domestic administrations (Duizhang, 2018). This measure applies to Chinese and foreign firms alike and means that all game publishers must pass censorship and obtain a license for their games in order to release them in China. If they fail to do so, it will damage the prospect of their games as their sale will be considered “illegal”. As such, the license becomes essential for all video games wishing to enter the Chinese market legally.

Although licensing strengthens the regulation of China's video game market by reclaiming the right of approval a license for a video game release, this measure has a non-negligible influence on the content of video games and their existence in China, as domestic administrations require all game developers to submit their games to the censorship system and pass it before they receive a license. Unlike domestic publishers, who have looser censorship standards for publishing video games, the criteria of domestic administrations are rigorous. Many contents acceptable to domestic publishers might not be permissible by administrations. For instance, when the domestic video game agency AEC introduced *Diablo II* (Blizzard North, 2000) to Chinese gamers in 2000, its contents—the color of the blood, the corpses of defeated enemies, and the appearance of certain enemies—remained identical to the foreign version thanks to the lax standards of its domestic publisher. It allowed both Chinese and foreign gamers to enjoy a similar experience of the talents of Blizzard (Duizhang, 2018). Yet in 2015, when NetEase launched *Diablo III* (Blizzard Team 3, 2015) jointly with Blizzard Entertainment in China, many in-game contents similar to those in *Diablo II* were modified. For example, to meet the standards and demands of domestic administrations, blood was completely removed from *Diablo III*, and the corpses of defeated enemies and the appearances of certain enemies were adjusted (Solo, 2021). The need for a license mainly generates these modifications during the censorship process. Many domestic and foreign game firms must comply with domestic administrations' requirements and modify their in-game content in exchange for approval.

Although censorship affects the content of both Chinese and foreign games, judging by the number of licensed foreign games in the Chinese market compared to games developed in China, foreign games, and their developing firms face stronger resistance to being granted licenses. For instance, comparing the total number of licensed domestic games with foreign games in 2021, the gap between the two was enormous. Only 76 foreign games passed censorship and received a license in 2021. Although the freeze on new game licenses affected the total number of Chinese games (Ye, 2021), and only 679 received approval in 2021 (compared to 1308 games in 2020, for example), according to data from the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) website, this number is still approximately

nine times larger than for foreign games. Due to the significant differences between licensed Chinese and foreign games from the NPPA, it seems that foreign ones are more difficult to exist on and even share the success of the Chinese market.

## 2. ■ Hypothesis and Research Method

While censorship is affecting foreign video games in the Chinese market by manipulating the number of licenses they can receive for operating in China, it is possible that its existence and influence may also affect the work of local participants who are in charge of importing foreign games into China. They may be put in a vulnerable position where they need to make more compromises and pragmatic judgments to maintain their business. Taking this into consideration, a hypothesis can be proposed: **The effects of censorship on foreign games extend to local participants, and they need to react pragmatically in order to maintain their business in China.**

When censorship affects and limits granting licenses for foreign games in the Chinese market, many participants who work within relevant domestic businesses, such as video game agents and employees who work in the local branch of foreign developers and publishers, will be affected because their living conditions are linked mainly with the life or death of these games. Therefore, the status quo of domestic participants in relevant businesses can be assumed as they experience difficulties from the shortage of foreign games in China.

To examine this hypothesis, the research method of this study will mainly rely on interviews and ethnographic research approaches. Specific gaps will be filled through documentary analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to reveal the dilemmas for participants of relevant businesses in China. All of them are experienced participants in China's video game market or qualified informants to address certain events in China. Their personal experience provides valuable data to examine this hypothesis. Information provided by other insiders who revealed specific information relevant to this research during informal interviews—normal conversation—will also be mentioned in support of this hypothesis. These methods should

accurately describe the difficulties of foreign games and local participants in the Chinese market. Due to the requirements of certain interviewees, all names mentioned in this study are pseudonymous to avoid any possible threat and conflict.

### **3. ■ Effects and Responses**

While censorship profoundly impacts the number of imported foreign games in China, those relevant participants, such as Chinese video game agents who import games, also face impacts. According to informants, most of them believe that the working and survival conditions of these participants in China are jointly affected by the existence of hidden double standards in censorship and that those who are in charge of reviewing in-game content use tighter standards to examine the content of foreign games compared to those made in China, under the excuse of persevering Chinese power. Ultimately, this shrinks the number of import games and affects their business prospects.

#### **3.1 ■ Standards, Unknown Condition, and Freeze on Licenses**

The license is a pivotal item for Chinese agencies wishing to import a foreign game successfully and legally sell it in the Chinese market. It follows that these agencies hope to obtain a license as fast as possible so they can quickly generate revenue from foreign games and withdraw initial investment made for the import of the game and localization of the in-game content. Nevertheless, according to informants, these agents sense that, in order to protect the interests of Chinese developers, the members of committees have targeted their games and erected high bars, identifying as many “problems” as possible and putting obstacles in the way of their operations. For example, GAO Qin, an informant who worked in the Shanghai branch of a well-known foreign publisher, accused some committee members of having double standards when identifying content with sexual connotations in foreign games. In Chinese games, they might express fewer opinions on or even neglect entirely content with sexual connotation. In contrast, they might try their best to identify anything which could be accused of containing a sexual expression in foreign games. In

addition, some informants who have experience with censorship also accuse committees of having different measures for identifying content that contains elements of violating social morality. They suggest that demands are made for modifications of some content in foreign games considered to be violating social morality, but similar systems or contents in Chinese games, on the other hand, are deemed fine, and no modifications are required.

These accusations lack further support, as the informants did not offer evidence to substantiate their claims and simply provided their personal experiences. Yet, while the number of foreign games that have received a license in China is dramatically lower than their Chinese counterparts, such accusations should not be dismissed entirely. The gap in numbers and their own personal experience of censorship are crucial reasons for the agents to believe that unfair treatment exists, as domestic administrations need to ensure that the interests of Chinese developers are protected in the domestic market.

While the unfair treatment can potentially increase the number of contents in foreign games that require modification, such a circumstance would inevitably affect Chinese agents. It would force agencies to invest extra time and money to match the requirements of committees. Some interviewees said that making modifications to their games according to the guidelines of the committee is more-or-less tolerable to them because this kind of modifications, such as localization, is acceptable. It happens in other markets as well. For instance, blood is forbidden in video games in Germany, so foreign developers have to modify such content before launching their games in the German market (Pham and Sandell, 2003). However, this does not mean that these agents would agree that their games should be put into a position where they could be forced to make extra investments of time and money to match such unfair standards, but ultimately might not receive a license because the NPPA is issuing fewer licenses to foreign-made games. When such unfair treatment damages the interests of Chinese agencies by affecting their games on licensing matters, it threatens the survival of these firms in the Chinese game market. The longer their games take to be granted a license, the higher the chance that these agencies will end up facing bankruptcy.

Along with the unfair treatment and economic burden, there is another vital effect of censorship on Chinese agents. It psychologically impacts them when they are waiting for a license. This effect is an unacknowledged condition within the censoring process. According to informants, as the entire process of censorship is opaque, an agent could wait a long time without receiving any information or opinion about their game. In this case, the waiting can become painful for them. They have no idea what content they should revise to match the committee's demands or when their game will be granted a license. XIAO Qi, an employee who works for a video game developer, publisher, and agent based in Shanghai, revealed that the frequently indefinite, very long period of the licensing process tests their patience and causes a massive amount of stress for them. It is possible that they will receive no demands for modification and no exact date for receiving a license for a long while after they submit their games to the relevant cultural administrations. In this case, everything is unknown to them. This is not to mention that they worry their firms might shut down before receiving a license from the NPPA. The unfair treatment of foreign games in censorship may intensify the existing influence of censorship on Chinese agents, forcing them to live in circumstances where they face worse financial and psychological situations compared with Chinese developers.

However, this indeterminate period is not as catastrophic for agents as is a freeze on new video game licenses in China. Similar to many Chinese developers, agencies that play a pivotal role in importing foreign games into China have also suffered a critical impact from the freeze on new video game licenses in China. All video games are pushed into the void as their time to receive a license from the NPPA becomes uncertain. If new video game licenses kept being frozen for an indefinite time, it would result in a disastrous outcome for Chinese agencies as well as Chinese developers, causing unexpected damage to their interests and ultimately forcing them to go out of business. For instance, although the most recent eight-month licensing freeze ended in April 2022 (Cao and Li, 2022), it caused 14,000 small studios and gaming-related firms in China to close their operations in just 2021 (Ye, 2021). In this case, it is possible that many foreign games which were handed over to these agencies will never be able to enter the Chinese market due to their shutdown.

Although many Chinese developers and especially megacorporations in China such as Tencent and NetEase, are capable of overcoming this predicament by aggressively seeking majority stakes in foreign gaming companies (Blake, 2022), thus shifting their focus from the Chinese market to overseas due to the license crackdown (Cao, 2022a), many Chinese firms cannot copy this measure as they are agencies rather than developers. They cannot return video games purchased from overseas to foreign markets where they already exist. For this reason, a freeze on new video game licenses is further worsening the survival chances of Chinese agencies, forcing them to find practical solutions to prevent their shutdown, such as extending their business and helping domestic developers to build sales operations in foreign markets. After all, they can only keep importing foreign games into the Chinese market if they can adequately maintain their business in China.

### 3.2 ■ *Response to Difficulties*

As censorship and the freeze on new video game licenses had disastrous outcomes for Chinese agencies and their agents, they needed to respond specifically to these outcomes to maintain their business.

First, these agents pay extra attention to reviewing potential games they wish to import into China before submitting them for a license. According to informants, when their experience suggests an unfair treatment of foreign games, they pay more attention to selecting which games they should import. They hope this could reduce the waste of budget and effort during the censorship process and increase their chances of receiving a license. In this case, agents will review potential games to a standard that focuses on whether they will pass censorship rather than whether they will attract people to purchase them. For instance, ZHONG Yang, a former senior employee of a Shanghai-based game publisher and agency, advised that Chinese agencies should not consider importing games that have little chance to pass censorship. Domestic agencies would not consider importing video games such as *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2018), even though it is a phenomenal game that has sold millions of copies worldwide, mainly because their agents believe that it would not be approved a license by the NPPA as it contains violent content.



Moreover, although Chinese agents prefer games with minimal in-appropriate content from their perspective, it does not mean that these games can be submitted directly to local publishers. When an overseas developer hires a Chinese agency to introduce its game into the Chinese market, or an agency identifies the economic potential of a foreign game and wants to introduce it into China, agents will need to apply self-censorship to this game and revise its in-game content prior to applying for a license. The reason for them to self-censor and modify in-game content is that they need to reduce the time they spend on the licensing process.

For many foreign developers China is not the primary market, therefore, they may not mindfully adjust their in-game content to try to match the obscure standards of Chinese regulators. Hence, when Chinese agents attempt to import their games into China, they need to self-censor the in-game content and modify it, but only after receiving a permit from foreign developers.

Only when Chinese agents properly filter inappropriate elements of a game, will the foreign game be ready to be submitted to domestic publishers and be further reviewed by other cultural institutions.

Furthermore, Chinese agents and employees of the China office of foreign publishers in charge of importing their firms' video games into the Chinese market also need to take practical action in promoting and advertising unlicensed foreign games. The unlicensed condition of these games will affect agents in progressing sales operations for the games and further restrict their choice of advertising activity in the Chinese market. They can, however, still advertise their games on a small scale through some local media, even though they are yet to obtain a license in China. Still, if their game fails to receive or has not yet received a license from the NPPA, their publicity budget will inevitably be affected, and they need to overcome the difficulties. In this case, domestic agents rely on their foreign counterparts or partners to maintain their promotional efforts in the Chinese market.

The reason for requiring assistance from their company's foreign offices or foreign counterparts is that the budget for promoting their game in China is limited before it is granted a license. GAO Qin and ZHONG Yang both have indicated that when a game they

want to advertise has yet to receive a license, they are restricted from utilizing their budget in the Chinese office or advertising it publicly in the Chinese market. Nonetheless, when the grey area ensures Chinese gamers that they are able to obtain unlicensed games from foreign markets, advertising these games in China becomes necessary. It ultimately contributes to the increase of foreign games share in the Chinese video game market. Therefore, they identify a pragmatic but intelligent way to bypass the restriction: they ask adjacent offices in other markets to broaden their services and extend them to mainland China.

By asking adjacent offices or agencies in other markets to assist with their promotional and advertising activities, employees from the Chinese office can advertise their games simultaneously in the Chinese and the international market without having received a license. They also need to change their role, as they have to work as assistants to their foreign office colleagues to identify appropriate channels and key opinion leaders (KOLs) to undertake promotional activities for their games. Their colleagues in other markets, such as Hong Kong, play a crucial role in publicizing these games in China and distributing promotional materials—including video game demos, screenshots, and gameplay footage—to relevant Chinese gaming media and KOLs by allocating a sum from their budget.

Despite this being a practical action that allows foreign games to remain constantly visible in China without disruption in the absence of a license, this response, or solution, has its limitations. When the budget for promoting a game in one market is limited, widening services from that market to another can create extra weight on budget distribution, making it challenging to simultaneously satisfy the needs of promoting the game in two different markets. Hence, some interviewees indicated that it is not unusual that their choice of promotion in China is limited by their budget, forcing them to make pragmatic choices once again. For instance, according to GAO Qin, the budget for promoting certain unlicensed games can usually support hiring only a limited number of top-tier KOLs and advertising their games to Chinese gamers.

Although this response to the difficulty of receiving a license makes it hard to fulfil the needs of both offices simultaneously, it is more-or-less acquiesced to and accepted by some foreign game publishers and developers, as it will eventually improve global sales

figures for their games. For instance, a high-level employee who works in the Chinese office of a well-known Japanese console manufacturer and game publisher mentioned that his firm calculates the number of sales of video game copies by languages, such as Traditional Chinese or English, instead of regions or markets. For this reason, the head office will accept such a situation, allowing offices in different markets to work together to market games in the same language, and, thus, maintain the visibility of their games in China when they are unlicensed by the NPPA. These responses and compromises are critical evidence to prove that the effects of censorship and licensing regulations are seriously distorting these participants' working process.

Consequently, agents and employees working in the Chinese office of foreign game developers and publishers must work pragmatically to maintain their business and survive in the video game market in China.

#### 4. ■ Conclusion

According to this study, censorship in China has caused various impacts on domestic participants working in businesses related to foreign games import. As such impacts have modified the working process of relevant participants, forcing them to seek efficient solutions to respond to these effects and keep maintaining their business under these circumstances, the hypothesis can be confirmed: the effects of censorship on foreign games extend to local participants, and they need to react pragmatically to maintain their business in China.

The effects of censorship have forced these participants to make various detours, sacrifices, and compromises to maintain the daily operations of their businesses. However, these are worthwhile as their efforts have allowed more people to know about foreign products. For instance, their efforts have allowed China's console game and hardware market—formed mainly by foreign products—to surpass \$2 billion revenue for the first time in 2021 (Liang, 2022).

The Chinese gaming industry is facing unprecedented pressure from domestic administrations. The NPPA issued fewer licenses for video games, dropping from 9,368 in 2017 to only 314 in 2022—when even the video game giant Tencent received only a single license in

15 months (Cao, 2022b). It is, therefore, no wonder that since the resumption of license applications in April 2022 (Kaur, 2022) until December 2022, no foreign games received a license to allow them to operate in the Chinese market. The unwilling journey of participants making compromises and sacrifices is not finished yet, and their efforts to keep these games visible in China are more critical than ever. Their endeavours are also of fundamental importance to keeping foreign games available to Chinese gamers even under strict censorship.

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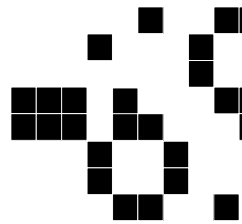
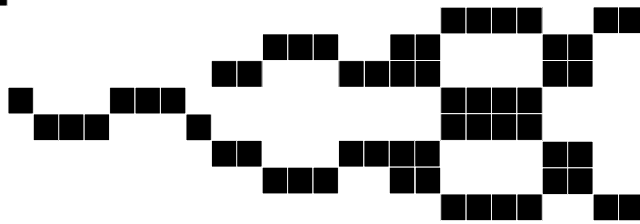
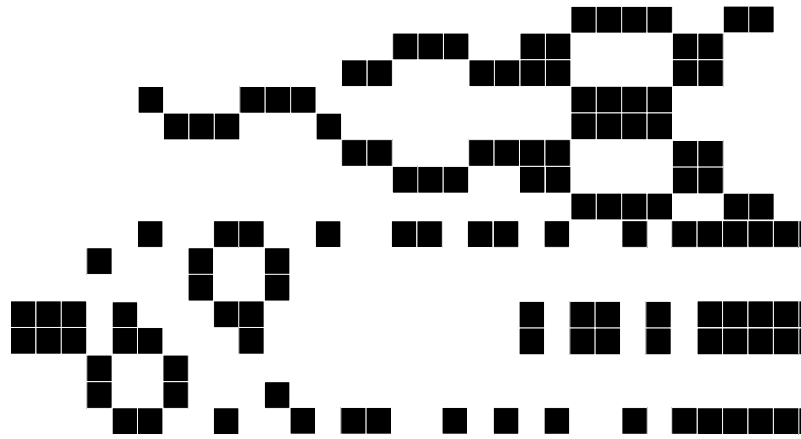
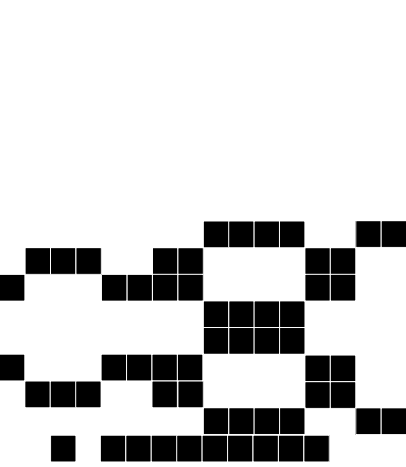
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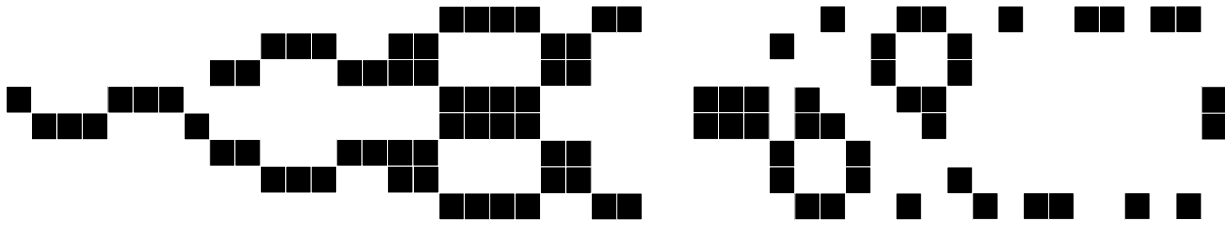
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## Industry



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## Work Hard, Play Hard

### The Concept of Playbour in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*



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### Summary:

Under the promise of complete creative expression, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) has created one of the largest game communities where players *play to work and work to play*. *ACNH* operates within a capitalist system, allowing players to exploit the environment for materials, sell natural resources for in-game currency, and accumulate furniture. This paper delves into the sugar-coated representation of *ACNH*'s contemporary capitalist system, examining how Nintendo exacerbates the concept of *playbour* (Kücklich, 2005), which disguises work as play and capitalizes on the commodification of recreational activities. *ACNH* seamlessly integrates neoliberal and capitalist logics into its core mechanics, enticing players to participate in ludic activities that mirror the principles of the *gig economy* and *platform economy* (Jarrett, 2022). Lastly, the paper will present a parallelism with the early simulation games *Capitalism*, *Sim City*, *Railroad Corporation*, and *Tycoon*, which are explicitly classified as business management games, and the mechanics of *ACNH*, cleverly disguised through a specific marketing campaign that positions the game among the so-called cozy games, that is, games in which the ludic action is synonymous with self-care.

### Keywords:

Animal Crossing: New Horizons; playbour; gig economy; platform economy; ludo-capitalistic practices

## 1. ■ Introduction

During the global health crisis that occurred following the COVID-19 pandemic, the so-called cozy video games gained tremendous success among the public, playing an important role during the prolonged lockdown phases experienced between 2020 and 2021. At a time when our daily lives were completely disrupted, confined within the four walls of our homes, with no clear distinction between private and work life, this type of video games kept us company, marking the passing of days through small relaxing tasks and aesthetically comforting environments, helping us discover new forms of socialization.

In English, the term cozy generally refers to anything that conveys a sense of tranquillity, comfort, and relaxation. Cozy video games are a subgenre of video games that emphasize a low-stress gameplay marked by simple mechanics, with charming visuals and soothing soundscapes. In these gaming contexts, playing is synonymous with *self-care*, a moment in which one takes care of their emotional and mental well-being. One of the most successful video games usually associated with this genre is *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (hereafter *ACNH*), released by Nintendo in March 2020, which coincided with the first lockdown. Amid the global pandemic, the game's release date could not have been more favourable: by December 2021, *ACNH* has sold over 37 million copies<sup>1</sup>, becoming the second best-selling game for Nintendo Switch, surpassing some of Nintendo's historic bestsellers, including *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. *ACNH* has surpassed the sales of the previous instalments in the series, the first of which was released in 2001, in a relatively short period of time. By December 2021, the four preceding titles had sold just over 31 million copies in a span of approximately twenty years, while *ACNH* sold over 37 million copies in just a year and a half after its release.

## 2. ■ Welcome to your island

*ACNH* is a real-time life simulator game in which the player takes on the role of a highly customizable character that moves to a deserted

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<sup>1</sup> Data updated as of June 30, 2022. The data was obtained from the sales report of Nintendo's best sellers, available at: <https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/finance/software/index.html>

island, where they have to develop a community of anthropomorphic animals and decorate the landscape. Once the adventure begins, the player discovers that their avatar has purchased a travel package called *The Gateway Package* from Nook Inc., a development company owned by Tom Nook, the island's manager. The package includes the cost of transportation and relocation, a camping tent, the Service Center—an administrative centre that will later evolve into a town hall—and the NookPhone, a smartphone used to access numerous services, including a camera, an encyclopaedia of the island's animals, the map, and DIY crafting recipes to build a variety of items, and beyond. Moreover, this device also functions as an access point to a whole series of tasks designed to collect money.

The player's first day on the island starts with a debt to Tom Nook: as a matter of fact, the holiday package costs 49,000 Bells, one of the two currencies in *ACNH*. Since the player will not have that amount of money at the beginning, they will be given a "special price" by converting the Bells into Nook Miles, the game's other currency. This will introduce the player to the Nook Mileage Program, a kind of points-collection system that they can use to repay the first of the many debts they will gradually incur with Tom Nook. It also serves as a loyalty program that allows for access to exclusive items to decorate the island with and gradually make more money each time the player decides to undertake a task. Initially, they should repay the 5,000-mile debt by performing a series of tasks to improve the island's appearance for the two inhabitants who have accompanied the player on the new adventure, such as pulling weeds from the ground, collecting wood, cleaning up the beach, and so on. The overall goal of the game is to develop a community of inhabitants, equipped with all the necessary services for living on the island, such as a town hall, a central square, a store where to buy furnishings and raw materials, a museum with a cafeteria, a campsite for visitors, and an airport. However, Nintendo's game does not have a definitive end but rather can be played indefinitely thanks to the countless possibilities for customizing one's home and, above all, the island itself. The world of *ACNH* is composed of a myriad of collectible items, which can be crafted by gathering the numerous DIY recipes available randomly during the gaming sessions, or by purchasing them directly from Timmy and Tommy's Shop or from the Nook Miles catalog.

*ACNH* may seem a very simple game, set in an idyllic atmosphere with cute anthropomorphic animals. However, what lies behind the pastel tones that mark its aesthetic is a game experience based on a capitalist economic system as every achievement is measured in terms of economic return (Bogost, 2020): the player engages in a plethora of activities to earn Bells and Nook Miles by exploiting the island's natural resources to obtain raw materials for crafting items in order to sell them, and accumulates pieces of furniture for the pleasure of owning as many customization options as possible. According to Tom Nook's philosophy, bucolic life and capitalism can coexist perfectly (Bogost, 2020). However, the gameplay of *ACNH* is designed to emulate and normalize the distortions of the contemporary economic system, masking them by using a kind of rhetoric that promotes endless creative freedom, accompanied by a kawaii aesthetic essential to creating a visually harmonious environment. This is expressed through three fundamental dynamics: the aestheticization of work, serial accumulation and hoarding, and, lastly, the normalization of going into debt. If playing is revealed to be a very similar activity to working (Bogost, 2019), *ACNH* exaggerates this concept by triggering a process in which players play to work and work to play to maximize their virtual earnings.

### 3. ■ The Economic System of *ACNH*: Bells and Nook Miles

The gameplay of *ACNH* is based on a complex economic system that simulates many of the transactions we do in our daily lives. The main currency is represented by Bells – indicated by a loot icon – and it is followed by the Nook Miles, which work similarly to the coupons obtained in loyalty programs. While in everyday life we can choose whether to participate in such point-collecting mechanisms, *ACNH* deprives the player of that choice since the beginning of the game coincides with the subscription to the service provided by Tom Nook. Bells and Nook Miles have different earning mechanisms: Bells are obtained by exploiting the island's natural resources and selling the proceeds to Timmy and Tommy's shop, such as specimens of insects, shells, fish, and metals. In contrast, Nook Miles can be collected through a system that divides labour into micro-tasks to complete during each gaming session. While it is possible to quickly accumulate a decent number of Bells by continuously selling items and raw materials, earning Nook Miles proves

to be a longer process as each task corresponds to a small number of miles. This consequently influences the amount of time spent working, as some of the most exclusive services in the Nook catalogue are so expensive that they require the player to engage in long working sessions, subdivided into small repetitive tasks. Once landed on the island, Tom Nook also provides the player with a bank account at the NookDirect Bank, accessible through a dedicated ATM. In addition to the usual deposit and withdrawal operations we are accustomed to in everyday life, Tom Nook's ATM allows us to repay our debts and access the Nook Miles catalogue and Nook catalogue. This digital ATM thus transforms into a marketplace, a sort of in-game Amazon for additional services.

### **3.1 ■ Mortgages, debts, and loans: working for Nook Inc.**

At the core of *ACNH*'s economic system is the Nook Inc., a development company whose economic activity revolves around constructing houses and services to transform deserted islands into pleasant communities with natural paradises to exploit for one's economic advantage. Tom Nook heads the company and holds a monopoly over the entire island: the amiable raccoon manages licenses for the terraforming service, which allows the modification of the island's morphology, oversees the town hall and service centre, and provides the only available banking service, along with phone services and catalogues featuring exclusive products. Once settled and having repaid the initial debt of 5,000 Nook Miles, Tom Nook will invite the player to improve their living situation, transitioning from a small tent to a small house with a virtual storage space. The initial cost of this offer is 98,000 Bells. Once the player accepts this sort of mortgage, they can move in and start repaying him. Tom Nook's loan does not impose a deadline, nor does it charge any interests, so technically, it is possible to continue playing while being in debt. However, every time the player attempts to expand their home or modify the island, they will be reminded of the need to repay Tom Nook the agreed-upon sum before incurring new debts. No inhabitant of the island, including Tom Nook, will ever miss the opportunity to emphasize the importance of enjoying a peaceful and carefree life in a lush natural landscape. Even though all kinds of construction works are accessible through a continuous debt mechanism, the game does not impose any deadlines, and

the player is not pressured to repay their debts quickly. While they are constantly invited to enjoy the bucolic amenities of the land and consider Tom Nook as a sort of a good Samaritan, the underlying operational logic of Nook Inc. aligns with that characterizing today's *host economy*. Developed within a neoliberal economic-political system, according to Anna Watkins-Fisher (2020), this model has introduced in contemporary society a progressive "privatization of social life alongside an extreme consolidation of power in the hands of a few, and the reduction of citizens to parasites, as citizenship has undergone a violent redefinition as a condition of precariousness" (Watkins-Fisher, 2020, p.16). The player's life on the island is influenced by the possibility of unlocking the different services offered by Tom Nook's society and the rate speed at which we can repay our debts to progress to the next level. Tom Nook employs a paternalistic rhetoric to position himself as the guarantor of the well-being of the island community, flattering the player by making them believe that it is their merit if the island is thriving. Adapting Anna Watkins-Fisher's description of the role of the actors in the *host economy*, it can be stated that Nook Inc. "sells access to the territory and infrastructure, capitalizing on the labour of those who build and use them. It positions itself as a platform that monetizes the content produced by others" (Watkins-Fisher, 2020, p.16).

### **3.2 ■ The NookPhone: fragmentation of labour and gig economy**

One of the new features introduced in the *Animal Crossing* series by ACNH is the NookPhone, a smartphone provided by Nook Inc. complete with a series of applications that expand the range of services offered by Tom Nook. The features include a camera, the Nook Miles program, the island's fauna encyclopaedia, the DIY recipes archive, a map, the terraforming service, and many others. One of the most important apps is the Nook Miles, essential for accumulating miles by performing a series of tasks or quick jobs, divided into two different categories: fixed standard tasks, right available at the beginning of the game, and those marked with a "+" symbol, infinite tasks organized in groups of five, that repeatedly respawn as soon as completed. This system has significantly changed the gameplay compared to the previous version, introducing further fragmentation of work that encourages the player to engage in small repetitive tasks to earn a few hundred miles at a time. The game designer

Ian Bogost (2020) has commented not so positively on the introduction of the NookPhone and the transformation of gameplay sessions into a sort of *Craigslist* where players browse for job ads. He stated that “Animal Crossing used to be self-directed, and players would often chat with the animal characters to be assigned favours to complete. But now the smartphone serves up infinite ideas: one completed task just spawns another in its place. Players are motivated to do specific things for extrinsic rewards rather than doing whatever they like for the sake of intrinsic pleasure, and knowing it will be valued” (Bogost, 2020). The Nook Miles app shares many similarities with the mechanisms of the *gig economy*. The English term *gig* refers to a type of work performed for a short period of time, and within the broader concept of the gig economy, it usually refers to an economic model based on on-call, occasional, and temporary work, thus excluding continuous employment. It is also often used in conjunction with the term *platform workers* (Jarrett, 2022). Both concepts describe the working condition of those engaged in a series of temporary jobs, often performed simultaneously, rather than being part of a singular career path. Specifically, the term *platform worker* is used to indicate those who work for platforms like Deliveroo or Uber, which act as intermediaries that connect workers with employers to perform specific and fragmented tasks (Jarrett, 2020). The Nook Miles program and its associated app adopt a very similar structure: they offer the player a series of gigs to add to the daily workload on the island to earn a few hundred miles for purchasing new items or unlocking additional services. The player’s work situation within *ACNH* is complex as they simultaneously occupy different types of positions: on the one hand, they are working full-time for Tom Nook for the island’s urban and social development; however, on the other hand, their work is also structured in discrete units and additional gigs, such as uprooting ten weeds, catch 5 bugs, collect 5 fruits, and so on. Lastly, similarly to a freelancer, they can decide for themselves when and how to work. *ACNH* focuses on the creative freedom offered by the game in building one’s dream island to disguise a gameplay and core mechanics that have deep roots in the mechanisms of today’s capitalist and neoliberal systems. The sheer number of objects that can be created, the countless goods available for purchase, and the kawaii aesthetics of the game, manage to overshadow the true nature of a creative activity that is actually generated by a series of hyper-standardized and repetitive tasks.



#### 4. ■ Playbour: Play to Work, Work to Play

*ACNH* adopts the contemporary capitalist logic and directly implements it into its mechanics, which are based on two main actions: *farming* and *crafting*. They respectively refer to “the frantic and desperate accumulation of resources to obtain rare items or other amenities” and the “creation of weapons, equipment, and other objects with the precision of a craftsman”,<sup>2</sup> often following a recipe or gathering starting materials. The hours spent performing each task reveals to be a form of play-work that greatly exemplify the concept of *playbour* (Kücklich, 2005), a hybrid form that disguises work as play and capitalizes on the commodification of recreational activities. This concept was developed to describe the relationship between the video game industry and the ludic-work activities of *modders*, since “although the game industry increasingly recognizes their contribution, it has no incentive to challenge this view: the perception of modding as play is at the core of the exploitative relationship between modders and the game industry” (Kücklich, 2005). According to Kücklich, the game industry “benefits from the perception that everything related to video games is a form of play and, therefore, a spontaneous and non-profit activity” (Kücklich, 2005). In *ACNH*, players work to play and play to work: they are grinding the game to accumulate useless and yet cute items to display and they spend their time crafting and farming to earn Bells and Miles, performing a series of repetitive tasks. Likewise, Nintendo capitalizes on the contents created by players, taking advantage of the tremendous success the game has had in the last two years. Following the launch of *ACNH*, new platforms that stress these mechanisms have emerged. In mid-2020, appeared the first marketplaces for buying, selling, and trading player-created and in-game items, called Nookazon, a trading website that adopts the style and dynamics of platforms like Amazon and eBay to list various items, from fossils to clothing. Payments are always made using in-game currencies, Bells and Nook Miles, and the platform uses Discord to facilitate agreements between buyers and sellers, who virtually meet in the game to exchange goods. The service has garnered incredible success among players as it allows them to bypass the standard waiting times in the game that regulate the introduction of new DIY recipes, furniture items, clothing, and so on. With Nookazon, players can instantly purchase the desired items without

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<sup>2</sup> The definitions are taken from the official Instagram account of PlayStation Italia.

having to wait for their availability in the game, and they can also obtain items by offering specific services. *ACNH* did not only influence players' activities and their relationship with the series. During the lockdown, several companies took advantage of the huge success of *ACNH* by advertising their new collections through specially designed islands. These practices have not only been adopted by companies and fashion houses, but also by players themselves who create designs to simulate highly sought-after real-life clothing by companies such as Adidas, Nike, and Puma.

#### 4.1 ■ Cozy Game or Business Simulation?

The gig-centric game experience of *ACNH* can also be identified in the way Nintendo promotes the game on the Nintendo Shop webpage. The marketing copy relies on imperative verb forms, such as, 'collect', 'craft', 'fish', and 'scavenge', pointing towards the work activities performed in the game. However, the underlying work-related subtext is mitigated by slogans that exalt a care-free life while decorating the island in all kinds of creative ways. The visuals help emphasize this idyllic imagery by highlighting the beauty of a fully customizable world where every object is cute. It is interesting to notice the game's label, according to which *ACNH* is an *animal life simulation*, as well as *social simulation* in other contexts. This categorization stresses a particular clash that occurs examining the mechanics of *ACNH* along with the game's marketing campaign. Considering these factors, it becomes apparent that instead of being a social simulation, Nintendo's game is more similar to games like *Tycoon*, *Sim City*, *Capitalism*, or *Railroad Corporation*. These gaming experiences are explicitly labelled as *business simulations* and *management simulations*. Also known as *tycoon games*, these types of experiences are characterized by a gameplay focused on managing economic processes and/or urban planning. *Tycoon*, *Capitalism*, and *Railroad Corporation*, for example, are management experiences where players simulate financial decisions, develop new businesses, and engage in trade. *Sim City*, on the other hand, is a city-building video game focused on urban planning and expansion of cities, while simultaneously managing the population and services. These video games have a gameplay characterized by three features: goal-oriented, business-oriented, and profit-oriented.

By comparing these gameplay dynamics with those of *ACNH*, the following similarities emerge: all of them stress the need to optimize time and the gathering of natural resources to achieve the desired profit. The primary resources in business and tycoon games are time and money, and the primary objective is to increase one's economic wealth. Moreover, the action is primarily carried out from a god-like perspective to convey a sense of monopoly and direct management. While *ACNH* does not directly simulate the management of a specific type of business, it creates a game experience that follows the aforementioned principles: to earn as many Bells as possible in the most efficient way; the primary goal sponsored by *ACNH* is the endless customization possibilities, which translate into acquiring as many economic resources as possible as the main objective; finally, the game experience has a very personal point of view, which is also highlighted by the marketing copy of *ACNH*, which enhances the need to give the island a personal touch, despite being constantly guided by Tom Nook's economic demands. Beyond a kawaii design and the promise of self-expression, are capitalist dynamics that normalize the fetishization of goods and the exploitation of natural resources for profit, disguised as a cozy game that is supposed to put at ease the player's mental health.

## 5. ■ Conclusions

*ACNH* has quickly become a successful product worldwide to the point where it has influenced our social interactions, our daily lives in a period of social isolation, and cherished our creative possibilities. However, *ACNH* offers players a sanitized gaming experience devoid of any visual and functional discomfort: all furniture items are charming, none of them will ever break, and our avatar will never feel discomfort living in a house that is either too big or overcrowded with objects. The gameplay adopts a capitalist logic within a sugar-coated gaming experience, where the repetitive, alienating, and fragmented labour of the player is sold as an aesthetic experience. Even the economic transactions have been stripped of any negative elements, as the continuous indebtedness system does not involve any interest rates. *ACNH* is advertised as a social simulation game and most of all, as a cozy game, that is, a game experience designed to have a relaxing gameplay to cope with our stress, our hectic life, and somehow nurture our mental health while perform-

ing simple, repetitive tasks. Looking beyond the kawaii aesthetic and the joyful slogans of Nintendo's marketing campaign, however, the game shares similarities with business simulation games and more generally with tycoon games, goal-oriented, business-oriented, and profit-oriented ludic experiences. Early games of this genre, such as *Tycoon*, *Sim City* and *Railroad Corporation*, to name a few, simulate real life business mechanisms, giving the player a sense of time and money management to make profits. *ACNH* does the same, although under the guise of freedom of expression: unleashing the player's creativity means taking up Tom Nook's gigs and tasks to unlock his company's customization services, engaging in buying and selling natural resources to earn money, acquiring collectible items that have no practical function, besides an aesthetic value, and continuing earning money to repeat all these processes again and again. *ACNH* is a game released at a time of deep uncertainty that, by means of its meticulous tasks, managed to provide a sense of stability and order in an upended daily life. It offered players what they needed: a perfect and safe world in which to hide, and this need took precedence over the capitalist and neoliberal system that informs the overall gaming experience. Even today, *ACNH* continues to capitalize on players' need to find forms of escapism.

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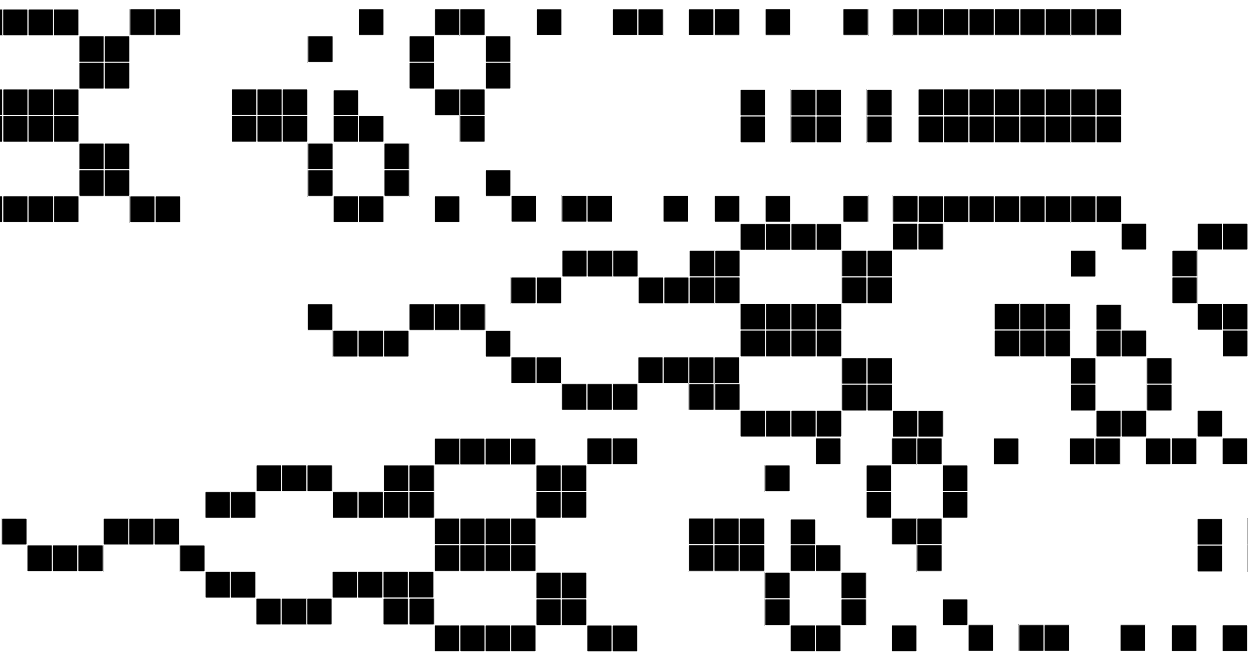
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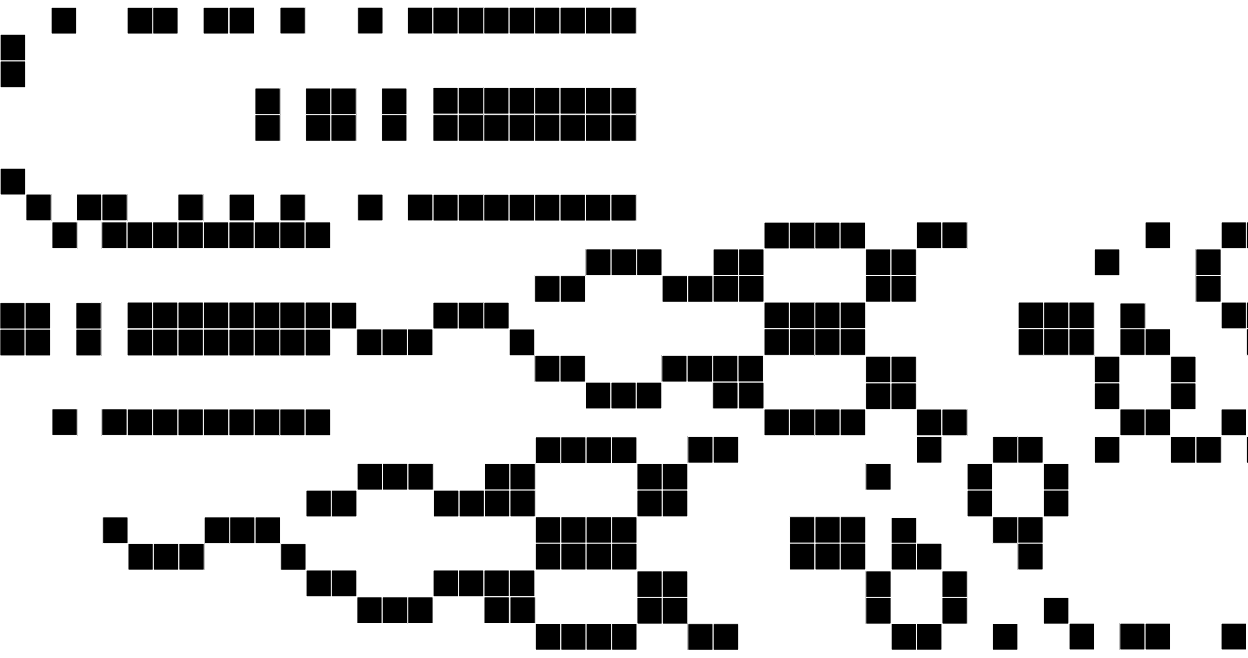
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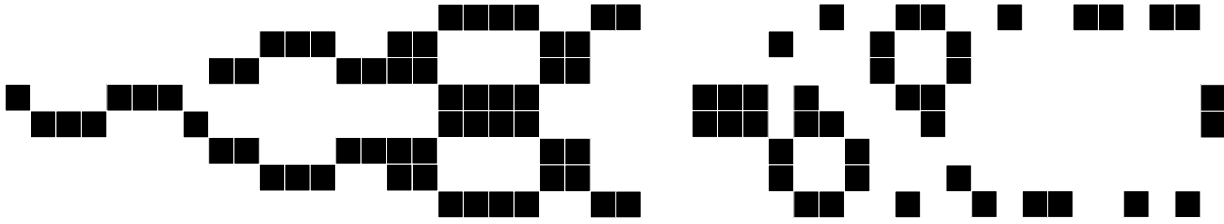
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## Industry



UDC: 795:659.1

## Interactive In-Game Advertising for Open-World Games Based on User Preferences



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### Summary:

Traditional in-game advertising methods often clash with the immersive nature of gaming, bombarding players with intrusive pop-ups and irrelevant content. This research tackles this challenge by designing and developing a versatile, plug-and-play asset for Unity and Unreal engines. This innovative asset facilitates a seamless integration of interactive in-game advertisements while simultaneously gathering and analysing player preference data to personalise the ad experience. A prototype was created and rigorously evaluated. Results unequivocally demonstrate a strong player preference for this approach compared to disruptive pop-up ads. Players reported significantly less distraction, higher engagement with advertisements, and an overall enhanced gaming experience. This research highlights the potential for a fundamental shift in in-game advertising, where ads become an integrated, player-centric element of the gameplay. Future work will focus on expanding the system's compatibility across various gaming platforms, including virtual reality environments, and incorporating sophisticated machine learning models to further refine ad personalisation.

### Keywords:

in-game advertisements, pop-up ads, game development

## 1. ■ Introduction

According to Finances Online article by Gilbert (2023), there are more than 2.5 billion video game players worldwide. Gamers from a multitude of cultures, ages, and lifestyles play electronic games using consoles, PCs and online communities, handhelds, and mobile phones. There are over 10 million game developers, including indie game developers, working in the game development industry, according to Clement's Statista article (2021). The game development industry is a collaborative digital working platform and development stakeholders can be identified as programmers, creative artists, 3D-2D designers, engineers, writers, and non-technical support providers.

In-game advertisements are the main revenue generation method for most video games. However, the gameplay is usually interrupted for the player to go through an advertisement. That can be identified as the main problem domain in in-game advertising. Thus, after studying the problem domain from both the developer's perspective and the player's point of view, this research study is designed to address this main problem by designing a system with an asset plugin for Unity and Unreal game engines in order to create a more interactive and customisable in-game advertising environment.

## 2. ■ Background Review

According to Smith (2015), Game Advertising can be defined as “[t]he association of marketing communications messages with video computer games to target consumers through games, Around-Game Advertising, or In-Game Advertising activities”. From this definition, it is clear that three distinct facets of Game Advertising exist, within which different forms of advertising and promotion are present (Smith et al., 2014a). An advergame is a digital game created primarily to promote and advertise a brand, product, or service, playable online or through game discs or downloads (ibid). Advertising involves marketing through subtle in-game displays or licensing game branding with related third-party products around-game. The research study, which was done under the topic *Twenty years of research on gamified advertising: a systematic overview of theories and variables* by van Berlo, van Reijmersdal, and Waiguny,

has provided a comprehensive overview of gamified advertising (2023). The study is focused especially on theories and variables. The overall overview is based on the most important ad, game, and player characteristics influencing the effectiveness of gamified advertising. Their discussion on the future of advertising in games is a highly anticipated prediction to continue this research.

The research conducted by Smith, Mackie, Sun and Sutherland (2014b) identified the factors that influence in-game advertising according to game placement types and by categorising players according to their age and attitudes. The research by Huang and Yang (2012) on the effectiveness of in-game advertising has provided the impacts of ad type and game/ad relevance. It has identified the major impact of in-game advertising on the game development industry.

*In-game advertising: The role of newness congruence and interactivity*, the research by Devika Vashisht, HFO Surinder Mohan, and Abhishek Chauhan has the following findings regarding players' preferences about in-game advertisements (2020):

Findings show that incongruent-newness results in higher brand recall but less favourable brand attitude. Under incongruent newness, high interactivity results in higher brand recall. However, both high- and low- interactivity conditions result in similar brand recall under the congruent-newness condition. Under the congruent-newness condition, high interactivity results in a more favourable brand attitude, whereas under incongruent-newness condition, both high- and low- interactivity conditions result in similar brand attitude (Vashisht, Mohan and Chaudhan, 2020).

In 2021, a team of researchers, including Amir Abbasi, Umair Rehman, Ali Hussain, Ding Hooi Ting and Jamie Islam discussed practical implications for advertising platforms and advertisers who want to attract gamers using pop-up ads (2021). Their research explores the stakeholders who are most suitable for game advertisers. In 2011, the researcher Ho Keat Leng from the Nanyang Technological University discussed that the relationship between perceptions of the game affecting recall rates is complicated and requires further research (Leng et al., 2021). Those researchers identify valuable facts that can be used to create interactive game advertisements.

In 2006, researchers Moonhee Yang, David R. Roskos-Ewoldsen, Lucian Dinu, and Laura M. Arpan published the research paper entitled *Effectiveness of "In-Game" Advertising: Comparing College Students' Explicit and Implicit Memory for Brand Names* (2006). The research results indicated that college students had low levels of explicit memory (recognition test) for the brands, but they showed implicit memory (word-fragment test) for the brand names placed in the video games. Based on this study, it is better to consider gamers' age in terms of advertisement personalisation.

In 2014, research done by Laura Herrewijn and Karolien Poels from the University of Antwerp found some interesting results, which were published in the paper entitled *Recall and Recognition of in-game Advertising: The Role of Game Control* (Herrewijn and Poels, 2013). The results indicate the relevance of brand prominence, showing that spatial position is a more important variable to consider than the size of an ad. In 2012, researchers Jen-Hung Huang and Tzong-Ke Yang wrote a research paper *The Effectiveness of In-game Advertising: The Impacts of AD Type and Game/AD Relevance* (Huang and Yang, 2012). The results of their study revealed that animated billboard ads prompt better advertising effects than static billboard ads. This is one of the core mechanisms which will be used in this research prototype.

The article by Research Dive (Anon., 2022) on the in-game advertising market report predicts the essential statistics of the in-game advertising market. According to their predictions, dynamic ads that are interactive and customizable will have an apparent trend in the future. Also, there is a relationship between gaming platforms and advertising revenue increase.

Although the above mentioned researches, and many more, have valuable findings for the betterment of the game development industry, the lack of a proper solution platform for making in-game advertising more interactive and customizable can be considered a major shortcoming.

### 3. ■ Methodology

The research is based on the prototype and the evaluation of its results. According to the evaluated results the prototype will further be modified as well.

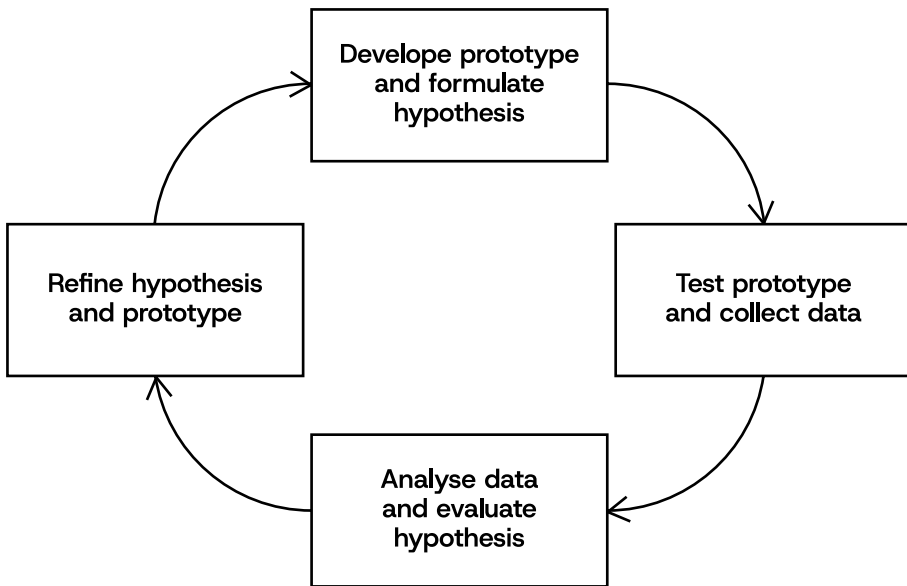


Figure 1. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 ■ Aim and Objectives

The main objective of the research study is to fill the void between in-game advertising and the intractability of in-game ads and make it more interactive to the player according to his/her preferences. Therefore, the research study aims to design and develop a plug-and-play asset for the Unity and Unreal engines so that developers can directly use them inside the game environment, and an additional system to collect and analyse player preference data and publish advertisements.

#### 3.2 ■ Research Problem

Advertising in gaming is mainly used for brand awareness rather than direct conversions, as players are typically unwilling to leave

their immersive experiences. Interrupting gameplay with disruptive or irrelevant ads can be especially frustrating for gamers. Ads that blend seamlessly into the game environment are generally more effective and better received by players.

### **3.3 ■ Preliminary Study and Analysis**

After the background study, a requirement analysis was conducted. The following functional and non-functional required key features of the in-game advertisement plugin were identified. It should be able to:

- render advertisements on plane game objects as textures
- detect the player who watched the advertisement
- update the player view count per advertisement
- detect player advertisement view duration
- update the total player advertisement view duration
- get statistical details about ad views
- customise advertisements
- remove and update advertisements
- calculate and claim revenue
- post advertisements (ad type, view count, expiration date)
- view historical data about advertising
- pay for advertisements
- select available games for advertisements
- predict and suggest ads for the player according to their previous preferences.

### **3.4 ■ Prototype Design and Development**

After analysing all the requirements, the prototype was designed and developed. Considering the technical feasibility, the Unity game engine was selected as the development platform in the initial stage. Unity is a platform-independent game engine that was developed by Unity Technologies. Firebase was selected as the database management tool for the backend of the prototype. Firebase provides cross-platform software development kits with database features and it was developed by Google. The prototype development process was done according to four main stages.

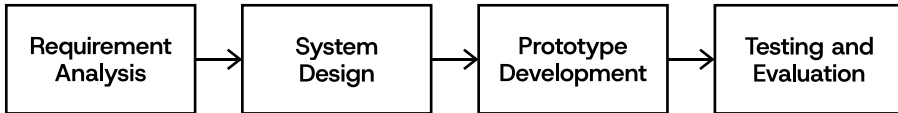


Figure 2. Prototype Design Method

The prototype game has a simple storyline – “Rescue Lily,” to create a familiar gaming experience, with the game’s main objective being to rescue a little girl from furious zombies. The game environment is developed using the Unity assets store, and characters are from Mixamo, a platform developed by Adobe. The game environment is comprised from cyberpunk cityscape assets, as these contained many usable billboards for interactive advertising.

The prototype design includes two random scenarios: one with traditional pop-up advertisements and the other with interactive advertisements using billboards.

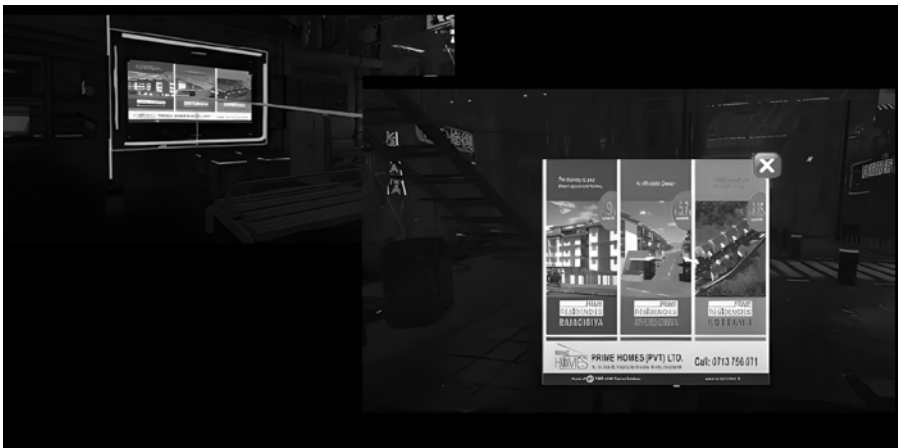


Figure 3. Detecting advertisements using ray cast technology vs Pop-up advertisements

The pop-up advertisements appear by blocking the player’s view and distracting them. The alternative advertisement appears on billboards in the game, and is detected using the Unity Raycasting method (Figure 3). The difference between this advertising mechanism and the traditional advertising mechanism is that there is no distraction or disturbing the player’s view.



Advertising viewing and view duration calculating are based on the Unity Raycast mechanism. The Raycast method in Unity is a function that checks if a ray, cast from a specified origin in a particular direction, hits an object within a given distance and specified layers, and it can also handle trigger interactions. Here, the origin is the player's head, and the ray's direction is from the head to the billboard. Max distance was considered to filter out billboards that were far away. The event will be triggered if the ray cast at the player's head hits a billboard with a maximum distance of 30 coordinated, which is equal to 30 meters in the real world inside the game.

#### **4. ■ Results and Findings**

Results were gathered after evaluating the prototype. To evaluate the prototype, 111 stakeholders participated as game players. After their gameplay feedback was collected, their gameplay was recorded as evidence.

A sample of one hundred eleven game players was involved in the testing and evaluation phase. They were undergraduates at University of Moratuwa and professional game players from Gamer.Lk. Among those were game developers, ranked game players, game designers, and players with marketing backgrounds. After the gameplay, anonymous feedback was recorded for the final evaluation.

The prototype was assigned randomly, and a few of them had to play with annoying pop-up advertisement scenarios and interactive advertising scenarios. Pop-up advertisements could not be closed immediately, and the players had to wait for a few seconds because the close button was set to a timer.

Interactive-advertisement designed scenarios could be played without any distractions, and the players had the freedom to read the advertisements while they were playing or after completing the main objective.

##### **4.1 ■ Analysis of Results**

The selected sample of participants gave honest feedback, illustrated by the feedback collector platform, as shown in Figure 4. Although

the majority of the players selected they prefer advertisements in the game environment rather than the ones popping-up and blocking their field of view, twenty-seven point three out of the hundred and eleven participants opted for 'no advertisements' while playing a game as the answer to the question, "Which types of in-game advertisements do you prefer?".

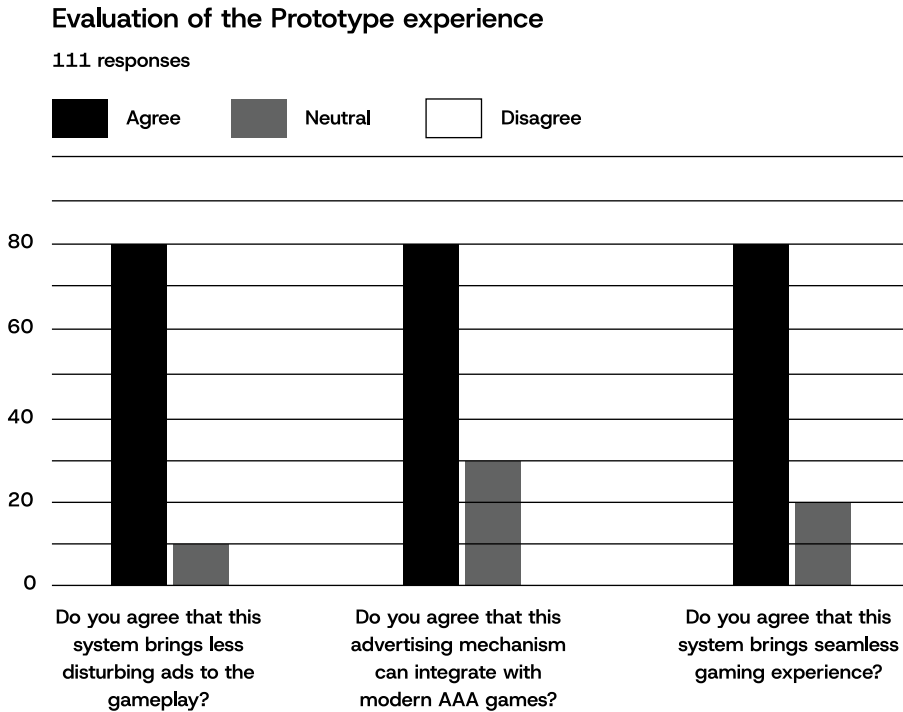


Figure 4. Feedback about advertising methods

Prototype experience was also evaluated, and results can be seen in Figure 5. Nearly seventy percent of participants stated that this new advertising mechanism brings less disruptive advertisements to the gameplay. More than fifty percent of them say this mechanism can be integrated with modern AAA-type games. More than sixty percent of participants say that this brings a seamless gaming experience for the gameplay. Few of the participants gave neutral feedback regarding the prototype experience, and few did not provide an answer to that question.

### Which types of in-game advertisements do you prefer?

111 responses

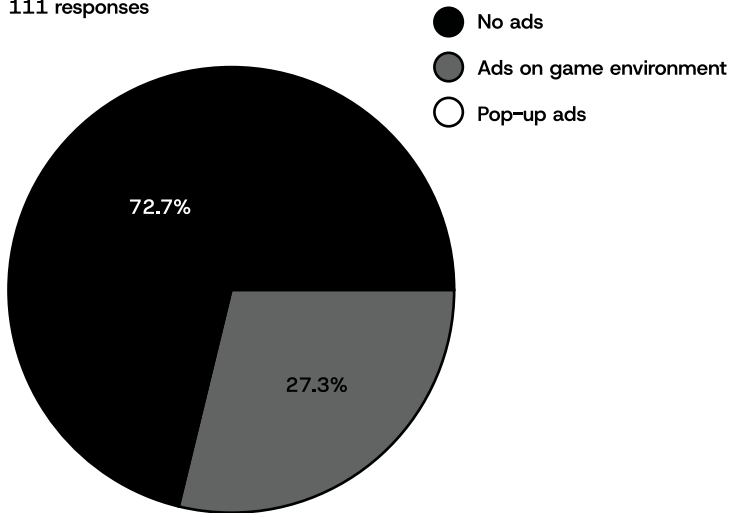


Figure 5. Feedback about the prototype experience

## 5. ■ Conclusion and Further Work

The analysis of the prototype's results revealed vital insights. The initial hypothesis suggested that in-game advertisements are more user-friendly, less intrusive, and more engaging than traditional pop-up ads. Feedback from participants supported this, highlighting that in-game ads provided a smoother experience without disrupting gameplay. A primary reason is that ads integrated into the game environment don't obstruct the player's field of view, maintaining immersion. Players found in-game ads less distracting, making gameplay more enjoyable while allowing developers to monetise.

However, the study had some limitations. The prototype currently supports only a few genres, like open-world, action, adventure, and role-playing games, and is limited to Windows platforms. Additionally, an internet connection is needed for real-time, interactive ads, which may not align with the preferences of offline single-player game enthusiasts.

Future research will expand the platform to Virtual Reality (VR) games and other consoles, including PlayStation and Xbox. A machine learn-

ing model is being developed to deliver personalised ad experiences. As VR, augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) technologies advance, there is a growing demand for immersive gaming experiences. The Apple Vision Pro, for example, is already prompting new research into immersive game design. This evolution promises richer, more immersive experiences for players, focusing on integrating advertisements seamlessly into virtual worlds.

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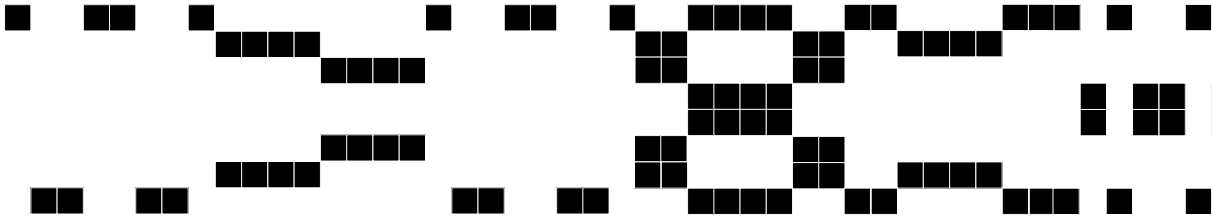
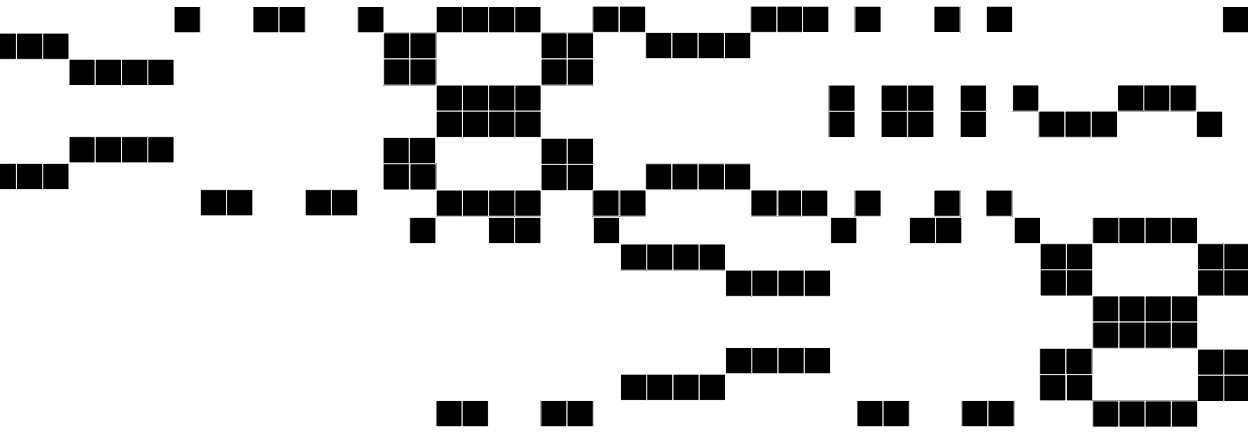
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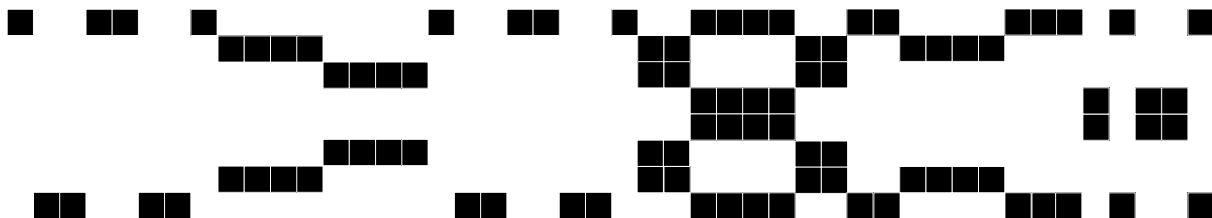
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## Academia



UCD: 795:81'37

## Beyond Functionalism: Narrative, Mechanics, and Meaning in *Fallout 3*



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### Summary:

This essay aims to revisit a contentious issue that was once at the heart of the debate between ludologists and narratologists: the relationship between narrative, mechanics, and meaning in video games. Despite their seemingly irreconcilable positions on this issue, both narratologists and ludologists focused on the games' functional aspects, such as mechanics, rules, play, and narrative structure, without explaining how players and critics move from the level of functions to the level of meaning. Through an analysis of the interplay between narrative and mechanics in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), this essay shows that a purely functional view of video games, whether narratological or ludological, fails to explain how meanings are generated in video games, and in doing so, fails to account for those aspects of a game that players respond to most strongly. In conclusion, we argue that a viable framework for understanding video games as complex semiotic objects can only be developed by moving beyond the prevalent functionalism of video game studies and addressing the question of meaning.

### Keywords:

narrative semantics, narrative and meaning, game studies, video game criticism, *Fallout 3*

## 1. ■ After the Great Divide

Over the past decade, the lingering effects of the “ludology vs. narratology” debate in Game Studies seem to have finally subsided. We need not rehash the history of the debate here—dismissed as tiresome and non-existent even by one of its leading participants, Gonzalo Frasca (2003a)—or revisit the issue of whether the “ludologists’” fears against narrative imperialism were justified. Although, in hindsight, Markku Eskelinen’s (2001) and Espen Aarseth’s (2004) accusations may appear groundless, they are understandable given that most early game scholars came from literary and film studies, where narratology had greater significance than elsewhere. A less often acknowledged fact is that, from its beginnings in French structuralism, narratology always harboured a universalism that might appear imperialist from a less sympathetic perspective. With the notable exception of Gérard Genette, who advocated for a “modal” narratology focused solely on narration in the verbal medium (Genette, 1983, p.12), the patriarchs of the discipline, Claude Brémont, Roland Barthes, and Tzvetan Todorov, all believed in the omnipresence of narrative, regardless of period, language, genre or medium. Conceived as a new “science of narrative” (*science du récit*), narratology was born out of this universalism (Todorov, 1969, p. 10); its aim was—in theory, though not always in practice—to transcend the narrow confines of linguistics and literary studies. “Narrative starts,” says Roland Barthes ([1966] 1975, p.237), “with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, [...]. Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural.” Narrative is “present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, melodrama, comedy, pantomime, paintings (*in Santa Ursula* by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation” (Barthes, [1966] 1975, p.237), so why shouldn’t it be present in video games, too?

Why not, indeed? After all, even a skeptic like Jesper Juul conceded that games and narratives share at least “some structural traits” (2001), and the self-proclaimed ludologist Frasca confessed that “ludologists love stories, too” (2003a). As everybody involved in the “ludology vs. narratology” debate soon realized, it would be both unreasonable and unproductive for ludologists to completely ignore

narratological tools and insights, not least because it would mean discarding some of Game Studies' foundational texts, such as Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997). To bridge the gap between Game Studies and narratology and formulate a new theory of interactive narratives, which would account for the presence and function of narrative in video games, another epithet— "transmedial"—was added to the list of narratology's attributes in the mid-2000s.<sup>3</sup>

In all these incarnations, however, narrative theory remained faithful to its initial, optimistic notion that a definitional approach was not only possible but also necessary for understanding narrative and would yield significant results in analysing individual narratives. In other words, the basic assumption was that to analyse any given narrative, one must first determine the underlying structure common to all narratives.<sup>4</sup> The assumption had its roots in Russian Formalist narrative theory and its continuation in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), to which classical French narratology was heavily indebted. Despite the tremendous changes in narratology's aim and scope in the last few decades, it still implicitly informs much of contemporary narrative theory. However, this assumption runs into serious difficulties when explaining the relationship between narrative and its manifestation in a concrete medium. The difficulties persist regardless of whether by "narrative" we mean a universal, abstract, deep structure, the way Barthes and other classical narratologists did, or a "mental" or "cognitive construct," as more recent, cognitive and transmedial narratologists do. The problem was already present in the early writings of Viktor Shklovsky on literature and cinema, which introduced two ideas essential to the narratological project: that the goal of theory is to "establish absolutely exact laws" governing the construction of the plot,<sup>5</sup> and that this construction can be identified across media, in

<sup>3</sup> See Ryan, 2004, 2006; Thon, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> On narratology's fundamental assumptions and their consequences for the study of narrative, see Schaeffer, 2020, pp. 9–19.

<sup>5</sup> "To do real work in cinema theory," says Shklovsky in "The Plot in Cinema" ([1923] 2017, p.354), "one should begin by collecting all the existing films, or at least a couple of thousands. Classified, these films would produce the kind of mass material that would make it possible to establish several absolutely exact laws." The idea was taken up verbatim by Bremond, who believed that the goal of narrative theory was "a search for the laws which govern the narrated matter" (Bremond, 1980, p.387), but these "laws" were so abstract that they ended up having little value for analysing actual narratives.

literature and film alike. However, the identification of certain types of plot or narrative structures or even narrative as such in various arts and practices cannot account for the specific meanings these structures produce in different media. The differences between the uses of devices such as parallelism, interruption, and deceleration in novels and films, noted by Shklovsky ([1923] 2016, pp.355–356), are not only a matter of technical execution. These devices also carry different meanings and implications in novels, films, and video games, and their semantic effects are medium-dependent. Although acknowledged in principle by narratologists from Seymour Chatman to Marie-Laure Ryan, this insight has yet to be fully applied in the narrative analysis of video games.<sup>6</sup>

There are other ways the heritage of Russian Formalism and classical narratology continue to inform both the narrative analyses of video games and ludological arguments against narrative imperialism.<sup>7</sup> In emphasizing rules and downplaying the role of stories in games, ludologists have unwittingly embraced a reductionism that haunted narrative theory from the start. The problem was already diagnosed in the late 1920s by Pavel Medvedev in his pamphlet against the Russian Formalists, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928). Medvedev's criticism of the Formalists' tendency to reduce narrative texts to plot, treating everything else, including character and story, as replaceable and ultimately insignificant "material," was aimed primarily at Shklovsky, who famously claimed that "no more of the real world impinges upon a work of art than the reality of India impinges upon the game of chess" (1990, p.36), and that the entire purpose of elements like characterization, motivation, and setting is to justify or disguise the text's narrative construction.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Noël Thon's *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (2016) marks an important step in this direction. For an assessment of the achievements of Marie-Laure Ryan's version of transmedial narratology in the analysis of video games, see Dušanić, Alidini, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> There has been an increasing engagement with Russian Formalist ideas in Game Studies in recent years (see, for example, Myers, 2010; Lankoski and Björk, 2015; Mitchell, 2016; Willumsen, 2018; and Vught, 2022). However, the connections between Russian Formalism, narratology, and Game Studies have gone largely unnoticed.

<sup>8</sup> In his 1960 review of the *Morphology of the Folktale*, Claude Lévi-Strauss criticized Vladimir Propp's approach to the fairy-tale in similar terms, objecting to his treatment of content as replaceable and arbitrary. However, although he accused Propp of formalism, Lévi-Strauss did not fundamentally oppose his functionalism

It is difficult not to agree with Medvedev on this point. The reduction of artworks to a limited number of plots and self-sufficient mechanisms of construction is not only counterintuitive but also threatens to deprive artworks of their meaning:

[A]s the motivation of the device, the material becomes something totally unimportant and replaceable. One and the same device can be motivated by the most varied material. Essentially, every motivation is equally good. In order to motivate a digression, it is possible to put the hero in prison or lay him down to sleep, to make him eat breakfast or simply blow his nose. [...] Thus, from a formalist point of view, motivation in art tends toward zero. Every element of material is replaceable and, within limits, quite dispensable. Death may be replaced by a character who separates lovers, and this character may be replaced by simply rearranging chapters. (1978, pp.107–108)

As Medvedev rightly points out, the thesis about the absolute replaceability of “material” is tenable only in naïve or bad art. Outside of soap operas and telenovelas, a character’s death, disappearance, or marriage never serves the exact same function and has widely different effects on the recipients.

Recent criticisms of ludological “formalism” (i.e., the tendency to reduce video games to mechanics and formal rule systems – cf. Juul, 2015; Willumsen, 2018) rarely engage with this aspect of the Formalist heritage. Although ludology has been amply criticized for being reductionist (Klevjer, 2002), essentialist (Murray, [2005] 2013), exceptionalist (Malaby, 2007), and even conservative (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017), the deeper connection between Russian Formalism, classical narratology, and ludology has largely gone unnoticed. If, from a purely mechanical, functional point of view, it matters little whether an avatar ends up in prison, dies, gets married, or goes to sleep, provided these actions have the same consequences in the gameworld, from the player’s point of view, these actions

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and never really questioned how meanings are generated in a particular text, genre, or discursive practice. From Lévi-Strauss’ anthropological point of view, meanings exist at the level of deep structures and are essentially transtextual, transgeneric, and transcultural. Save for Genette, the mainstream of classical French narratology embraced both this functionalism and this universalism. This led them to generally bracket the question of narrative semantics (see Doležel, 1980).

have very different meanings. In this respect, video games present scholars with an interesting challenge: although they are, by definition, dependent on a “construction” (in a much more literal sense than the one Shklovsky intended when he described narrative as a “machine” and a “construction”) and seem to validate a functional view of narrative, they also quite plainly reveal the shortcomings of this view. In what follows, we argue that, despite their outwardly irreconcilable positions on the significance of narrative, narratologists and ludologists share a functionalist approach to video games. This approach tends to bracket out the issue of meaning and fails to account for how video games achieve specific semantic effects. We will show this by focusing on the role of seemingly “superfluous,” non-functional elements in *Fallout 3*.

## 2. ■ The Limitations of Classical Narratology

The *Fallout* franchise is a post-apocalyptic role-playing video game series set in an alternate timeline that diverged from our own sometime after WW2. In this alternate reality, nuclear energy proliferated while fossil fuel and other resource shortages led to global chaos and, finally, widespread conflict, culminating in a nuclear disaster in the mid-21st century. *Fallout* portrays a dark vision of the future, warped by the retro-futuristic technology and paranoia of the Cold War era. Coupled with the stark realities of nuclear war and its consequences, this makes for a rich, complex world that is both strangely familiar and bizarre. The *Fallout* universe depicts a wasteland crawling with mutated creatures, rival factions vying for power, and remnants of a lost pre-war civilization. Players take on the role of a vault dweller, a survivor who emerges from an underground shelter into a new world, forcing the players to learn alongside their avatars.

The third game in this series, *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), is no exception to the established norms. It takes place in post-apocalyptic Washington, D.C., centuries after the nuclear war. The protagonist, the Lone Wanderer, is a young inhabitant raised in safety within an underground Vault. When the Lone Wanderer’s father mysteriously disappears from the Vault, the protagonist breaks out and ventures outside for the first time into the Capital Wasteland. The game offers an open world for players to explore, allowing them to complete quests, engage in combat, and make decisions that af-

fect the Wasteland's fate. Perhaps more importantly, *Fallout 3* offers a third-person view, a large map, and the opportunity for immersion like no previous game in the franchise. Its popularity was instrumental in securing the franchise's future because it introduced the setting to a new generation of players who might not have played the earlier isometric titles or would have ever been interested in them. *Fallout 3* set many standards that subsequent games would follow and remains an important phenomenon in video game culture.

The *Fallout* franchise received considerable critical attention, including the attention of narratologists. Daniel Dunne (2018), for instance, offered a classical narratological analysis of the franchise, basing it on the structuralist model formulated by Roland Barthes, notably in the "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" ([1966] 1975), and further developed and modified by Seymour Chatman (1978), Hans-Joachim Backe (2012) and others. Dunne's approach aptly demonstrates what a classical narratological analysis of video games can offer. His central claim is that video games can be approached "from the perspective of the text's affordances or guidelines for narrative, rather than from the perspective of player choice" (Dunne, 2018, p.3). For this approach to work, one must have a basic understanding of how narrative works in video games and bear in mind the crucial distinction between active and passive narratives, i.e., those that necessitate player input and those that require no activity from the player or are player-led.

Dunn describes *Fallout 3*'s narrative structure as a predesigned progression of Barthesian *cardinal functions*. As a brief reminder, in the "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," Barthes distinguished three levels that every narrative work possesses ([1966] 1975, p.243): the level of *functions* (in the sense Vladimir Propp and Claude Brémond gave to this word), the level of *actions* (in the sense used by A.J. Greimas when he writes of characters as actants), and the level of *narration* (which is roughly the level of "discourse," as seen by Tzvetan Todorov). Following Propp, Barthes ([1966] 1975, p.243) claims that a *function* "has a meaning only insofar as it takes its place in the general line of action of an actant." It has "a seedlike quality," planting, as it were, the narrative soil with an element that will come to fruition later, either on the same narrative level or elsewhere, on another one (Barthes, [1966] 1975, p. 244). Having distinguished between *functions* (elements that drive



the plot) and *indices* (optional elements that merely enrich it), Barthes goes on to delineate two types of functions – *cardinal functions* (or nuclei) and *catalysts*. Cardinal functions are “hinge-points” or “risk-laden moments of narrative” (Barthes, [1966] 1975, p. 248) that propel the story forward, giving it suspense, conflict, and overall drive, while catalysts are merely points of emphasis, with a “phatic function.” For example, in the plot of *Cinderella*, the introductory cardinal function is the invitation to the ball, without which there would be no conflict and no plot, while the fairy godmother’s appearance might be considered a catalyst, whose aim is to further the plot by enabling it to evolve and progress.

Adopting Barthes’ framework and applying it to *Fallout*, Dunn claims that cardinal functions play a pivotal role in organizing a game’s narrative:

[...] the cardinal functions frame the player-character’s action and ability. By establishing game rules, character goals, and player controls, the cardinal functions create a static foundation that is still open for the player to explore. This foundation corresponds to the game design ideal of the ‘golden path’: a default path of play from which the player can diverge by taking other routes to the end, although ultimately, these are just minor deviations from the default path (Bateman & Adams, 2007, p.88). Many video games offer these deviations of narrative and gameplay, but the *Fallout* games allow for these paths to significantly alter cardinal events (Dunne, 2018, p.52).

In the case of *Fallout 3*, the player is initially treated to a scene of their inception and character creation and spends a substantial amount of initial in-game time in their home at Vault 101, utterly unaware of the broader world of the post-nuclear Wasteland. This type of extended tutorial or introduction serves several purposes. It largely imposes the same limited perspective upon the avatar and the player, fostering a shared process of learning: as the player becomes more attuned to the Vault dweller’s prejudices, customs, social and other norms, so too does the avatar, which has an effect of further increasing our immersion. Although there is some debate as to whether the game itself privileges a divide between the knowledge of the player and avatar (see Dunne, 2018, p.73), this mainly applies to those players with previous gameplay experience and franchise knowledge.

More importantly, this tutorial section serves as the introductory cardinal function, setting up the early conflict underpinning the main quest line. As the protagonist's father goes missing and the Vault descends into chaos, the Lone Wanderer must venture out into the world for the first time.

The middle cardinal function is the main quest, but the narrative possibilities grow after the avatar leaves the Wasteland. Once they have mastered the basic game mechanics, such as the in-game HUD, the Pip-Boy, the basics of fighting, the controls, and the aiming system, and learned something about the culture, the player is free to respond to the gameworld. The path represented by the middle cardinal functions is the main narrative arc: the Lone Wanderer is tasked with locating his father, and the narrative arc can be as direct or as convoluted as the player wants it to be. The "golden path" referenced earlier is possible and achievable: "The main quests reinforce the character's role so that the player can complete the video game. This makes it so that regardless of the actions of the side quests, or the abilities of the character, the player-character always can progress and complete the video game" (Dunne, 2018, p.57). Nonetheless, following the main plot will force the player to explore the Wasteland, gain deeper knowledge of its functioning, and achieve familiarity or connectedness with the world. The middle cardinal function attempts to trace and resolve the initial crisis, and it also presents the Lone Wanderer's character arc by resolving his internal motivation for wandering in the first place. Nevertheless, the player is free never to advance this aspect of the story but to revel instead in exploring the Wasteland and fulfilling side-quests that may or may not impact the final calculus of the game.

It is worth noting that the side-quests, although they represent diversions from the main narrative, can develop into genuine micro-narratives that present complex moral dilemmas, compelling plotlines, or simply satisfying stories (see Alidini, 2016). While most of these side-quests have no relation to the main story, they may still impact how the game unfolds and enhance the Lone Wanderer's abilities or stats, granting him faction allegiances, weapons, and materiel. They may also influence his moral standing (his in-game Karma) or other elements that, when viewed cumulatively, may open new possibilities.

The true significance of the side-quests, however, is that they form a patchwork of active narratives,<sup>9</sup> spaces where players can express themselves in various ways: by refusing to deal with a particular faction or becoming their enemy, by engaging with the citizens of a town or destroying it, by trying to build a home, etc. In this respect, side-quests are like Barthes' *indices*, metaphorical, facultative, narrative-enriching elements. The potential for self-expression in these active narratives is perhaps most compelling in the case of building homes in the Wasteland, where the Fallout modding community has transformed a mundane side activity and mini-quest into a genuine opportunity for expression by inventing houses in different styles from diverse in-game materials of varying size and complexity, in order to give players a better sense of rootedness within the game-world – with no impact to the main story whatsoever.

Once the Lone Wanderer has found their father, the middle cardinal function is concluded. It reveals a new crisis (the concluding cardinal function), which frames and at once exposes the progress of the Wanderer and the consequences of his actions, forcing further exploration of the gameworld (Dunne, 2018, pp.79–82). In this case, the Lone Wanderer is tasked with purifying or poisoning the Wasteland's water supply by their dying father, which will result either in clean water for all and a significant shift in power or a constant struggle for non-irradiated water for all the inhabitants of the Wasteland. Although the Lone Wanderer can choose between several possible outcomes, how the cardinal functions will be resolved and processed is not up to them. In other words, the player's approach to solving the main quest's objective may vary—the Lone Wanderer's perks, stats, and capabilities may, for example, unlock peaceful resolutions through threats or flattery, making a physical confrontation unnecessary—but this does not significantly alter the charted course, which is already programmed and contains a limited array of choices (Bogost, 2016; 2006).

The progression of cardinal functions and their presentation throughout the game is part of a deliberate effort to make the final sto-

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<sup>9</sup> Dunne's analysis shows that, contrary to what is usually assumed, even passive narratives – at least in the case of *Fallout 3* – have a ludic role (see also Backe, 2012, p.244). Although they involve many non-interactive elements (such as cutscenes, plot lines, etc.) that a player cannot alter, passive narratives provide the player with frameworks, ways to understand the game's rules, and opportunities to immerse themselves in the Fallout universe.

ry more acceptable or understandable; it results from an internal, symbolic logic rather than an arbitrary choice made by the game's creators. In this instance, the Lone Wanderer must sacrifice himself to achieve either water purification or water poisoning, regardless of their desires and inclinations. The concluding cardinal function also concludes the entire game, ending it with a montage of cutscenes that reflect on the actions that the player took throughout the game, trace the personal destinies of the NPCs they frequently interacted with and signal the gravity of the choices made in side-quests.

To appreciate the role and functioning of narrative in *Fallout 3* and many other video games, one could build upon Dunne's high-level analysis in several directions, for example, by taking a cue from Barthes' S/Z and further delineating functions into smaller increments dealing with narrative detail, or by focusing on structural patterns of the main plot, etc. One could also examine the role of the game's paratexts, such as menus, interfaces, loading screens, and the content they display, following Genette (1997), and explore the malleability of these structures in their interaction with the player, understanding the ways external factors shape the "main text."<sup>10</sup> Although these analyses may broaden our understanding of the relationship between narrative and mechanics, they have a common weakness. By focusing on a limited number of elements abstracted from a system that produces complex semantic effects, they fail to explain what is specific about the role of narrative in video games and how these effects are achieved through and in interactive digital media. Nowhere is this more obvious than peripheral, static elements, which do not perform an essential function in the plot. While elements like audiotapes, artefacts, pictures, or symbols do not hold narrative functions and hence do not feature in Dunne's work, these elements still contribute to the game's overall significance, no matter how small or seemingly irrelevant. While they may or may not have an active role in game mechanics, they still carry meaning that some players recognize or encounter as structurally or symbolically significant. In the case of *Fallout 3*, food works as such an element, and focusing on its role in the game can prove particularly illuminating.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Steven Jones (2008), who does not engage with *Fallout 3*, but gives other valuable examples.

### 3. ■ Situating Food

Sarah Stang (2022) recently pointed out that food in the *Fallout* universe serves many purposes, some crucial to the game's meaning. Firstly, representations of food and drink serve as evident, ironic puns on modern brands, playing into familiar imagery and providing visual and narrative commentary on real-world consumerism. For example, brands such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola have been reimagined as Nuka-Cola in the gameworld. Through adverts, vending machines, audio clips, collectibles, and assorted paraphernalia scattered across the world, the variety and aesthetic ubiquity of these artefacts of a bygone world serve as focal points, easing the player into a process of "storyplaying" (see Domsch, 2013; Alidini and Dušanić, 2022). At the same time, the darker impulses of the alternate universe are revealed through such benign gameworld items—as various in-game pamphlets and side-quests reveal, the domination and power wielded by corporations such as Nuka-Cola or Vault-Tec contribute to the nuclear catastrophe in their naked pursuit of profit, forced cultural homogeneity and increasing political paranoia. Food items reveal their decidedly political character as they become a vehicle for inviting real-world feedback. As an instrument of *defamiliarization*, to borrow another concept from Shklovsky, food invites the player to reflect upon their reality by presenting the familiar as strange, deformed, or alien. By invoking parallels with the 1940s and '50s culture and echoing oppressive patterns documented during the Cold War, the game not only poses the question of what could have happened in the real world if things had gone a step too far but also forces us to ponder the fictional nature of the universe of *Fallout*.

Apart from the cultural, ideological, and political implications of such food systems, Stang also shows how the game produces commentary through the interaction of food and game mechanics. The packaged goods are imbued with radiation levels, further defamiliarising the gameworld. The game portrays strange and new forms of food, presenting the strangeness as both visual and material. It forces the player to scavenge for food items to replenish their health or to collect and use synthesized drugs from the previous era, sometimes at a considerable cost. These complex game mechanics also contribute to the game's overall meaning: by grappling with issues such as scrounging for meat and scavenging parts from killed enemies

or dead beasts and mutants, *Fallout 3* further complicates the issue of food and forces the player to confront the moral complexities of cannibalism. Human meat, as well as the meat of irradiated human beings (or “ghouls”), is generally radiation-free and can prove to be one way of ensuring survival in the game. However, this is true only of those beings that have retained sentience—other feral life forms are contaminated. The peculiarity of the moral choice—whether to engage in cannibalism—as well as the associated perk that comes with it in the subsequent titles of the franchise, demonstrate how the interplay of ludic and world-building elements can produce not only narrative elements but also new signifiers and layers of meaning. Given how arbitrary and outwardly incoherent the mechanics are in this case (Stang, 2022, pp.367–8), the game designers privileged the decision to engage in cannibalism even though this moral choice does not significantly impact the progression of the story and does not otherwise figure prominently in the storyworld. Its true significance, however, lies in the ethical dilemmas it raises. Could cannibalism ever be acceptable, even in an apocalypse? What is the price of survival? What is the role and value of moral scruples in a world falling apart? What is the purpose of sentience when the reviled ghouls are not cannibals, yet many non-irradiated raiders are? Although they can be posed directly in a side-quest or dialogue tree with an NPC character forming an intrinsic part of the game world, such questions are perhaps more potent when placed at the cross-section between the ludic and diegetic. In other words, when players are confronted with an arbitrary mechanic and forced to grapple with it extradiegetically, this liminal zone becomes a space where new meanings and interpretations are generated.

#### 4. ■ Body Trouble

Other aspects of in-game food, especially its productive and subversive capacities, are equally engaging. The actual consumption of food, or food-adjacent items serving the traditional purpose of replenishing the player’s stats, acts as a powerful commentary on humanity. Beyond the issue of cannibalism, the flesh itself becomes a signifier of sorts, “the pliable body” (Stang, 2022; Wallin, 2019), illustrating how game mechanics are seldom “just” mechanics but point to larger ideological or cultural issues. For instance, the player can acquire a “Lead Belly” perk and become immune to various

ailments of contaminated food or mutated meat; condiments like “Rad-Away” can remove the deleterious effects of irradiated meat, and “Stimpaks,” or synthetic drugs, can render organic food unnecessary for replenishing stats. However, all such advancements come with the cost of losing a part of one’s humanity and inching closer to machines or mechanical life forms.

Following the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on the “body without organs” (see Cremin, 2016, pp.19–21; Wallin, 2019), we can further examine the significance of *Fallout 3*’s embodiment issues. Through a system of in-game perks, buffs and debuffs, traits, and pieces of lore surrounding them, the game puts forth a mosaic representation of the body as something more than a sum of organs. Instead, the game offers a mediated examination of interdependent particulars that flow and change course, normalizing states of bodily change, such as mutations, drug-induced anxiety, perceptible, and other shifts. These modifications can alter the player’s dialogue with NPCs and, depending on the various “stats” or experience checks, entire quest lines, too. Likewise, drug use, while ubiquitous, can provoke conflicted value judgements. Its continual use in the game’s interfaces serves as another double signifier, for it simultaneously presents us with a new and different world and underscores the less attractive sides aspects of modernity:

As much as *Fallout* portends a future in which the idea of the body as bounded and stable is superseded by a highly experimental approach to the composition of the body and its affective capacities, it is concomitantly an augury on the implicit manipulation of the body by the industrial precursors of the Anthropocene, namely, the military-industrial complex (Psycho), hyper-masculinized agon of sport (Buffout), and industries of cognitive capitalism (Mentats). It is here that *Fallout* reveals, in part, the affective commitments of pre-apocalyptic society, which also implicate those dominant affective modes that ultimately propelled the world into ruin. (Wallin, 2019, p.22)

Although this implicit condemnation of modern reality brings us back to the positioning of Nuka-Cola and other similar objects in the game, it is not just a quasi-philosophical extra that adds something to the overall meaning of the game but performs a ludic function, too. Through the in-game Pip-Boy interface, which all vault-dwell-

ers carry on their wrists, injuries and other body states are graphically depicted; clicking on a broken limb “fixes” such issues with Stimpaks if the player has them in their inventory. The Pip-Boy thus becomes a sort of “game-within-game” device, a *mise en abyme* of the simulated, self-contained Vault life, isolated from the rest of the post-apocalyptic Wasteland. Like all good citizens, Vault dwellers follow the instructions and guidance of their Overseers, and the Pip-Boy is both a rite of passage and an initiation into Vault society proper. Hence, it is no small irony that this technological marvel (one of the few pieces of technology in good working order in the Wasteland) also plays the role of implicit instructor and the controller of society. The simplistic depictions of the boy within the interface mirror the outward simplicity, corruption, and fallaciousness of the social order demonstrated by Vault 101, from which the hero of *Fallout 3* came out of and into the Wasteland.

Thus, the problems of the body transcend their usual in-game limits, and it is through the stereotypical, veneered, and overwrought image of a character such as the Vault Boy that we are led to wonder about the actual limits of corporeal experience. The fact that the trusted and cheerful boy is, in fact, anything but raises far-reaching doubts, compelling the players to wonder: if that is false, what else might be false, too? *Fallout 3* is a particularly apt framework for raising such questions, given that it begins at the literal inception of the protagonist and follows their development through childhood and adolescence in the sheltered Vault 101. However, such a position allows for a radical questioning of all other mores – morality and cannibalism included. Only by mooring a character in a culture and then unmooring them within the same game can the world invite extradiegetic musings from the player. Once these extradiegetic musings are introduced, it becomes even easier to question game systems as a player, opening the game world up for more intrusive forms of play.

In the world of *Fallout 3*, the body can be “returned to the event of becoming and made into a medium for radical bio-artistic practice” as it “is no longer human in its standard sense, but rather, a ‘machine’ in the sense of its potential to connect with other ‘bodies’ of the dark post-human wasteland” (Wallin, 2019, p.25). Players can “define their relationship to food” (Stang, 2022, p.370), including the eating of human flesh, thus demonstrating the mal-



leability of fundamental civilizational norms and inviting us to re-think our current practices and ways of dealing with consumerism, political and social upheaval, the imaginary and the unimaginable.

Even if food consumption is optional for survival, the presence of these mechanics and their interplay with foods as healing resources still invites scrutiny. Such a position invites many other considerations besides the obvious, moral ones, raising humanitarian and environmental concerns, for “each time they consume unfamiliar, disturbing, and irradiated food, the player is reminded of the environmental devastation that surrounds them—both nature and culture in jeopardy.” (Stang, 2022, p.370) Food thus produces new layers of meaning, drawing unexpected parallels and implications that transcend the seemingly narrow scope of the gameplay.

## 5. ■ A Ludic Critique

If a closer analysis of the food motif in *Fallout* revealed the pros and cons of narratological approaches to video games, the issue of setting presents a similar challenge to ludic approaches. In a scathing review of *Fallout 3*, Shamus Young (2015a–e) focused on ludic elements and decisions that impacted the game’s mechanics, rendering various aspects of the simulation moot or nonsensical. Contrasting the setting and main quest goals of *Fallout 1* (Interplay Productions, 1997) and *Fallout 3*, he pointed out the inconsistencies of the latter:

In *Fallout 1*, you needed a water chip to save the lives of your people who lived in an underground vault. In *Fallout 3*, you’re trying to clean water for a wasteland that you have no reason to care about, for people who seem to be doing okay without your help, because your idiot dad told you to. (Young, 2015a)

According to Young, the avatar’s questionable motivation results from deeper issues with the game mechanics. Given that one of the chief roles of mechanics is to aid the player in learning and applying rules (see Frasca, 2003b), inconsistencies in the gameworld point to mechanical failures that may diminish the game’s coherence and disrupt immersion. These are even more conspicuous in a game setting like *Fallout*, which pretends to present a complete

alternate universe by establishing visual, narrative, and mechanic-based (simulation-like) correspondences between the setting and the player's knowledge and assumptions.

To demonstrate the shortcomings of *Fallout 3*, Young focuses on the issue of food in the game. Unlike previous (and subsequent) games in the franchise, the storyworld of *Fallout 3* has no farms producing crops or food (Young, 2015b). Since trading is often risky or sporadic, and the game offers no information on viable economies outside the Capital Wasteland, all that is left are the in-game settlements. These settlements are populated by communities that have no means of sustaining themselves. Hence, the entire population of the gameworld would seem to be entirely dependent upon scavenging canned or packaged foods from before the apocalypse. Few, if any, NPCs have anything resembling a real job: slavers, caravan traders, shopkeepers, vendors, and security officials have their trades and duties, but they are relatively rare. Since city-dwelling NPCs rarely venture outside, they are presented in strange stasis. However, as the Lone Wanderer walks through various Super-Duper Marts, derelict buildings, former vaults, and long-abandoned homes, they encounter numerous leftovers, which would signify that these foods, drugs, and assorted scrap are neither rare nor particularly precious to the broader gameworld. Something similar could be said for the relative abundance of Nuka-Cola throughout the Wasteland, some 200 years after the nuclear apocalypse. Even though bottle caps are used as the *de facto* currency of the *Fallout* universe, one can still find unopened bottles, vending machines with preserved bottles of Nuka-Cola, sometimes even full crates of the stuff, that survived, seemingly untouched, for centuries, and despite the existence of raider parties, scavengers, Ghouls, and other organized groups whose purpose is to collect and utilize resources. Furthermore, while there are critters across the Wasteland, some of which serve as food for the NPCs and the Lone Wanderer (iguanas, rad-roaches, and the like), it remains unclear what they eat and how the region's ecosystem functions. The inconsistencies, however, are not the product of deficient motivation or "ludonarrative dissonance," in the sense of a marked opposition between the game's mechanics and plot points (Hocking, 2007), but the result of a conscious decision to sacrifice some of the game's functional and logic coherence for a different, semantic richness.

Gonzalo Frasca famously distinguished between four levels of game rule ideology (2003b, pp.232–233): the first level concerns representation and events and is shared with the game’s narrative; the second relates to manipulation rules, or what the player can do within an established rule model; the third signifies goal rules, or what the player must do to win, while the fourth speaks to meta-rules, or how the given rules model is malleable and subject to change. At all four levels, the main issue is the interplay between what the player perceives and what the game allows or communicates an allowance for. Viewed through the first level of Frasca’s classification, *Fallout 3* presents the ludologist with the challenge of articulating the worldview implied by the game rules. In this regard, the gameworld of *Fallout 3* appears strangely situated: the conflict between the stated narrative frame (“War, war never changes”) would seem to imply a grim, cut-throat world of ruthless scramble, yet the docile, incompetent, passive or resigned nature of many in-game citizens belies that fact. Things are equally ambiguous on levels two and three, and it is no wonder that Young takes issue with the motivation for the main plot of *Fallout 3*. As the player and avatar eventually realize, the reason why the avatar’s father escaped Vault 101 and triggered the sequence of events that drove the Lone Wanderer to the Wasteland was to continue his work on creating a water purifier for the entire region. However, as it never rains in the Capital Wasteland, it is unclear where all the water in the game comes from and how the existing non-Ghoul population survived for 200 years without it. Put simply, clean water is either vital for survival or it is not, in which case the motivation for the main quest makes little sense. This tension between purpose and meaning is a core issue for Young and one that distinguishes *Fallout 3* from the previous two games, which were more firmly grounded in a post-apocalyptic mindset and offered better functioning and seemingly more logical mechanics (Young, 2015b).

Moreover, the plot of *Fallout 3* presupposes a kind of “good player” dynamic since a genuinely evil character would probably not go looking for their father in the first place, nor decide to help him save the Wasteland. The game privileges the good karma path by making the players go through the motions and allow themselves to be embroiled in the convenient plot over the water purification technology, without the option of refusing to be an instrument of their father’s legacy or the—however unwilling—pawn of the En-

clave. The game's rules—and especially its metarules, to continue to Frasca's fourth level—thus place a cognitive load on the player: the Lone Wanderer may become one of the best equipped and most dangerous individuals in the Capital Wasteland, kill almost indiscriminately and sacrifice others, yet remains unable to control and carve out their path. The outcome of this path is offloaded to the post-game future, where the Wanderer (should they survive) goes off into the sunset.

It is, therefore, unclear what exactly the player is expected to do and take away from this fallen world. The gameworld seems to be in an unfinished state of permanent stasis, akin to an isolated sandbox designed for the player's enjoyment, filled with different exploits, allowing for all manner of cruel and unusual occurrences, seemingly without consequence. While the game offers many poignant and compelling moral conundrums that evince what some have described as *phronesis*, or practical wisdom (Schulzke, 2009), this seems to be contradicted by the game's overriding systems that render these choices weightless. However, if all the game rules seem to communicate is evidence of a non-functioning, absurd world where nothing makes a lasting impact, how is it possible that *Fallout 3* was so successful and resonant?

The answer to this question lies beyond the scope of purely functionalistic, ludological, or narratological approaches – because it is a question of meaning. Indeed, the players and critics of *Fallout 3* responded most strongly to a perfectly *non-functional* element of the gameplay—the all-encompassing representation of the retro-futuristic milieu that went far beyond the first two titles.

As these later three games largely feature a close perspective and a highly detailed, nearly infinitely explorable landscape rather than a distancing isometric view and defined and limited locations, they allow a much closer examination of the *Fallout* world than the first two games could produce, and the objects of that world are meticulously crafted to surround the player with the ashes of the Atomic Age's fantasies of tomorrow. (McClancy, 2018)

*Fallout 3* was the first game in the franchise to have the technical means and resources to activate the “nostalgic imaginary” of the 1950s, mo-

bilize part of that mythology and transform it into a powerful visual language (McClancy, 2018). This setting was unlike anything the franchise had offered up to that point and played a pivotal role in the appeal of *Fallout 3*.<sup>11</sup> Today, more than 15 years later, the game still holds the same appeal, and still inspires attempts to put this experience to words.<sup>12</sup> It was this setting, and not the functional elements, such as the plotline and game rules, that allowed for the introduction of game-altering mods entirely outside the established in-game dynamics for which *Fallout 3* is known. Finally, the setting made accepting some particularly absurd in-game additions easier, such as the official *Mothership Zeta* expansion, which forces the Lone Wanderer to defend himself from an alien abduction. Such a break from conventional post-apocalyptic survival narratives is much easier to deal with if the player's relationship to the gameworld is already somewhat "constructivist" in nature. In this respect, the ludic cracks in the façade serve as vehicles for immersion and the construction of meaning, which escapes both narrative and ludus and inspires a *paideia* of the player's devising.

## 6. ■ Towards Interpretation

This analysis was not meant to be exhaustive but to highlight the affordances and shortcomings of functionalistic approaches to video games. Although undeniably useful as a starting point, these approaches are reductive insofar as they tend to overlook crucial aspects of players' experiences (such as the ethical dilemmas raised by cannibalism or the impact of the milieu in *Fallout 3*). By focusing on seemingly peripheral elements like food and setting in *Fallout 3*, we tried to show that even "surface motifs" and non-narrative elements contribute to the overall meaning of a game. These elements may not have an active role in game mechanics or serve narrative functions, but they still have meanings recognized by most players. In this respect, there is less difference between narratologists and

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<sup>11</sup> *Fallout 3* was welcomed as a towering technical achievement. As the overwhelmingly positive reviews on Metacritic (n.d.) and similar websites testify, many players lauded the game's unique blend of immersion, production values, breadth, and innovation: "The ironically devastated world of *Fallout* has never been better realized than in *Fallout 3*, offering a vast landscape that is almost relentlessly bleak in its hopelessness. It's absorbing, immersive, paradoxically beautiful, and kind of depressing to play over long periods of time." (ibid.)

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, *A Gaming Masterpiece: How *Fallout 3* Crafted an Amazing Setting* (Video Analysis) (2020).

ludologists than it might at first appear. In their extreme versions, both approaches fail to explain how players experience video games, which are neither just stories nor sets of rules but rather complex semiotic objects with meanings that are both cultural in the broadest sense and medium-specific. In other words (and contrary to what is usually assumed in various ideologically motivated attacks on ludology), these meanings are not just political, social, or historical, but also intrinsic to video games. If Shklovsky believed that “no more of the real world impinges upon a work of art than the reality of India impinges upon the game of chess,” recent game scholars have gone too far in the opposite direction:

Reducing a complex representation to its underlying rules is to sidestep human meaning-making— and the culture the game is situated in. Indeed, is it possible to understand Cold War-era *chess* without studying the tensions between the East and the West? Games, their creation, and their use are always culturally situated, and this contextual situatedness has an impact. (Stenros and Montola, 2024, p.11)

There is no doubt that games are always culturally situated – they are, after all, artefacts. However, to claim that their “situatedness” makes it *impossible* to study them without reference to a particular political, historical, and cultural context is absurd. When one remembers the outrage caused by Janet Murray’s allegorical interpretation of *Tetris* as a commentary on American consumerism, it becomes clear that the pendulum of game criticism has swayed in the other direction.

Yet for all this emphasis on ideology and context, Game Studies have not articulated, so far, a viable framework for studying how meanings are generated in video games. In this respect, it is highly symptomatic that the question of game semantics is gaining traction in the last few years. Even a cursory glance at the latest issues of journals like *Game Studies* reveals an increasing interest in meaning-generating mechanisms in video games. The direction of this new research can be broadly described as an attempt to modify existing theoretical traditions and map their concepts onto the study of video games—from various philosophical schools, such as phenomenology (Arjoranta, 2022; Moran, 2023; Meakin et al., 2023), to more traditional literary approaches, such as close reading (Fiorilli, 2022), postcolonial criticism (Ruotsalainen and Välisalo,

2022) and beyond (Rodéhn, 2022). These attempts clearly indicate the need to move beyond functional views of video games, whether ludological or narratological, and establish a foundation for a new interpretative framework. The main task of game studies today is to bridge the gap between theory and practice and start building this foundation.

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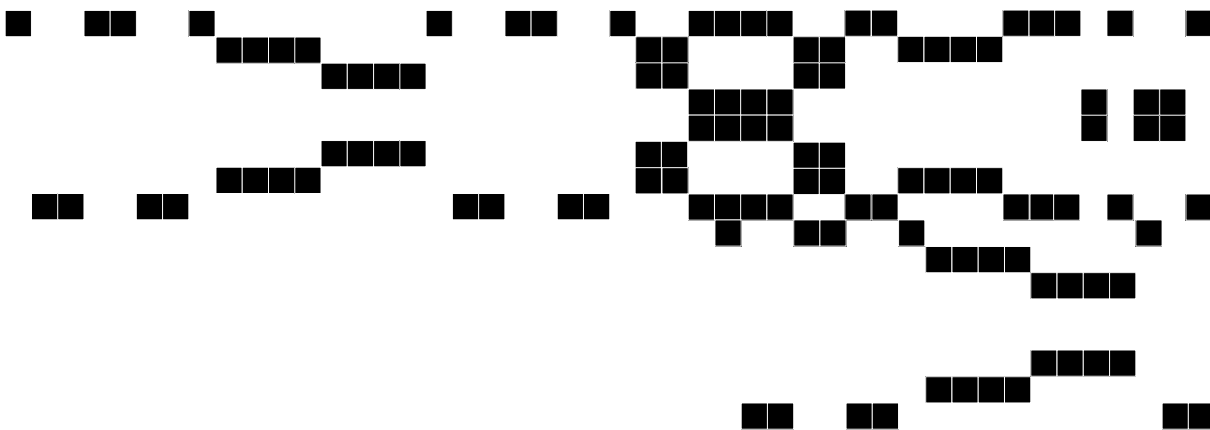
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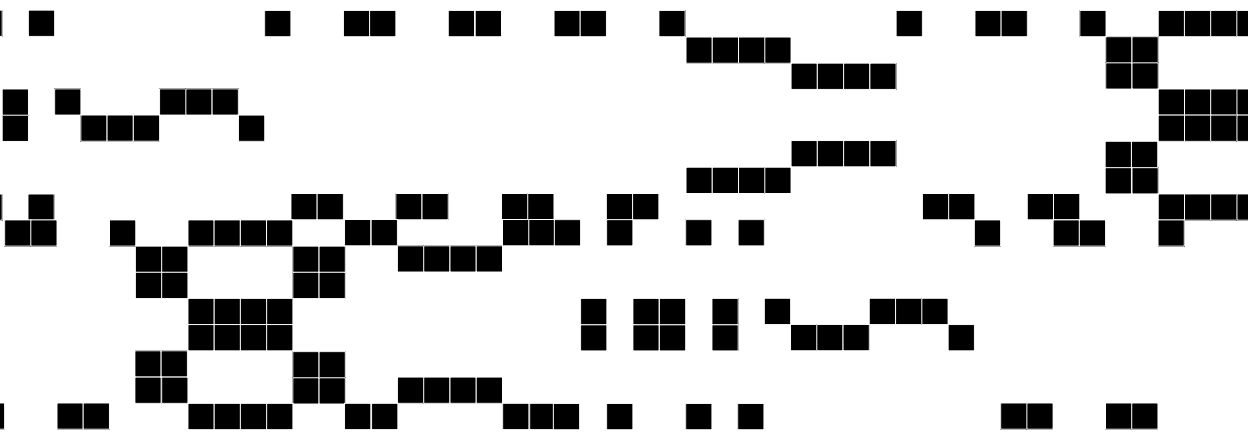
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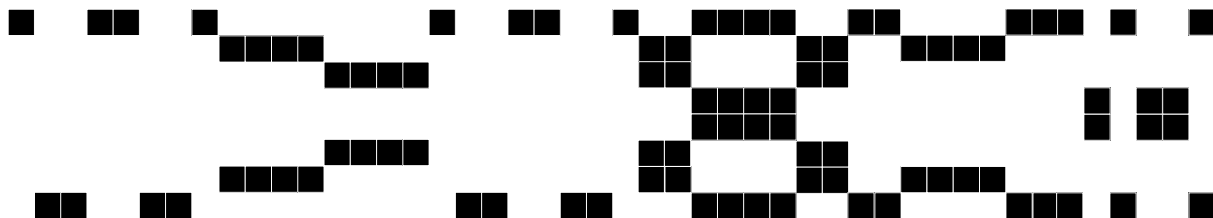
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## Academia



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### **Worlds That Heal: Mechanics of Empathy in *Rakuen***



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### Summary:

*Rakuen* (2017), designed by Laura Shigihara, is an isometric adventure with a retro aesthetic reminiscent of 16-bit titles from the Super Nintendo era. The protagonist, an unnamed boy, assists diverse characters within the hospital where he spends his time, as well as in the magical world of *Rakuen*, to overcome their suffering and pain – all through empathetic listening and fulfilling specific emotional tasks. This paper explores the various gameplay mechanisms in *Rakuen* that manifest empathy instead of hostility towards other video game characters, and the role of empathy in the game's narrative and character development. This analysis is achieved by utilizing elements of literary theory (mainly the notions of portal-quest fantasy and some elements of children's literature theory) as well as recent psychological definitions of different aspects of the empathic process.

### Keywords:

*Rakuen*, Laura Shigihara, empathy, gaming, portal-quest fantasy, death.



## 1. ■ Empathy and Storytelling

Empathy is considered a key component of emotional competence (Hoffman, 2008). The literature cites two aspects of empathy: affective and cognitive (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004). The affective component of empathy involves the observer's emotional response to the affective state of the other (ibid.). The cognitive component of empathy refers to the understanding of another person's feelings and the person's ability to place themselves within the other's perspective; and on the basis of understanding that perspective – and the state in which the other person is located – to react adequately (ibid.). Empathy as a concept of psychological science should be distinguished from sympathy. Unlike sympathy, where a person reacts emotionally just because another person feels something, an empathetic person tries to feel the same thing as the other person feels (Milivojević, 2015).

One of the authors of the aforementioned definitions, Simon Baron-Cohen, also provided a more comprehensive and user-friendly step-by-step definition of empathy. This definition is particularly clear for laypeople and interdisciplinary researchers who are not primarily engaged in the field of psychology. Here are the key points of his argument:

- 1) Unlike sadness, happiness, or anger, empathy is a process and a skill that can be developed. While a negligible number of people with certain neurological problems may not experience empathy (such as those with narcissistic personality disorder, psychopathy, or borderline personality disorder, as described by Baron-Cohen, 2012), the majority of the population possess the capacity to feel empathy to varying degrees, able to actively work on improving their empathic abilities.
- 2) Not an all-or-nothing ability, empathy exists on a spectrum. While the so-called "evil" persons are generally considered to be at the low end, and "good" persons are placed significantly higher, we all fall somewhere along this spectrum.
- 3) Empathy arises when our attention shifts from being solely focused on ourselves to another person.
- 4) Going beyond understanding another person's thoughts and feelings, empathy involves responding to them with appropriate emotions and actions.

(Baron-Cohen, 2011)

A process such as it is, empathy cannot be turned on or off like a switch. With the exception of rare cases of “zero empathy”, everyone is capable of experiencing empathy, which can fluctuate and develop over time. Requiring both recognition of emotions between individuals and an active effort to understand and respond with support, empathy relies on reciprocity. These unique characteristics of empathy may account for its growing popularity in artistic reception studies, such as the school of “affective narratology” in literary studies. This branch of postclassical narratology examines strategies for emotionally connecting readers to characters and events (Milosavljević Milić, 2015; Bjelanović, 2022, p.11). Fueled by two approaches: “pathography” (Handler Spitz, 1985) and “fictopathography”, there is also a renewed interest in the psycho-emotional readings of fiction, with the latter approach analysing the emotional and mental states of literary characters and fostering a deeper understanding of similar processes in real life.

Video games seem like a particularly suitable field for similar affective narratological research. Unlike literature, in the interactive medium of video games, the boundary between the fictional character and the reader—or in this case, the player—is substantially different. So, the connection between the “recipient” and the protagonist of the narrative is direct and literal, which potentially can lead to a more clear empathic exchange.

Decades of research on the impact of video games on mental health have yielded contradictory data. Recent studies show that playing video games contributes to low self-efficacy, self-confidence, increased aggression, depression, and anxiety (see Trbojević Jocić, Jocić, Beara, Zotović, Kostić and Hinić, 2023; Anderson et al., 2010). On the other hand, other studies suggest video games can have positive effects on emotional regulation, stress reduction, feelings of belonging, catharsis, and even the development of emotional and empathetic competence (Greitemeyer and Osswald, 2010). The conclusions about video games’ impact are as diverse as the games themselves. Still widely viewed as violent, banal, and even mind-numbing entertainment, video games are increasingly becoming not only a major entertainment industry, but also an artistically developed narrative medium. Research on the emotional impact and content of video games therefore depends heavily on the

type of game being studied. Despite the continued immense popularity of action-oriented “violent” video games, there is a significant number of popular and critically acclaimed titles that avoid using combat as a gameplay mechanic. It could be stated that a growing number of video games influence the development of not only strategic and creative thinking, but also emotional and empathic competence through their gameplay systems. For years, some of the world’s most popular games have been *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) and *Roblox* (Roblox Corporation, 2006), both emphasizing creativity, exploration, building, and cooperation, rather than exclusively violent resolutions. What is more, in the last few years we have seen an increase in the number of successful, erudite video game adaptations of classic literary works, with examples including *Elsinore* (Golden Glitch Studios, 2019), a postmodern retelling of *Hamlet* from Ophelia’s perspective, and *Metamorphosis* (Ovid Works, 2020), an experimental treatment of Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*. Last but not least, there is a recognizable phenomenon of the so-called “pacifist runs”, in which the players deliberately avoid combat playing in the games that typically involve fighting. In light of the above presented observations, it could be said that empathetic gameplay is possible, if not directly encouraged by the designers, in numerous video games.

## 2. ■ Systems of Rakuen

*Rakuen* (Laura Shigihara, 2017) is a video game by lead designer Laura Shigihara. The main character is an unnamed Boy who begins the game in a hospital, where he meets other seriously ill patients like himself. As he explores the gloomy hospital and the charming, magical world of Morizora’s Forest, the Boy, alongside his Mom, helps his friends from the hospital ward overcome past traumas, repair broken relationships with family and friends, and heal their emotional wounds.

*Rakuen* is, in a way, a genre-bending title. The game was created with *RPG Maker*, a tool that allows users to create video games using pre-made graphic elements and simple scripts, rather than building entire game engines from scratch. As the name suggests, *RPG Maker* is mainly dedicated to creating role-playing games and their derivatives, with simple graphics and mechanics that corre-

spond to the visuals and rudimentary gameplay systems of 16-bit game consoles from the late 1980s and early 1990s. But, despite being developed with a game-making tool meant for producing action RPGs, *Rakuen* leans closer to a traditional point-and-click adventure game. It lacks combat or character progression systems, and in fact offers limited options for both movement and interaction with the game environment (one command button handles both initiating dialogue and interacting with objects in the world and the Boy's inventory). Instead of an epic, sprawling story, it focuses on a more personal narrative exploration of the characters' relationships with illness (both physical and mental), loss, loneliness, and parental love. In these ways, *Rakuen* shares the most similarities with *To the Moon* (Freebird Games, 2011), another character-driven adventure game created with *RPG Maker* which also features a more intimate storyline (notably, Laura Shigihara was also one of the main composers for *To the Moon*).

### 3. ■ Conflicts and Resolutions

*Rakuen* features an even less "hostile" environment than most point-and-click adventure games, which ordinarily contain at least some segments in which certain enemies must be outsmarted, avoided or overcome – not with brute force, but with ingenuity. In *Rakuen*, even that kind of lateral thinking to overcoming hostile obstacles is entirely missing. The only true enemies in the game – in the sense they threaten Boy's health and existence, or impede his progress – are "Envoys", ghostly materializations of aversive feelings such as anger, sadness, and fear. Touching them means instant death, or rather a restart on the same screen, i.e. game location. However, Envoys actually act as spatial obstacles, and not active enemies that must be defeated by using some sort of battle mechanics, system or gameplay element. Practically inanimate, Envoys fail to actively seek to attack the player, and they either move in predictable, repetitive patterns, or stay still.

As with other elements of *Rakuen*'s gameplay, there is a symbolic undercurrent of empathy here. Not something to be vanquished or destroyed, unpleasant feelings (represented by the Envoys) are a natural and ever-present part of the world, their influence only diminished by restoring the world's overall emotional balance (the

magic world of Morizora's Forest is saved only after helping each of the Boy's friends from the hospital ward in the real world).

Other rare examples of "hostility" in *Rakuen* are resolved in humorous, idealistically optimistic ways. Each conflict is resolved only after the player comes to understand the buried negative feelings and unspoken frustrations of the NPCs that led to these conflicts in the first place. In other words, every conflict in *Rakuen* is resolved not by triumphing over some enemy or NPC, but by empathically recognizing their problems and acting accordingly. In other words, conflicts are overcome by employing both aspects of an empathic process: cognitive understanding of NPCs' plight, and affective emotional response in order to help them.

In Morizora's Cave, the player encounters a dark chamber containing an anthropomorphic tree (called Friendly Foot) and an anthropomorphic mushroom (called Shimeji). These NPCs are in conflict. Friendly Foot is in distress because he fails to be able to grow in a dark environment. Shimeji, on the other hand, thrives in darkness and refuses to allow light in. Shimeji might initially appear the villain, stubbornly opposing the tree's needs. But when the player punctures a hole in the cave ceiling, the Boy (and the game itself) are empathic to Shimeji's needs. The Boy apologizes to the mushroom for lighting up the room. In response, Shimeji admits the tree's need for light and announces a cheerful relocation to a shadier corner of the cave ("Oh it's no biggie... I have legs and can get up and move no problem. This guy over there though... he kinda needs the sun. So I gueeeessssss it's okay if this one room is so bright..."). In the end, everyone involved in the initial conflict has their emotional and physical needs fulfilled through compromise and empathy.

In another encounter within the cave, Boy meets Bad Attitude Onion, an anthropomorphic plant who acts rude towards the Boy, insulting his looks and even provoking him. From its dialogue lines it is obvious that the Bad Attitude Onion harbours comedically contempt feelings not just towards the boy, but for its surroundings as well. The player, however, can clear the room of red spores that induce negative feelings (these plants are called "badshrooms" in the game). Once the spores are gone, Bad Attitude Onion changes its in-game name to Happy Onion, while his in-game model remains completely the same: he remains the same person, but his emo-

tional demeanour transforms. Happy Onion apologizes to Boy for its previous behaviour, thanks him for his help, and even begins to enjoy its surroundings. A potential foe thus becomes a content and satisfied individual once the aversive elements in his environment are removed, signalling that the Onion was a good person all along – just in a temporary aversive emotional state.

#### 4. ■ Breaking the Rules of the Portal-Quest Fantasy

The protagonist of *Rakuen* is not a typical fantasy hero. The Boy possesses no magical powers (save for the ability to open portals to another world using a magical book), nor does he have any remarkable physical strength, unremarkable in every way – except for his desire to help others. Not only does the Boy lack exceptional strength, but he is also seriously ill. The game shows us that he spent some time in hospital before the story begins, and the player can learn, through contextual clues such as by reading the medical chart in the hospital room, that the drugs prescribed to the Boy are used to treat cancer.

Though the Boy does not resemble a typical adventure hero, *Rakuen* possesses elements of a traditional fantasy portal-quest plot. Initially confined to the narrow world around him, due to his illness, the Boy is not allowed to leave the hospital, even though an unnamed catastrophe left the hospital in a dilapidated state. As a result of flooding and structural damage, the Boy is unable to leave even his own floor. However, with the help of his Mom and the magical adventure book (which is also called *Rakuen*, after the fantasy world in which it takes place), the Boy soon opens the first of many portals to the magical world.

As in a classic portal-quest story, the Boy leaves his real-world environment for the fantastical Morizora's Forest, leaving behind his everyday life, devoid of fantasy, and, through transition to a new world, directly coming into contact with the magical (Mendlesohn, 2008, p.2). Morizora's Forest is inhabited by anthropomorphic animals and plants, dragons, fairy-like Leebles, as well as Morizora, the sleeping Guardian of the Forest in the form of a giant, round, white, friendly owl. Ludonarrative mechanics of *Rakuen* follow the rhetoric of the portal-quest precisely: its narrative and gameplay elements are based on the transition from the everyday to the magical world, and on the exploration of said new, magical world (ibid.).

As in most portal–quest plots, the well–being of the fantastical land is connected to its king, and the sustainability of the world directly depends on his moral state (ibid, p.3). Morizora’s Forest suffers and decays before the growing presence of Envoys, who symbolically represent the ever–increasing presence of unpleasant feelings in that magical world. In order for the Guardian of the Forest to awaken from the supernatural sleep and thus prevent the decay of the Forest, it is necessary to cleanse the world from the presence of aversive feelings. The world will be saved, both symbolically and literally, when it is once again filled with love, kindness, and understanding.

Not always a tangible object or physical reward, heroes of portal–quest stories invariably have a quest goal. Instead, the true reward can be the hero’s moral growth and the granting of access to the “kingdom”, a symbolic representation of paradise (ibid, p.4). This is exemplified by the Boy, who enters the magical world seeking permission from the Guardian of the Forest to travel to a distant land called “Rakuen” (Japanese: 楽園, *rakuen*; paradise). In the video game as well, the Boy’s true reward lies in his moral and empathetic growth, as he awakens the Guardian of the Forest by completing a series of good deeds for the other patients, thus becoming a hero worthy of traveling to Rakuen.

However, the Boy’s story deviates from the established structure of the portal–quest narrative. These intentional gaps in the classical narrative composition can be interpreted as symbols of the plot’s emphasis on empathy. In typical portal–quest fantasies, the magical world remains distinct from the real world (ibid, p.2). One world is ordinary and everyday, while the other is magical, with a firm boundary between them. In *Rakuen*, however, this boundary is permeable. The Boy isn’t trapped in Morizora’s Forest; he can move freely between worlds. Since he has never been confined within the magical world, escape is not his objective. The player has the option to return to the hospital world at any time and then revisit Morizora’s Forest with no additional obstacles. As actions in one world influence the other, the game systems intentionally encourage the player to jump between the hospital and Morizora’s Forest to tackle challenges and progress the story.

For example, certain parts of the Forest—the sky islands where another Leeble Village is located—are initially inaccessible to Boy. A “storm” has broken the magical plant stalks that the Leebles used to

climb to the clouds. (The parallel between the fantastical “storm” and the catastrophe that nearly destroyed the hospital in the “real” world is deliberate, serving as further evidence of the interconnectedness of the two worlds.) Later in the game, Boy gains the ability to water the wilted flowers in the hospital rooms. At first, these appear to be non-interactive parts of the game environment. However, when Boy waters them—when he recognizes them, in other words, as active parts of the world and living beings in need of help and care—magical plants will grow in the Forest at specific locations corresponding to the places where the flowers were watered in the hospital. This grants the player access to a new location in the game.

Another example lies in one of the game’s overarching side quests: finding marbles for Boy’s friend, Sue. Sue, a frequently sad and seriously ill girl on the same hospital floor as Boy, has a difficult past. Abandoned by her abusive and gambling-addicted father and bullied by her peers, she developed a coping mechanism – collecting marbles and crafting escapist stories about each one. Early in the game, Sue tells us she has lost some marbles and asks the player to bring back any that could be found. Interestingly, most of Sue’s marbles are located within the Forest – a magical world that shouldn’t be accessible to her according to the game’s logic. The Boy can acquire these marbles as rewards for completing tasks in the magical world or by exploring. Upon returning them to Sue in the hospital world, he is rewarded with her excited and grateful stories about each marble (which she calls “planets”, because each of them represents a fantastical, whimsical, paradise-like world she retreats to in times of pain and distress).

In *Rakuen*, unlike classical portal-quest fantasies, constant communication and intertwining of magic and reality exist between the two worlds. This unique mechanical connection, absent in typical portal-quest plots, serves as the primary way the Boy improves the lives of other characters. NPCs from the “real world” hospital find happiness and relief from emotional burdens thanks to the Boy’s magical solutions to challenges within Morizora’s Forest, and even through the direct delivery of magical artefacts from the other world. Good deeds in the Forest always resonate in the real world, and vice versa.

Morizora’s Forest can therefore be understood as an allegorical space: a mirror reflecting the hospital world. The hospital is depicted in cold colours and with a washed-out graphical filter, while the



Forest stands in contrast as a space of pure, bright colours existing in eternal summer and verdant greenery. Here, the Boy encounters doppelgangers of the NPCs from the hospital – doctors, patients, visitors, and others – in the shape of different magical creatures. Their appearance in the Forest, along with their background stories, serves as symbolic representation of their deepest emotions – primarily fears, but also traumas and injuries.

Sue appears in the Forest as a translucent spirit wandering in search of a long-lost friend. This reflects her fragile health, her inability to move on from past wounds, and the remorse she feels for unintentionally abandoning her only childhood friend. The angry old man Tony, the Boy's neighbour from the hospital floor, transforms into a grumpy bear in the Forest. His story, revealed only after entering the Forest, begins with a humorous scene of the bear Tony inexplicably destroying the gardens of the peaceful Leebles. It ends with a heart-breaking exploration of the rift in his family caused by the loss of a child. In the Forest we also meet Kisaburo, a comical water creature who is following the Water Dragon's advice to bathe in a healing lake far from his wife, whom he has not seen in a long time. In the real world, Kisaburo is an elderly man suffering from increasingly severe dementia, slowly losing contact with the world around him and his memories of his wife and family.

The Boy can only help his hospital friends when he aids their allegorical representations within the Forest. In the real world, the patients remain silent, withholding their troubles from the Boy. Some, like Tony or Kisaburo, refuse conversation entirely, opting instead for digressive and impersonal topics. Morizora's Forest thus becomes an allegory for the Boy's development of empathic understanding – an affective response to their problems. The Boy does not learn about his friends' struggles directly through real-world conversations. Instead, he gains emotional insight through allegorical scenes and dramatizations that unfold within the Forest. By aiding these allegorical representations of the hospital patients and resolving their seemingly whimsical troubles (which, over time, reveal the true depths of their trauma), the truth about the emotional wounds tormenting them in the real world is unveiled.

Through cognitive reaction (recognition of emotional states) and assertive empathetic actions, the Boy helps the cartoon characters – bears, ghosts, water creatures, and the Leebles – and alleviates

their traumas and soothes the damaged emotional relationships of the hospital patients. Therefore, the violation of the portal-quest fantasy story principle of non-interference between magical and real worlds in *Rakuen* is established as an essential mechanism of empathetic storytelling and playfulness. The violation exists to allow the magic of one world to illuminate and ultimately ease the suffering of the other, through the Boy's acts of empathy.

Furthermore, as the game progresses, the Boy uncovers an increasing number of portals connecting the hospital and the Forest. Serving a dual purpose, this mechanic allows for progressively more intricate and challenging interactions between the two worlds. Yet, it also holds a symbolic weight. As the Boy's empathy for his surroundings flourishes, the connections between the hospital and the Forest – between reality and allegory, the external world and the inner world of his friends – deepen and grow more nuanced. This, in turn, fosters a stronger and more empathetic bond between the Boy and those around him.

## 5. ■ Death and Empathy

Half of the *Rakuen's* game time takes place in the hospital, where numerous characters, including the Boy himself, teeter on the brink of death. The game eschews banal resolutions. Resolving a character's emotional turmoil fails to translate to a magical physical recovery. The problems the Boy helps his friends address are not even presented as health problems. In all cases, what actually torments the patients in the hospital are unresolved, unfinished relationships with loved ones: friends, partners, and family members. Their health condition does not change with any player actions. Winston's wife remains in a coma, even after we help him process his guilt over her health condition. Tony does not recover from his illness, but he reconciles with his daughter. Kisaburo and Sue even die after our help, but with healed relationships, at peace with themselves and the world, and without the emotional pain they had felt until then.

Death remains a constant presence in the game, and its representation is not downplayed. There is a long and strong tradition in children's literature, from H. C. Andersen to N. Gaiman, of depicting death as something impermanent, allowing for communication with

the afterlife (Jocić, 2022). Although the ending of *Rakuen* suggests such a comforting vision of death, in which the ghosts of (some) deceased NPCs are shown as young, healthy, and reborn, death is still an undeniable and unavoidable part of the game. Ultimately, *Rakuen*'s goal is not to conquer death or establish communication with spirits. The Boy's deceased father, for instance, never appears in the game except for a brief flashback. Instead, the game focuses on fostering relationships with the living.

In *Rakuen*, healing does not come from physical cures, but from mending the broken bonds between people. Empathy is a key element in this process. Prosocial behaviour, defined as voluntary actions intended to benefit others (Eisenberg and Miller, 1987), is a core aspect of empathy. This includes cooperation, helping those in need, sharing, and giving gifts (Brebrić, 2008). Every action the Boy takes on his journey embodies this prosocial spirit. All the missions, objectives, and quests ultimately aim to foster understanding, emotional empathy, and, most importantly, strengthen relationships and build a sense of community. In the Forest, for example, a series of seemingly unconnected tasks in which Boy helps various villagers culminates in a successful celebration of Starry Night, a central holiday for the Leeble community. Boy's acts of helping those in need, sharing, and giving gifts directly contribute to the community's joyous reunion. This theme continues with the hospital patients. Boy's actions help mend relationships – Tony reconciles with his daughter, Sue reunites with her childhood friend, and Kisaburo and Winston find peace with their wives.

The final part of the game leads to the self-actualization of the Boy himself. In the last segments of *Rakuen*, the Boy and his Mom, through conversation, calm the Boy's dark side, allegorically depicted as an apparition in the form of a young boy named Yami (Japanese: 闇, *yami*; darkness). In this way, at the very end, the traumas of the Boy himself are also resolved: his fear of illness, fear of death and abandonment, as well as the identical fears of the Mom herself.

The conflict in *Rakuen* – symbolic, not physical – is the struggle for the reestablishment of interpersonal relationships, which then leads to the overcoming of emotional wounds. In contrast to loneliness, or lack of relationship and connection, lies empathy: a two-way, self-less connection with another being.

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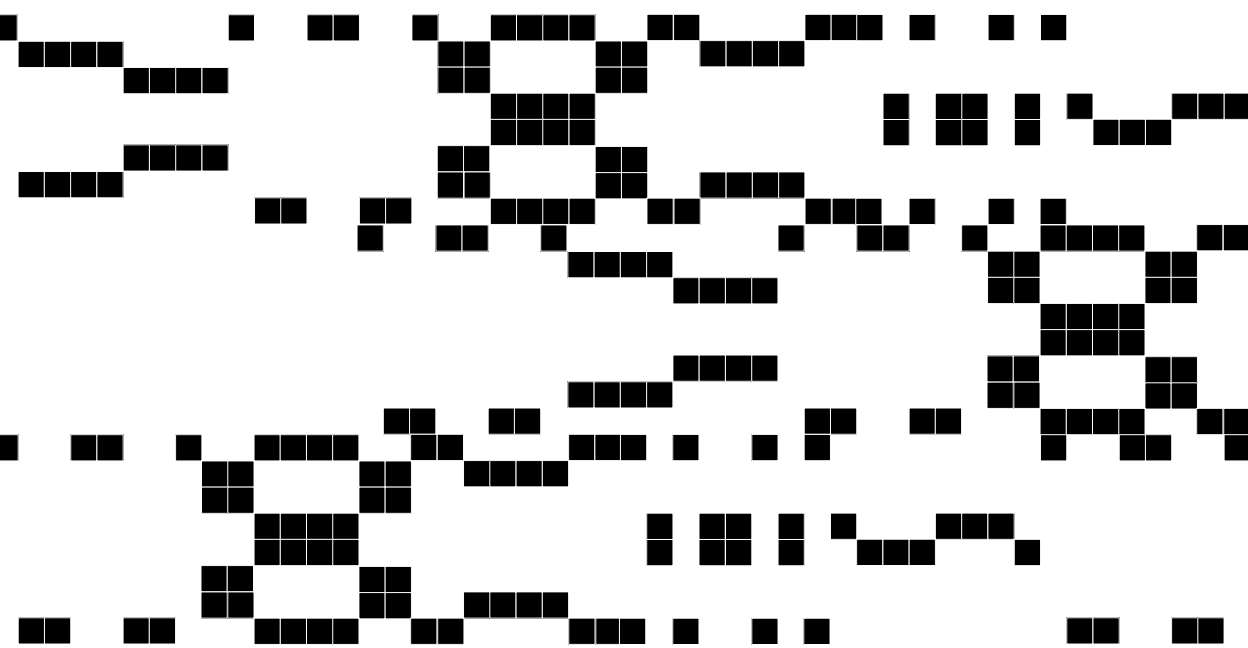
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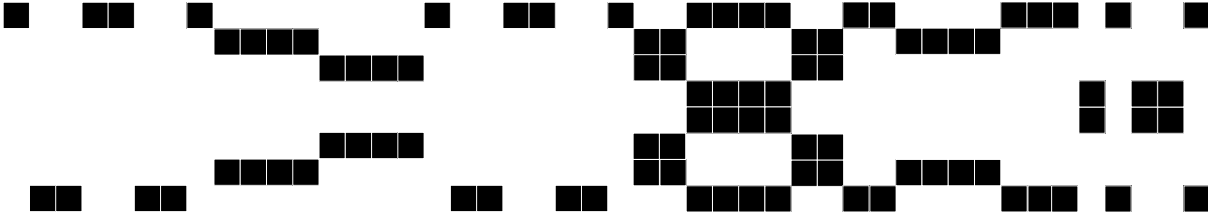
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## Academia



UDC: 795:94

### **Building Video Games from Historical Data: How Video Games Can Depict Time**



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### Summary:

Historical depiction in video games suffers from its affiliation with pre-existing narrative forms. At first, video games reproduced their stagings and biases—then developers became aware of video games' unique potential. What emerged from their experiments is that video games can deliver a more complex vision of reality than most traditional forms of storytelling. We consider here some of these experiments through three case studies, *The Forgotten City*, *Battlefield One*, and *Crusader Kings III*, and focus on their depiction of time. Our study aims at proving that video games can transmit historical knowledge in an effective, rational, and emotional way, as long as the overall experience it offers to the player is built from historical data.

### Keywords:

narrative, history, representations, game design, narrative design

## 1. ■ Introduction

Historical depiction in video games seems so biased it would be easy to deny it any educational value (Šisler, 2008, pp.203–220; Mukherjee, 2017; Penix-Tadsen, 2019).

The first reason for this would be its chosen themes. Since its inception, the historical video game genre has had two main forms, strategy and action (HistoriaGames, 2023)<sup>13</sup>, and its most widespread theme has been military history. Developers tend to follow these trends more out of habit than through reflection. However, in doing so, they deliver a vision of the past that, while not intended to be reductive, nonetheless disregards what science has highlighted since the nineteenth century, such as social history or the history of mentalities.

The second reason for this would be the unavoidable blind spot of all mimetic forms of art. To stage events, video games have often chosen to picture the world from a panoptic point of view, because perceiving the fluctuations of time requires taking a step back. Studios developed god games or city-builders. Nations became the main characters, and players manipulated events to value their importance. But such staging leaves little room for individual agency or the very fabric of history. The tribesmen of *Dawn of Man* (Madrugá Works, 2019)<sup>14</sup> have names but no history. The leaders of *Civilization* (Firaxis, 1991–2019) only serve as metaphorical embodiments of their culture. Such an evolution is not different from that of human sciences, which concluded the same: to grasp the very nature of an event, one would have to abandon biography (Loriga, S., 2010). Focusing on individuals or a given segment of space and time set from an individual perspective resulted in similar biases. RPGs have often neglected history in favour of fiction, following a path paved by nineteenth-century novels. The main protagonists of the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft, 2007–2023) do have personal stories but become inhuman or godlike because of their status in that fictional tale of Assassins and Templars that goes way beyond the boundaries of time, space, and culture.

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<sup>13</sup> Statistics compiled from the HistoriaGames website database: out of 2225 historical games, 61.4% are strategy, 26.18% action.

<sup>14</sup> They only serve as tools for the player to yield in order to make their village grow, tools that they need to take care of (hunger, seasons, etc.).

Yet, there are reasons why these facts and biases exist. Video games already have a long and rich history, but only recently began to reflect on themselves. As such, the phenomena described above are no more than the memory of trends the industry once followed. Video games reproduced historical stagings from the genres it drew inspiration from. The inspiration taken from board games (Rollings and Adams, 2003, pp.321–345) thus explains video games' focus on military history. The influence of cinema (Carr, 2006, pp.30–44) may also shed light on their first-person staging tendency. So, instead of disdaining video games as flawed, studying them would help consider their effects on the audience and pave the way for more precise stagings.

Developers did not wait for researchers to do so. They experimented with video game mechanics and found that it had unique staging potential. It can depict contradictions or plot holes in archives through non-linear narratives. It can give different insights into an event through flavour texts, leaving the story for the players to reconstruct. It can also combine opposite experiences of time, namely individual and panoptic, into a single game.

Our analysis will try to highlight this unique potential by looking at video games' depiction of time. Using both tools of narratology and video game studies, we will compare recent examples, set in different time periods, with different kinds of gameplay: *The Forgotten City* (Modern Storytellers, 2021), *Battlefield One* (DICE, 2016), and *Crusader Kings III* (Paradox, 2020). Each of them highlights how video game mechanics can introduce innovative ways of staging the fabric of a historical period or an event, or simply convey just how unfamiliar the past can become through time.

## 2. ■ Staging Endgame

The very nature of the video game experience is to be active. In such a context, it would be absurd to only show history, but more effective to let players experience it. This means exploiting the similarities between historical data and gameplay by designing one from the other. To prove how important this mindset can be, we will focus on an unavoidable step in a game, the very sign of its artificial and fictional nature: its end.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> On the role of a strong ending in narratives, see Ricoeur, 1983, pp.106–107.

*Crusader Kings*, a historical series developed by Paradox, uses the motif of lineage to give meaning to the relaunch of its games. CK games fall into two genres, grand strategy and RPG, but stray far from them because of the way they combine them. Most of their game experience deals with territorial management and geopolitical issues through the means of a world map. But unlike grand strategy games in which the player embodies a government, CK games add role-playing elements to their world map, the most meaningful of them being character sheets, a typical role-play element, if any (Konzack, 2013, pp.86–94). This addition changes nothing in the player's mission, which remains to manage a territory over time. The difference lies in the fact that they will do so through the different heirs of a lineage they will embody one after the other. In this way, they can simultaneously envision the daily life of individuals in the Middle Ages and the logic underlying the geopolitical evolution in Europe.

This setting has historical value for several reasons. Given the period staged, that is, the Middle Ages, lineage seems appropriate to depict the act of ruling lands. The combination of gameplays also enables players to grasp the complex process that shapes events. Every in-game event results from an intertwining of physical phenomena, structural constraints, balances of power, individuality, and chance. Algorithms play a part in it, especially in chance: they determine whether the player's heir will inherit their qualities or whether their vassals will offer them troops during a war.

But CK's mix of gameplays gives the theme of lineage an even greater meaning at the endgame. In a classic RPG, embodying a character would limit the player's experience to a single point of view in space and time. The game would end either at the end of the character's quest or at the end of their life. Then, restarting the game would only lead them to play the story all over again, without much room for other sequences of events or new points of view. Thus, the player would only think of the consequences of their actions on a short-term basis. On the other hand, grand strategy games do not display any ending but the one determined by victory conditions. These conditions are more related to the game itself than its diegesis: defeat all rivals, possess more resources, etc. In this way, grand strategy games tend to share features with their board-based ancestors, such as *Risk* or *Diplomacy*. Yet, in doing so, grand strategy games do not grant individual agency any importance in the evolution of history.

But the very fact that *CK* is simultaneously played at the pace of nations and of characters grants a special status to its endgame—or should we say endgames—as it is possible to identify several of them. The first one, from a macroscopic perspective, would be the set of victory conditions. They are simple and quite classic: to ensure the survival of the player's dynasty, and to give it as much glory, lands, and titles as possible. These far-reaching goals determine the player's actions in that they cannot make choices out of short-term pressure. And if their lineage survives, there will be no end to the game, not even at the date chosen by the developers (1453), since it is possible to load a save into another Paradox game, *Europa Universalis IV* (Paradox, 2013), and continue playing an alternative version of history until 1821. Such a never-ending experience transforms the usual victory conditions of strategy games, which mainly reflect materialistic goals (power, money) or extradiegetic constraints (every game needs a winner), into something closer to reality. It represents a long-term vision, much like how a leader would need to think in order to ensure their lineage's survival. Bonus point: that experience does not lure players with insignificant victory rewards compared to the number of hours needed to get to them. The very experience of managing a dynasty is enough to keep players playing; therefore, it enhances immersion.

But other endings occur from a microscopic perspective. If the game goes on for centuries, the first ruler embodied by the player inevitably dies. Then, taking on the role of their heir means reshuffling the cards at every level (government, diplomacy, human relations, etc.), because new risks arise: betrayals, new enemies, rebellions, or simply mistrust in a poorly experienced ruler. This end-game experience occurs at every death, and knowing the rules of the game does not make it easier to manage because of the procedural process shaping events we described above. Unexpected crises can always occur. A benign decision taken three in-game years earlier can have disastrous consequences for the entire story. But would you reload your save that far back? Thus, players experience both the life of a person in the Middle Ages and the set of physical, structural, and collective constraints weighing on them. They enjoy caring about the individual agency provided by the gameplay as much as the long-term ambition provided by victory conditions.

Thus, *CK III* transcends the usual division between panoptic and internal staging, diachrony and synchrony, strategic mindset and

role-play immersion. This was made possible because the end-game was not designed from the perspective of an individual or a country, but in a way that allows one to experience the causal relationship between the two. Then, the player's actions are haunted by the prospect of a potential end to their game, in such a way that reflects what a ruler could have felt when confronted with time and change—unless, of course, they cheat by reloading their saves.

But *CK*'s developers are history lovers working for a similar audience. Is it possible to stage a historically relevant endgame in a genre that doesn't aim to be historically consistent, such as first-person shooters? In short, the answer is yes, for gameplay mechanics are just tools in a designer's box. An example of it would be death as staged in the introduction of *Battlefield One*. *Battlefield One* is a classic FPS: the player takes on the role of a soldier and succeeds in their mission by killing enemies and taking control of specific areas of the battlefield. The scenery is also classic for a war game and doesn't make the in-game death experience more immersive. The story takes place during World War I, a common setting for FPS players—and being familiar with a staging usually doesn't help convey emotions (Huron, 2008).

And yet, *BO*'s introduction is disturbing. It begins with the cutscene of an ex-soldier recalling the battles he fought through a PTSD episode. Then, the player dives into the ex-soldier's memory and gets lost in the middle of gunfire between two ruins. There, they start to play. The sheer volume of visual and audio information to take in is enough to make them feel overwhelmed. The absence of a tutorial is also striking: the player spawns into the game without warning, as a soldier discovers the reality of war when he goes to combat for the first time. Then comes the inevitable: scripted failure, staged in-game by the death of the protagonist. Since the player knows they are at the beginning of the game, this death is not too confusing yet. Immersion is only enhanced by the epitaph of a real soldier displayed on screen.

But when the player returns to battle, they don't take on the role of the soldier they just played, like in a classic FPS. They appear somewhere else, playing as someone else. They do not realize it until the next time they fail and die, when a different epitaph appears. Then, they resume the battle as a third soldier, and so on after each of their deaths. This

build-up of deaths does not come alone. The music speeds up. The enemies grow in number and the difficulty increases, shortening the life of every new soldier. The player can grow weary of dying, but they still have time to wonder when the experience will end.

*Battlefield One* is thus proof that FPS mechanics can convey an emotionally driven death experience. Everyone knows that World War I caused millions of deaths. Conversely, everyone dies in an FPS, usually without caring about it. Death only means that the player has failed their mission. In such a staging, death is only envisioned out of the diegesis, when part of a count that gives players a rank. But when the game adds constraints to each failure, the player feels the weight of all those ending lives, of all those corpses piling up behind them. They feel it even more so as the developers worked on the slowness and the recoil of weapons to convey the difficulties of handling guns at the time. That new constraint helps create a new feeling, panic: the player doesn't handle their FPS the way they used to, they lose their marks like young soldiers may have lost them – and die all the faster. What *BO* depicts about World War One is not an individual tragedy, nor is it a disaster that plagued nations for years, but it depicts both at the same time.

Thus, when developers design every aspect of their games with attention to staging, historical data will not only be data displayed to the player. It will transform into an experience that players can live and learn from.

### 3. ■ Staging Interactive Storytelling

Interactivity is the second basis of video game narratives. While novels or movies typically follow a linear structure, a video game's core lies in disorganized exploration. Interactivity thus tends to stimulate curiosity and thinking. Players can be tempted to discover the entire content of the game, whether to complete it or discover its easter eggs. This is the very consequence of an impulse stimulated by the open nature of games (Juil, 2007, pp.191–203) and their system of rewards (Gazzard, 2011).

The adventure role-playing game *The Forgotten City* uses this impulse as a means to pass down different perspectives on facts. Its

plot is part investigation, part escape game, and part time loop. The player travels back in time during the visit of a Roman ruin. They find themselves trapped in the first century AD, before the downfall of the city. But they are also trapped in a time loop: the people of the city live under the surveillance of a god that enacted a mysterious Golden Rule. According to this law, every single crime tarnishes the whole community: any theft, lie, or act of violence leads to the awakening of statues executing them all, and the day starts all over again as if the game were being restarted. The game's main quest starts there: to go back to their own timeline, the player must discover who will violate the Rule and cause the destruction of the city.

Each in its own way, the main mechanics of the game fuel the player's curiosity by pushing them to explore not only the space but also all possible versions of reality. The escape game mechanics turn every action into an inquiry. It also amplifies every action: touching an amphora and reconciling two people are insignificant acts in the history of mankind, but will they play a role in the big event of the destruction of the city anyway? Is there a clue in the hidden areas of the map that can help find this out? The investigation mechanics also help by associating the act of obtaining information with a reward. Finally, the time loop mechanics provide a way to test each version of reality without overthinking its consequences. While this gameplay may not seem related to any historical background, when applied to historical data, it enables effective transmission of knowledge, since the player only interacts with elements designed out of it (characters, items, setting, and plot).

But non-linear storytelling has an even more important part to play in the setting, as it allows for the staging of virtual events without having to prioritize any particular version. Far from the meaning given to it by Genette (1972)<sup>16</sup>, non-linear storytelling in video games makes use of virtuality. It implies that an event can lead to several endings, but that the player only experiences one of them at a time. However, the player is aware of this and may wish to experience them all. *The Forgotten City* takes this logic to its limits. It offers around twenty characters and as many possible ways of achieving its four endings. What defines the path to these endings are

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<sup>16</sup> Gérard Genette (1972) suggests that the temporalities of the narrative and the recounted facts do not match. The act of telling the story is non-linear since it does not follow the chronology of events.



the characters themselves, through a casual chain made from the consequences of their actions. The developers also chose (Maher, 2021) to use a time loop to multiply versions of reality *ad infinitum*: since every failure disappears when the in-game day starts all over again, players can enjoy testing reality as much as possible.

This mechanism has consequences for the facts depicted. The absence of a narrator other than the player themselves deprives facts of consistency, one of the possibilities of the “investigative narrative” as described by Annick Louis (2020). Facts are only displayed to the player but need to be reconstructed in order to make sense. The end-game displays a hierarchy amongst the four endings of the day but does not clarify their proceedings. The player can only interpret what happened according to the chain of events they followed during this very game. Thus, their investigation does not lead to facts, but only to the most likely conclusion, shedding light on how artificial the act of interpretation can be. The event eventually becomes unstable and its causes unfathomable: while the destruction of the city is certain, its nature and components may conflict in each version of the day lived without cancelling each other out, transforming the events into a monster, a pure fictional item – and the inclusion of fantastical elements in the narrative only makes it worse. All this staging brings to the fore a reality at the very heart of social sciences: no fact can be understood in its entirety because it is made out of a complex, even arbitrary, crossroads between individual trajectories. Interpretation often implies adding consistency to reality.

Still, the non-linear storytelling and the time loop motif offer a way to read reality that keeps the player aware of the arbitrariness of each reading. Thanks to these mechanics, the player knows that they have chosen one branch of reality among others. They also know that somewhere there might be an extra cause, a different explanation, something that they have missed. Then, they may feel frustrated by their interpretation of events, because it condemns reality to a single version that is not faithful to everything they saw. This feeling exists in any non-linear narrative, but *The Forgotten City* dramatizes it because the golden statues punish every misinterpretation. Returning to the beginning of the time loop is also humbling, because it ruins a whole day of efforts. So, the chosen rhetoric oscillates between reparability and irreparability: everything can be tested, but nothing is trivial. By its very nature, a game

is repairable, because it can be restarted. Players do not take into account the consequences of their actions. However, certain game mechanics help to convey the permanent aspect of a decision. According to Ian Bogost (2007, pp.28–29), the procedural rhetoric of irreparability consists in exploiting the replayability of a game within its design to make the player feel the consequences of their actions. Every word is a potential mistake. Choices symbolize how dangerous certainty of mind can be: the player must name a culprit for the catastrophe but knows that stating one of the characters as guilty conceals the complexity of the event. Thus, videogame storytelling emphasizes “the laws that govern the dynamics of history” (Chapman, 2016, p.76). It represents the complex nature of events, and their potential but hidden paths. It also reminds us how difficult the job of historians and lawyers is, as they take on the roles of spectator, analyst and actor at the same time.

#### 4. ■ The Benefits of Mixing Fiction and Facts

It is only through the means of fiction that this becomes possible. And although it may seem paradoxical, fiction has much to offer to historical depiction, complementing scientific knowledge but without falling into the pitfalls of classic historical storytelling. This all depends on how the narrative mixes facts and fiction. To explore this matter, we will compare *The Forgotten City* to the *Assassin’s Creed* series.

In *Assassin’s Creed*, the setting and most of the characters found in the game are historical. However, the main plot is contradictory. It refuses to be labelled as fiction, so the player assumes that the main protagonist has indeed lived. Yet, the basis of the plot—the Assassin’s sect and mission—is pure fiction. Similarly, assigning Assassin or Templar roles to historical characters distances them from their identities and may reduce them to narrative tools. In such a context, the story played does not deal with history. The game delivers a fictional narrative staged with the costumes and settings of reality.

*The Forgotten City* does the very opposite. Time travel, time loop, escape game: all its main mechanics are fictional. It also shares a lot of features with fantasy games, since its designers first developed it from *Skyrim*. Among these features, we can quote music, the structure of the narrative, quest design, etc., but these fictional devices all serve the

representation of history and even try to convey how unfamiliar the past can become through time (for more details see Noury, in press).

The most meaningful example of this logic is a dialogue between the player and Sentius, the fictional magistrate in charge of the Roman city. Since Sentius knows about time travel, the player can talk to him as a modern-era person. They can take this opportunity offered by the fictional setting to chat with him, bringing past and present face to face. The player can even criticize Roman civilization, but Sentius perceives such criticism as an outrage and demands that they explain themselves. The player can answer with the following arguments: slavery, bloodsports, gender inequality, persecution of religious minorities, and collective punishment. From a twentieth-century perspective, each of them may violate human rights. Yet, Sentius has a different vision of respect. As such, he not only dismisses these criticisms, but also fails to understand them. Here are his responses:

- Slavery: "Of course. What else would we do with those prisoners of war who would otherwise have been executed? And besides, there are laws for their protection as well."
- Bloodsports: "Our gladiators are almost all volunteers seeking glory, or condemned prisoners who would have been executed anyway! I do not see the harm."
- Gender inequality: "Of course! But with fewer rights come fewer responsibilities, and the right to be protected by their fathers and husbands."
- Persecution of religious minorities: "You mean the blasphemous cult responsible for burning down half of Rome last year? It's hard to blame the people for being angry about that."
- Collective punishment: "Are you talking about our practice of decimation? Of course. We could hardly unite all these warring tribes without a disciplined, formidable Legion."

In this dialogue, Sentius isn't more righteous than the player. But the player isn't more righteous than him either, because both of them are determined by their own value systems. And the player cannot fight against Sentius's logic, since he is the stranger there, alone in a place in space and time that is not his home. Thus, the very tool that should help erase the distance between them, which is dialogue, only makes it bigger. Both feel estranged, even though

they are talking. Dialogue becomes even more powerless over time. There is no option allowing the player to convince Sentius. The only possible way out of this conversation is to admit that “What you are feels wrong to me.” But this final attempt is useless, since Sentius replies: “Well, right now you’re a long, long way from home.”

Everything the player has learned through this dialogue comes from a history book. Yet, science would aim to understand the past. The knowledge it would pass on would help erase the distance. Fiction contributes differently to knowledge. It brings an emotional face-to-face that questions what is often unquestionable—values. The interactivity adds to this by creating hope in the player, the hope of convincing a stranger, before ultimately taking that hope away. Where does truth lie, then? Who is right and who is wrong? This staggering experience is made possible only through fiction and is enhanced by the active role given to the player.

## 5. ■ Conclusion

Endgame, interactive storytelling, playing with reality: the features considered here were only a fraction of what makes video games’ narratives unique. Still, they make it possible to see what only video games can offer to historical depiction and understanding.

Building a video game from historical data thus avoids falling into two pitfalls that are as meaningful for the audience as for the developers: not wasting the players’ time with aimless game mechanics, and not turning the video game experience into an academic course—even though serious games have their place in video game practices. Hence the importance of narrative design, whose role in development aims precisely at this: give meaning to the player’s actions.

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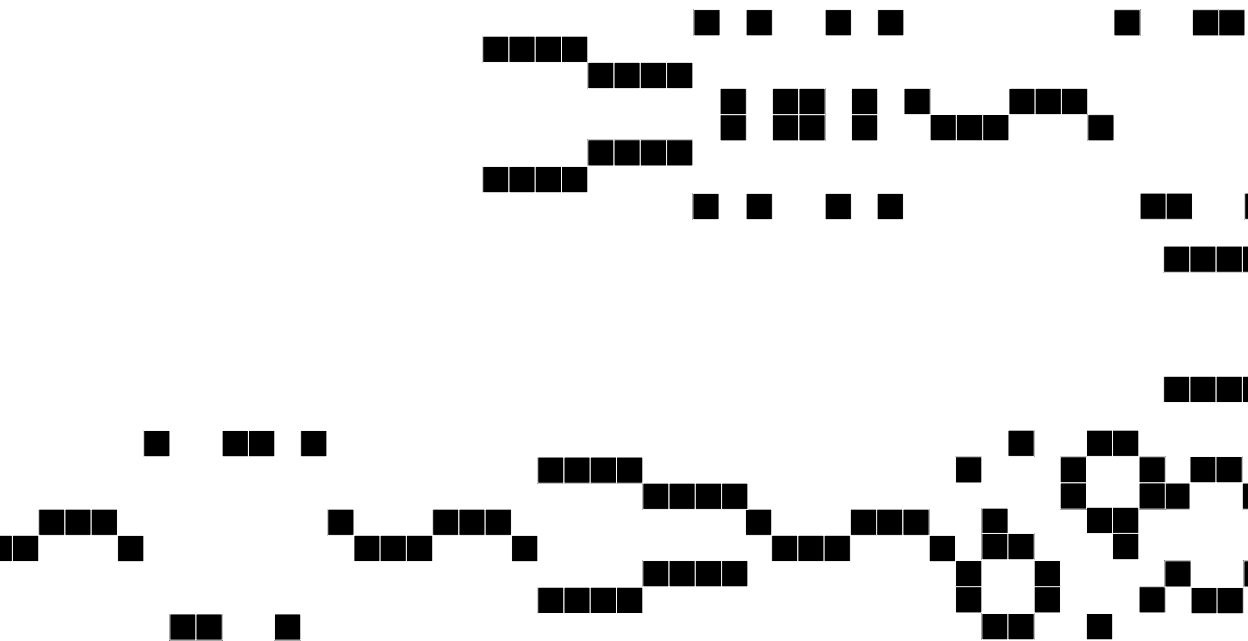
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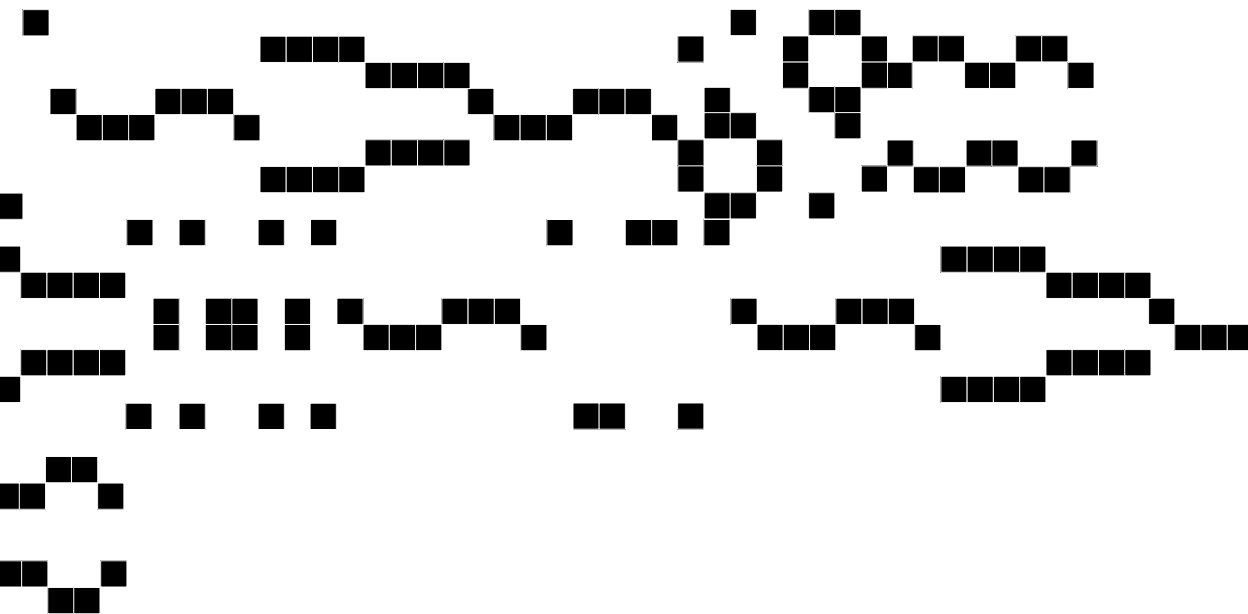
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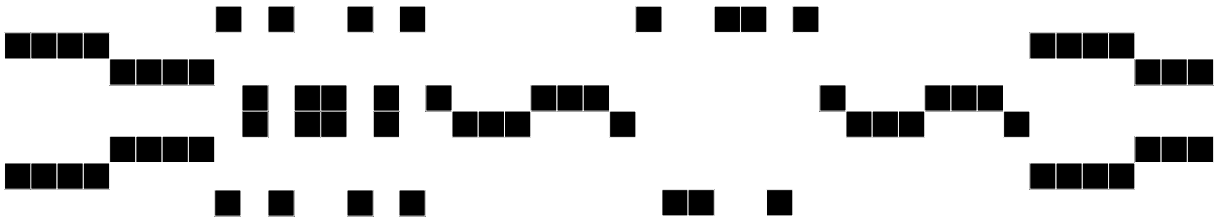
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## Criticism

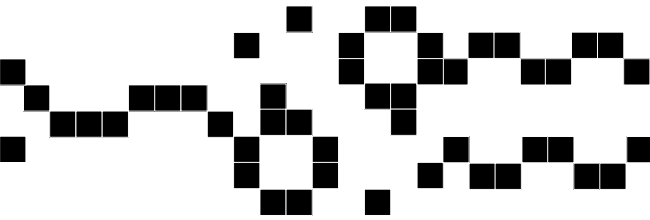


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### The Early Video Game Review (1981–1991) as an Evolving System of Media Critique



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**Summary:**

This study of the early UK gaming magazine empirically examines, via content analysis and discourse analysis, the early game review's format and evaluative conventions, and questions how these relate to wider sociohistorical developments within gaming. It concludes that the highly formulaic three-part structure of the review is an attempt to build critical authority on the part of an emergent, yet youthful, gaming press. Furthermore, that these reviews start to define gaming successes by constructing key paradigms of critique via a range of evaluative categories. Shifts within both the three stages of the review, and in the evaluative categories, help reveal changes in the technological and cultural landscape at a key formative time for gaming as a social practice.

**Keywords:**

Media critique, UK gaming magazines, game reviews, commodity culture, video games

## 1. ■ Introduction

The vast archive of gaming magazines, published in the UK from the early 1980s onwards, provides a unique insight into the development of the gaming industry and the gaming culture it attends to. Whilst the video game magazine as a multi-text contains many subsections, each intertextually linked, “the most obvious function of the video game press, however, is performed by reviews of the current crop of titles” (Newman, 2008, p.31). The centrality of the review is made apparent via the allocation of a coherent space within the magazine – the review ‘section’ – and the tendency for the front pages to proclaim the number of reviews inside. These tendencies would suggest that reviews clearly sell copy, and that these magazines acted as ‘buyer’s guides’ for the gaming community (Perreault and Vos, 2020). Therefore, as the review is the core mechanism of the video game magazine, to fully understand how these magazines contributed to gaming culture we must attempt to understand the video game review as a system of media critique. This paper will provide an empirical examination of the early gaming review, as they became increasingly systematized, and begin to place that process of professionalisation within its wider sociohistorical context.

The UK video gaming industry can be historically understood as two industries that operated synergistically. The primary industry is one of games production and distribution, and the secondary, or supportive, industry is one of representation, as performed by the specialist UK publishing press. The earliest significant academic examination of the 1980s UK video game industry was carried out in the doctoral thesis of Leslie Haddon (1988), with his research covering the early to mid-1980s. As part of his study Haddon examines the growth of the gaming industry from a cottage industry to one of media synergies. Haddon (1988, p.202) notes an attendant process in gaming journalism, whereby “games writing became routinised and continuous, instead of haphazard and occasional.” This work signals what will become for Haddon an ongoing interest in the adoption of home computing as a highly significant, and gendered, shift in social practice. Another seminal work in relation to understanding the history of British gaming magazines is Graeme Kirkpatrick’s *The Formation of Gaming Culture* (2015). This book is the first to dedicate itself to the analysis of the early UK games magazine as the vanguard text of a new gaming imaginary. Influ-

enced by constructionist scholars, and the theoretical framework of Bourdieu, Kirkpatrick's study on gaming culture argues that the initial function, or purpose, of these new technologies is initially undetermined, only to be contested by 'rival social constituencies' as its capacities and identity are explored. The lack of explicit guidance as to what early microcomputers were functionally designed for gives them a highly self-referential identity and ensures that these rival constituencies will have plenty to contest over.

The significance of the games review (those micro-texts within the magazines), whilst long understood by the gaming community, has been only sporadically engaged with by academia over the last two decades, with some notable exceptions including Tsang and Prendergast (2009), Suominen (2011) and Ribbens and Steegen (2012). However, that is beginning to change with growing academic recognition of the key role played by the gaming press in determining the dominant discourses around gaming culture. These efforts are now coalescing into often localized studies (Pasanen and Suominen, 2019; Swalwell, 2021; Lima, Pinto and Gouveia, 2022) that recognize the need for a textured and nuanced understanding of the gaming press as both cultural archive and societal agent. This paper seeks to contribute to that project by outlining the games review's increasingly systematized format, and its changing evaluative taxonomy—one that adapts as gaming journalism attempts to build, and protect, its own sphere of influence.

## 2. ■ Methodology and Sample

Textually orientated discourse analysis was combined with content analysis in this study to examine 16 gaming publications dating from 1981 to 1991. It is an approach that encourages a consideration of the texts as being socially embedded, within an interlinked set of societal and institutional procedures and processes, which are both discursive and material. Whilst the discourse analysis approach of this thesis is heavily informed and directed by the works of Fairclough (2003), I would not claim it to be a piece of Critical Discourse Analysis per se, nor would I claim to be a linguist in training or inclination. However, some of the concepts and frameworks of CDA have proved invaluable to my study of how cultural industries can intersect with lived social practice, with a core element of my research question being how the

evolution of the specialist gaming press corresponds to the development of a coherent gaming identity and culture. This is a question that centres on the “dialectical relationships between discourse ... and other elements of social practices” (Fairclough, 2003, p.205).

In this paper, two key approaches were taken to the magazine sample. Firstly, content analysis for recording specific changes in evaluative categories (Graphics, Lastability etc). Secondly, discourse analysis for the reviews themselves. The following 16 publications (with publication dates included) were examined for terminological changes in their scoring systems, i.e. by what categories did they grade games on: *Your Computer* (1981–88), *CVG* (1981–2004), *ZX Magazine* (1982–87), *Home Computing Weekly* (1983–85), *TV Gamer* (1983–85), *Personal Computer Games* (1983–85), *Commodore User* (1983–90), *Your Spectrum/Your Sinclair* (1984–93), *CRASH* (1984–92), *Your 64* (1984–85), *Your Commodore* (1984–1991), *Computer Gamer* (1985–87), *Zzap* (1985–1992), *Amstrad Action* (1985–95), *ACE* (1987–1992), and *Mean Machine* (1990–92). These publications were read from 1981 to 1991, although some continued to be released after that time and many were discontinued before then. Where any new terms (e.g., ‘Originality’) came into usage as a scoring category a log was made of the magazine and the date of publication. This then formed a taxonomy of gaming evaluation, one which informed my broader concept of an emerging tripartite paradigm of game critique – the construct/experience/commodity.

The above magazines chosen are representative of the two key formats of video game magazines, the platform-specific and the multi-platform. They include not only the high-profile ‘successes’ that receive attention, but also the lesser-known ‘failures’. It is a sample that looks to examine both those texts traditionally included and excluded from the gaming historical narrative.

### **3. ■ The Tripartite Syntagms of the Review: Context/Content/Critique**

The review itself is generally short in length (often 4 to 6 per A4 page), and comprised of a written critique of the game itself, screenshots (pictures of in-game footage) accompanied by explanatory

text, and a review scorebox. The review system contained in that scorebox usually categorises the game in terms of such qualities as Graphics, Sound, Playability, Value, etc. These are sometimes further aggregated into an Overall rating or score. From the very earliest manifestation of the video game magazine review there is a highly standardised structure that underpins the critical genre as a whole. This structure can be formulated sequentially into three stages: i) context; ii) content; and iii) critique. Whilst the emphases will vary over time, this essential sequence endures across the 1980s and early 1990s, and can be seen repeated in other cultural industries, especially where consumer reviews play a significant role.

The structure is a sequence of introduction, description, and evaluation. I have termed this structure tripartite (see Figure 1). Yet, as I will argue, the three parts operate both as syntagms (as sequence) and as paradigms (as types of critique). Firstly, I shall provide an example of the structured critique, and then extrapolate on the implications and affordances such a structure provides.

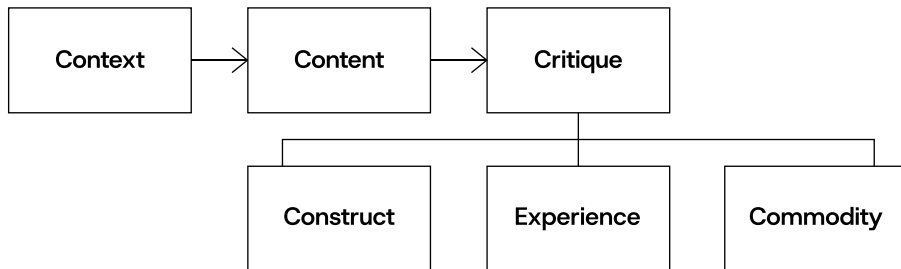


Figure 1. The tripartite structure of the game review

The following lines are taken from reviews, in order to display the sequencing at work I have inserted numeric notations to indicate the paragraph of the review being cited, e.g. (4). The publication title, publication year, video game title, publication issue and page reference are also cited:

“(1) [Context] With the TV series of the same name on our screens Richard Wilcox should be assured good sales of his well-promoted and now available game ... (2) [Content] The

basic objective is to fly your jetcopter off the deck of a ship ... (3) [Critique] Throughout the graphics are excellent" (*Airwolf*, Anon., 1984a, p.8).

"(1) [Context] Mike 'Lords of Midnight' Singleton has really pulled out the stops in what is the first true arcade game since *3 Deep Space* ... (4) [Content] The location is an underwater power station ... (5) [Content] This is where you come into it. You must use the Hermes to knock out the other computers ... (10) [Critique] to the game's merit the multitude of features do not detract from the playability" (*Quake Minus 1*, Anon., 1985a, p.37).

The pattern followed by these reviews, and the many like them, is to first introduce the product, and the context of its production, where there is often a reference to an auteur producer. The middle part of the review is generally a 2nd person set of descriptions that form an instructional narrative of 'how-to' play the game (an unusual blend of banal directions and 'choose your own adventure' style role-play). Thirdly, there is the summing up or critique. The unanimity of the convention is striking, and suggests an inherent correlation between the structure itself and the central functions of the review. Indeed, the review structure can be regarded as a metonym of the wider gaming press and amounts to a division of discursive labours, where the function of the consumer review is to interpellate, to inform, and to instruct; to engage the gamer and direct them to the product.

Another function performed by the formulaic tripartite structure of context/content/critique is to provide industry-wide discursive coherence at a formative time for the practice of gaming critique. The newly emergent field of video game journalism required a clear, easy-to-follow format for both its producers and consumers. This would allow the new and untested reviewers, as cultural intermediaries, to experiment within safely organized parameters, whilst giving the reader a recognisable and trustworthy sense of equivalence between reviews. As such, the increasingly formulaic nature of the games review is an early attempt to build the cultural capital of gaming journalism within a broader journalistic ecology. This attempt at validation is an approach that would continue to the present day (Perreault and Vos, 2020).

It is important to note that there is a general shift by the early 1990s within this highly stable tripartite structure, particularly in terms of the initial syntagm of 'context'. The following examples highlight this development:

"(1) On becoming Mayor, Haggar has put his life of mindless violence behind him – until daughter Jessica is kidnapped by the brutal Mad Gear gang and held for ransom" (*Final Fight*, Anon., 1991b, p.54.).

"(1) Big Dick's in town! Sworn to eradicate crime, the vigilante Private Investigator has decided to meander the environs in search of mendicants, panhandlers, and buskers" (*Dick Tracy*, Anon., 1991a, p.16.).

Whereas initially the syntagm of context was predominantly non-diegetic (it spoke not of the game but its framework of production and consumption: the software house that made it, the genre the game belongs to, etc.), by 1991 the context section is now often diegetic. The references to the fictional characters of Mayor Haggar and Dick Tracy are to background plots provided by the marketers. This takes the contextual and journalistic depth out of the critique, and angles it instead towards the roleplaying tendencies of gaming culture, and the recycling of advertising copy. It is a move away from the serious and towards the celebrational, away from the adult and towards the youthful. These are tendencies that typify many of the late 1980s and early 1990s video game magazines.

It should be noted that those publications that were always highly focused on the youth market, would tend from their outset more towards the diegetic storytelling approach to Context. And the more adult-orientated magazines (for example, *ACE*) would stay with the original format of non-diegetic openers, followed by instruction and evaluation. The Context section provides a useful marker as to the branded identity of the publications, i.e., whereabouts on the scale from serious to fun they wish to occupy.

The next section will examine the final syntagm of Critique, by looking at the paradigms that formed their critical evaluations. By analysing these favoured paradigms of critique we can better understand the pleasures being promised to the buyer.



## ■ The Tripartite Paradigms of Critique: Construct/Experience/Commodity

The standardisation of the review, into a tripartite syntagmatic structure, is a process mirrored within the final stage of critique, where the procession of three syntagms branches off into three paradigms of evaluation, which I have called the Construct/Experience/Commodity. These paradigms collectively form the parameters by which a game will come to be judged. The Construct/Experience/Commodity system is one informed by my textual examination of the overall sample, and by collating those evaluative categories used in gaming magazines (Graphics, Playability, Sound, etc.). My research has shown that whilst these three paradigms are manifestly present within the set evaluative categories of the discrete scoring box, they are also latently active in the main body of the reviews.

Before looking at the data (re: which evaluative categories were used most often) it will be useful to clarify what is being meant by the terms 'Construct', 'Experience', and 'Commodity'. The term Construct refers to those factors that have formed the game as a product, and speaks to how well the game has been made or programmed. As such, the Construct paradigm is a term that corresponds to the production sphere (Johnson, 1986; Du Gay, 1997) and is mainly diegetic in focus. Significant examples of this paradigm are Graphics and Sound. The most prevalent of all the evaluative categories (see Table 1) employed by the gaming magazine, Graphics, is a techno-aesthetic term, whilst Sound is the audio equivalent. The 'Experience' paradigm relates to evaluating those experiences offered by the game to the gamer, for example, Playability, Addictiveness and Lastability are principally experiential categories. This paradigm corresponds to the sphere of consumption and tends towards the non-diegetic, that which is occurring outside of the game.

Thirdly, the 'Commodity' paradigm is one that centres on consumer imperatives. Accordingly it cannot be tied into one sphere of the circuit of culture (Johnson, 1986), but is instead the wider guiding principle by which all others are articulated. The core example of this term in video gaming parlance is Value. It should be noted that whilst some terms of critique (i.e., Graphics) nest quite firmly within one paradigm or another, some of the most significant and interesting categories are crossover evaluations; ones that tend to embrace two or all of the par-

adigms. Playability and Gameplay are such examples of the crossover category, and it has been their ability to span the three paradigms of the Construct/Experience/Commodity that has provided these terms with their discursive dominance over gaming culture.

I shall briefly cite from some Critique syntagms of various video game reviews to highlight how the paradigms of evaluation latently underpinned the reviewer's critique (not just the editorially provided scorebox). For each citation, I have inserted the paradigm that correlates with the evaluation. Some evaluative terms, as previously mentioned, cross over into two paradigms:

"The graphics [Construct] aren't very impressive ... far too easy to play [Experience] ... Collecting laundry proves to be an original idea, but it doesn't prove to be exciting [Experience-Commodity]" (*Mr Wong's Loopy Laundry*, Anon., 1984b, p.59).

"Originality is low [Experience-Commodity] ... but this doesn't make the game any less playable or addictive [Experience]. It includes above average, well drawn and fairly smooth graphics [Construct]" (*Mr Wong's Loopy Laundry*, Anon., 1984b, p.59.).

"Brilliant character animation. [Construct]" ... "Terrific gameplay [Construct-Experience] that is easy to learn but hard to perfect." ... "Plenty of lasting challenge. [Experience-Commodity]" (*Way of the Exploding Fist*, Anon., 1985c, pp.16-17).

"Overlapping graphics aren't very good [Construct]" ... "not very original [Experience-Commodity]" ... "Screens don't vary much, just get harder [Construct-Experience]" (*Rock Raid*, Anon., 1985b, p.19).

These citations reveal the three categories of critique continually at work within the video game review, categories labouring to produce meaning around what makes a good game. The young review teams that wrote these reviews, employed by magazines such as *CRASH* and *Zzap!64*, would be provided with pre-prepared context and content sections (by other more experienced magazine staff members) and then left to provide a suitably demotic end critique – one that still had the authenticity they alone could provide as 'honest gamers'. Thereby, the standardised three-part structure

outlined above acts as a means of framing critical variety, and instilling authority into the newly emergent video game review.

Having established the core three paradigms of gaming critique, it is now possible to produce a revealing taxonomy of gaming-evaluative categories, in which we can see shifts in emphasis and meaning across the time period of the sample from 1981 to 1991.

#### 4. ■ The Scoring Category – Building an Inventory of Evaluation

The table below lists the most popular categories of critique used within the video game review, and is drawn from my research of a broad sample of sixteen publications from the 1980s and early 1990s. This research has allowed for the construction of a basic evaluative taxonomy of the review, and traces “the emergence of a game-specific evaluative terminology” that Kirkpatrick (2012) makes reference to in his early essay on the subject. The resulting data reveals how emerging evaluation sets classified success and failure in terms of the gaming product. The dates listed below

Evaluative Category	Magazines in sample using category	Introduced 1981-1983	Introduced 1984-1986	Introduced 1987-1991
Graphics	16/16 (100%)	3	11	2
Value	13/16 (81%)	5	8	0
Sound	10/16 (63%)	1	6	3
Playability/Gameplay	10/16 (63%)	2	6	2
Lastability	9/16 (56%)	2	3	4
Overall	8/16 (50%)	1	4	3
Originality	7/16 (44%)	2	5	0
Addictiveness	6/16 (38%)	1	5	0
Presentation	5/16 (31%)	1	2	2
Instructions	3/16 (19%)	2	1	0

Table 1. Evaluative categories used by games reviews, and % of sample publication used by.

also provide a breakdown of when the terms first came into usage, which allows for a fine-grained detailing of the trends. Synonyms have been collated in order to recognise the discursive patterns being formed, for example, Hookability (ZZap) has been included in the Addictiveness category, as was Addictive Quality. Aside from a few synonyms, there was, however, a distinct consistency in the terminology being used for the categories, with variations often only attempts by the magazines at linguistic novelty.

The popularity of these various critical categories ebb and flow in relation to technological and cultural factors. Firstly, on the diegetic side, and within the Construct paradigm, Graphics is clearly a pre-eminent category throughout the history of gaming evaluation, and signals an early technological determinism within the critical perspective. Technological determinism can be described as always representing “the way things are as the necessary, inevitable outcome of features intrinsic to certain types of machinery” (Kline, Dyer-Witheyford and De Peuter, 2003, p.46) and it is a perspective that has suffused the popular history of computing. In terms of game evaluation Graphics is technologically deterministic in that the visual display comes to represent the outcome of features intrinsic to the machine. Therefore, it is regarded as crucially important from the outset how a game looks, as the visuals are perceived as signalling how well the product has been constructed/programmed. The visual display is the programmer’s code made manifest. Alternately, Sound is largely irrelevant as an evaluative signifier up until the arrival of the more acoustic machines, circa 1984, as until that point little audio was used on the early home computing machines.

Secondly, in terms of the non-diegetic categories of critique, there is an increased usage of the terms Lastability, Originality, and Addictiveness, in the mid to late 1980s. It is significant that these terms became more prominent at this time, when the amount of available games escalated rapidly, and as the attendant gaming culture matured. With more and more games to choose from the evaluations become more discerning and fine-grained (more qualitative than quantitative). The new questions are not simply how good does the game look (Graphics), or how well does it play (Playability), but instead ask how intense will the experiences be (Addictiveness), and how long will the game engage them for (Lastability). The rising importance of the Experience paradigm signals a stable period

of technological development for the micro-computer market. In a time where the 8-bit machines enjoyed a solid support base, their games would grow in sophistication and variety.

Significantly, the term Originality, so important in the mid-1980s when gaming is consolidating its position as a culturally valid and dynamic medium, becomes disregarded post-1987. I would argue that in the mid-1980s the expansion of the gaming industry led to consumer demand for continual innovation and development, and that these demands were initially met via a shift in both game production and the evaluative framework – it was seen as important to be original. However, by the late 1980s, these demands were elided, and originality was supplanted by the operations of market segmentation; originality was replaced by the provision of difference. This framework of difference had already been constructed via some of the conventions of the video game magazine (its collective listings and directories of games by type) and the commonplace categorisation of the video game into various genres. In the late 1980s, it became more important that games are generically the best so far, for example the best-looking shoot-em-up, rather than actually offering anything new. A central convention in determining this framework of supposed difference will be the notion of Playability or its replacement, Gameplay.

## 5. ■ Changing the Terms of Evaluation – Whatever Happened to Playability?

Whilst Gameplay is an evaluative term that emerged in the mid-1980s (Kirkpatrick, 2015) it would not become discursively dominant until towards the end of the decade, during a period I have termed the third wave of video game magazines (Bootes, 2016). Etymologically, Gameplay was preceded by Playability, a common category of evaluation employed from 1982 onwards by CVG. In examining its linguistic predecessor, a little light can be shed on how the meaning of Gameplay has been constructed by the early gaming industry. Each of these following quotes are definitions of its predecessor/alternate term Playability, which come from magazine rating guides explaining the categories of evaluation to the reader:

“Is the game fun to play right from the start or, after a complicated start, does it become fun to play?” (Crash, 1981, 1, p.10)

“Playability is the all-important question of game balance, how long it will build your attention and how addictive it is.” (CVG, 1983, 23)

“Some games you just can’t stop playing, no matter how late at night it is. This measures the addictiveness of the game, and how much you’ll think about it – even when you’re not playing it.” (*Mean Machine*, 1990, 1, p.6)

The core tenets of these definitions are fun, engagement, and gaming balance. Whilst other evaluative categories focus on technology, “Playability alone is exclusively focused on the experience of the player” (Kirkpatrick, 2012). In his groundbreaking work on the subject of gameplay, Kirkpatrick (2012) marks the origin of the new gameplay terminology as being autumn 1985, with CVG magazine using the term during its review of *Maze Gold CVG40*. Whilst I have discovered earlier usages of the term, as a category of evaluation in TV Gamer magazine (March 1984), I would agree with Kirkpatrick that its usage only became significant from the late 1980s onwards. I would also argue that the key shift from Playability to Gameplay is one from consumption to production. Whilst Playability always contained within it the sphere of production (the playability of a game being perceived as dependent on how well it was programmed), it still primarily emphasised the experiences of the gamer. Gameplay, with its increased emphasis on diegetic features, places the producers more in control of the dialogue of interactive play.

To summarize, Gameplay became significant as the dominant quality that the gamer was encouraged to demand, as the key bearer of gaming capital. Yet, it did so at the expense of a broader set of gaming critical discourse. Furthermore, Gameplay, as a category, elides categorization, in that it promises the gamer rewards according to their ability and knowledge, their embodied gaming capital, regardless of taste. In doing so Gameplay also avoids the pitfalls of post-Fordist market segmentation and instead reconstructs the users’ preferences as multi-faceted and critical. If the game is good, then the gamer should accept it regardless of genre. In doing so it performs both a commodity and identity function, both opening up the market and consolidating the gamer as connoisseur. Finally, Gameplay is reductive, and metonymical, in that it converts organic play into a commodity and then returns

the original act of play back to its user as a tepid experience, one now determined by the forces of production.

The shift in gaming critique by the early 1990s is away from originality, and towards the continual obsolescence of what Newman (2012) terms a supersession-based culture of technology. One consequence of the use of rating-centric reviews is to encourage this consumption of the new, by “emphasising and ranking games with reference to the characteristics and qualities that are indivisibly keyed to the delivery technologies, magazine reviews might be seen to assist in normalising the supersession” (Newman, 2008, p.35). Whilst each of the evaluative categories I have listed has its own connotations and functions within the consumer culture of video gaming, they do tend to coalesce into those three core paradigms outlined earlier. Furthermore, this tripartite system is one that constitutes, whilst responding to, shifting audience expectations. As such, these categories of critique are, to paraphrase Brecht, both mirror and hammer; in that they reflect and form the culture of gaming.

## 6. ■ Conclusion

The reviews studied in this research filled the early gaming press with critical and diverse micro-texts, consumer artefacts that provide us with invaluable contemporaneous accounts of both the games they assessed and the gamers they speak to. The tripartite structuring of these reviews is part of an attempt to build, and protect, a unique sphere of cultural production and influence – the gaming press. Accordingly, the evaluative language developed by the early gaming press corresponds to the development of a newly coherent sense of gaming identity and culture. These paradigms will help constitute the boundaries of gaming capital (Consalvo, 2009): the emerging evaluative discourse of what makes a good game, and how these games should be talked about by their players.

In conclusion, whilst the overall discourse of the video game magazine appears increasingly juvenile, the review itself is operating on an increasingly complex and intertwined number of levels: as a consumer guide, cultural construct, and journalistic oeuvre. Whilst the categories applied here are specific to the video game medium, and are an inventory of its critical format, the wider paradigmatic/

syntagmatic approach used here represents an analytical framework that can be used to engage other media products. The consumer review as a wider genre can be said to focus on three inquiries: it asks how proficient is the product's construction; it asks how it will make the user feel; and what is its overall commercial value. These are arguably the three central tenets of any mainstream critical interaction with the commodity.

Yet, there is always already a dialectic in operation here, something that takes these texts beyond the remit of being just commodified guides. There is a tension between the creation of a new authority/structure and the waywardness of play. Whilst literary conventions are adopted in an attempt to assure critical conformity, there is also an increase in the use of humour and pastiche within the reviews themselves. As the reviewers become aware of their own conventionality, they would come to parody those formulas of critique. What begins as playful labour, as a pragmatic counterweight to the overriding commodity function of the consumer guide, becomes experimental and transgressive—the problem with playfulness being that it seldom does what it's told for long.

To finish with the words of the original authors, here is a 1993 review for the game *DJ Puff's Volcanic Caper* (Anon., 1993, p.13.), a mediocre software title served by a highly nuanced and self-reflexive review, where the reviewer dramatically performs the process of critique:

"Let me warn you I'm reaching in to my big bag of Disgruntled Reviewers Terribly Apt Words and I'm producing the phrase (rattle rattle) 'odds', 'stacked', 'against and 'you'. OK? Here we go. *DJ Puffs Volcanic Caper*, eh? The odds are stacked against you and no mistake, matey." In summary, the reviewer concludes: "See DJ Puff? See the word 'crap'? They go well together, don't they?"



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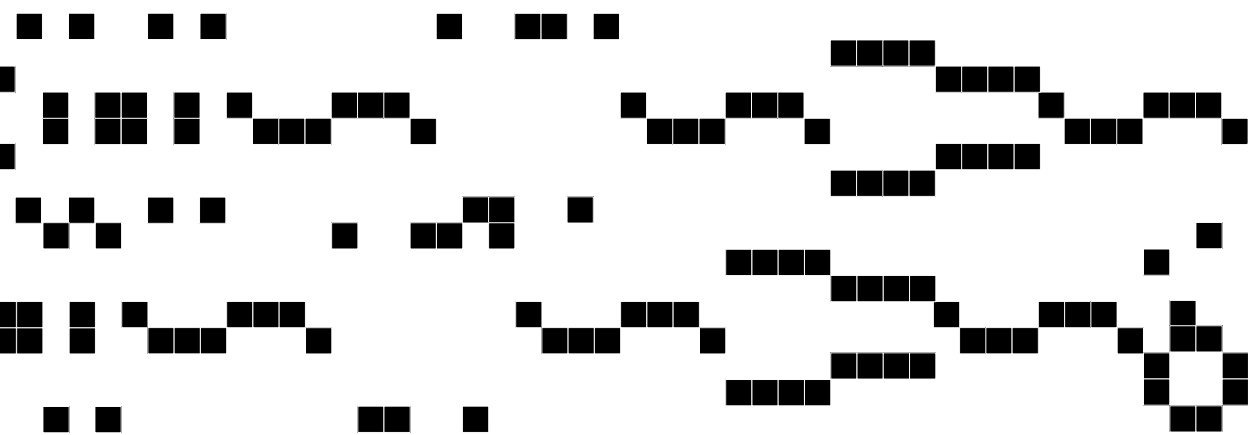
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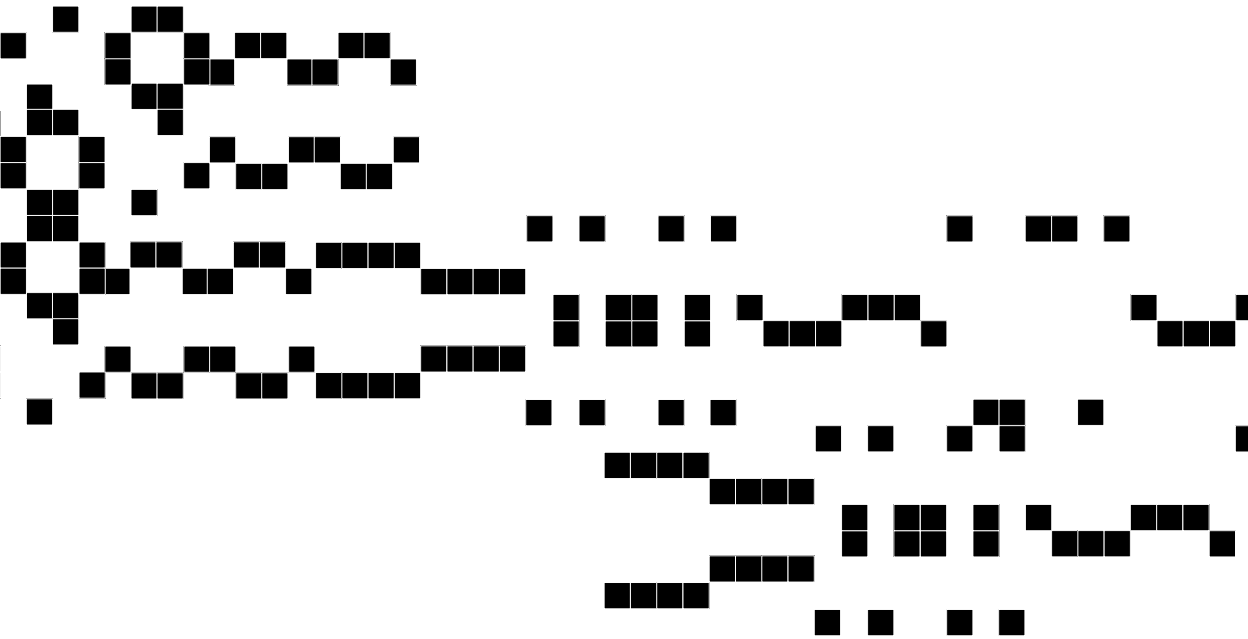
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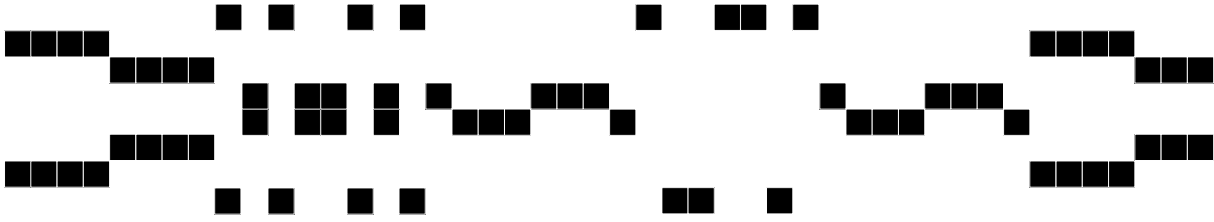
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## Criticism

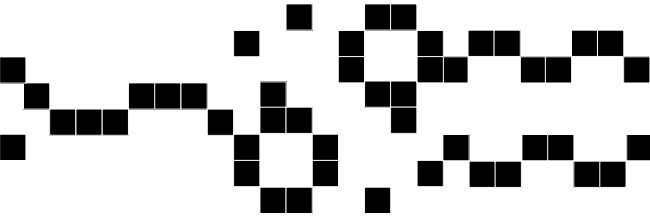


UDC: 795SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

### **Transient Titans – Exilic Refraction in *Shadow of the Colossus***



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### Summary:

*Shadow of the Colossus* is often lauded for its aesthetics, be they visual, aural, or atmospheric. The sublime and melancholic sense transmitted throughout the Forbidden Lands remains palpable but ambiguous; its origin likely comes from exilic phenomena. This essay examines *Shadow of the Colossus* via exile studies in order to provide a new reading of the game's characters, narrative, and landscape. The field focuses on transplantation, metamorphosis, and the possibility of transcendence or return, all of which inform the game's narrative as much as they do its world and atmosphere. While certainly an aesthetic masterpiece, a great part of *Shadow of the Colossus'* allure originates from Wander's exile and how it manifests beyond him. The landscape is therefore melancholy because it prompts nostalgia; its world can be read as a refraction of the narrative's overt exploration of home's reconstitution.

### Keywords:

Shadow of the Colossus, Team Ico, video games, exile studies.

Team Ico's *Shadow of the Colossus* begins with movement, a journey. And though most stories are exilic in nature, departure is vital to remember in a story dedicated to the resurrection of a part of home. The game opens with Wander making his way to the Forbidden Lands, a place uninhabited and prohibited. Noticeably, he must cross a great bridge, seemingly endless, in order to reach the Shrine of Worship, wherein he believes he can resurrect Mono, his significant other, through the supernatural being Dormin. The spirit offers a contract: it can resurrect Mono, but only if Wander slays sixteen colossi who harbour Dormin's fractured essence and pace the land as sentinels of the realm. Thus begins *Shadow of the Colossus*, with transplantation and the promise of a restored home in Mono, representative of the village from which Wander departs. Simultaneously, Mono represents the dissolution of home, as through her wrongful sacrifice, home for Wander has ceased to be. It is fitting then that the hero's name is what it is—a wanderer, a wayfarer; gone from the village to restore it abroad. The Bridge represents the first symbol of a story whose allure is based not just in artistic style, landscape, or music but mostly in what is ultimately an encounter with the exilic condition, intriguing and terrifying as it is. The game refracts Wander's condition as much unto the Bridge as it does unto the eponymous colossi whose defeat can be read as attempts at "transcendence" (Milbauer, 1985). Each encounter with a colossus and the world, informed by Wander's exile, clarifies the melancholic ambiance of the game's totality.

Exile studies focus the attention on displacement and the compulsion to return or reconstitute home, wherever that may be. While numerous definitions provide variations on the condition, it is always informed by homes lost and sought, the psychic manifestations of which almost always find themselves reflected upon the landscape as viewed by the transplanted subject. In extreme manifestations, and one which arguably finds itself in *Shadow of the Colossus*, is the act of terraforming, transforming the land in an effort to inhabit it, to transcend one's exile. Accentuated by exilic phenomena, the game becomes one more oriented toward homemaking as opposed to spirituality or morality; its somber quality stems from the futility of the enterprise and its emotional toll.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See also Cole, T., 2015. The Tragedy of Betrayal: How the design of Ico and *Shadow of the Colossus* elicits emotion. Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA.



Figure 1. Bridge to the Forbidden Lands<sup>18</sup>

*Shadow of the Colossus's* first major symbol, the Bridge to the Forbidden Lands (Figure 1), marks the beginning of Wander's exile as well as unifies all other exilic aspects of the game. The Bridge, as part of the landscape, draws attention to the environment, hostile in its emptiness. In the way of structures, the Bridge is one of the major, intact architectural constructs in the game (others include the Shrine of Worship and the site of the sixteenth colossus). Wander trespasses upon the Forbidden Lands via a bridge whose seeming interminability mirrors the voluntary exile the hero has undertaken. The overgrown nature of the Bridge like that of the other structures accentuates this effect by implying the passage (as well as the stasis) of time. This juxtaposition of transit and paralysis echoes what André Aciman calls the "permanent transience" of exile as a state (Aciman, 2000, p.13). The Forbidden Lands become the physical manifestation and reflection of Wander's condition, the place to which he has been voluntarily banished, the price of Mono's resurrection. The land to which an exile has been expelled defines him as much as the land from which he has departed—"home" is both the nostalgic and fondly recalled point of origin (the birthplace) and simultaneously the new locale where the exile attempts to establish fresh roots, to settle, to "transcend exile" (Milbauer and Sutton, 2020, p.2). The Bridge, a principal symbol of *Shadow of the Colossus* itself, is as much a refraction of Wander's transience as it is a striking edifice of the landscape.

<sup>18</sup> All screenshots from *Shadow of the Colossus* (2018) were self-taken.



The Forbidden Lands also lack any major biodiversity. Nearly half of the map is a desert, whose only life forms are sparse weeds, even sparser trees, and the occasional fauna. The rest of the map, while a lush green in some locations, also lacks any major animal life forms. The only animals in the Forbidden Lands are kites, doves, fish, tortoises, and lizards. The lack of biodiversity in the bulk of the game's world contributes to the game's impression of solitude—there hardly seems to be anyone around, except for Wander and Agro, his mare. Adding to this isolating effect, fan translations of the game's art book claim that time does not pass in the Forbidden Lands until Dormin's resurrection—exile's interminable sense is made more palpable in part because of this stasis, reflected as much upon the land as Wander's exile itself. Rather than simply marvel at a vibrant world, the Forbidden Lands turn the gaze upon Wander because they reflect his isolation as much as they refract his exile. This is a land whose beauty lies in its quiet monotony, intriguing because it reveals Wander's latent instability.

It is therefore fitting in a world so barren that by the end of the game, Mono discovers at the very top of the Shrine of Worship an Edenic garden with deer and other animals otherwise missing from the rest of the map. The Bridge connects the entrance of the Forbidden Lands to the Shrine of Worship, two sites of transgression, as it were.<sup>19</sup> Both represent points of no return for Wander—the entrance irtraceable and the Garden accessible only after his demise<sup>20</sup>—and both are connected via a bridge whose length highlights the infinitude of Wander's growing affliction. Exile studies often point to the expulsion from Eden as the first migration; that the Shrine houses this garden at its top is symptomatic of the exilic nature of *Shadow of the Colossus*, intensified by the fact that the fruit found in the garden reduces Wander's health and stamina rather than augment them, acting as a literal manifestation of the corrosive nature of uprootedness. If the Bridge concentrates his condition, it is always oriented toward continued expulsion, even if the Shrine

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<sup>19</sup> See also Cesar, M., 2018. Meaning Through Performance: Transgressing Boundaries in *Shadow of the Colossus*. Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA for further reading on transgressions in this game with an emphasis on life and death.

<sup>20</sup> Though, the Garden can be reached in subsequent playthroughs with enough stamina.

promises resurrection of Mono and reconstitution of home. Though the mission provides Wander purpose, it is an illusion of stability, resulting as it does in the exile's dissolution.

The Bridge to the Forbidden Lands ultimately represents a threshold as opposed to just a structure. It marks the beginning of *Shadow of the Colossus* as much as it does the end of it. Considering and enhancing this narrative organization, *Shadow of the Colossus* becomes a game whose overt topics—such as morality, spirituality, aesthetics—are all informed by exile, bookended as the game is with the symbol of the bridge. Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality* provides a useful contention to consider: the crossing of the threshold is already and always a transgression, something made literal in Wander's arrival to the Forbidden Lands (2000, pp.75–76). While Derrida is writing in a more nationalistic context, the same idea applies in *Shadow of the Colossus*, where the lands can only be trespassed upon. The host, Dormin, promises home's reconstitution, illusory though it may be, but that promise is only ever fulfilled through death, either of the spirit or the hero. Hospitality in the Forbidden Lands thus demands an incredible price—the life of the host that the guest might take root, what Derrida calls absolute or ultimate hospitality. Wander, having slain the sixteen sentinels, merges with his host; his destruction brings about Mono's resurrection and the destruction of the Bridge, vehicle of potential return or transcendence. And though the Bridge's destruction may likewise point toward emancipation—the possibility of newfound home in the Forbidden Lands without external pursuit—Wander does not remain to cultivate it, even if reincarnated himself. The Bridge becomes a refraction of Wander's exile-as-transgression, voluntary though it may be; in a single structure, the quality of the journey is concentrated, as is the gravity of Wander's circumstance, otherwise muted beneath the awe of colossal combat.

If the Bridge symbolizes movement and passage, then the migrating subject must likewise be examined. Wander's name is fitting, as it points to his defining characteristic as well as his circumstance.<sup>21</sup> As Asher Milbauer and James Sutton put it, "the exile is a traveller, a wayfarer, a wanderer, an individual whose uprooted life is defined

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, it is unsure whether Wander's name is "Wander" or if he is simply "The Wanderer." Regardless, both monikers point toward a general namelessness (and facelessness) typical of the exilic condition (Milbauer & Sutton, 2020).

by movement and pathway rather than by stasis and stable identity” (Milbauer & Sutton, 2020, p.1). Indeed, *Shadow of the Colossus*’ mechanics accentuate this orientation toward errant travel, toward instability. Wander is equipped with the Ancient Sword, which, when held to the light of the sun, casts a beacon to guide him on his way to the next colossus to be slain, though the path is never quite direct. It is also the only weapon capable of killing the colossi. Because of the nature of weaponry, the Sword also bears the overt quality of violence, be it of thresholds or of creatures—in the killing of each colossus, Wander approaches the position of host in the Forbidden Lands, which is, in turn, traded for Mono’s salvation. The Sword then represents two things: one, a compass in uncharted territory and, two, an initiative for Wander to continue his quest, perpetuating his condition while likewise being the means for restoring home abroad in Mono.

Like the Ancient Sword, *Shadow of the Colossus*’ map also accentuates the exilic quality of not just Wander’s character but of the landscape itself, marking as it does the locations of the Shrine of Worship, smaller shrines, and the sites of the slain colossi. Much as Wander’s sword lights the way forward, the map charts the path taken. During each run to face a colossus, the map will trace a glowing dotted line along whatever path taken to reach the next foe, resetting with each colossus slain, the gravesite of which is marked by a beam of light shining upward into an overcast sky. That the map in *Shadow of the Colossus* tracks the movement suggests two things: that the game encourages exploration and that while the colossus’ path may be fixed, Wander’s is not—all the same, he must topple the next titan to progress. Wander remains in a state of permanent transience, forever moving towards the next goal, irrespective of detours. The map, like the landscape from which it is lifted, refracts his condition unto parchment, serving as a record of his travels with beams of light like stars marking each attempt at reconstituting home in forbidden territory—a constellation of his wanderlust.

*Shadow of the Colossus* has simple but meaningful gameplay. The mechanics include archery and sword fighting and, most importantly for the subject of this paper, riding and climbing, which the game does little to facilitate. Rather, Agro is a mount who only slowly responds to commands, resulting in a riding mechanic that can be difficult to master but that feels more realistic. Climbing, too, can be rather difficult in *Shadow of the Colossus*, particularly early on

where Wander's stamina is greatly limited. Wander's explorational difficulties can then be read as a metaphor for the traditional exile's navigation in a foreign land—even simple movements become complex in unfamiliar territory. While the Sword may assist in orientation, travel and familiarity remain profoundly challenging. And while the use of that Sword is dramatic in and of itself, the bulk of *Shadow of the Colossus* is spent rather undramatically: riding to the next target and then climbing to reach it. Likewise, to reach the colossus' vitals, varying degrees of climbing are required so that even in the act of combat there is an emphasis on movement and instability. The only moments in *Shadow of the Colossus* that are not marked by movement are the temporary rests at scattered shrines meant for healing and saving, which themselves are only fleeting, refractions like the rest of the world of Wander's restlessness. In the same vein, stopping to reorient himself via the Sword's light itself represents the path to be taken. The scope of possibility is almost always open towards movement and never stasis, echoing Aciman's definition of exile as permanent transience once more. Wander's navigational circumstances, his Sword, and the map all present in an exilic reading of *Shadow of the Colossus* as refractions of the hero's condition, are technologies and practices that serve to perpetuate his banishment as much as they promise its cure.

Wander's journey is therefore ultimately a Sisyphean one, marked by its repetition. Each time Wander slays a colossus, he is assaulted by shadowy tendrils which enter his body and induce a blackout. At some point during his unconsciousness, Wander is transported back to the Shrine of Worship, to where Mono and Dormin await—and then the cycle repeats. Upon the game's conclusion, there is no option to free roam. Rather, one can only restart with the same upgrades as the last playthrough, adding to the Sisyphean quality of the gameplay and story. As Milbauer and Sutton highlight, "the life of the exile is embodied in and defined by the shuttling back and forth, the journeying, between ... two points" (2020, p.2). Wander as an exile follows the same pattern, oscillating between the Forbidden Lands, representing voluntary banishment, and Mono, representing home. Regardless of how Wander returns to the Shrine, the gravitation refracts what Aciman calls "compulsive retrospection," a habit typical even of reformed exiles. He writes that "[e]xiles see two or more places at the same time not just because they're addicted to a lost past. There is a very real, active component to

seeing in this particularly heightened retrospective manner: an exile is continuously prospecting for a future home—forever looking at alien land as land that could conceivably become his” (2000, pp.13–14). While there is no retrospection as such in *Shadow of the Colossus*, there is instead a nostalgic return to the lifeless girl upon the altar and the memory she symbolizes—between her and the colossi the hero must wander.<sup>22</sup>

If the landscape reflects Wander’s exilic state, then the colossi he is destined to defeat are a refraction of the very same condition. *Shadow of the Colossus* makes a glaring juxtaposition: Wander and the colossus (almost always the third colossus, one of the more humanoid ones). There are no other animate, humanoid creatures in *Shadow of the Colossus*, so these two figures are always in some sort of tension. Wander and the various colossi seem on the surface to be in direct opposition, but, through that opposition, reveal how they distort Wander’s exilic condition by representing it more aesthetically, each battle an encounter with the sublime.

The colossi are both manifestations of Wander’s displacement and of the territory, the place to which he has been voluntarily exiled. The Bridge to the Forbidden Lands draws attention to the landscape just as each colossus does. They are made of the same stone as other ruined structures and show marks of local vegetation or the surrounding environment. In effect, they are animate parts of the landscape, as opposed to being animate beings upon the landscape—if a Bridge is a refraction of Wander’s instability, then the colossi must be refractions as well. While mostly having ape-like or bestial appearances, the colossi all walk fixed paths which, seemingly, do so in opposition to the hero’s wanderings. They too are always in movement, paradoxically permanent but transient, though of a different condition entirely. However, it is the fixed nature of each colossus’ path that draws attention to the errant nature of Wander’s exile. The colossi are sure in their footfalls, while the protagonist is more unsure, unfamiliar, and, ultimately, foreign. The colossi, by contrast, are then native, familiar, and draw out Wander’s latent and nascent state. Though security seems to come from their

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, there is a game mode in the 2018 remake titled “reminiscence mode”, which allows one to revisit battles. There is also a filter with this title in the game’s photo mode, hinting at the fact that each new playthrough may very well be a memory or that compulsive retrospection is a primary factor in Wander’s mission.

destruction, the colossi remind Wander of his instability because of the price they exact on his untethered soul.

With each colossal defeat, Wander suffers a type of *petit mort*, which, mentioned earlier, takes the form of black tendrils (Dormin's essence) piercing Wander, who is gradually becoming a vessel. Two things happen with each kill: Wander gets stronger, as his health and stamina rise, but he also grows more dishevelled in his appearance—his skin gains patches of black, his clothes tatter, his hair gets darker, and, upon the defeat of the final colossus, he gains horns and eyes that match those of the colossi he has felled. This transformation, brought on only by the defeat of these transient titans, points to another foundational concept in exile studies: metamorphosis. In *Boundaries of Exile, Conditions of Hope*, Martin Tucker writes that “[i]dentity after exile is never the same as identity prior to its arrival” (2009, p.11). Transformation both marks the genesis of exile and the character of its condition. In Wander's case, the crossing of the threshold upon the Bridge marks the commencement of his exile, for there is no option to cross over once again and back to his native village. With each slain colossus, Wander's transformation progresses, though never quite being completed until a final metamorphosis whereupon Lord Emon, the elder of Wander's village who has been pursuing the deserter, remarks, “to be reduced to such a sight...,” leaving the statement unfinished (Team Ico, 2018).<sup>23</sup> Wander's transgressions terrify and offend the elder, the boy's new form the product of his exile and his attempts at reconstitution. Though the elder's disgust may come from Dormin's reawakening, it also reads as disdain for deigning to establish home elsewhere, especially as he calls for Wander's execution, “It is better to put him out of his misery than to exist, cursed as he is,” certainly disallowing any potential transcendence (Team Ico, 2018). The hero's transgression is as much about resurrection as it is about desertion—once banished, Wander becomes the Other.

In Edward Said's “*Reflections on Exile*,” he defines the condition as a “discontinuous state of being,” (2002, p.4). His definition of exile as a

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<sup>23</sup> Lord Emon narrates the opening of *Shadow of the Colossus*, which has implications for an exilic reading as well. Bearing witness, as is mentioned elsewhere in this essay, is imperative for exile not to evolve into oblivion, which is far worse. If Lord Emon is narrating Wander's story, then, despite damning Wander and Mono to an eternity of expulsion, spares them from an exile from memory itself.

fragmented existence is twofold in *Shadow of the Colossus*, where Wander is cut off from his homeland, seeking to reconstitute it abroad, and simultaneously intaking a discontinued being.<sup>24</sup> The colossi themselves are fractured, discontinuous parts of Dormin and, likewise, point to a growing discontinuity in Wander. With each fight, he liberates a fraction of that spirit in the hope that home in Mono might be re-established—but he also absorbs the fragment into his body, transforming him into a corrupt vessel. As such, battles against these golems are representations of Wander trying to transcend a discontinuous state of being that has been refracted unto titanic guardians whose defeats mean his salvation. In reconstituting Dormin, he aims to reconstitute home itself through the spirit's promise, ignorant of the outcome. That these very same colossi must be endlessly beaten echoes, once again, Aciman's definition of exile as permanent transience—Wander must face each one perpetually, trapped in eternal liminality. Exile manifests as the looming colossus, threatening to destroy us while promising its return.

As fitting as Wander's very name is, is the manifestation of the sixteenth colossus. This final challenge has the most dramatic arena, amidst a great storm. Noticeably, this is the most "human" colossus, as it does not bear any beast-like resemblance—its face looks almost like a burial mask. To reach the final arena, Wander must make his way to the southernmost point of the map and shine the Sword's light upon a large door—the final threshold. Beyond it, he rides atop Agro for the last time; a bridge collapses, forcing the mare to buck off Wander before she falls into the chasm below. As she hits the water, lightning strikes and the storm intensifies. Here marks the final challenge, a truly solitary one. Kindness and hospitality are balms for the banished, found only perhaps in the steady company of Agro, from whom Wander has now been separated, a sacrifice to the sixteenth colossus. There are a few aspects of this final fight that hint at a darker conclusion for the game, and which complicate Wander's affliction. Unlike the other colossi, the sixteenth colossus is stationary. Where others offer parallel motion to Wander's travels, accentuating the unstable quality of Wander's exile, the final offers an antithesis: stability.

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<sup>24</sup> Like the Biblical King Nimrod after whom Dormin may be named, the spirit's essence has been split, stored in the colossi to stop him from what he might do. For Nimrod, this was construction of the Tower of Babel into the Kingdom of God; for Dormin, it may be expansion into Wander's village and the world beyond. Both represent passages to other lands, and the threat of displacement.



Figure 2. Wander's Body Rising before the Sixteenth Colossus

To triumph over this final colossus would seem to mean conquering the exilic condition, for it marks the end of Wander's quest and a means toward a stable, continuous existence—Mono's resurrection. Conquest over the sixteenth colossus, however, points instead toward the opposite. The previous fifteen colossi all share another attribute in addition to their mobility: they all collapse upon their defeat and return to the land as mounds of ruined structures and earth. The sixteenth colossus does not share this final quality. Rather, upon its defeat, the titan is propped up by the "robes" that surround its legs, which keep it from falling and uniting with the surrounding landscape. Instead, it stands slumped to one side, with the left arm extending down toward the base, where Wander now lies unconscious. A cutscene then begins, revealing to the player for the first time how the protagonist is returned to the Shrine. A light shines upon Wander's body from the sky, lifting him from the ground and teleporting him to the Shrine's interior. The first part of Wander to rise from the ground is his right arm, extended upwards just as the colossus' left flows downwards. A peculiar parallel is painted in a single, brief shot: the sixteenth colossus remains standing, its lifeless arm extended downward while Wander, collapsed as the previous fifteen colossi have, is lifted toward the Shrine a final time (Figure 2). That the sixteenth colossus still stands suggests exile's triumph. The titan, the most human refraction of Wander's condition with a face like Death, stands as Wander is laid low, his own condition a living death. In a game whose tone gets darker as the story progresses, this final posture seals the nature of the vision—this is not transcendence, but deliverance toward Dormin, exile interminable.



The final battle is followed by the game's conclusion: Lord Emon's arrival at the Shrine of Worship with a small group of warriors. It is revealed that Wander has been followed because of his theft of the Ancient Sword as well as for the threat his actions represent in the resurrection of the Shrine's spirit. The contract completed, the reunified Dormin possesses Wander's now-corrupt body with horns and eyes colossus-blue, transforming him into a shadowy giant reminiscent of those the hero defeated. Here the player futilely takes control of what is either Wander or Dormin or both at once in an effort to defeat the party come to seal the spirit away.<sup>25</sup> The battle is always destined to fail as Lord Emon takes the Ancient Sword and casts it into a pool at the base of the Shrine's staircase, sucking the darkness from Wander's crepuscular form and returning him to his pre-possessed state, though retaining the tarnish left by his slaughter of the colossi. The player again takes control of Wander, having the option to run from or toward the sealing light which pulls him inexorably in. Here the player's choice can influence the reading of whether Wander regrets his actions or whether he accepts his fate—running toward the light might mean embracing transcendence in the form of death. Regardless of player influence, Wander is sealed away with Dormin as Lord Emon returns to the village. Though it is Dormin's form the hero assumes in the final fight, the shadows of the colossi congeal in a spirit refracted from Wander's exile.

In the preface to *Transcending Exile*, Asher Milbauer asks, "How does anyone [...] survive exile and transcend his 'unnatural state of existence'? What are the means that writers offer to their characters to stay alive under the circumstances of transplantation?" (1985, p.xv). This question is paramount to a complete reading of *Shadow of the Colossus* and of Wander's identity, for it shapes the overall tone of the game. Transcendence of his exile produces a rather optimistic ending, especially if one subscribes to reincarnation as the Horned Boy as a type of emancipation. Though, as the sixteenth colossus' final posture would suggest, it is my belief that Wander does not transcend his condition. Even if death can at times be considered a method for transcendence (Milbauer, 1985), I am not left with any particular relief; and neither, I think, is Wander—home is restored in his absence. Desolate as this ending is, Wander remains trapped in an eternal cycle of defeating the colossi, as is

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<sup>25</sup> Futility, which is explored only in regard to potential transcendence in this essay, is explored further in *Fortugno* (2009).

the player. Upon the end of the game's credits, players are redirected to the title screen and given the option to recommence. Pressing "continue," *Shadow of the Colossus's* story begins again, with no option to return to the previous playthrough. Peaceful return is then denied even to the player.

As the game's credits roll, Mono wakes, discovering at the pool where Dormin and Wander have been sealed, a baby boy with horns.<sup>26</sup> It is implied that Wander has been reborn as this infant, to be taken care of by Mono in the perpetual exile of the Forbidden Lands. While death might offer a means of transcendence for some exiles, it is my belief that this isn't quite a triumph or liberation not least of which because there is no continuity between Wander and the Horned Boy. Wander suffers throughout the game a series of small deaths, culminating in this final rebirth, and though transformation may act as balm or cure to the banished, home in Mono is denied Wander as he once was—he dies in exile. Wander cannot be "cured" without dying, which is not, in fact, a cure, but a curse, as death marks not the end but rather the recommencement of the cycle of exile and slaughter.<sup>27</sup> It seems to me that Wander, like the player, is trapped in a Sisyphean condition of rebirth into the same exilic path, forever destined to cross the Bridge, and never return—the sixteenth colossus, Wander's ultimate refraction, remains standing.

*Shadow of the Colossus* ends with severance. Upon sealing Dormin alongside Wander, the Bridge to the Forbidden Lands begins its collapse, crumbling module by module, as Lord Emon and his party ride back toward their home. Having reached the other end, the village chieftain turns and looks upon the Forbidden Lands, remarking, "Poor ungodly soul... Now, no man shall ever trespass upon this place again. Should you be alive... If it's even possible to continue to exist in these sealed lands... one day, perhaps you will make atonement for what you've done" (Team Ico, 2018). This is one of the stronger lines of

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<sup>26</sup> This may be the protagonist or a relative of the protagonist of another game in the Ico universe, Ico (2001, 2011).

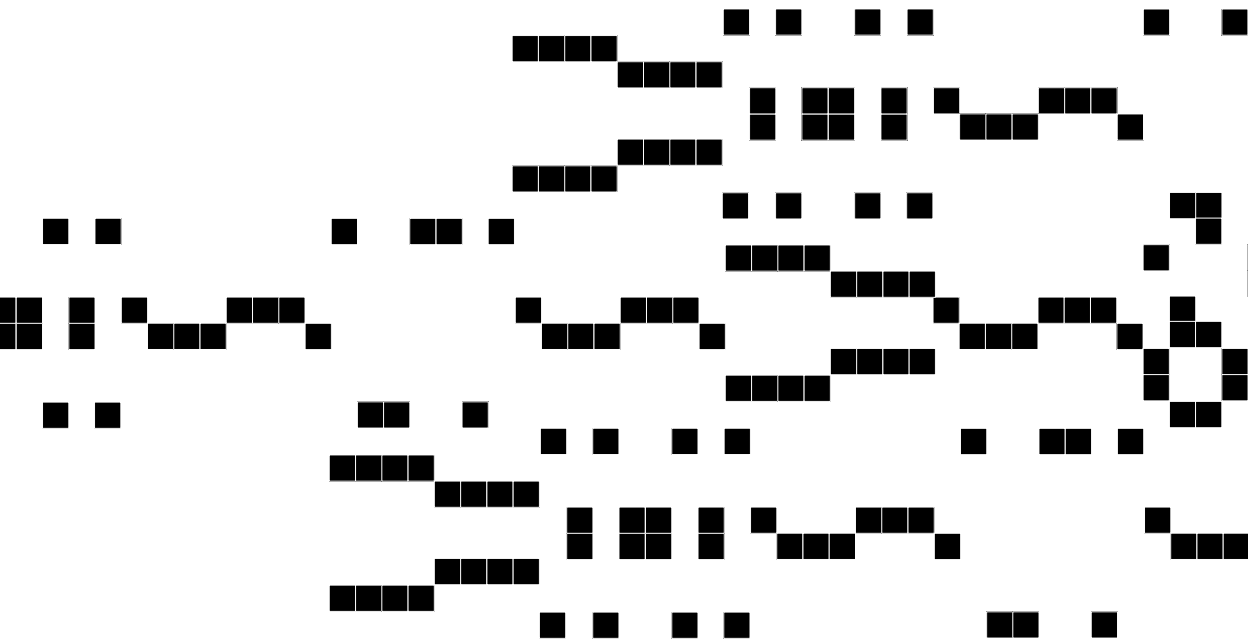
<sup>27</sup> Wander is taken, held in Mono's arms, to the Edenic garden mentioned earlier in this essay and, while this might point toward a second chance at liberation, it is my belief that the garden exists only if there also exists the transgression of the fruit—Paradise is defined by exclusion and expulsion. Even if this were not the case, the Horned Boy is not the same as Wander; there lacks the continuity necessary to counter a "discontinuous state of being" (Said, 2002).

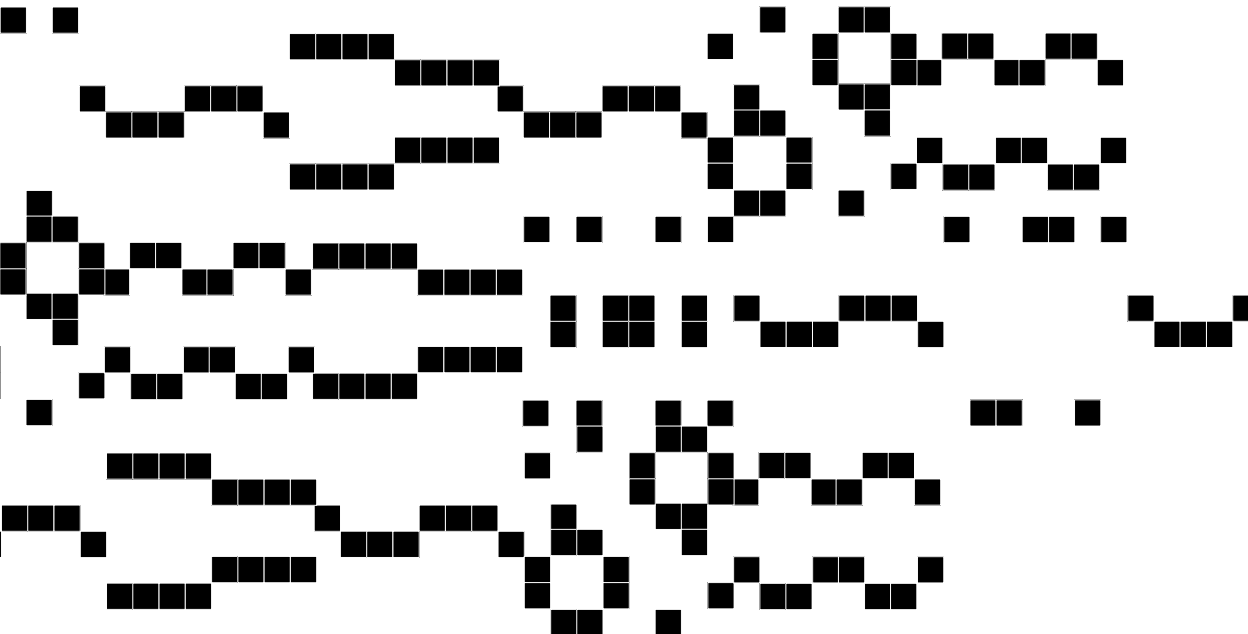
dialogue in the game, pointing to two ideas on exile in the story: that Wander's exile is now complete, and that atonement is imagined as the only emancipation. Yet, Wander's exile is, in many ways, already atonement for crimes he did not commit—Wander atones for the transgression of his people against Mono with his own trespass. The Bridge, the unifying symbol of exile in *Shadow of the Colossus*, has crumbled, forever denying the possibility of return, not even to Mono, who cradles a child born in Wander's stead but who isn't his continuation. Severance allows for Mono's future in a land charged with Wander's refracted displacement; it allows for that refraction to instead become one of homemaking for her and the Horned Boy.

Though an exilic reading of *Shadow of the Colossus* transmits a rather pessimistic message about the game and the condition, I must here emphasize that exile is intriguing not least of all because of its melancholic beauty. This is not to say that exile should be something romanticized at peril of melodrama but rather that its contemplation remains beautiful even in its desolation. This is likely why ruins are such enchanting places to explore and contemplate; their shadows allure as much as they frighten. In refracting Wander's exile, the Forbidden Lands become a breathtaking place because they elicit the hero's nostalgia as much as it does his hope for newfound home. In every parcel of the landscape there lies the reminder that exile, though terrifying, remains a beautiful source of meditative reflection.

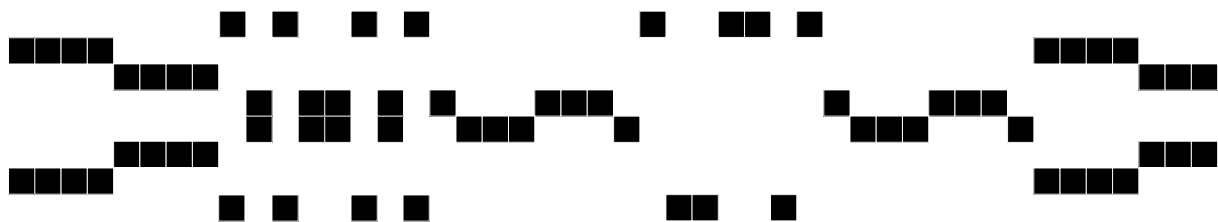
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## Criticism



UDC: 795GOLF CLUB: NOSTALGIA

### **Criticism of a Critical Game – *Golf Club: Nostalgia***

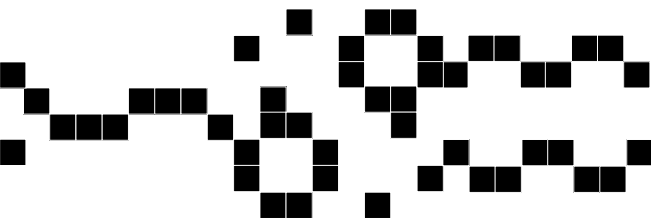


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### Summary:

This paper aims to offer criticism of a video game that can itself be considered a part of critical discourse. The game in question is *Golf Club: Nostalgia* (2018), made by Demagog Studio (Serbia). A post-apocalyptic golfing simulator on the surface, *Golf Club: Nostalgia* unveils subversive narrative layers which tackle capitalism and consumerism and point to a possible future state in which our planet suffers an ecological catastrophe. This “anti-escapist entertainment”, as Igor Simić, one of its authors, calls it, fundamentally achieves a ludonarrative dissonance. The simplistic game mechanics fall short when juxtaposed with the multi-layered storytelling that positions the game in the genre of “critical games”. Even though it is not fully accomplished as a game in the ludic sense, *Golf Club: Nostalgia* manages to question what a video game is supposed to be and how far it can go in playing with criticism. This hermeneutic reading tends to decode meanings from semantic signs contained within the game’s narrative, visual and musical elements, as well as game mechanics, covering the most important aspects of the video game medium, which is why the paper could be recognized as an example of *video game* criticism, a discipline arguably still in its infancy. This analysis is both textual and contextual, enveloping the form and content of *Golf Club: Nostalgia* as an indivisible unity.

### Keywords:

Golf Club: Nostalgia, video game criticism, critical games, ludonarrative dissonance



## 1. ■ Introduction: Video Game Criticism, Ludonarrative Dissonance and Critical Games

With the historically significant tension between two tides, that is narratology, which favors the story-based approach to systems, and ludology, which favors the rule-based approach (Bogost, 2006, pp. 50–53; Mäyrä, 2005), more current approaches to video game criticism imply that the video game critic's object of study should be the "video game text", which only exists in the player's awareness of both video game form and content, and in the various interrelations between them and the player (Keogh, 2014, p.14). More specifically, Brendan Keogh (2014) postulates that by paying close attention to *specific* video games as *played*, scholarly video game criticism will help produce more nuanced literacies around the video game form (p.19). This is the kind of perspective on video game criticism that I am going to adopt in this paper.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, in my analysis I am going to reject the notion of ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking, 2007) in its narrow sense. Originating from the video game criticism that has primarily flourished in the "critical video game blogosphere" (Abraham, 2013) and rooted in the playability concept, it has always been a staple of commercial video game criticism (or "reviews"), with one particular blog entry making the division between the playability and the socio-political aspects of (what will subsequently become) a number of video games tough to mend, ludonarrative dissonance is the discrepancy – understood primarily in negative terms – between what a video game is about as a game (its form), and what it is about as a story (its content) (Hocking, 2007). Yet, what if the designers want the players to feel uncomfortable? What if there are dissonant values in the very psychology of the character the player is controlling? With numerous other "what ifs" game designers might choose to use ludonarrative dissonance can be a tool in what Grace (2014, p.5) calls critical design. As Grace has it,

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<sup>28</sup> However, where my approach differs from Keogh's is his insistence on the phenomenological notion of body: by "form" he means the material conditions that enable the existence of video games (e.g. a controller), which the player can access only through their body. I will use the term "form" in the ludologists' sense, as distinctive features of video games as a medium, while recognizing the equal importance of their content that can be shared among plural media.

a player accepts the newly asserted foundation of a continual critical design, the player can function in the game world with little if any tension. Once the player assumes the premise of the game and continues to accept it, the game becomes a smooth, rhythmic experience of practicing the asserted critique. (Grace, 2014, pp.6–7)

This ultimately creates a new kind of immersion, one that influences the player to “practice the asserted critique”, while not being able to forget about the so-called “real” world. Firstly, Keogh (2014, p.13) finds a fallacy in an approach to immersion that sees video games as “virtual worlds” rather than as “material, cultural, and formal artefacts that actually signify something”. Then, those who use ludonarrative dissonance as a flaw usually do so following the idea that video games are immersive if the games’ contents complement their forms. By using ludonarrative dissonance only in a negative context, some video game critics ignore the fact that dissonance has existed in European art formations for centuries (e.g., in baroque, avant-garde, and post-modernist works of art). Such formations use dissonance as a valid artistic tool for questioning deeper messages and meanings that cannot be expressed through the classical use of harmony (Jocić, 2022, pp.51–52). Ludonarrative dissonance can thus be self-conscious, and can self-consciously cause ludic discomfort (Jocić, 2022, p.54, 55). If it is a consciously chosen tool for criticism, it does not have to “break” the immersion of a video game.

As Mary Flanagan (2009, p.1) aptly points out, there is as much a need for a critical approach in examining games as there is in creating them. Among “essayist critics”, “ideological critique” gained popularity with the appearance of indie, amateur and otherwise non-mainstream games (Parker, 2014). Such games “not only provide outlets for entertainment but also function as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social issues” (Flanagan, 2009, p.1). Alternative or “radical” game design is made for artistic, political and social critique or intervention, and proposes ways of understanding larger cultural issues as well as the games themselves (ibid, p.2). Entertainment is but one of the many desired outcomes of alternative game design (Grace, 2014, p.13). Games that are designed in this manner offer a space for “critical

play” (Flanagan, 2009, p.6) which is subversive, interventionist and disruptive (ibid, pp.10–12).

The origin of such a genre can be traced from the point when Clark Abt (1970, p.9) coined the term “serious games” in 1970, meaning games that “have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement”. In 2005, Jason Rohrer proposed the term “art games” to refer to games that explore artistic and philosophical issues (Jagoda, 2017, p. 9). Flanagan (2009, p.13) also mentions “activist games”, which emphasize social issues, education and intervention. She also says that these games most commonly engage in social issues through themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals and characters, and less commonly through game mechanics. Both Flanagan and Grace (2014) use the term “critical games”, with the latter stating they have only one goal – critical commentary through gameplay (ibid, p.2). Grace also notes that highly reflective games are explicitly about social critique but may offer little in the way of new mechanics (ibid, p.8). Murphy (2016, pp.7–8), too, remarks that emerging (indie) developers put more effort into telling diverse stories, instead of focusing on innovative gameplay. A progressive approach to narrative design in combination with conservative gameplay design thus leads to a ludonarrative dissonance. I shall make an example of this through my analysis of Demagog Studio’s *Golf Club: Nostalgia* (2018). At the same time, I offer a video game critique and demonstrate how criticism can function within a video game.

## 2. ■ *Golf Club: Nostalgia*: An Example of a Critical Game

In *Golf Club: Nostalgia*, Earth is abandoned and the richest 1% are coming back from their Mars colony to play golf on the ruins of humankind. Igor Simić, the creative director and CEO at Demagog Studio, reveals that several things inspired the choice of golf as the central game mechanic (Nesterenko, 2021). The first was a photo that went viral in 2017 of golfers not stopping their game while a wildfire was raging behind them. The second was the fact that Donald Trump, a firm disbeliever in climate change, is an owner of golf courses. On that account, Cassidy (2021) asks the following: would the ecological catastrophe in the *Golf Club*’s storyworld even happen without the (rich and often politically influential) people who like golf?

Golf is a symbol of the perils of capitalism, which this game criticizes at the forefront. Therefore, at the very start of the game, a socially-conscious player might think that they have found themselves in the shoes of a man personally responsible for the catastrophe that happened before the beginning of the game's narrative.

When one glances at the reviews of *Golf Club: Nostalgia*, it becomes clear that the rating of the game's narrative is overwhelmingly positive, while the rating of its gameplay is mixed. The authors introduced their game on Reddit (See: Untold\_Tales\_PB, 2021) as a fun and simple golf game wrapped around a heavy, complex story and setting, which does not align with the usual framework behind golfing simulators. Walters (2021), for example, states that *Golf Club: Nostalgia* is, first and foremost, a story, and that the sporting elements function only as a framing device. The developers themselves do not deny that gameplay is secondary to the story: Simić said that *Golf Club: Nostalgia* is more an interactive audiobook than it is a golf game, but golf was needed so the game would be more than a walking simulator (Garcevic, 2018). In choosing golf for the main game mechanic, Demagog Studio essentially created a dissonance in what players of golfing simulators expect and what they get by playing this game because the game openly criticizes its likely primary target group.<sup>29</sup> But, as Grace (2014, pp.1–2) has noted, critical games often critique player expectations and, subsequently, players' relationships with the societies which foster such expectations. Their aim can be to change consumer behaviours (Jagoda, 2017, p.7).

The player starts playing this golfing simulator by casually hitting the golf ball but, while doing so, they gradually unveil the history of the Catastrophe, which transforms their experience into a significantly less casual one. Valentine (2021) suggests that the rich, should they play golf on our graves, would do it in a serene, unbothered and careless way. The character the player controls is equally serene, unbothered and careless; however, only at first glance. The player can deduce this through one of the narrative layers unfolding as they progress through the game. Nonetheless, only certain types of players will grasp this because the narrative layer that contains such information is an optional one and certain

<sup>29</sup> The most distinct moment of ludonarrative dissonance in BioShock is also essentially connected to golf: Andrew Ryan is playing golf as he gives his famous monologue on free will. I thank Darjan Kubik for this observation.

players might choose to overlook it. There are, in fact, four narrative layers, and an extra one outside of the game:

1. The main one is uncovered via “Radio Nostalgia from Mars”. This is the only radio station in the new world, which plays music and recordings of survivors’ confessions. It helps the player piece together a picture of the collective life on Mars at the time of the game’s narrative, as well as the image of what life on Earth was like before the Catastrophe.
2. Charlie, the golfer in a hazmat suit whom the player controls, writes a journal that is unlocked when a level is completed in a certain number of strokes. By reading his journal, the player familiarizes themselves with Charlie’s individual past, and discovers that the character is ridden with guilt over not saving more people, including the woman he loved. Access to this part of the narrative is conditioned by skilful completion of levels and is therefore only granted as a reward to players determined to delve deeper into the story.
3. The albino boy who watches Charlie as he plays golf gives pieces of his own story in textual cutscenes after each level. This narrative layer offers a perspective on those who were not “saved”, which enriches the focalization of the game and creates what Mikhail Bakhtin termed heteroglossia.<sup>30</sup>
4. Through environmental storytelling, the world of the game itself reveals some facts about life on Earth before the Catastrophe, especially the socio-political aspects of the state humanity was in.
5. Lastly, as additional game content, the graphic novel “*Charlie’s Odyssey*”<sup>31</sup> tells his story more linearly.

With its motto is “breathe easy, kick back and reminisce” – standing by the idea of playing golf unencumbered by the socio-political context, “Radio Nostalgia” has the leading role in creating the game’s atmosphere, providing the musical background while the player plays golf. The player is not required to pay special (if any) attention to it, but they would lose sight of the game’s core purpose if they chose to

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<sup>30</sup> The upcoming title in Demagog Studio’s video game trilogy, *The Cub*, will broaden this storyline.

<sup>31</sup> The odyssey, a long journey (home), becomes a leitmotif in the game. Charlie finds Cavafy’s poem “*Ithaka*” (the island Odysseus goes home to), emphasizing the verse: “Keep Ithaka always in your mind”. Charlie’s Ithaka is, of course, Earth.

ignore it. Even the musical interludes between the listeners tuning in have a narrative value. For example, the song “Two Astronauts”, “the first interplanetary hit” by Ana Čurčin, implicitly tells of the Cold War, a possible cause of the Catastrophe, by unfolding a story of a Russian and an American astronaut who argue about art (Tarkovsky versus Kubrick, Dostoyevsky versus Melville). In the lyric’s subtext, this poses the question of East versus West, and implicitly whether the distinction is truly of any importance in outer space, where east and west no longer geographically exist. In a cultural sense, too, national borders are being erased because people have become “creatures of the world”, a post-apocalyptic unity.

Music is of immense importance to *Golf Club: Nostalgia* and one of the biggest (if not the biggest) factors contributing to its atmosphere. While the game openly references some works of literature, art and film<sup>32</sup> which serve as its prototexts, it eschews doing so with music. This is the reason why I would like to offer a comparative reading of the game and a song by Queen. “The Prophet’s Song” (A Night at the Opera, 1975), originally titled “People of the Earth” based on the first verse of the Intro, was written by the band’s guitarist, who interestingly happens to be an astrophysicist, Brian May. As he told the British weekly music magazine *Melody Maker* in 1975, the song was inspired by a dream he had in which a catastrophic flood<sup>33</sup> caused people to touch each other’s hands, “desperate to try and make some sign that they were caring about other people” (See: Songfacts, n.d.). The sentiment resembles that of Charlie’s, and the first verse of the song correlates with “Radio Nostalgia’s” spokesman often repeating an address to the “creatures of the world”. In the first verse of Verse 1, the song introduces the motif of the “moonlit stair”, comparable to Jacob’s Ladder in the Book of Genesis – a ladder leading to heaven. The metaphoric moonlit stair in the game leads humanity to a sort of heaven and salvation – to Mars. The song connects to Charlie’s personal history in the verse: “a man who cried for a love gone stale”. In contrasting an old man and the young, the lyrics also have a parallel in the relationship of Charlie and the albino boy. The “lost and the

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<sup>32</sup> Even though it is not explicitly referenced, the very mention of Kubrick in “Two Astronauts” and the leitmotif of the odyssey bring 2001: A Space Odyssey to mind.

<sup>33</sup> Demagog Studio’s second title in the trilogy, *Highwater* (2023) is set in the same storyworld as *Golf Club: Nostalgia* and depicts a part of Earth devastated by a flood.

unloved babe [...] from mother's love [a] son estranged", is a part of "children of the land / [who] quicken to the new life [...] fly and find the new green bough / [and] return like the white dove". The white dove symbolizes the path to new life in the Bible, which is what the white boy represents in the game. In the song, however, white is mentioned once more: "death as a bone white haze". All remaining life on the game's Earth is now white, and this paleness resembles death more than life. Unlike Noah who entered the ark with all the animals, mankind of the game has left the animals behind, and "two by two, [the] *human zoo*" ran out of the metaphorical "rain". The saved 1% are the real animals in the world of *Golf Club: Nostalgia*, if we perceive animals as savage and purely self-oriented creatures. Queen's song and the Bible are thus incremental in understanding the intertextual play in the game.

The importance of music is reflected in the importance of language. "Two Astronauts" is sung in both Russian and English, and other languages are heard on "Radio Nostalgia" as well. People who tune into the broadcast raise questions of home and origin by vocalizing their memories.<sup>34</sup> These monologues are indispensably coloured by the teller's mother tongue. Languages other than English are not accompanied by subtitles and translations, which has a double (artistic) function. On the one hand, the sound of different languages becomes inseparable from *personal* memories, which is why the player does not lay claim to them and would not necessarily understand them even if they were told in a language the player spoke. On the other hand, various fragments in languages an average player does not understand correlate with numerous places of uncertainty within the story about the Catastrophe. The player can try to fill them but their knowledge will always stay fragmented. An implication of this is that complete truths, too, only belong to those who comprise the 1%, while the rest (including the player) never get a full picture.

Delivered in fragments, other narrative segments require a skilful and dedicated player to piece together a more complete picture. Charlie's journal uncovers that he is not among the richest people who are a part of the "project called humanity". He is a pilot that saved the 1% and was sent on a golfing trip to Earth as a token of gratitude from those who were saved. Playing golf is the only rea-

<sup>34</sup> One of the reviewers even touches on the role smell plays in the reminiscing, calling it "a Proustian sentiment if there ever was one" (Byrd, 2021).

son for anyone to come back to Earth in the game, and if Charlie would try to freely wander outside of the golf course, he would be taken back to Mars. Hence the player spends their time playing golf as Charlie, even though that is not at all what Charlie wants to do on Earth. This incremental disagreement between the core game-play principle and the main character's intrinsic motivation to come back to Earth is also an example of ludonarrative dissonance.

While Charlie's story is that of the past and the present, the story of the albino boy is a narrative segment that suggests the future, unveiling the possibility of further life on Earth. The boy was born in this brave new world<sup>35</sup> and therefore manages to survive in it. Through his story, the player also finds out about the more recent past: how Martians came back to Earth to prepare the golf courses and light up the neon lights. The world they created sets the stage for a different kind of storytelling – environmental storytelling. Simić even stated that the main character of all the games in this Demagog Studio's trilogy is the games' world itself.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 1. "Covfefe". *Golf Club: Nostalgia*, Demagog Studio, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> I intentionally use the phrase because Huxley's dystopian novel is openly referenced in the game.

<sup>36</sup> Said at a round table at the White Nights: Belgrade conference on February 8, 2023.



The colour palette of the environment is minimal: mostly blue tones, which traditionally suggest sadness, are juxtaposed with neon pink, the flashy colour of consumerism. The environment is mainly depicted via Central European and Yugoslav brutalist architecture, inseparable from communism. Neon pink signs are put on the monuments with references to popular political memes and capitalist concepts (e.g. “Covfefe”<sup>37</sup> or “Sillicon Vallium”, see Figure 1), and together they constitute a visual oxymoron and illustration of political dissonance. Apart from them, at times the player encounters graffiti such as “Fuck [Mark] Zuck[erberg]”. Together they represent two sides of the same coin: the neon signs glorify what the people who wrote the graffiti hate. The game also includes a giant monument to Elon Musk (Figure 2), with Simić saying it was designed to evoke Karl Marx’s head in Berlin (Garcevic, 2018), once more connecting the politically unconnectable. This is a visual metaphor for what Simić called the “ideological mishmash” (See: Korchnak, 2023) we are currently living in. There is no ideological centre, only two juxtaposed ideas of progress (See: Nikačević, 2022). Therefore, a dissonance exists at the core of our political present and in *Golf Club: Nostalgia* it is implicitly materialized through what the two poles of the game’s ludonarrative dissonance symbolize – the narrative that criticizes and the gameplay that glorifies capitalist values.



Picture 2. “Elon Musk”. *Golf Club: Nostalgia*, Demagog Studio, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Referring to Trump’s afterward deleted tweet, originally posted on May 31, 2017, which contained a misspelling (“Despite the constant negative press *covfefe*”, my italics) that became emblematic of Trump’s time as the US president.

The storyworld of the game is visually impressive enough to speak for itself, especially to those born in Yugoslavia and countries with similar histories. As Simić puts it, having in mind that Yugoslavia no longer exists, people who were born there are excessively aware of the crises, the fragility and the passing of all ideologies, leaders and regimes (Nesterenko, 2021). Therefore, this game is ultimately not intended for golfing simulation enthusiasts but rather for people who understand such crises. That is why Simić calls *Golf Club: Nostalgia* “anti-escapist entertainment” (Valentine, 2021), referring to its essential dissonance with the traditional concept of immersion, a pillar of what is commonly considered good game design. By enforcing such dissonance in the players’ very expectation of what a video game should be like, *Golf Club: Nostalgia* questions the medium itself.

In a level called “Aphrodite with a selfie stick” (Figure 3) the player sees an enormous statue of Venus de Milo holding a mobile phone and taking a selfie. Such intervening with a classical work of art illustrates Simić’s statement that the hierarchy of the media is changing, and that we should not necessarily expect much innovation from what is called “high art” because its role is possibly being shifted to popular culture (Garcevic, 2018). Therefore, this game does not criticize only the socio-political aspect of reality but also the traditional hierarchy of the arts, becoming as much an “activist/critical” game as it is an “art game”. As Jagoda (2017, p.12) justly concludes and *Golf Club: Nostalgia* demonstrates, video game history, culture and form promise to play an important part in the evolving humanities, not to mention social and political life as such.



Figure 3. “Aphrodite with a selfie stick”. *Golf Club: Nostalgia*, Demagog Studio, 2018.

### 3. ■ Conclusion

With my analysis of *Golf Club: Nostalgia*, I have illustrated a bottom-up approach to video games which, in a sense, fall short as a game because their main mechanic is negligible in terms of the gameplay experience. I have suggested that socially engaged and started knocking down the boundaries that most video games have set for themselves as it is, *Golf Club: Nostalgia*, Demagog Studio's first commercial title, never intended to fall in line with what a video game is generally expected to be and by doing so, it underlined the political and artistic potentials of pop cultural expression, whose role in social critique is growing ever more paramount.

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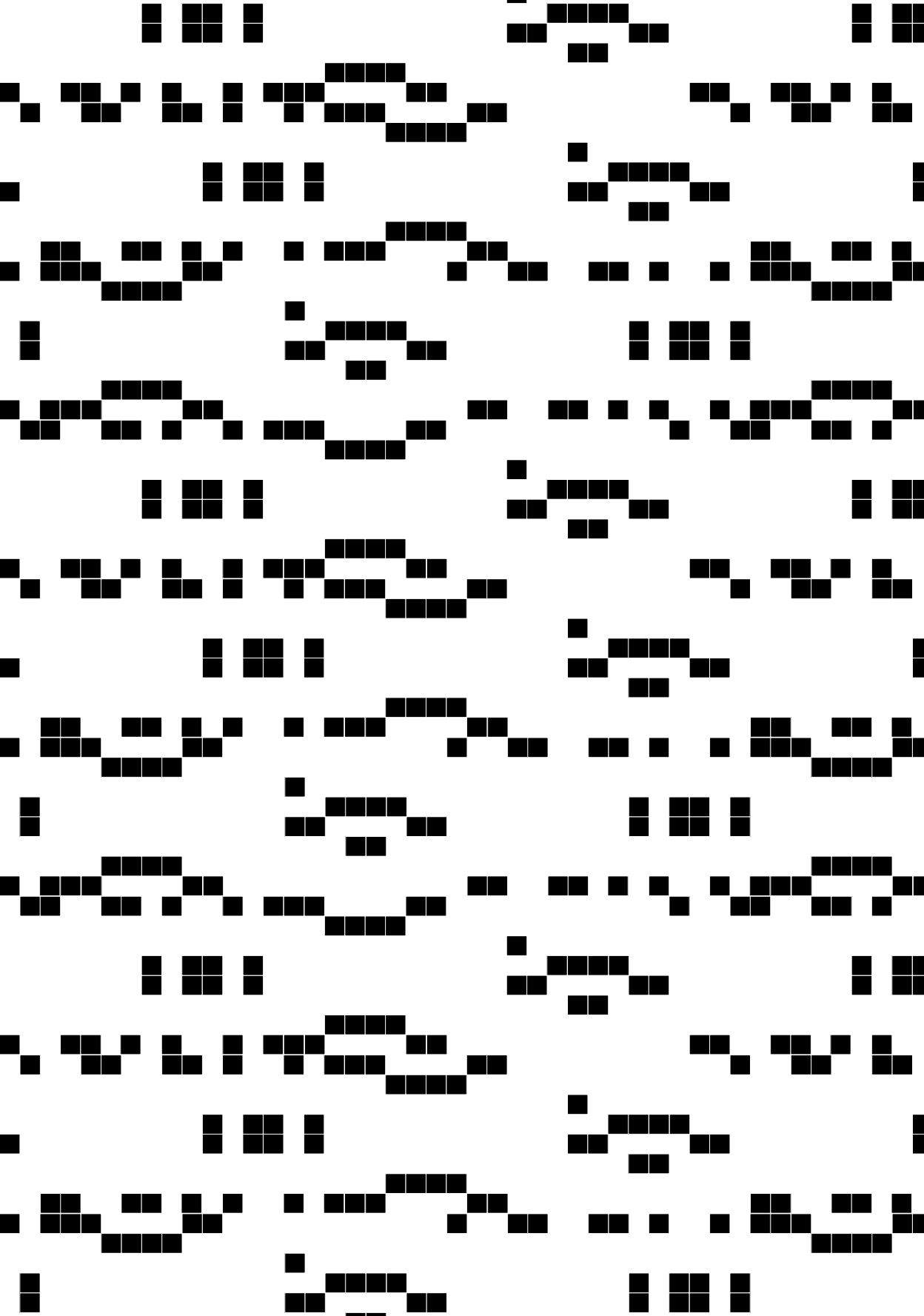
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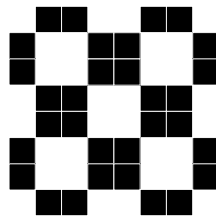




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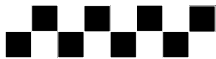
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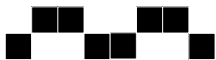
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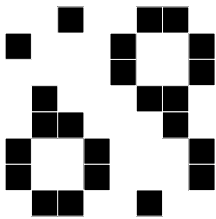
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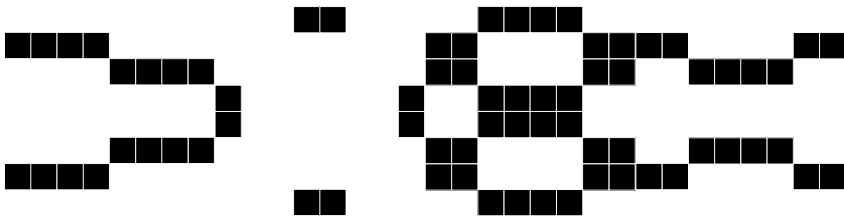


Y



Z

Example of the word Code



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