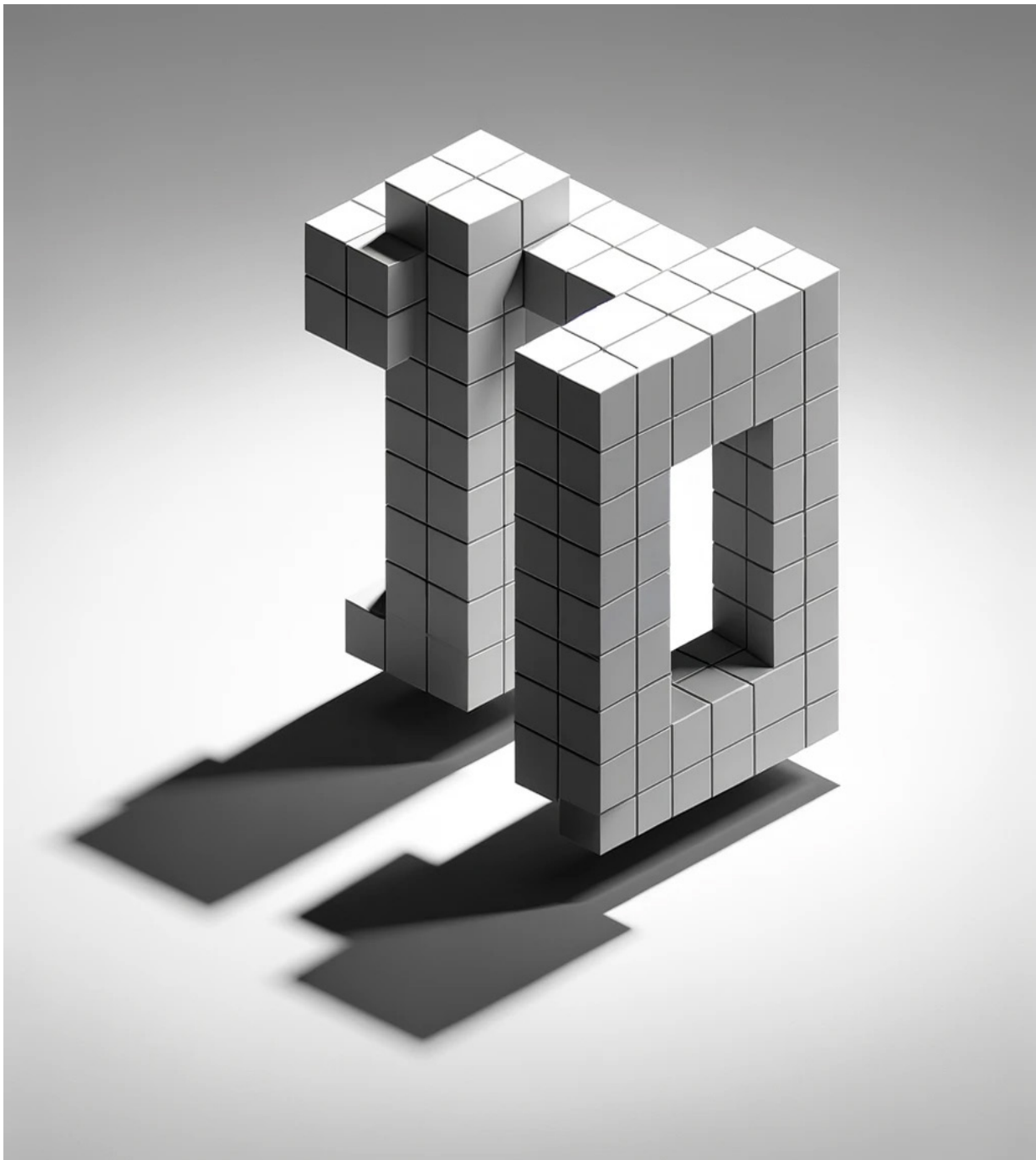


A DECADE IN GAMES STUDIES

Critical and reflexive interrogations on digital play and games research

Edited by Marco Benoît Carbone, Federico Giordano, Ivan Girina, Ilaria Mariani, Marco Teti





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A DECADE IN GAMES STUDIES. CRITICAL AND REFLEXIVE INTERROGATIONS ON DIGITAL PLAY AND GAMES RESEARCH

Edited by M. Benoît Carbone, F. Giordano, I. Girina, I. Mariani, M. Teti

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Ten years of GAME – Games as Art, Media, Entertainment

With the present issue, *GAME* celebrates ten years of activity as an independent academic journal, one that is neither tied to a commercial publisher nor to a single institution. As a way of celebration, the journal will now be accepting submissions for rolling issues along with our traditional theme-based, monographic issues. This is also a chance to glance back at the history of the field of game studies, and of our journal's place in the broader research communities, over the course of the past decade.

GAME emerged in 2012 from an independent *milieu* of early-career researchers as a then-pioneering project. One of the very few journals that posited games as their core academic subject, it sought to inaugurate a dialogue between the then-rising international field of game studies and a focus on games research from more traditionally established disciplines, such as semiotics, film and media studies, and media archaeology, among others. *GAME*'s intellectual roots were situated in the disciplinary traditions of Italian universities, from which most of its Founding Members had graduated. Yet, while some of them would further pursue their academic careers in Italy, others would go on to embark on doctoral and professional experiences abroad. Therefore, from its inception, and up to the present time, the journal has been embracing a remarkably hybrid positionality and growingly polycentric stance. The diverse make-up of perspectives has been reflected in the variously situated views of games research hailing from distinct national contexts, as well as in the transnational trajectories of those who have driven the journal's activities and contributed with their articles. From the onset, *GAME* resisted a putative ludological "purism"—its full title, *Games, Art, Media and Entertainment*, promising to both cater to a then-nascent games studies field and encompass a much broader, interdisciplinary remit. The journal also suggested the possibility of overcoming an Anglocentric approach by publishing contributions in Italian (and, in principle, in all other languages), therefore promising to establish connections between diversely situated research communities. This flexibility has allowed the journal to occasionally and playfully navigate not just different languages, but different approaches, too, hailing from distinct or intersecting academic contexts.

At the same time, *GAME* opted for not relying on the support of commercial platforms or external publishers—entailing that the journal's onus would rest entirely on the motivated labour of an independent Editorial Team, as well as on the generous contributions of Authors and Reviewers. Not benefiting from any financial support has sometimes exerted a significant toll on its Editors. Still, this has also meant freedom, allowing the journal to maintain complete independence, unfettered by financial obligations and disentangled from the neoliberal logics of contemporary academic publishing and institutions.

Up until the present, we have pursued such an endeavour mostly through the relatively unusual format of theme-based calls. Over the span of a decade, and across the field of both games studies and interdisciplinary games research, this has allowed the Journal to offer focused insight into a variety of subjects. Our theme-based issues have looked at topics as diverse as gamification and ludic pervasiveness; spatial technologies and the aesthetics of space in games; play subcultures and cultural discourses around the medium; transmedia relationships between games, film and cinema; meta-games and design as self-reflexive practice; sonic and games studies intersections; accessibility and inclusive design; agency and the politics of being in games and digital media; and normativity and taboos in and around games. A survey of such topics may suggest that *GAME* has been playing along a series of developments in game studies as a growingly diversified field. The journal has explored approaches developing from semiotic, ontological, and phenomenological frameworks; embraced the growing poststructuralist turn of games studies; addressed key perspectives such as feminist and queer theory; opened up to subcultural theory and reflections on labour and industrial infrastructures; and expanded its remit into fields of intersection between games and film studies, musicology, education, design, philosophy, and media archaeologies. A defining feature of the journal, interdisciplinarity has driven *GAME* to develop a distinctively hybrid stance. The variety of perspectives and voices hosted by our theme-based issues are testimony to some of the changes, turns, critical rifts and folds that have taken place during the past decade in the fields of games research.

Today, as a project crafted by a constitutively transnational group, the Journal aims to further build on the diversity and independence that have defined its work since its inception and that we aim to cultivate by providing an independent platform that we hope to devote to scholars and scholarly communities around the globe, in a multicultural and multidisciplinary perspective. In light of these reflections, *GAME* hereby inaugurates a two-track publication system that will allow the journal to welcome both guest-edited, theme-based issues – facilitating in-depth and broad-scope investigations on topics of timely concern and interest – and rolling, open call issues – bolstering the explorative, interdisciplinary endeavours and growingly diversified intellectual journeys of the games research communities.

The rich array of topics and diverse approaches that populate this issue represents an example of the intercultural, transdisciplinary research into games, play, and gaming that *GAME* has been welcoming and for which it will continue to represent a generous platform. In this issue, our authors grapple with a wide range of perspectives and conceptual frameworks that represent the interdisciplinary development of games studies as a field over the course of the past two decades. Overall, these contributions explore disciplines like media and games archaeologies, offer reflections on dimensions like agency and ownership, explore industrial and legislative frameworks, and interrogate the relations between art and avantgarde in and through gaming. While focusing on a variety of national and transnational contexts, this issue's contributions offer theoretical and conceptual frameworks that address foundational questions for games studies, such as the notion of play and its ideological production in the late twentieth century, the sociocultural construction of games as object of investigation, and the nature and dynamics of national and global industrial formations.

In “The Playful Turn and Critical Play”, Braxton Soderman and Justin Keever address broadly relevant questions, such as the value of critiquing play, as play itself may become a form of critique, while the workings of critique are made increasingly playful. Bringing to the surface the criticalities of movements “against play” that do not critique *through* play or do not aim to make play critical, the Authors address this dimension as a creative force as much as a potential accomplice of dominant ideologies. The following article turns to further reflections on games studies' developments as Stefano Caselli, Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone, and Tomasz Z. Majjowski explore the now well-established “historical turn” and sub-field in game studies by addressing the multifaceted relationship between the fields of digital games and historiographical research. The Authors focus on the growing role played by digital games in cultural memory-making processes: dwelling on theoretical reflections on the notions of prosthetic memory, historical fantasy, pseudohistory, and metaphor, they address the rich intersections and increasingly open gateways to both history-making and critical historiography afforded by games research.

The ensuing articles turn to issues pertaining to national and transnational contexts and dynamics. In “‘Your Subaltern is not my Subaltern’: Intersectionality and the Dangers of a Single Game-story”, Zahra Rizvi and Souvik Mukherjee address a timely and urgent issue: while the role of the postcolonial and the Subaltern in video games is increasingly discussed, games made in the Global South are rarely the object of such discussions, which instead perpetuate an agenda focused on products developed in the Global North. By identifying and underscoring the impact of absences and omissions in current scholarship, and by interrogating and unravelling game-stories that are given precedence *vis-à-vis* game-stories that are not being told, the Authors argue for a shift in focus onto game-stories, epistemologies, and discursive modes hailing from South Asia. In so doing, Rizvi and Mukherjee suggest the challenging, decentering, and

provincializing of the geopolitical hegemonies of Global North games studies not only from a performative, but from a procedural and grounded perspective. Turning back to the European context, in “The many facets of culture in digital games policy: the EU dimension”, Maria O’Brien discusses state support for digital games production within the European Union, where games are indeed considered as cultural objects, albeit “not quite as cultural” as other media like film. As a result, few decisions granting approval by the European Commission are taken to support games, in contrast to the extensive number of decisions for other audio-visual forms. O’Brien thus highlights how the notion of culture may operate as a shifting signifier pointing underpinning diverse frameworks of value. The following contribution turns to the issues stemming from a nation-based focus on games. In “Game Studies Meets Japanese Studies: Ten Years of Research”, Luca Paolo Bruno asks the reader to question what makes a digital game “Japanese”. The essay provides an example of contemporary approaches to attend discourses of gaming historiography, industrial practices, and regional studies, which are confronted through the nexus of ideas of “Japanese” games.

The contributions that follow focus on issues that pertain to both the memory of games and the epistemic orbits in which their frames of value can be attracted and stationed. In “Game(play) Archives: Quebec Video Games as Case Study”, Dany Guay-Bélanger, Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon, Francis Lavigne, and Bernard Perron discuss a preservation protocol that includes *corpora* of Québécoise games and packages of audiovisual recordings, game datasheets, and copies of meta and paratextual documents for preservation, pedagogy, and guideline creation. Turning to Italy, in “Games and Cathode Rays: Discourses on a New Medium in the Italian Specialized Magazines (1981-1988)”, Diego Cavallotti focuses on 1980s, game-oriented, tinkering-oriented, and video-oriented magazines emerging in that national context as a new medium is taking over living rooms and game arcades. Cavallotti reconstructs the epistemic framework in which video games emerged as a cultural phenomenon in Italy and reflects on how magazines moulded their projected readers in this context. Shifting the issue’s focus to discourses around what constitutes “art” in relation to gaming, Gemma Fantacci examines contaminations between video game culture and contemporary artistic practices in “Sovversioni Videoludiche: Dalle avanguardie alle pratiche performative in-game”. At the intersection of games studies and contemporary notions of artmaking, video games – as Fantacci argues – display a capacity to mobilise semiotic subversion and political analysis that reconnects the medium to the experiences and critical matrixes of twentieth-century avant-gardes.

Overall, these articles offer a snapshot of the increasingly established place of gaming and play research in international academia. While far from exhausting the breadth and diversity of both established and emerging approaches in games research, the contributions included in this issue may serve as an example of the gaming medium’s gradual transitioning from the periphery of academic inter-

est to a timely object whose far-reaching consequences are at the core of the interests of many disciplines.

REMEMBERING PROFESSOR PATRICK JOHN COPPOCK

On a closing note, *GAME* wishes to remember and celebrate the work of Professor Patrick John Coppock. Early in 2023, we were deeply saddened to hear of Coppock's passing on the 13th of February. A psychologist, linguist, and semiotician, Coppock was a scholar of international reach. His work took place as extensively in Norway as in Italy, where his accomplishments have been promptly celebrated by AISS – the Italian Association of Semiotic Studies. Coppock's work focused on writing and corporeality, particularly by drawing from and building on the perspective of Peirce's semiotics. He was also a pioneer in the game studies community, having participated in the founding of the Game Philosophy Network (2005, <https://www.gamephilosophy.org/>) and through a decisive role in establishing Game_Philosophy@UniMore (2007, <https://web.archive.org.../20071.../http://game.unimore.it/>). Coppock's fruitful collaborations with Italian academic institutions, especially in the cities of Bologna and Reggio Emilia, brought together disciplinary interests that included the Philosophy and Theory of Ludic and Social Media, which he explored in his taught courses and scientific output. Among Coppock's numerous publications, we wish to underscore *E/C*'s 2010 theme-based issue dedicated to video games as text and practices, co-curated with Dario Compagno (http://www.ec-aiss.it/monografici/5_computer_games.php), as well as a monographic issue of *Bianco e Nero* (564, 2010), co-edited with Marcella Rosi and Federico Giordano. Both issues helped some of *GAME*'s forthcoming Editors cut their teeth on academic research.

Coppock has, indeed, represented a point of reference as the nascent Editorial Board of *GAME Journal* sought to elect their Scientific Board. Coppock's work approached games as key sites of practices of enunciation, corporeality, and signification, in a way that contrasted with the belatedness of most of the academic *milieu* of the time. Coppock thus stood among some of the most ardent supporters of a scientific approach to electronic gaming. His steadfast support to the *GAME* project proved invaluable for a Journal that took its initial steps through the enthusiasm of then (sometimes pre-) doctoral students, at a time when the idea of studying video games at the University represented an exception—and, in the most conservative academic circles, could still sound like an irrelevant or even absurd endeavour. In hindsight, one would be hard-pressed to downplay the importance of Coppock's intuition—and mentorship of future game scholars. A decade later, scepticism about video games as a legitimate venue for research has given way to the widespread recognition of the medium's central role in contemporary media ecologies and the semiotic practices of millions of people. The editors at *GAME* and the game studies community will therefore remember Professor Patrick John Coppock for his

vast and multidisciplinary knowledge, his brilliant wit, and his inexhaustible intellectual curiosity — as well as his ability to recognize, encourage, and support emerging projects that dared explore a putative oddity or fad as sanctioned by conservative quarters. We hope that Coppock's name and his transnational scholarly figure will be able to inspire a growing reappraisal and celebration of the historical and cultural diversity of games research.

The Editors at GAME Journal

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The Playful Turn and Critical Play

ABSTRACT

This article examines the playful turn during the last decade and a half of game studies in relation to the idea of critical play. It analyzes critical play broadly, as a design paradigm, as a form of play that is critical and subversive, and as a shorthand for work that is critical of play. Thus, the article traces two general tendencies within the emergence of critical play that advocate for play as a form of critique and work that critiques play. In doing so, we highlight the ways that game studies scholarship has understood and extended the idea of critical play while locating understudied avenues for exploring critical play in the future. We argue that the provocative and paradoxical formation of “critical play” establishes a productive tension between its terms, allowing play to revitalize criticality while critique can operate to remove the excesses of play within the contemporary period.

KEYWORDS: Play; Ludification; Critical Play; Critical Game Studies; Critique; Videogame Theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

The inaugural issue of *G|A|M|E: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* was entitled, “Players, all of us”, and commenced with an essay “Homo Ludicus. The ubiquity of play and its role in present society” by Peppino Ortoleva (2012). For Ortoleva (2012), play increasingly enters “into areas of common living where its presence would have been deemed as irreverent or misplaced until a few years ago, from mourning to war, from management to science”. Ortoleva argues that a “paradigm of playfulness” has emerged, naming it a “new ludic system”, and explaining that one goal of the 21st century should be to describe different experiences and principles of play to understand how humans will inhabit and reconfigure this new world. This paradigm of playfulness is one expression of a playful turn in game studies, a turn that emerged after the first decade of academic game studies that focused on formally defining games and their specific properties.

Similar to Ortoleva’s paradigm of playfulness, Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul, and Joost Raessens (2013) announce the rise of play and playfulness as concepts and experiences increasingly permeating life in the 21st century—the “ludic cen-

ture” as it has been called (Zimmerman, 2014). Their chapter, “Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity”, begins with a playful turn: “A spectre is haunting the world—the spectre of playfulness. We are witnessing a global ‘ludification of culture’” (p. 75).¹ While performed as a rhetorical gesture, invoking Karl Marx’s famous opening to “The Communist Manifesto” aligns playfulness with communism’s struggle, implicitly suggesting that play is the enemy of some (attacked by the unplayful powers of a rational, serious, and technocratic culture) but also a radical, liberating force that can reshape culture entirely. A year after “Homo Ludens 2.0” appeared, Miquel Sicart (2014) invoked the liberating powers of play and playfulness in *Play Matters*, explicitly framing the book’s paean to play “as a call to playful arms, an invocation of play as a struggle against efficiency, seriousness, and technical determinism” (p. 5). Thus, play was cast as a vehicle for social, cultural, and political critique and a way to activate criticality by usurping and resisting dominant traditions and stale worldviews (of course, with a little flare, fun, and frivolity to boot). If play is “free within the limits set by the rules” as described by Roger Caillois (1961), then the turn to play in game studies enacted a breaking free, as if game scholars’ focus on the formal aspects of games and their rules could no longer contain the freedom of play (p. 8).

Playful turns such as the ludification of culture and the paradigm of playfulness can appear to be objective, as diagnosing the growing significance of play which calls for further analysis. Yet, they also contain an air of jubilant excitement, identifying play as a transformative force permeating reality and ushering in a century of playful disruptions. While gamification—or turning life into a game—has been critiqued as bullshit, playfulness or the playification of reality is celebrated, to wit, as “the shit.” In a prescient article “A Critique of Play”, media theorist Sean Cubitt (2009) wrote, “The predilection of postmodernism for play in all its guises is inadequately critical.” Through the lens of the culture industries and consumer capitalism (including the videogame industries) Cubitt theorized play as a quintessential ideological form, powerful because it invokes innocence, childhood, purity, and thus can operate as a “royal instantiation of good”. That is, play and playfulness become codewords for what is good, positive, pure, subversive, creative, innovative, and so forth. We share Cubitt’s suspicions concerning play, arguing that game studies’ predilection for play should become robustly critical.

A decade beyond the ludic turn in game studies, attaching the grand promises of the ludification of culture to a radical transformation of culture seems increasingly untenable given the pandemic, entrenchment of authoritarianism, proliferation of white supremacy and homophobia, and the annihilating force of war—all of which reveal, in different ways, the painful persistence of domination and oppressive structures despite the carnivalesque dreams of playful subversion. Indeed, the 21st century seems anything but playful. At this moment, we need further critiques of play which would refuse to imagine a pure, liberated play, opting instead to link play to a perpetual process of critical examina-

1. The ludic turn—the name of a section of the book in which their essay appeared—marks the ascendancy of play as an analytic subject in game studies as well as a transformation of culture (Raessens, 2014). The term “ludification of culture” first appeared in an article by Raessens (2006) though it was undeveloped at the time, indicating that a more robust turn to play occurred a few years later (p. 53).

tion. It is urgent to understand the limits of play, to critique play's mobilization for oppression and commodification, and to challenge play as an inexhaustible, malleable resource or ontological force at the command of human agents or naturally expressive in material culture. There's a need to overcome play's innocence and neutrality, bracketed from power and ideology, and instead to see the "spectre of playfulness" as manifesting a site of ongoing critical struggle.

Such a struggle is not new, and in the last decade and half, a body of scholarship has emerged that investigates the intersections of criticality and play that seeks to understand play's possibilities and limits. In this article, we trace ways that game studies scholars have combined the critical and play, have leveraged play and playfulness as forms of criticality, or have been critical of play itself. This mapping is not intended to be exhaustive, but we seek to critique forms of play's appropriation while diagnosing possibilities for further exploration. Ultimately, we argue that even critical play itself is "inadequately critical" (as Cubitt said of postmodernism's proclivity for play), and thus we aim to renew emphasis on the critical side of critical play.

2. CRITICAL PLAY

Mary Flanagan's (2009) *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* joined criticality with play to create a productive tension between two words that, understood colloquially, appear as polar opposites—play invoking frivolity and whimsy with criticality suggesting serious reflection, judgment and discernment. Critical play brought the academically valorized practices of critical thinking and critique into the orbit of play. Precursors were focused primarily on games, such as serious games that cultivated critical reflection and social awareness, countergaming practices (Galloway, 2005) aimed at critiquing mainstream game forms, and educational theory intrigued by videogames' production of critical thinking through problem solving. For example, games and learning scholar James Paul Gee (2003) wondered if videogames could "lead to critique, innovation, and good or valued thinking and asking in society?" (p. 46). Flanagan's work—along with others, such as Lindsay Grace's (2010) critical gameplay project—extended these traditions while entangling play more closely with critical practice.

Critical play can be understood broadly in two ways, as a form of critically-inflected play and as a design methodology which is "focused on creating a critique through game designs" (Grace, 2020, p. 47). As a methodology, designers seek to inscribe criticality within the design process and develop games "that instill the ability to think critically during and after play" (Flanagan, 2009, p. 261). Drawing on a tradition of avant-garde experimentation in art and media, critical play designers offer alternative games that seek to critique the status quo, induce radical change within everyday life, and embed social values within the play process (Flanagan & Nissenbaum 2016). Flanagan (2009) explains that "the goal in theorizing a critical game-design paradigm is as much about the creative person's interest in critiquing the status quo as it is about using play for such a phase

change” (p. 261). Thus, play becomes an instrument for the delivery and exploration of social critique—similar to how performance art, avant-garde films, and documentaries seek social commentary and change within their own mediums.

However, when Flanagan (2009) mentions that the critical play approach seeks “to make compelling, complex play environments using the intricacies of critical thinking to offer novel possibilities in games”, these intricacies tantalize but are left unexplained (p. 6). The key point is to make room for reflection, to embed social values within design and play processes (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2016), not to explain how criticality and play interrelate. When Ragnhild Tronstad (2010) reviewed *Critical Play*, she wrote that Flanagan “doesn’t address the apparent paradox in the concept ‘critical play,’ or how these two terms, put together like this, must necessarily influence each other. What happens to play when it becomes critical? And how might critical content be influenced by play?” The “paradox” emerges because criticality can invoke seriousness and determined thinking, while play suggests frivolous fun and pleasure without the interruptions of criticality. Play is understood as subjective, absorbing, and engaging while criticality is objective, distant, contemplative and reflective. When combined, how would these interact? At the end of *Critical Play*, Flanagan (2009) mentions “shifts in play” generated by critical play design but does not develop them (p. 260). However, Flanagan invokes the immersive and safety principles of play to explain why critical thinking within videogames might be effective. “Play offers a way to capture player interest without sacrificing the process of thinking through problems that are organized subjectively,” Flanagan wrote, suggesting that play could engage without interrupting critical thinking (p. 261). Flanagan also indicated that “Play is, by definition, a safety space”, suggesting that players can explore difficult social issues without risk (p. 261). These typical definitions of play—as absorbing and safe—cast play as assuaging medicine that eases the player’s healthy intake of critical content.

In this scenario, where play becomes a vehicle for critique, one worry is that play’s absorbing properties do not engage players more deeply with critical content but negate critical reflection. As Rilla Khaled (2018) explains, “Within mainstream entertainment games, immersion has been embraced to the detriment of reflection, serving almost as its antithesis” (p. 19). Echoing this, especially when political content is involved, game scholar and artist Anne-Marie Schleiner (2017) worries that “the player’s critical and reflective capacity, political or otherwise, is easily bespelled amidst the movement of game actions” (pp. 74–75). Given such concerns, Sicart (2013) has argued that slowness in games can foreground “reflection against the pressure of function, efficiency, and speed” (pp. 72–73), or Brain Upton (2015) has noted that designers must embed time for reflection in gameplay so players can comprehend narratives or perform other mental labor. Perhaps most significantly, Khaled (2018) has theorized an approach called “reflective game design”, examining how play can “trigger critical reflection” and arguing that “surprise, player unfriendliness,

2. Scholarship has broadened the study of critical play and reflection. For example, Grace (2014) differentiates between “social critiques” which point outward, challenging larger cultural and political norms and “mechanical critiques” that point inward toward subverting conventional game forms, also called “reflective” or “recursive” play (p. 5). Jess Marcotte and Rilla Khaled (2017) studied the practices of critical game designers themselves, interviewing them about their design processes and how they approach critical game design and reflection. *G|A|M|E* released a special issue about self-reflexive, critical games while theorizing and publishing games intended as research and “playable critique” (Barr, 2016; Caruso et al., 2016; Gualeni, 2016). Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2020) linked formal analyses of game systems and logics to understanding the reflective impacts of critical play. Using queer theory as a critical guide, scholars have discussed queering play and game mechanics to critique normative forms of play and design (Chang, 2017; Marcotte, 2018; Ruberg, 2020). Moving in a different direction, Brock (2017) theorizes forms of “self-reflexivity” not “reflection,” making us aware that games already create constant self-consciousness related to performance and one’s individual and social reality beyond the game.

ambiguity and multiple interpretations can push players toward reflecting on their play experiences” (p. 20). Khaled’s work deepens understanding of how play can trigger reflection in relation to play. For example, Khaled’s arguments that critical reflection is about questions not answers, ambiguity not solutions, aligns reflection with play and playfulness, where “to be playful is to add ambiguity to the world and play with that ambiguity” (Sicart, 2014, p 28). That is, if game designers incorporate ambiguity and possibilities for playfulness then such games might not negate reflection but encourage it.

Research over the last decade surrounding critical play and reflection has been robust and innovative, however we argue that research must continue to explore how play and critically influence each other.² Both critical reflection and play are wide ranging activities with a wealth of affective and phenomenological overlap and difference. For example, critical reflection embraces suspicion and doubt, suspends judgment, weighs arguments, and gains distance from experience to contemplate alternative solutions to a problem. Play also seeks alternatives but is characterized as engagement, curiosity, whimsy, fancy, mimicry and a whole host of actions and thoughts that do not necessarily dovetail with the affective qualities of a critical (not playful) mindset. Play liberates, imagining possibilities and testing them playfully while critical reflection deliberates, sifting through possibilities to judge or select actions according to criteria. Ascertaining similarities and differences, synergies and repulsions, between criticality and play—perhaps through a deeper engagement with play studies (Henricks, 2020)—will deepen understanding of when play and criticality align or are at odds.

Beyond comparing play and criticality, focus on the mutations of critical reflection within critical play is also urgent. Simply studying how play can trigger reflection or make room for it suggests that play is a tool to nudge critical thinking, operating within the same framework that caused Gee (2003) to wonder if games could lead to critique. Instead we must understand how play situations generate their own forms of reflective engagement and thought. For example, Patrick Jagoda (2020) discusses games as an unique sensorium which couples affect and rationality, catalyzing new forms of reflective engagement. “Thought during gameplay is shaped by speed,” Jagoda argues, but instead of simply turning to slowness to inject critical reflection within play, Jagoda acknowledges that speed in gameplay transforms thought as an affective experience (p. 94). Similarly, Rainforest Scully-Blaker (2020) theorizes moments of stasis and stillness in games but refigures them in terms of velocities and player emotions that modulate reflection. Thus, when Scully-Blaker asks, “can play be a critical act?” (p. 3), play does not trigger criticality but enacts new forms of it: stasis and stillness are pauses that open space for reflection but also suggest new affective and phenomenological ways of thinking about reflection. Simply put, we argue that game studies scholars should seek new theories of criticality that arise from the particular sensorium of games and play instead of treating them as vehicles for already known and inherited forms of social criticism and critique.

This point harbors a deeper lesson: game studies research can appear uncritical in terms of criticality itself—overlooking criticisms of critique itself as being politically ineffectual or privileging a dominant subject position of mastery. In contrast, Paolo Ruffino (2018) advocates for what he calls “Creative Game Studies,” an embedded form of research and writing which “strives to be inventive, critical and performative” by intervening directly in game culture as a participant—thus sacrificing the mastery of critical distance to create new forms of entangled knowledge. Indeed, play as a form of action within a system might provide a means to critique the mastery and privilege associated with critical distance while striving to produce new critical experiments. Bruno Latour (2004), for example, argued that critique has become ineffectual, turning instead to a definition of “critical” from science describing when an event reaches an intensity which causes a radical transition in form. What if games embodied this idea of criticality instead of criticality as reflection?³

Ultimately, the idea of “critical play” suggests that the critical is a known entity and that designers innately know what critique is, when instead, critical reflection about the critical itself is necessary. While critical play designers and scholars can become enamored with play’s potential to trigger critical reflection, we argue that they need to be aware of the histories and futures of criticality and critique. Marcotte and Khaled (2017) provide an instructive point that “The boundaries of what is *critical* are in constant flux and today’s critical design might become the status quo tomorrow” (p. 199). For example, long ago media theorist Lev Manovich argued that videogame players seamlessly move between absorbed states of action and moments of interruption where they scan information on feedback systems, adjust control panels, and pause to strategize (2001, p. 209). Manovich argues that processes of interruption have been absorbed into gameplay. Disrupting player experiences to produce reflection is an outdated strategy because the oscillation between immersion and interruption is a new ideological paradigm which Manovich calls metarealism. Disrupting immersion is the new immersion. Indeed, as Jay Bolter (2019) has shown, “reflection” is now a mainstream media aesthetic—not a critical gesture. If metarealism operates as an ideological norm in ludic culture, breaking this dominant norm requires different theories and design strategies. This aligns with the urgent need to rethink the “critical” of critical play.

3. When discussing political play, Sicart (2015) pivots toward play as critical thinking in action, writing, “We need to understand play as an action and not a mode of reflection” (p. 2). Here, play as an activity aligns with the transformative potential of politics, where play as action becomes social critique in action, seeking critical mass and mobilizing change in real life (Flanagan, 2010).

3. PLAY AS CRITICALITY

Beyond referring to a design approach that uses play as a vehicle for critique, critical play can also identify a *mode* of play guided by critical awareness or the idea that play is a subversive, critical force in itself. In terms of the former approach, Flanagan (2009) theorized the idea of “unplaying” as a modality of play which reverses dominant forms of “expected play” ingrained within social norms; for example, instead of playing with a doll through conventional forms of care-giving a player might dismantle the doll as an inversion of expected

play and gendered norms (p. 33). As Grace (2020) explains in relation to critical play, “Players are always free to engage in playing with a game contrary to its intended play” (p. 138). Such an idea has been generative, for example, when Soraya Murray (2018) draws on Flanagan’s work to theorize games as “playable representations” and “playable visual culture” (p. 25). The “playable” indicates a modality of interaction—guided by critical awareness—that allows players to probe possibilities within games and thus their embedded politics, norms, and ideologies, even subverting them.

Seen in this way, critical play carries political connotations of subversive activity. Espen Aarseth’s (2007) influential article “I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player” signaled a shift from the formal study of games and their rules to that of play and players, doing so through the lens of play as a seditious force breaking free from the rigid “prison-house of regulated play” (p. 133). Sicart (2014) also frames play as critical and subversive, pointing out that “the critical nature of play has been widely explored” in the Marxist politics and playful theater of Augusto Boal and Paolo Friere, in political live action role-playing, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque, and in Situationist, Dada, and Fluxus art movements which Flanagan also investigates (p. 72). Drawing on these traditions, Sicart (2015) argues that political play puts critical thinking into action, leaning on an understanding of critical thinking as action and transformation. Since play and playfulness can appropriate contexts to disrupt, transform and reconfigure them, then play suddenly aligns with critique, which also seeks to understand, transform, and reconfigure dominant culture.

Yet, while play can be critical and subversive, it is not necessarily so. For some time, play has been recognized as a way to motivate and sustain political action while also providing imaginative exploration of alternatives to dominant culture (Hearn, 1976; Csikszentmihalyi, 1981). This exploration of possibilities explains how play’s appropriative aspect can take over a context and reconfigure it, even subvert it. However, the appropriative properties of play might increase engagement with an activity in an apolitical manner. Thus, play can express players’ freedom to explore possibilities within a context while operating as an apolitical subversion for subversion’s sake. Thomas S. Henricks (2015) explains: “play’s strength is its opening of possibilities, which people are free to gather on their own terms or to disregard entirely” (p. 225). One can play against dominant norms or play along with them. Players might seek to critique conventions or play against ideological content in a game, but they might simply seek independence from a system instead of resisting it intentionally.

Thus, we argue that for play to be critical, critical perspectives must guide play’s ambivalent and agnostic powers of appropriation, engagement, and subversion. For example, Bo Ruberg’s notion of “playing queer” deploys play as a means of deconstructing the hegemonic ideologies normatively at work in the videogame system from within the system itself, via the fluidifying force of playing in such a way that contradicts the value systems being reproduced.

Queerness, in Ruberg's (2019) concept of queer play, is a theoretical framework that enacts a transformative force upon the game system through playing "wrong", involving such strategies as "playing to lose, playing to hurt, to playing too fast or too slow." (p. 17-18). Ruberg specifically likens this form of queer play to a kind of transformative self-expression which is not dissimilar to Schleiner's (2017) concept of ludic mutation, where "The player's power lies in creation, change, and modification of a game" (p. 11). Key to these forms of subversion is the fact that criticality guides play, whether through critiques of normative culture in queer theory or more broadly through critiques of capitalism and social oppressions.

Ian Bogost (2016) disagrees with linking play to criticality and subversion, explaining that the danger is that "Play becomes a skill or literacy, akin to critical thinking or problem solving" (p. 101) which can cause play to lose its vibrant "diversity" and turn it into an instrumental activity or political ideology. Play as subversion becomes a "palliative to structure" in these situations (Bogost, 2016, p. 101), echoing ideas that play serves a compensatory function, figured today as escapism. Bogost is right that play's diversity expands far beyond its uses to invigorate politics, despite similarities that play and playfulness have with critical subversion. Nevertheless, discounting play's political uses and upholding its significance as autotelic (i.e. an end in itself) ontologizes play, essentializing it as a primordial activity. This results in an ideology of play against criticality—a point we critique in the following section.

In contrast to Bogost's dissatisfaction with play being mobilized for political purposes, some scholars, such as in Susanna Paasonen (2018), extends Sicart's notion of subversive critical play to its logical endpoint where play is not only a "palliative to structure" but an annihilator of structure, eroding all norms in a post-political utopia. In the realm of sexuality, Paasonen (2018) argues that "the concepts of play and playfulness can be used in eroding some of the tenacious norms and dualisms through which sexual lives continue to be labeled and understood—be these ones separating the straight from the queer, childhood from adulthood, normality from deviancy, work from play or fantasy from reality. It then follows that gender is, similarly to sexuality, figured as variations in ways of being, rather than through any clear—let alone binary—distinctions" (p. 15). Here too, play is guided by the critical. It's not about play making "bad sex" good, but about undermining and supplanting dominant stratifications of sexuality. Paasonen's radical utopianism is a powerful vision of play as liberation and the fulfillment of critical theory's dream of unfettered emancipation.

However, framing play as critical and subversive must tarry with the long history of capitalism co-opting subversion for commodification. One wonders if Paasonen's utopian vision of sexuality and play charts a vast deterritorialization that can be reterritorialized by new markets and capital. Wark (2012) once wrote of the tactical use of play by the Situationists that they had failed to grasp "that play of this kind could be captured and made a functional component of

commodification” (p. 95). The subtext is that play and playfulness can become engines of capitalist innovation that reproduce dominant social relations. The key point, we argue, is that play must be guided by politics instead of embraced as subversion for subversion’s sake.

4. ONTOLOGICAL PLAY, UNBOUNDED POTENTIAL

The idea that play is a subversive force of critique has laid the groundwork for theories of play that treat it as a concept that unlocks the boundless potential latent in our present moment—a tendency in recent games scholarship that needs to be described and critiqued. The suturing of play and criticality has given rise to a process that we call the ontologization of play—rhetoric around play that treats it as an unbounded potentiality which is constrained by games in both a practical and conceptual fashion. These approaches suggest that play transcends games. Play bears either a capacity to critique and subvert the systems that games reproduce, or, in an inverted fashion, play operates as the freedom within these systems, catalyzing new possibilities without the need for critique or subversion. These ontologizations of play, which treat play as a transcendent facet of being, may seem opposed to one another but synthesize throughout the decade to produce analogous views.

Miguel Sicart’s (2011) critique of proceduralism provides a useful foundation for this movement. Sicart critiques proceduralist approaches to game studies, particularly Ian Bogost’s (2006; 2007) concept of procedural rhetoric, in order to free play from the rationalist tendency of proceduralism that claims that games are ontologically rule-based and these rules provide the structure of significance (i.e. the message) that players come to understand through playing the game. Sicart’s critique of this instrumental version of play being determined by rules and procedures attempts to liberate play from games, but also has the effect of freeing the player from the game. Sicart (2011) argues that proceduralism erases the agency of the player, what he calls the ethics and “embodied singularity” of the player, landing on a humanist argument for the centrality of the player in the event of play: “without the player there are no ethics or politics, no values and no messages. Objects can have embedded values, technology can be political, but only inasmuch as there is a human who *makes* the politics”. Thus, the locus of meaning within the game is transferred from the game and its rules to the player and their play.

Ironically, Bogost dialectically integrates Sicart’s critique of his work into his book *Play Anything*. In this text, Bogost presents an inversion of the appropriative quality of play that Sicart theorizes in *Play Matters* (2014). For Bogost (2016), just as for Sicart, anything can be played (pp. 105–107). However, Bogost refuses the subversive potential of play that Sicart ascribes to play’s ability to appropriate contexts. For Bogost, play is not that which appropriates contexts, it is that which emerges from contexts (i.e. from constraints): to play the world involves giving oneself over to the conditions of reality, welcoming the

system of objects we encounter in the world, not resisting it. For Bogost (2016), playing is accessing the play in the system (the looseness, the constitutive gaps that permit the system's functioning) to discover the possibilities of the real systems we are embedded in (p. 107). Play is not the function of an agent, but of a system of objects and their material properties: as such, Bogost argues for a humility in the face of objects and their systems of signs which open possibilities within the object-system that humans can explore. For Bogost, play is "submission" to constraints, not their subversion, but it is a submission that unveils the play in the world (2016, p. 99)—a problematic point which suggests that there is nothing in the world that ought to be resisted.

A year after Bogost's *Play Anything* appeared, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemeiux's *Metagaming* (2017) posited a version of play that builds partially on Bogost's (2012) more overtly object-oriented philosophy in *Alien Phenomenology*, while also operating from a partial anti-proceduralist position, and opens by establishing a political and ethical position against the proceduralism of videogames specifically. For Boluk and Lemeiux, videogame mechanics are non-negotiable, unmalleable, digitally encoded operations opposed, for example, to the contingent and negotiable rules of tabletop games. Within videogames, play must submit to the rigid mechanistic and material demands of the videogame apparatus, thus preventing any kind of creative mutation.

To develop a distinction between videogame play, understood as total submission to a non-negotiable system, and play itself as distinct from the limiting conditions of constraint, Boluk and Lemeiux graft Catherine Malabou's distinction between flexibility and plasticity onto videogame play and primordial, metagame generating play. For Malabou, plasticity is the ability of something (the 'brain' is Malabou's key object of interest) to give, receive, and annihilate form. Flexibility, for Malabou, is the "ideological avatar" of plasticity and describes the neoliberal co-optation of a more fundamental and transformative plasticity. Flexibility superficially valorizes adaptability and creativity in the context of non-industrial labor in a manner that actually enforces a rigid submission to the skills, ethics, and norms of a world determined by neoliberal capital. Boluk and Lemeiux adapt Malabou's philosophy through their theorization of play, positing a false play (akin to flexibility) and a real play (akin to plasticity). The former operates as a rigid submission while the latter expresses a horizon of pure explosive potential.

Boluk and Lemeiux (2017) arrive at what we might call pure play via their key concept, the metagame, which is "the environment for games" (p. 14-15). The metagame forms the conditions which facilitate the existence of discrete games but which also make discrete games impossible because play always points beyond the immediacy of the discrete game to the game's larger context, the metagame. Rather than a circumscribed magic circle, there is a "messy circle" in which discrete games are permeated by their wider contexts (2017, p. 15). This impossibility of games as such places play in a position of primordial primacy

and metagames as messy postmodern entities that identify “not the history of the game, but the history of play” (2017, p. 17) that breaks free from localized determinations of play which are non-meta games. The endless hunt for the metagame, understood as the system which determines and permeates discrete games, allows us to access the creative plasticity which functions as the primordial core of this endless proliferation of play-environments (metagames) that humans, as socio-historical-economic beings, are constantly doing the work of creating.

We can see Boluk and Lemieux thinking through the interrelation of play and system in a manner that is not unrelated to Bogost’s location of play within a larger object-oriented system of reality. Sicart, too, would ironically take this turn towards postmodern meta-systematicity in his more recent theorizations of play, subsuming Boluk and Lemieux’s concept of the metagame within the category that Sicart (2022) calls “playthings”. The plaything concept completes the player-and-thing circuit of the appropriative agent of play, integrating into Sicart’s play-theory a notion of agential-material entanglement. Play, when viewed through the new materialist theoretical lens of the plaything, is no longer located primarily in the playing subject, but in the interweaving of materialities (here understood as agencies) of the human and nonhuman materials within an apparatus which stabilizes play situations. The primordial plaything, then, is an apparatus of play that lies beneath the concepts of toy, game, etc. which secondarily circumscribe this apparatus. Thus, it is similar to Boluk and Lemieux’s assertion that videogames are not games (but ideological avatars of play), where they distinguish the sociomaterial messy apparatus of play from the epistemological paradigm of the videogame.

The political stakes, and potential limitations, of ontological approaches to play can be explained by turning to Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford (2020) who propose the latent capability of distributed and democratic agencies to rupture the neoliberal order. Taking agency to be paradigmatic of videogame play, Muriel and Crawford embrace the Latourian conception of agency in which “from an ontological point of view, agency is defined as what transforms reality one way or another” (2020, p. 140). In turn, agency is understood as “distributed and dislocated...not the direct product of an actor but nor is it the product of a structure”: it circulates across human and nonhuman actants (2020, p. 144). Muriel and Crawford insightfully place this conception of agency in conversation with the Foucauldian concept of the *dispositif*, or apparatus, demonstrating that the socio-material assemblages which compose an apparatus set the conditions of possibility for agency. On the cusp of the insight that agency reproduces the power relations that condition it, the Latourian notion of ontological, distributed agency offers Muriel and Crawford a way out of the determining power of the apparatus: the apparatus is necessarily constructed by a circulating and dislocated agency which can restructure the apparatus just as easily as it reproduces it (2020, p. 146). In this theorization, the play of agency is ontological, and the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism is merely an epistemological

veil. The Latourian rejection of structure in favor of a flat ontology of playful, agential distribution produces an overly optimistic view of play as simply needing to be epistemologically rethought, rather than fundamentally re-structured.

Across these approaches, we detect a common interest in producing a primordial concept of play which is ontologically primary, either in its existence beneath epistemic or ideological categories, or in its embeddedness in an ontology of objects. In all of these approaches, there is a recovery of play, where play is creative and liberatory, whether it is subversive or not. Such approaches run the risk of naturalizing play as it exists within the immanent conditions of neoliberal capitalism. We argue that such ontologizations of play must be critiqued, insofar as ontologizing play can have the residual effect of constructing a tautology which ultimately makes excuses for the ideologies of play which proliferate under the totalizing conditions of neoliberal economization. To treat play as ontology is to argue that play itself is the thing that will liberate play from its co-optation by capital: that playfulness is a way out of the commodification of play, because play has a creative potentiality which is omnipresent but either unseen or unappreciated. The idea that gamification, commodification, and the videogame form are veils over play's creative potentiality does not reckon with the possibility that such a creative potentiality is exactly what makes play so useful to contemporary capitalism: that play names a never-ending productivity (Boluk and Lemieux), or a looseness in the system of capital which is necessary to its functioning (Bogost). To treat play as primordially ontological is to develop an analytical system which risks naturalizing the very form of our subjection to capital by arguing that it is the method of our liberation.

5. CRITICAL OF PLAY

There is an implicit counter-movement to these ontological attempts to recover play: the beginnings of a turn against play, in which we see new avenues of engagement and tactics of resisting the playful turn. Some scholars have become critical of play, theorizing its limits, misuses, ideologies, and oppressions. This move against play—the pulling apart of critical and play in game studies to instead be critical of play—involves forms of critique which are similar to those we have discussed, such as queering play that critiques dominant forms of play as buttressing heteronormative ideals in contemporary society. In our estimation, such forms of critique need to be expanded in order to expose the limits of play and resist its ideological uses as a positive, vital force.

Earlier critical approaches to play exposed how power could mold play and sought to liberate suppressed play forms through critique, not by insisting on play's primordial creativity and positivity. Critique's ability to dismantle and expose ideologies also generate new futures, futures which are less oppressive. This is an instructive point for those who see only negativity in critique and affirmation in play. For example, in their influential article "The Hegemony of Play", Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce

(2007) critiqued the constriction of play by the digital games industry, arguing that “the computer game industry narrowed the concept of both play and player in the digital sphere” (p. 309) by focusing on repetitive forms of play that appealed to hegemonic social norms such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and heterosexuality. The authors identified a hegemonic form of play that had become ossified, rigid, and calculated through repetitive commodification and gameplay. As critical theorist McKenzie Wark (2012) wrote of the games industry, “play is now captured and made functional for the same forms, over and over” (p. 95). This hegemonic form of play exemplifies an ideology of play where a codified form of play—militarized and masculinized—appears natural and essential to the industry (Kline, Dyer-Witthof, de Peuter, 2003).⁴

Beyond such approaches, some theorists embrace a wider critique of play as such. Shared across these critiques of play—which respond to the ludification of culture and theories that ontologize play as a liberating force—is a lack of faith in the pure, innocent, creative power of play or the ability to easily separate play from those hegemonic systems it is supposedly able to subvert. In short, play becomes inseparable from the systems which produce/allow it, and liberating play from these systems threatens to naturalize an ideology of play as a pure creative force instead of acknowledging how play might be complicit with, or collude with, the systems that seem to dominate it.

For Cubitt (2009), play might have been seen as innocent and childlike in the past, but this view attached play to frivolity and superficiality that could be dismissed as immaturity. While play was understood as creative and a source of imagination, it was also separated from life and ignored as unserious and wasteful. Yet, with the rise of immaterial labor and the power of the creative industries, play became useful. Play could be used as a tool to generate creativity and innovation, or to exploit workers by masking problematic labor conditions with enjoyment, what is known as playbour (Kücklich, 2005; Rey, 2014). Cubitt’s critique recognized that play “is no longer a utopian force but a property of contemporary capital”.⁵ On the one hand, Cubitt demonstrates that play is historical through and through. Play does not lie outside of history (as a naturalized, ontological base or instinctual property of the human) but is caught up within processes of historical unfolding which shapes its significance according to social, cultural, technological and political forces.

Similarly, critical theorist McKenzie Wark (2014) entreats us to “Never Play!” as a resistive slogan that supplants the directive to “never work”, especially within a world where labor and leisure have blurred. Wark argues that in the “overdeveloped” world, value is extracted from play as well as work (p. 163). The creation of data through play with electronic devices fuels an information economy wherein our play is commodified in various forms. Moreover, Wark (2014) explains, this economy has both a closed-off “game” aspect and an open “play” one: closed game-like systems of data harvesting and selling are joined (and sustained) by open-ended “play actions that map the potential

4. In another example, Thomas Malaby (2007) critiqued play’s traditional and normative definitions, thus opening pathways to future, empirical studies of play.

5. Other scholars have critiqued this as “ludic capitalism” (Galloway, 2012, p. 27) or an ideology of playfulness (Soderman, 2021).

space and possible design flaws of the games themselves” (p. 164). Open-ended play in the context of spectacular capitalism is to embody, abstractly, the game designer, contributing to the closed game’s next iteration of commodification.

Other scholars, such as Aaron Trammell and Tara Fickle, critique play in terms of oppressive use and racializing functions. Fickle appears to place less faith in recuperative and creative possibilities of play, instead drawing attention to the use of games as a critical hermeneutic for understanding the process of racialization within conditions of American white supremacy. Fickle (2019) argues that the creation and negotiation of parameters and performances of “Asian American”—a complex identity category which simultaneously promises solidarity and liberation while being constrained by its amalgamation of “a massive range of ethnic, linguistic, class, and generational differences” (p. 12)—functions as a ludic site entangled with the problem of political legibility and identity. For Fickle (2019), racialization is a “game of representation”, not a “product of in-game representation” (p. 13). Communities are racialized not only through visual representations but through a collective negotiation of a social ruleset. In an evocative example, Fickle describes how the alternate reality game *Pokemon Go* (2016) activates the mechanism of race by unveiling unspoken constraints placed upon the movements of members of different races via the encouragement of players to visit places where their lives are ultimately at risk. *Pokemon Go*’s rules function to magnify not erase racial difference by drawing attention to the structuring absences of unspoken social constraints (p. 20). Fickle demonstrates how play, and its critical potential, unveils the rule structures of dominant society and is co-constitutive with systems of racialization and racial oppression, thus articulating how play is not separated from real life. That is, play unveils structuring constraints—the rules of the social game—which ground the impossibility of a pure play untainted by oppression.

Fickle (2019) provides contrast to Bogost’s argument that play emerges from submission to constraints and inverts it politically, writing, “To play a game... is not to free oneself from but rather to voluntarily subject oneself to arbitrary constraints” (p. 2). This submission is precisely that form of subjection which is the vehicle for racialized oppression, which also emphasizes the violence of play. Such a feeling of the constraints of play is also articulated by Kishonna Gray and David Leonard (2018) who write, “From the Internet to the constructive worlds of virtual gameplay, the digital world offers spaces of play and freedom in a post-ism promised land of equality and justice, but our experiences reveal the fissures found within those spaces” (p. 5). Here too, the ideological promise of freedom (through play and within a post-race society) are revealed to be illusory, where the fissures in these spaces are not opportunities for resistance, but cracks in the illusion that play is freedom.

Aaron Trammell (2020) follows a similar path, critiquing play from a framework of critical black studies and arguing that “play is wielded as an instrument of power” rather than acting as a liberating, creative activity. Play, as a disci-

plining power, is not (necessarily) embodied in the first case in the procedural contours of a game-structure, but is instead a mode of being that a subject, a player, may project onto an object, the played, in an involuntary manner. When play is nonconsensual, it is still play, because play is voluntary only on the part of the player, who takes on play as a mode of being voluntarily, then exerts the subjective force of that mode of being onto the world, which organizes that world as the “played” object. Play is an exertion of power onto the played: for Trammell, torture then is play (in particular, the torture of black slaves in American chattel slavery) while the brutality and dehumanization which is inherent in torture unveils the disciplinary, objectifying violence of play.

Across these critiques of play, we can identify a common thread of subjectivation/individuation. Play is not the power of a pre-constituted individual subject, rather, play flows through the player, as the product of a regime of power (slavery, racialization, inequality) and/or an ideology (ludic capitalism). Moreover, though uncritically, flawed discourses of play (such as those imbued within hegemonic forms of the mainstream games industry) threaten to undermine a clearer understanding of play in terms of both its potentials and oppressions. This transforms the player into a vector for tainted play and playfulness which, we could say following Wark, works in the open space of potential only insofar as it writes into existence new forms of dominance. Play therefore becomes inseparable from the hegemonies which produce it.⁶

6. CONCLUSION

What does it mean to undertake “critical play” research today? Foucault (1990) once said that the critical attitude is a “way of thinking” that becomes “the art of not being governed, or the art of not being governed like that and at this price” (p. 384). Today, critical play researchers can continue to use play and games as vehicles for social critiques which express political desires to not be governed “like that”. However, increasingly scholars and designers must understand play as form of governmentality that requires an attitude that we don’t want to play like that and we don’t want *to be played* like that. Play cannot be understood simply as a beneficial—or even neutral—conduit for critique. Instead, it is urgent for designers and scholars to be more critical of play and to understand its limits. The ludic turn, the rise of a paradigm of playfulness, the ongoing ludification of culture—these are exciting processes. However, they can fuel ideologies and ontologies of play where play is uncritically understood as a vital force of subversion and transformation, instead of understanding play as a non-neutral form of governmentality through which power can circulate. When Wark claims that the slogan for today’s world might be “Never Play” or when Schleiner invokes a “no play imperative” in some instances, they are refusing this circulation and recognizing the limits of play. Such slogans remind us that not playing or choosing not to play might be just as interesting topics

6. As Patrick Jagoda’s (2020) work makes clear, since many aspects of play are captured by neoliberal economic logics, speaking of “play” as a concept onto itself is impossible: instead, we have such frameworks as play-*qua*-choice, or play-*qua*-improvisation, which are bound up in specific forms of dominant neoliberal logics that scholars and game designers may seek to overcome and displace.

than play itself. Indeed, the only way to recover a liberatory notion of play may be to refuse play altogether, at least until we have built the proper critical tools.

As a design methodology, critical play is itself malleable, a self-reflexive process of incorporating criticality and the discoveries of critique into the process of design. Thus, undertaking critical play research today requires understanding how play and the critical relate and how they potentially transform each other. It requires a deeper understanding of play's limits, problematic ontologies and ideologies, and integration into commodification. It requires the critical distance of historicization and thus, understanding the history of play—in both practice and theory. Historicizing play, particularly in relation to work, leisure, and struggle throughout the last several centuries, rather than treating play as a transcendental concept, will galvanize new understandings of how play, criticality, critique, and politics operate within different contexts. Indeed, re-researching critical play today even requires being critical of critique and critical reflection and understanding their limits, histories, and transformations. Such knowledge, then, can be cycled into critical play design practices.

It is instructive to note how generative critiques of play can be. Play and playfulness are often upheld as subversive, as shifting contexts and imagining alternatives, but critique can also catalyze the exploration of alternatives, where suspicion and doubt can identify dominant social norms and rules that can lead to their subversion. Critique does not simply, as Paolo Pedercini once argued, reproduce normative ideologies and structures by repeatedly insisting on the complicity of games in the reproduction of those structures (Murray, 2018, p. 20). Murray offers a rejoinder to Pedercini that critique provides the conditions of self-reflexivity necessary for the creation of non-oppressive forms of play and games. Building on Murray's position, we argue that what traps us in this critical stasis, where media reinvest us into the dominant world order, is not critique but cliché. Criticality not only repetitively denounces (as its detractors suggest) but creates awareness of constraints and limitations which can be observed or subverted depending on the political context.

Today, the dominance of play is demonstrated in a naming convention that has overtaken game studies monographs: *A Play of Bodies* (2018), *Playing Nature* (2019), *Ambient Play* (2020), *Treacherous Play* (2022), and so on. These books are not necessarily about play as such, but about configurations of games and their contexts; nonetheless, they pay lip service to play as the mode in which one encounters these configurations. Play, as a titular, rhetorical convention, can overshadow the specificity of its contexts. No doubt, the paradigm of playfulness and ludified culture will be described, cataloged, and even critiqued. However, when one can ostensibly “play anything,” the danger is that play becomes an epistemological obstacle to change, and not an agent of change. The propagation of play—even the propaganda of play—threatens to eclipse a more critical need to understand its limits.

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LUDOLOGY

Pokémon Go, Niantic, United States, 2016.

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Ten years of Historical Game Studies

Towards the intersection with memory studies

ABSTRACT

As a multidisciplinary field of study, historical game studies has become increasingly established as a stand-alone branch, albeit one having clear interdisciplinary links with (and significance for) both history and game studies. Recently, many historical game scholars have increasingly been dealing with the concept of memory. Concepts such as Landsberg's 'prosthetic memory' (2004), 'media memory' (Neiger et al. 2011; Erll & Rigney 2009), and the study of how digital games play a significant role in cultural memory-making processes have enlarged the field to include more open-ended and broader approaches and implications (see also Hammar 2019b; 2020). The article aims to deal with these recent developments within historical game studies. Recent debates and increasingly prominent topics in the literature (prosthetic memory, historical fantasy, pseudohistory, history as metaphor) will be framed in terms of their relation toward memory studies, and further possible developments and open questions within the field(s) will be identified and discussed.

KEYWORDS: Historical game studies, memory studies, digital games, prosthetic memory, pseudohistory.

1. INTRODUCTION.

Historical game studies has increasingly become "a distinct interest separable from the larger field of game studies by way of the theory, content and purposes with which it is concerned" (Chapman, Foka, & Westin, 2017, p. 359), and is now established as a stand-alone branch, albeit one having clear interdisciplinary links with (and significance for) both history and game studies.

We are in a rather privileged position, when looking back at the developments in the past decade, since this is when historical game studies really took off as a "field". There were isolated but highly important efforts prior to this (e.g., Uricchio, 2005) that helped to pave the way, but the beginnings of a network of scholars, associated conferences, and an academic community fell within the decade. In 2017, Chapman, Foka, and Westin commented on his-

torical game studies as a field “that has only really started to properly cohere in the last few years” (2017, p. 359). Chapman, Foka and Westin chart the emergence of the field. The 2014 conference *Challenge the Past/Diversify the Future* (University of Gothenburg) was the first conference to include a track dedicated to historical games. Chapman, Foka, and Westin note that it “was probably the largest gathering of scholars working on these games so far” (p. 364). This event also laid the groundwork for establishing the Historical Game Studies Network.

Scholars within historical game studies focus on games that relate to the past in some way and are therefore interested in these games’ engagement with history and positioning within the historiographical debate, as well as with the possibility of their functioning as a distinct historical form (Chapman, 2016a, pp. 4-5). Some contributions already summarise and reflect upon historical game studies as a field; amongst its major interests, we may list, with Lundblade (2020, pp. 16-17): historical learning through games, historical depictions of a certain period within games, and close readings and textual analysis of historical games.

Most importantly for our present focus, historical game scholars usually frame historical games as interventions in a broader historiographical debate that concerns the complexity of history and its contingency. Games, after all, usually provide users with counterfactual “what ifs” that effectively accommodate the conception of past events (and history) as fluid, vulnerable (see, e.g., MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2007), and in-the-making (see also Koski, 2017), rather than fixed, stable, and already-happened (Hammar, 2017, p. 375).

In furthering this approach, many historical game scholars have recently been increasingly dealing with the concept of memory (Begy, 2015; Chapman, 2016b; Cooke & Hubbell, 2015; de Smale, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Hammar, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Hammar & Woodcock, 2019; Kempshall, 2015; Kingsepp, 2007; Pöttsch & Šisler, 2016; Šisler, 2016; Sterczewska, 2016; 2019). Whilst the phenomenon of historical digital games is underexplored within memory studies itself (de Smale, 2019b, p. 20; Kansteiner, 2017), on the other hand, “an increasing amount of scholars researching historical digital games have applied knowledge from memory studies to highlight processes of memory-making through playing historical digital games” (Hammar, 2019b, p. 28). Concepts such as Landsberg’s “prosthetic memory” (2004), or “media memory” (Neiger et al., 2011; Erl & Rigney, 2009), and the study of how digital games can “play a significant part in cultural memory-making processes” (Hammar, 2019b, p. 28), have enlarged the field to include more open-ended and broader approaches or implications (see also Hammar, 2020). This has also allowed scholars to focus on the potential significance that even pseudohistorical games (including, e.g., fantasy and sci-fi games) may have for historical discourse and public forms of history-making.

The shift echoes an important change in game culture itself. For years, history was chiefly the province of strategy games such as the *Civilization* series (1991-2016), providing a distanced perspective on the historical process. With

the publication of the *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007), history also became the province of open-world games, the genre hitherto dominated by fantasy and contemporary settings — and the series itself, spanning twelve entries (with three more in development) is considered to comprise the most important set of historical narratives within contemporary game culture. It is worth noting that the series not only offers the possibility to experience simulated historical realities from the perspective of an individual, but it also relies on the narrative device of the past being directly accessible through the genetic memory of the individual, calling the playing through narrative episodes “memory synchronisation” (on the matter, see also Mukherjee, 2017).

The present article aims to map the recent developments of historical game studies, pointing out a recent, increasing shift of the field towards memory studies. Such a shift can be observable and explicitly stated or implicit, arising from a convergence of interests and perspectives from both fields. First, we will introduce historical game studies and memory studies as converging. We will identify how and where historical game studies is increasingly inclining towards the concept of memory, pointing out three main areas in which memory studies and historical game studies intersect and overlap. We will then focus on three recent debates and increasingly prominent topics in the literature (prosthetic memory, historical fantasy and pseudohistory, public history), which will then be framed in terms of their relation toward memory studies. To conclude the article, further possible developments will be discussed.

2. HISTORY, MEMORY, AND HISTORICAL GAMES

Before dealing with the ways in which historical game studies are increasingly using memory as a concept and being inspired by memory studies as a scholarly field, it is worth considering, albeit briefly, how the two approaches can be conceived of as already converging.

If “memory” by definition proceeds from a point situated in the present, and therefore “the focus of memory studies rests, precisely, not on the ‘past as it really was’, but on the ‘past as a human construct’” (Erll, 2011, p. 5; see also Jaeger, 2020, p. 10), the term “history” covers two seemingly contradictory ideas and refers both to “simply what happened” (Clive, 1989, p. 7; Peterson et al., 2013, p. 35; Elliott, 2017, pp. 22–23), and to the knowledge and study of what happened (Gorman, 1992, ix). Jenkins suggests using “the past” to refer to what happened, and “historiography” when referring to the writings of historians (Jenkins, 1991, p. 7). It is this second meaning that, especially within critical historical theories, points in the direction of memory studies, by highlighting the inherent mediacy, contingency, and situatedness of all histories, and also gave rise to the memory paradigm within academia in the early-mid twentieth century (Klein, 2000, pp. 127–128; see also Baer, 2001). This also interacts with a focus on heritage that foregrounds the vibrant relationship between the past

and the present — creating links of solidarity between generations, in line with the definition of “cultural-heritage” adopted by Tara Coplestone, as linking past and present through a multiplicity of elements that may be tangible, intangible and/or natural, and that are “used, created, altered and passed between generations” (adapted from Coplestone, 2017, p. 417, adapting Vecco, Blake).

As also noted by Jenkins, the idea of historiography is exactly motivated by awareness of the mediacy of all histories. Chapman (2016a) refers back to the critical historiography of Hayden White and Alun Munslow amongst others (see White, 1973; 1978; 1980; 1990; Munslow, 1997; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2013; see also Kramer, 1989; Berkhofer, 1995; also informed by Foucault, 1972); who emphasise this awareness, claiming that all history is a form of narrativisation.¹

1. This “linguistic turn” in historiography and historical theory (Paul, 2011) marks a significant turning point for contemporary history: on one hand, claiming that all history is narrativisation constitutes an invitation to reject realist histories and “objective” approaches to the past in their entirety, and therefore encourages us “to put hope” in novelists and film directors, novelists, and popular histories (idem, p. 80); on the other, it proposes to speak about historical realism in terms of language (ibid.) rather than of objectivity, therefore opening historical enquiries to whole new areas of interest. Historical theory is undoubtedly marked by the emergence of such positions, influenced by both postmodernism and poststructuralism (scholars refer to the “postmodernist challenge” posed to historicism: Berkhofer 1995; see also Chapman et al., 2016).

2. This is claimed by the memory studies’ pioneer Maurice Halbwachs. The author’s distinction between a universal and objective history on the one hand, and a group-specific collective memory on the other hand (see Ricoeur 2004 [2000], pp. 393–394) is echoed by another very influential memory scholar, Pierre Nora (1989), who similarly claims that far from being synonymous, the two terms are in fundamental opposition. For an in-depth look at the relationship between the two terms, see Klein 2000.

As a specific narrative form, history is a “narrative pursuit” that entails a selection of available “ascertained facts” (Carr, 1961, p. 9); a collection of those facts by the historian (constrained by the cultural framework she operates within – Carr, 1961; Chapman, 2016a, p. 49; Elliott & Kapell, 2013, p. 6); and an assemblage of those facts into a narrative “to tell a given story with a given ending” (Elliott & Kapell, 2013, p. 7) that often entails imposing current values, meanings, coherence, and motivations onto the past (Droysen, 1967, p. 219). Historians, as authors (Munslow, 1997, p. 3), “structure the chaos of the past” (Hammar, 2019b, p. 23) and inevitably impose subjective as well as cultural perspectives onto it (Munslow, 2007b). By acknowledging that we engage with the past through its representations, e.g., through narratives that historians provide to their audience by selecting and therefore assembling available historical facts, we acknowledge that our claims about what happened are “less absolute and much more humble in their alleged truth-value” (Hammar, 2019b, p. 23). In Adam Chapman’s words: “all representations have to leave something about the thing they represent out of their depiction. If they didn’t then they would cease to be representations at all and instead become the actual thing they try to represent!” (Chapman, in McCall & Chapman, 2017). It also, crucially, entails an awareness that “every narrative, however seemingly “full,” is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*” (White, 1980, p. 14; original emphasis); for example, as Klara Sterczewska (2016) notes, a design choice to minimise the presence of civilians in a war game is “ideologically non-neutral”.

By reflecting on these aspects, we may agree with contemporary memory scholars in conceiving of history and memory as companions, rather than irreconcilable opposites.² Whilst memory is usually used as an antonym of history (Klein, 2000, pp. 128–9), and to point to more affective, open, and fluid accounts of the past in contrast to cold, clinical, truth-based empirical approaches to it (Bollmer, 2011, p. 453), “blocking out the memorial function of historiography appears strange in light of the discussions among historians [...] regarding

the constructed nature, subjectivity, and perspectivity of all history writing” (Erl, 2011, p. 25). According to contemporary memory scholars, the opposition “history versus memory” must be abandoned to correctly grasp the relationship between history and memory. Historical memory is better conceived of as one among various ways of remembering, from religion and literature to architecture, collective rituals, and any other media (Erl, 2011, p. 5), and history as “capturing the evidence of the past and transcoding it into an assimilable narrative” (Chapman, 2013b, p. 323) within a broader context of constantly narrating, imagining, and representing the past beyond the boundaries of the reference to historical evidence. This recognition is far from being recent: Siobhan Kattago remembers that “according to Greek mythology, Mnemosyne was the mother of the nine muses, one of whom was Clio, the muse of history” (Kattago, 2015, p. 1).

Nevertheless, we note that the two fields of history and memory studies focus their attention differently, despite both being interested in how we engage with the past. For this reason, we suggest that the two can be viewed as complementary. Whilst history and historiography are both focused on sources, evidence, and facts situated in the past, memory is concerned rather with present practices, performances, and media dealing with how the past is currently interpreted, re-enacted, and narrativised.

We observe that the fields tend to converge, especially when scholars analyse popular media that engage with the past. Both historical film scholars and historical game scholars agree in considering history as a narrative construct affected, constrained, and biased by current beliefs, ideologies, and arising within certain hermeneutic horizons. By acknowledging such dimensions, scholars interested in analysing popular historical media more or less explicitly or implicitly adopt or engage with the perspective of memory studies.

2.1 INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN HISTORICAL GAME STUDIES AND MEMORY STUDIES

Based on what has been observed so far, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that memory is also (implicitly or explicitly) entering the field of historical game scholarship. Contemporary historical game studies tends to be concerned with reflecting on popular forms of history, and therefore on the contingency of history and the situatedness of every historical discourse, prior to every analysis or discussion of particular gaming experiences. Over the last decade, memory studies has appeared as a companion to history in addressing games that (more or less literally) deal with the past. Previously, “memory” had usually appeared as a term isolated from history and only loosely associated with popular representations and re-enactments of the past.

We have identified three (often intertwining) sets of circumstances where historical game scholars especially tend to refer to memory: (1) in considering how the elements of historical games are framed in relation to a broader multimedia horizon of historical imaginings and representations; (2) in provid-

3. The intramedial level looks at the rhetorical and formal devices that media use to generate and support certain types of memory-making, i.e., to establish and enrich their historical world-building. This is the main field of application and study of historical game studies too, which often focuses on processes and “procedural representations” as well as on other rhetorical devices proper to digital games. Chapman’s formal framework for historical digital games (2016a), for example, is aimed at providing “concrete formal concepts and categorisations of core structures particularly appropriate to the analysis of digital historical games”, and it “concentrates on the elements that have a real role in meaning making, in terms of both the developer-historian’s production and the playful reception/construction of players” (Chapman 2016a, p. 268), i.e. on “individual core formal structures and characteristics of games” (idem, p. 269). The intermedial level instead relates the intramedial level to previous and different representations of the same historical period, or event. It considers of course the formal properties of a media text, but it dialogues with other established media. This level also resonates with historical game studies’ reuse of the concept of resonance (Hammar 2019b, p. 45). Lastly, the plurimedial level concerns the reception of media texts and focuses on the social practices that allow the circulation and remediation (Bolter & Grusin 1999; Erll & Rigney 2009) of cultural memory related to specific artefacts. It acknowledges the significance of the social contexts in which media texts are received, and the possibility that memory-relevant texts or media are made so by “what has been established around them” (Erll 2011, 138). Most importantly, it acknowledges the flexibility of interpretations that a particular media text may acquire in different cultural contexts (Hammar 2019b, p. 46). For a systematic application of the intra-inter-plurimedial levels of analysis to digital games, see also Caselli 2021.

ing an understanding of historical games that relies on interpretation; and (3) in emphasising the subjective engagement with simulated pasts that historical games provide.

1. Historical game scholars deal with how digital games relate to the broader historical media discourse they take part in, as well as with all those processes that contribute to shaping historical games’ engagement with the past. It is here that terms such as “popular memory”, “cultural memory”, and “collective memory” pop up more often, mostly to describe all those media processes that co-construct the way in which we imagine, describe, and narrate our shared past.

This use is already present in one of the most-referenced articles that anticipate historical game studies — William Uricchio’s (2005). The author uses the term “memory” only once, speaking of “specifically situated” historical games as “inculcated through encrusted layers of historical scholarship, training, and popular memory” (idem, p. 328). This take is furthered by many other scholars, especially in recent times (see, e.g., Begy, 2015; Chapman, 2016b; Cooke & Hubbell, 2015; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2016; Šisler, 2016): all borrow the concept of memory, or theoretical frameworks of memory studies, to frame historical games towards a broader ensemble of popular media, texts, or experiences, that engage (and allow us to engage) with the past (see also Chapman, 2016a, p. 12).

This broader multimedia historical discourse brings historical game studies closer to the focus of contemporary memory scholars: Pötzsch and Šisler (2016) and Hammar (2019b), for example, explicitly draw upon Astrid Erll’s (2008b) framework for the analysis of cultural expressions to tackle historical games, distinguishing between intramedial, intermedial, and plurimedial levels of analysis.³

2. In his *Digital Games as History*, Adam Chapman problematises history to the point of defining it as an “active process of remembering” (Chapman, 2016a, p. 5). The way in which such an influential work on historical games deals with memory is paradigmatic for the trend we are analysing here. Within the first pages, he contends that “we clearly need a definition of history, or at least the historical, that rests on more than only judgements of perceived accuracy or truth” (idem, p. 10), and he later occasionally uses memory and history as synonyms. Most significantly, with one of the most important definitions introduced by his book, that of historical games as “systems for historying”, Chapman counters “ontological” definitions of historical games and defines historicity as arising from the intertwining of interpretation, game experience, and historical resonance. By emphasising the role users have in recognising and enacting historicity in games, Chapman implies an understanding of the historical that closely recalls that of the

mnemonic given by one of the forerunners of contemporary memory studies, Pierre Nora, in introducing “sites of memory” (French: “lieux de memoire”). In defining how a cultural objectivation of any sort could become a site of memory, Pierre Nora gives primary importance to the role of the experiencer/interpreter: to become a site of memory, a cultural objectivation has to be perceived as fulfilling a memorial function in a given society (Nora, 1989, p. 19). The concept of “historical resonance” (see 3.2, below) Chapman introduces (2016a, p. 36) points in the same direction.

Whilst Chapman explicitly mentions memory studies, his account in *Digital Games as History* remains historical. Others, instead, explicitly borrow the framework of memory studies and approach games that deal with the past through the lens of memory. As we will see in section 3, such a hermeneutical broadening of the definition of historical games leads to an analysis of games engaging with the past in non-literal ways, including through historical metaphors, pseudohistories, and historical fantasies (Chapman, 2019; Hammar, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Hammar & Woodcock, 2019; Koski, 2017; Pfister, 2019).

3. Memory studies is also explicitly invoked when games are considered as artefacts that make “accessible a kaleidoscopic image of history as composed of multifaceted, intimate, and idiosyncratic personal recollections rather than a linear trajectory of events presented as the result of unambiguous chains of cause and effect” (Pötzsch & Sisler, 2016, p. 28). When historical games themselves explore the past as negotiated, contingent, shared, and vulnerable (see also de Smale, 2019a, 2019b; Hammar, 2020), approaching them through the lens of memory studies instead of history is increasingly becoming the preferred methodological option. This is also why reference is often made to memory when considering forms of historical playful subjectivation within digital games, as we will see in the section on prosthetic memory below.

3. RECENT APPROACHES

The overview provided throughout 2 and 2.1 allows us to consider how some recent approaches within historical game studies are increasingly shifting towards memory. Among them, we have identified the following (often inter-connecting) trends: historical subjectivities and prosthetic memory; pseudohistory and public memory; and games as public history. These areas particularly demonstrate the two-way contributions and relationship between historical game studies and memory.

3.1 HISTORICAL SUBJECTIVITIES AND PROSTHETIC MEMORY

Many historical game scholars give primary importance to the potential alignment of historical games with historical subjectivities. This is also informed

by the broader interest, shared by game scholars more generally, in the game experience as leveraging the alignment with, or adoption of, virtual subjectivities and subjective standpoints internal to gameworlds (see, e.g., Bayliss, 2007a; 2007b; Calleja, 2011; Gee, 2008; Grodal & Gregersen, 2008; Grodal, 2003; Kania, 2017; Klevjer, 2006; Leino, 2010; Taylor, 2002; Vella, 2015; Vella & Gualeni, 2018; Wilhelmsson, 2008). This process is especially relevant if we consider historical games, where the alignment with in-game subjectivities becomes crucial for the game to be perceived as a “system for historying”. It is commonly contended that historical games allow a particular kind of subjectivity (King, 2007), i.e. they allow players to achieve historying by letting them engage with rules, constraints, and narratives that help them comprehend historical actors (Peterson et al., 2013, p. 39), therefore to some extent entering the mental universe of past actors to reconstruct the reality they lived in (see also: Gilderhus, 2003, pp. 45-46; Uricchio, 2005, p. 334).

Subjective engagement is especially considered when scholars deal with pseudohistorical games featuring visual novel and dating simulator elements. Such games provide an understanding of history as vulnerable and subjective (Koski, 2017), and often relativised by those who survived or won (ibid., pp. 14-15), by leveraging the relationships that they allow users to build with their characters. In this way, these games leverage the emotional engagement of users, be it emotional, romantic, and/or sexual (Hasegawa, 2013), and provide an engagement with history that relies less on the representation of historical processes and more on a free, open-ended, and often fetishising re-imagining of past contexts and characters (see also Caselli & Toniolo, 2021). Such focus on historical as well as pseudohistorical subjectivities allows Koski (2017), for example, to focus on the metahistorical dimension of *Valkyria Chronicles* (Sega, 2008), and Hasegawa on an engagement with history that inclines towards romance, diversity, and queerness, and which therefore embraces anachronism and fantasy (Hasegawa, 2013, p. 145).

Either way, historical game scholars’ focus on historical subjectivities allows them to analyse present practices, processes, and engagements with the past, with particular attention to affect and empathy. Some scholars have viewed historical empathy as primary in attempting to “understand the past on its own terms” (Hartman et al., 2021), especially in popular media (see e.g. Metzger, 2007, on the historical film’s ability to foster “historical empathy”, pointing out however that this is sometimes difficult to extricate from “presentism” and a felt “resonance between the past and the present”, p. 71). In relation to games, Sky LaRell Anderson observes how the game *Valiant Hearts* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014) “showcases personal stories to emphasise affect through empathy[, leaning] from both physical and political action toward the personal stories of everyday people involved in WWII” (Anderson, 2019, p. 191), relying on artefacts and items that convey lore, with the potential to enhance affective engagement (pp. 192-3).

Such emphasis on present empathetic ways to engage with the past is also central to memory studies. Prosthetic memory, as discussed by Alison Landsberg

(2004), is significant here. This kind of memory arises from mass media and derives from the engagement with a mediated representation (Landsberg mentions “seeing a film, visiting a museum, watching a television miniseries” among other examples, and adds even “perhaps [...] entering virtual worlds on the internet”; Landsberg, 2004, pp. 20; 48 respectively). We could add the memories derived from video games. Such memory is not the product of a lived experience. Like artificial limbs, prosthetic memories are technological, mediated memories that arise when a person interfaces with the past at an “experiential site” (Landsberg, 2004, p. 2), i.e., during the experience of a site of memory. During such an experience — highlighting another aspect of the “prosthesis” metaphor — individuals “suture themselves” (ibid.) into a larger history, both apprehending historical narratives and taking on “a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which [they] did not live” (ibid.). This mostly happens as the audience empathises with the depicted characters and their personal and communal pasts (Landsberg, 2015, p. 30). Prosthetic memories are therefore not premised on any claim of natural ownership and challenge “the essentialist logic of many group identities. Mass culture makes memories more widely available so that people who have no “natural” claim to them might nevertheless incorporate them into their own archive of experience” (idem, p. 9). At the same time,

[O]ne’s engagement with them begins from a position of difference, with the recognition that these images and narratives concerning the past are not one’s ‘heritage’ in any simple sense [...]. People who acquire these memories are led to feel a connection to [that] past but, all the while, to remember their position in the contemporary moment (ibid.).

The concept of prosthetic memory, in this regard, echoes that of ludic subjectivity in being at the same time felt as belonging to others as well as oneself during one’s engagement with a gameworld (see the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement, introduced by Vella, 2015, pp. 55-72). Prosthetic memory extends memory beyond the personal, and further blurs the distinction between “history” and “memory studies”. As observed by Hammar, “relatively little attention in both game and memory studies has been paid to Alison Landsberg’s concept of ‘prosthetic memory’ and its role in analyzing historical digital games” (Hammar, 2020). Nonetheless, the concept of prosthetic memory usefully draws attention to the affective relations we develop with the historical worlds that digital games depict and simulate — and especially to the social and political implications of such relations (ibid.). It is by borrowing and problematising the concept of “prosthetic memory” that, for example, Hammar analyses how the historical gameworld of *Mafia III* (Hangar 13, 2016) is ideologically, hegemonically, and politically situated towards the past depicted.

The focus on historical and pseudohistorical subjectivities, therefore, shares with the perspective of prosthetic memory both the emphasis on empathy and

the concern with present biases, hegemonic representations/simulations, and ideologically oriented ways to approach the past within digital games. This opens the possibility of counter-hegemonic play, with the player put in a position where they are able to challenge the hegemonic discourse about the past. The concept of hegemony, coined by Gramsci (1961), means the way the past is constructed as a means to justify existing power relations, and internalised to a degree where other perspectives become near-impossible to accept (Hammar, 2017). In multiple contemporary games there are attempts to present counter-hegemonic narrative, with *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2013) — a game depicting the transatlantic slave trade — and *Through the Darkest of Times* (HandyGames 2020) — focusing on pre-WWII German resistance against the Nazi regime — serving as handy examples.

As Hammar (2017) argues in his analysis of *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*, most counter-hegemonic attempts are located within game aesthetics and narrative. While the game indeed allows for playing the freedom fighter opposing Haitian slavery, it also forces the player into violent solutions, reinforcing the hegemonic narrative of Black masculinity. Souvik Mukherjee (2015) echoes this conclusion when analysing empire-building strategy games. He points out that reversing narrative perspective and allowing a historically colonised nation to act as an empire in a strategy game is hardly an attempt at decolonisation, rather reinforcing the hegemonic concept that imperialism is the only possible course of history, inevitable and imperative. This does not mean counter-hegemonic discourse cannot be introduced through digital games: but if the work of prosthetic memory is to be successful in this regard, the game should include gameplay that reinforces the counter-hegemonic message.

3.2 PSEUDOHISTORY AND PUBLIC MEMORY

While mediated memory, as discussed by both Landsberg and Erll, is easily internalised, it belongs to the broader category of public memory: the officially sanctioned way to remember the past, often in contradiction with the particular memories of individuals or communities. John Bodnar (1994) describes public memory as being produced through the interaction between various actors of the public sphere, both official and vernacular — sometimes characterised by conflict over the way the past should be remembered. He claims, however, that in public memory the past serves certain political uses: not only to provide the source of social cohesion but also to justify the power of social institutions:

Public memory speaks primarily about the structure of power in society because that power is always in question in a world of polarities and contradictions and because cultural understanding is always grounded in the material structure of society itself. Memory adds perspective and authenticity to the views articulated in this exchange; defenders of official and vernacular interests are selectively retrieved from the past to perform similar functions in the present. (p. 15)

In recent years, digital games culture and historical game studies have both become more aware of the role games play in the shaping of public memory, leading to numerous discussions regarding the ways the past is represented (and therefore — commemorated) on both aesthetical and algorithmic levels (Hammar, 2017, Kolek et al., 2021, Pfister, 2020, Šisler, 2016).

It is worth noting that such discussion stretches beyond the realm of direct historical representation, towards games set in pseudohistorical or alternate history settings. In game culture, the employment of fantasy is especially widespread in the presentation of the past, as digital games are still a relatively underused agent in the contested field of public memory. Therefore, their licence to present the past is limited by other agents and institutions, officially and unofficially. As Chapman and Linderoth (2015) claim, the introduction of several sensitive topics in a game was considered trivialising unless the game itself was labelled as serving interests of more prominent agents, such as state-sanctioned education or institutional art. Wulf Kansteiner (2017) echoes this observation, pointing out that the memory of the most sensitive and inflammatory aspects of the World War — such as Shoah — are regulated by specialised institutions, such as Yad Vashem, often considering games a tool unsuited to presenting such matter, and actively opposing the release of Shoah-themed games. As a globalised and commercial medium, games must further obey different legal regulations, governing the public memory, such as a ban on Nazi symbols in Germany or censorship of the Armenian genocide by Turkey. Analysing this phenomenon, Eugen Pfister (2019) observes that it leads not only to the absence of sensitive aspects of the past from history-themed games, but also caters to revisionist versions of public memory. For example, to avoid legal troubles multiple games depicting the European theatre of the Second World War focus on the German Army and completely omit references to the Nazi ideology, perpetuating the myth of “Clean Wehrmacht” — the revisionist belief that the regular army was mostly free of Nazi ideological influence and therefore innocent of the most horrible war crimes, including the Shoah (Pfister, 2019, 2020, Chapman & Linderoth, 2015).

For such reasons, numerous sensitive historical topics are either absent from game culture — despite their prominence in other audiovisual media — or relegated to the background. Holger Pötzsch (2017) identifies filters applied in game design that minimise or exclude problematic content and features — for example, the “consequence filter”, that filters out the costs of warfare, such as post-traumatic stress disorder; and the “conflict filter”, which often gives the impression that violent resolution is necessary and justified, by excluding peaceful alternatives. Games addressing the Shoah, the transatlantic slave trade or Native American population genocide can still raise uproar from other public memory institutions.

For these reasons, as well as for their traditional ties to fantasy and s-f culture (Frelík, 2017, Peterson, 2012), digital games readily use tropes of pseudohistory or alternate history to address sensitive aspects of the past, thus seeming to dis-

tance themselves from the public memory. This is often analysed in the context of World War II, routinely supplemented by the presence of zombies or fantastic products of Nazi pseudoscience — such as robots or spaceships — with Hitler in the battle mech from *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software, 1992) serving as the paradigmatic example (Chapman, 2019; Jayemanne & Kunzelman, 2022). In such settings, the Shoah can be presented more openly without risking the outrage of memory-guarding institutions — indeed, the most direct depiction of Nazi war atrocities in recent games comes from *Wolfenstein: New Order* (Machine Games, 2014), an alternate history game set after Nazi Germany's ultimate victory, and *My Memory of Us* (Juggler Games, 2018), a platformer utilising fable-like aesthetics replacing Nazis with robots, and coding persecuted Jews as people wearing red clothing. Such a narrative choice is not without consequences: it relegates Nazi atrocities to the realm of the fantastical, as an unrealised project inhabiting the same memory space Nazi spaceships occupy, perpetuating the ideological myth of evil Nazis and noble Axis soldiers (Pfister, 2019; 2020).

The use of pseudohistorical narrative is however not exclusively a way of escaping the scrutiny of public memory guardians. It also provides the space for challenging hegemonic discourse within the public memory. For example, Klara Sterczewska (2016) moves towards the question “Is different memory possible?” while considering the 2014 game *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014). The game focuses on civilian experience of war in a modern European city, and tries to respect the complexity of such situations, while creating a fictitious setting loosely tied to Balkan culture. Sterczewska notes that it is inspired by testimonies of those who lived through the sieges of Sarajevo, but also Leningrad, Monrovia, and the Warsaw Uprising. The game shows the toll (both physical and psychological) that war takes on civilians, and their daily struggle to manage scarce resources, which also place a strain on their relationship with each other. The game's tagline is “In war, not everyone is a soldier”, emphasising the departure from the more “marketable” narrative. When considered in its local context, it also directly challenges the dominant trend in Polish public memory of World War II, especially the Warsaw Uprising, currently presented as a heroic and necessary (though doomed) sacrifice by the dominant political forces (see Kobielska, 2016).

“Historical branding”

Pseudohistorical, fantastical, and fictionalised representations still manage to effectively evoke a shared sense of “history”. As the idea of “prosthetic memory” underlines, reimaginings of history in popular media contribute to our collective perceptions and reception of history. Koski notes that *Valkyria Chronicles* “links its representations to a global textually mediated popular nostalgia or collective memory of the Second World War” (Koski, 2017, pp. 400-401) – it thus has “a general air of WW2-ness” (p. 403), rather than representing the historical context more literally. It taps into a public popular perception of history that

is pieced together from blockbuster films, and representations in other media, “creating what can be called [following Bullinger & Salvati, 2011] the cultural brand or mythology of the Second World War” (Koski, 2017, p. 398). Branding may also be a feature of the way history is commodified and consumed (de Groot, 2009); and “authenticity” may itself come in for commodification (see Goulding, 2000). The cultural memory of some (postmodern) periods may be even more associated with commodities and manufactured dreams than others. For example, Robin J.S. Sloan (2015) describes the nostalgic appeal of 80s-ness and 90s-ness in games as “not responding to consumers’ search for historical truth”, but instead “creat[ing] a virtual representation of consumer memories” (p. 29); Kathleen McClancy (2018) discusses the *Fallout* series (1997-2018) for its nostalgic 50s-ness, with its associated retrofuturism (nostalgia for a lost dream of technological progress, rather than for anything that actually occurred).

The popularity of neo-medievalist fantasy in games, heavily influenced by both fantasy fiction and tabletop role-playing games, provides another handy example of the aforementioned tendencies. While technically fictitious, they tend to borrow heavily from the popular imaginary of European medieval culture, reinforcing the public image of the Middle Ages and influencing public memory of the era by producing a general sense of “middle-agesness” without referencing any specific period or culture (see Eco, 1986; see e.g. Bonello Rutter Giappone & Vella, 2021, on neomedievalism in fantasy games). This strategy allows not only for the creation of a unique brand to be guarded as intellectual property (such as the world of Tamriel from *The Elder Scrolls* series (1994-2020) or Thedas from the *Dragon Age* series (2009-2014)), but also illuminates the way the past is constructed in popular discourse and highlights the most important tensions within the public memory sphere, as testified by numerous debates about the way neo-medievalist fantasy worlds are created.

One central discussion revolves around the projection of contemporary racial and ethnic divisions and discussions on the public memory of the past. The *Dungeons and Dragons* legacy results in the production of heavily-racialised game worlds, where folklore-based creatures such as elves are considered “races”, providing a handy tool to explore racial tensions without involving actual, real-world discrimination — or to safely introduce racist overtones catering to the far-right audience (Bjørkelo, 2020). Meanwhile, there is a tension between on the one hand, presenting past society as predominantly monoethnic, contributing to the political myth of “the white Middle Ages”, often providing justification for racist policies and ideologies today (Young, 2019; Bjørkelo, 2020), and on the other hand, modelling fictitious cultures on the ethnic composition of contemporary societies of former colonial empires, thus presenting the result of imperial policies as the natural and desired state of the world. This, in turn, provokes resistance against the hegemonic discourse of the Anglosphere, resulting in the creation of alternative visions of the distant past, rooted in various local idiosyncrasies, under an umbrella of ethnic fantasy (Majkowski, 2018).

Rather than simply discounting popular reception and even consumption of history, acknowledging it might — more positively — indicate ways forward. This kind of commemoration re-presents the past for the present, and in the present. The present therefore has a hand in creating the past as it is passed down. So it is no longer a case of simply examining the past context, but also of “widen[ing] the possibilities for thinking about how the past is constructed in different cultural contexts” (Hammar, 2017, p. 373). This can be related back to Salvati and Bullinger’s work on “selective authenticity”. They suggest that videogames as a popular cultural phenomenon function as sites aptly suited to examining how we “socially produce historical knowledge and derive meaning from the past” (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013, p. 163). The kind of memory (and its meaning) evoked in historical games may often have more in common with what Chapman (in McCall & Chapman, 2017) terms “authenticity”, than with “accuracy”:

If accuracy is alignment with the agreed upon facts of the past, authenticity is something much more ephemeral. It is often much more personal, much more subjective. And it is linked very much to collective memory and shared ideas (right or wrong) about what the past was like (ibid.).

Authenticity, according to Chapman, is “less about getting ‘it’ (the past) right and [more about] getting the feeling of it right” (Chapman in McCall & Chapman, 2017). By describing historicity in digital games as resulting from the recognition (through “historical resonance”), by users, of historical elements, narratives, and worlds, Chapman provides a hermeneutical understanding of historical games, reliant on narrativisation (on the one hand) and “historical” interpretation (on the other) (see Chapman, 2016a, p. 36). This opens up further avenues for exploring our ideas about the past and for engaging with it. A possible risk is that it may lead to approaches that comfortably confirm our assumptions — though it may also yield opportunities to challenge and subvert our expectations. The downside of selecting according to present criteria is the risk of reproducing and imposing, or only directly commenting upon, the viewpoint of one’s current moment (see Luke Holmes, 2020, p. 111; Jankowski, 2022).

3.3 GAMES AS PUBLIC HISTORY

In answer to these perceived risks, Luke Holmes (2020, p. 111) suggests the channelling of collective memory, where public participation is a formative element capable of collaborating with more scholarly endeavours:

if games can utilise *selective authenticity* to create a ‘feeling’ of history, and that history is one which is collectively constructed between academics and museum professions, on the one hand, and the public understanding of history, on the other, then this history is very unlikely to feel trivial. Indeed, it may be much more

reflective of our collective memory, and thus more reverential to controversial subjects (ibid.).

Of course, as we have seen, memory studies is concerned with the collective experience and public dimension of memory. A similar path is followed by the field of public history, which refers to the way the public co-creates historical experience, and as such directly engages with questions of memory. While the term “public history” initially referred primarily to outreach by historians sharing their expertise beyond the academy (Robert Kelley, 1978; Cauvin, 2018), the potential for a deeper and more equal collaboration with the public has since come to the fore, emphasising the participatory nature of public history as doing history not “for” but “with” the general public (Cauvin in Hartman et al., 2021). This has been particularly foregrounded in the study of historical games. For example, not only is the game *Valiant Hearts* greatly indebted to the expertise of consulted historians, but it is also indebted to documentaries (already an avenue for public history as outreach) for access to history (Kempshall, 2019, p. 237), and — significantly — also draws upon “personal archival material” sourced from the public (Hartman et al., 2021). Public history is therefore that which occurs outside the academy and formal educational institutions, through the participation of an interested public, as held by Hartman et al. (2021). Public history could, however, include other variously formalised and institutionalised frameworks such as museums and archives — Luke Holmes (2020), for example, focuses on “heritage organisations” such as museums. It may also take place through less “official” channels (Hartman et al., 2021), such as fan/player communities (McCall, 2018), and different kinds of memory institutions, such as smaller non-state museums (Holmes, 2020, p. 105) and independently curated collections open to the public (Bonello Rutter Giappone & Caselli, 2021).

More localised memory about the past as lived, experienced, and collectively constructed, has the potential to counter the state and the market’s monopoly on cultural heritage, and it would open onto that shared authority that is the condition for making public history (McCall, 2018). Public history, like prosthetic memory, extends memory beyond the personal by offering a basis for intergenerational and cultural memory.

Hartman, Tulloch and Young (2021) observe that this turn towards considering video games as public history is relatively new, and they identify three areas in which it has emerged: in relation to online play communities; history education; critical player engagement with the past and practices of history. They note that the question of whether historical games could or should be considered “public history” no longer needs addressing — “they are already operating in this role”; they look instead towards the next step in developing more nuanced approaches for historical games’ delivery of public history: “how can an informed and sophisticated narrative or experience be conveyed through this medium?”, perhaps updating MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler’s (2007) call

for greater complexity and sophistication in the ways games approach history, as a duty and responsibility that emerge from the increasingly complex technological affordances of the medium.

In a manner similar to memory studies, public history questions and examines the dependence of memory on social structures (see Erll, 2011, pp. 14-15), and is especially concerned with how our engagement with the past is (and cannot but be) constructed through communal stipulation, as observed also by Susan Sontag: “collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: [stipulating] that this is important and this is the story about how it happened” (Sontag, 2003, p. 86). In this respect, historical game studies shares the interest in how different communities share, create, and re-create mediated versions of the past with memory studies.

We can see, in the sharing of mods and the flourishing of internet forums and online communities dedicated to particular games, a kind of communal culture arising that has the potential to level authority (see McCall, 2018) and even to produce its own histories (Webber, 2016) — though of course, where academic historians engage in outreach (e.g. Whitaker, 2020), the implications of an “authoritative” voice may still be felt. Forums have been known to put pressure on developers to change certain aspects of the game. This suggests that there is potential for such radical participation within the player community more generally. According to Jeremiah McCall (2018), for example, participatory history is about “understanding the dialogue between the public and the past” (p. 406): game forum members are engaging critically in conversations about history sparked by the game and its medium, both developing and sharing playable mods of historical games and discussing them online, critically and/or cooperatively — such online discussions, McCall points out, may result in reinterpretations of the game and show that “the player takes an active role constructing their own historical meaning from the game” (2018, p. 415). McCall, furthermore – from within the “public history” framework – considers these engagements to be “authentic” and “historical”. There is therefore a growing interest in the possibility of interaction as “shared authority” emerging in ideas of participatory “public history”:

Work on public history talks of shared authority between historians and members of the public. When it comes to simulating the past with a historical game, authority is likewise shared between designers and players. (McCall, 2018, p. 409)

A framework specific to analysing games as public history has been proposed by Hartman, Tulloch, Young (2021), who offer the case study of *Valiant Hearts*, recognising both its exceptionality in terms of “representation of war” and its exemplarity in terms of play mechanics. Their framework takes into account three concepts: the “interactive archive” — where historical games enable the player to explore a “catalogue of historical events, objects and scenar-

ios”; “historical empathy” (discussed in Section 3.1), which refers to “the way in which games create an emotional resonance and personal connection to the past”; and “affinity space”, which extends the participation outside play. These steps towards expanding the study and use of games as and for public history lead in multiple directions, with public involvement taking a variety of forms — including online communities, as well as games in public spaces and heritage sites. This builds on the idea of history and heritage being accessible at a co-productive level — with players being personally (and collectively) invested in the game as potential contributors to a shared historical experience.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This article has aimed to trace the theoretical and methodological orientation of recent historical game studies, which we term a *de facto* shift towards memory (and memory studies). We first observed how historical game studies and memory studies converge in some assumptions and perspectives; then, we identified three areas in which the dialogue between the two fields is particularly dynamic, and also particularly explicit: historical subjectivation (which dialogues with prosthetic memory); pseudohistory (in dialogue with public memory); and conceiving games as public history.

We identify the turn towards memory studies as a notable and promising trend within historical game studies. The switching of focus towards issues of personal perspective, along with the sense of historicity and amplification of marginalised voices, not only abolishes rigid borders between historical and fantastic fiction, but also allows us to expand our view to the large body of fantasy and sci-fi-themed games, to consider their relationship with history. In our opinion, it also contributed to transporting historical game studies beyond the debate surrounding the veracity and credibility of the representation of the past: the question of “how can the past be represented in an interactive digital medium?” is no longer the only or even the most relevant question, as the perhaps more pressing question of “how is it experienced by the player?” comes to be foregrounded. This in turn started the influx of studies on the social, cultural and moral influence and responsibility of historical games.

There are many other potential intersections between memory and historical game studies to explore, and which we hope will be explored in the future. First, historical game studies may address games as historical artefacts rather than as representations/simulations of history, therefore considering processes such as the musealisation and the preservation of the gaming heritage, as well as the relation between games and contexts in which they are designed, produced, sold, and received by the public. This focus is shared by material culture theory, as observed by Begy (2015), which similarly looks at the cultural dimension of artefacts, games included, to reflect on the socioeconomic frameworks they were created within and for. By speaking of musealisation and of the preservation of gaming heritage, scholars have already been discussing the preservation

4. Hammar approaches this when discussing the limitations on the player-character's abilities to influence historical events in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*: "The transatlantic slave trade and Caribbean slave system continue regardless of the player's actions in *Freedom Cry*" (Hammar, pp. 377-378). As Hammar notes, the player participates in the attempts at resistance, in a way that drives home the systemic force of the colonial powers and the more organised collective efforts that would be required to overturn it — also reflecting the history of Haitian revolution and independence. The force of the collective is thus signalled by what cannot be achieved within the game by the protagonist player-character. In another line (also noting games' tendency to individualise), Bonello Rutter Giappone and Vella (2022) comment on representations of work in neo-medieval RPGs, observing however that it has tended to follow the neoliberal-neomedieval logic, that is: offering "a crosshatch of contemporary ideological constructions superimposed upon a pseudohistorical imaginary".

of digital games, but less has been done in terms of historicising their content and examining how digital games reflect the worldviews and the beliefs of their creators as well as of the communities sharing them.

A more systematic application of the theoretical and methodological frameworks from memory studies is another further avenue we hope historical game studies will pursue. Among the many contributions we mentioned in the course of this article, a significant number only borrow concepts and ideas from memory studies, and for the most part they fall short of delving into a systematic application of frameworks and methods. A systematic intertwining and dialogue between the fields, instead, may lead many of the approaches (already to some degree shared, as we've shown above) to converge explicitly, therefore opening more avenues for interdisciplinary cooperation. Another topic that historical game studies may further explore with the aid of insights from memory studies is the depiction and simulation of collective and cultural trauma — another particularly discussed topic within the field of memory studies — in historical digital games. Of course, memory studies also benefits from the contributions of historical game studies and the fresh perspectives that emerge from dialogue.

The emphasis on empathy and subjectivity also raises hope that digital games would increasingly focus on realities that popular histories tend to minimise and push aside — from microhistories (see Caselli & Toniolo, 2020) and history "from below" (Thompson, 1966), to the history of collectivisation and assembly, e.g., the history of work and workers; solidarity and resistance; etc. (taking its cue from E. P. Thompson, 2013).⁴ Memory studies makes available another rich resource and aids in developing the methodology towards such marginalised histories. In addition, our suggestions indicate opportunities for game developers to further explore, extending an invitation to game developers to diversify approaches to historical game design in directions that challenge established historical, and their associated present-day, hegemonies.

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“Your Subaltern is not my Subaltern”

Intersectionality and the Dangers of a Single Game-story

ABSTRACT

Despite the recent research on the role of the postcolonial and the Subaltern in videogames, the discourse of game studies remains restricted to titles that are focused on and developed in the Global North. Often, games made in the Global South tend to get ignored even as they engage with history and culture. Their discourse and procedural rhetoric are rendered Subaltern – especially, if there is a different language involved, if the game is made in the Global South, or if it addresses issues that are considered marginal. This double marginalization along the lines of language, region, and culture presents a lack in the otherwise intertextual positionality of discourses around caste, religion, South Asian queer studies, disability studies, and Dalit studies in relation to game studies. The Global South is often passed through a filter of sameness, with the ensuing popularization of the grand-narrative of a “single game-story”, where issues of caste, the diversity of religion and faith, queerness, and affinity are not commented and reflected upon. The epistemology of the digital requires revaluations of the kind that are already happening outside game studies. The authors of this paper seek to outline and analyse discursive absences and omissions that are widespread in current scholarship, interrogating and unravelling game-stories that are given precedence *vis-à-vis* game-stories that are not being told, and endeavour to bring the latter to the forefront. Looking in further depth at discourses of intersectionality and Subaltern studies, beyond what has been attended to in games research, this paper seeks to reconfigure the Subaltern in videogames to make a case for intersectionality and against the dangers of “the single game-story”. This involves centring critical analyses of the discursive and participatory politics of representation in a variety of game-stories from South Asia, through a critical and reflexive reinvestigation in the epistemological, linguistic and geopolitical hegemonies of Subalternity in games research and game-stories.

KEYWORDS: Subaltern, postcolonial, South Asia, diversity, intersectionality

In his celebrated essay on “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts” (1998), historian Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies a gap between the historian’s reading of the past and historical evidence. As Subaltern Studies historians contend, colonial historiography presents the indigenous *Santhal* populations¹ of the Jharkhand region of northern India as a people without history. Conversely, as the possible ways of describing the past are vastly different from those deployed in Global North paradigms, the Subaltern Studies historian attempts to reclaim the *santhal* as agents or subjects of their own actions. In fact, as we read it, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (2008) is more about whether the subaltern can be heard by majoritarian forces. In his formulation of minority histories, however, Chakrabarty brings up yet another important point. After their defeat by the British troops, the Santhal leaders are questioned about the reasons for their violent rebellion and the answer they give is enigmatic: they claim to have acted at the behest of their god, whom they call *thakur*. Chakrabarty comments that “between the insistence of the Subaltern Studies historian that the Santhal is the agent or the subject of his own action and the Santhal’s insistence that it was to their god Thakur that such sovereignty belonged, remains a hiatus separating two radically different experiences of historicity” (Chakrabarty, 1998, p. 477). He goes on to say that “we treat their beliefs as just that, ‘their beliefs’. We cannot write history from within those beliefs. We thus produce ‘good’, not subversive, histories”² (Chakrabarty, 1998, p. 477).

In media such as videogames, the plurality of experiences is key to the gameplay. As such, to fix the parameters of cultural experience is both risky and limiting for the space of possibilities (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003) that videogames have been described as representing. Chakrabarty’s points about minority histories is relevant here. Now that after many years of Game Studies (and after going through the many hoops of the ludology-narratology debates that raged from the late 1990s to the early 2000s: see Frasca, 2003; Murray, 2005), it is by and large conceded that videogames can tell stories. Issues such as race and colonialism in videogame cultures are also beginning to be addressed in recent years. Following the recent postcolonial criticism of videogames, the concept of subalternity has also been introduced in Game Studies. “Subaltern” itself is a term adopted from Antonio Gramsci’s work on hegemony where it refers to social groups who had been othered or marginalised from the established socio-economic system; the term was adapted by the Indian historian Ranajit Guha, who initiated what is called “subaltern studies” as a response to colonial historiography where the writing of history was contingent on the availability of written or printed archival sources and which, consequently, did not represent a vast section of people who do not have access to structures of written archives. The concept was further developed by the entire Subaltern Studies group in multiple ways and besides Spivak’s now famous essay, there has been important work by Partha Chatterjee (2012, 2013), Gyanendra Pandey (2006, 2010) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (1998, 2000, 2013) among others. It is such thinking that has recently been carried into

1. For more on this and the Santhal rebellion of 1855, see Guha (1988).

2. Wherein good histories begun as oppositional, they are focused on undoing exclusion and prioritize incorporation, that is, they seek to find place in the already-existing mainstream narrative while subversive histories critically examine, question and disrupt the existing narrative itself.

Game Studies almost three decades after Spivak published her essay and after almost twenty years of the formal recognition of Game Studies. Why such a delay occurred is a question that merits an altogether separate discussion. In 2016, the player/gamer subaltern was introduced in Souvik Mukherjee's article "Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism" (2016); in this article, Mukherjee's original position is developed on and rethought from two particular perspectives.

The question addressed here is not merely "can the subaltern game?", which is to say "can the subaltern take up controls, make decisions and exercise game choices, and win?", but also: "can the subaltern game-stories reach mainstream media focus?". In a review of DiGRA India's panel proposal abstract on "DiGRA India - Gaming the Sleeping Giant", submitted for the DiGRA –Digital Games Research Association 2022 Conference, the panellists were advised to structure India and Indian game studies research as and within "regional game studies". Paul Martin and Bjarke Liboriussen's essay on "Regional Game Studies" (2016) firstly presents a well thought-out explanation for their usage and choice of the term "region" itself (in comparison to "global," "international," "local," "glocalized," or "situated", for instance). It also provides an excellent rationale for providing space to research from different and diverse regions: "[we] see in regional game studies the potential to inscribe in game studies this progressive sense of place or, to shift into a philosophical vocabulary, to develop an academic field that is sensitive to the complex dynamics between space and place" (Martin & Liboriussen, 2016). However, with reference to the aforementioned review, to pigeonhole already contextualized research inside the general box of "regional game studies" is to demand research from and about the margins to remain peripheral³. There is also an anxiety behind a question that Chakrabarty touches upon and Martin and Liboriussen also ask: "What if the periphery became the centre?" (Martin & Liboriussen, 2016). Though we do not consider the abovementioned review as either ill-intentioned nor lacking in usefulness in a global game studies research perspective, where considering the diversity of various regions is now being recognised as of paramount importance, the deployment of 'regional' as a concept still needs to be more carefully thought through. "Regional", in the example of this review, seems to almost suggest non-Western, where research from the Global North is the norm and anything falling outside of it is relegated to subalternity: this is the positionality of being caught between language and silence(d). It is, therefore, important to rethink the concept to avoid reinforcing the centre-margin binary even further.

As the scenario stands today, research from and about the Global South escapes the margins if it continues to engage with primary sources in/of the Global North; in the case of Game Studies, this still means writing and participating in discourses about games and titles that represent the Global South which are being produced in and distributed from the Global North. This creates a field where even deeply-tied Global South-ist theoretical issues of global capitalism, neocolonialism and postcolonialism are ultimately conducive to discussing the

3. See footnote 2 and Chakrabarty's aforementioned point about good versus subversive histories.

Global North. While the intersection between postcolonialism and Game Studies is still a relatively newer phenomenon, it is of great value to scrutinize the kind of discourse stemming from this rich convergence. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's (2009) study of *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Grand Theft Auto* examines AAA games created in the West in a powerful critique of global capital, its connection to video games, and the networks of association between the virtuality of games and the prominent concerns of the real world. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter present the underside of the global game industry, including critical discussions of atrocities in African mines and the state of Indian e-waste sites. Souvik Mukherjee's (2015, 2016) work on postcolonialism and videogames, with its radical ideas of subversive play, cartography and postcolonialism in games, sheds light on the direct connection between postcolonial critique of games like *Empire: Total War* and *East India Company* and Indian player responses to playing games that have a gameplay navigating colonial history. Mukherjee discusses the uneasy affiliation between the figures of the player and the coloniser/colonized, and how the player, in playing the game, "has to become the Other" and "there is dominant tendency to force a resolution" (Mukherjee, 2016). We would suggest that this tendency is not just an underlying trait of videogames but also games research which struggles to decisively and overtly affiliate postcolonial critique to media production from postcolonial spaces. Dom Ford (2016) utilizes postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) and affect theory to make sense of the player's role in writing history. Another example of a videogame produced in the West and featuring a game-story of empire and colonialism – which Ford (2016) carefully teases through to and directly refers to the scrutiny of subaltern studies – is *Civilization V* (2010). This is a game that can be discussed while keeping in mind Spivak's (1988) contention of "critics who fail to acknowledge their own ideological framework in which they live, observe and write, merely end up generalizing and co-opting subaltern peoples into the Western narrative". In such games, the subaltern is "inextricably suppressed within the game's rules" (in Ford 2016). Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Lundedal Hammar's (2018) edited a "special" collection volume that analyses how games "perpetuate past and present global power structures in relation to inequalities in material wealth, exploitation of labor, and hegemonic articulations of history and the Other" and features studies of videogames including *Age of Empires* (1997), *Far Cry 2* (2008), *Witcher 3* (2007), *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), *Clash of Clans* (2012) and *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (2013). In the introduction to this essential issue, Mukherjee & Hammar discuss how the "treatment of colonialism in video games, barring a few notable exceptions, is marked by a Western and, specifically, late 19th-century imperialist bias" and at the same time, "the past years has seen a rather persistent, albeit unexpected, emergence of a pro-colonial or pro-imperialist discourse in mainstream academia that even justifies the continuance of empire" (p. 1). The various contributors of this issue engage with the

space in between these categories of imperialism and neo-imperialism, the space of postcolonial critique from diverse perspectives, and a majority of the contributors select games produced in the West to discuss the problems of representations of various places and peoples from the Global South, game mechanics, and gaming cultures in and through them. Two years later, Mateusz Felczak (2020) analyzes the cRPG *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire* using a postcolonial framework inspired by Achille Mbembe (2001, 2003, 2019), also includes a reading of Spivak's (1988) argument, which is another example that uses postcolonial criticism to examine the self-conscious narrative of a commercially mainstream game where the subalterns "truly do not speak, as their underprivileged predicament, conditioned both by the colonial subjugation (in this case: by the Rauataians owning the town of Sayuka) and the petrified state of the inequal societal relations effectively alleviates any form of meaningful in-game agency that could alter their state" (Felczak, 2020). To circle back to the introductory passages of this paper, the question remains, whose subaltern is it who is deemed as "silent" in the networks of power and discourse that surround questions of aurality, oriented on the critical examination of silence(d). Would the subaltern call themselves subaltern, if at all? And then, borrowing Chakrabarty's terminology, the question that arises is: is the games discourse creating "good" or subversive histories?

Returning to the issue of regionality, the very construction of the Global North-South binaries has been criticized in academia. Attributing an umbrella location (North/South) to countries that have very distinct and fragmented cultural constructions that homogenizes them into distinct blocks has been questioned by scholars who seek to understand the situation as far more complex. Of course, geographically (in the sense of the position relative to the Equator), the classification of the North-South binary does not hold as many countries such as Australia and New Zealand are considered to belong to the Global North. Further, claims like the ones made by Francis Fukuyama ('the end of history') and Thomas Friedman ('the world is flat') also work against the North-South binary. Nevertheless, others such as Arif Dirlik (2007) are cautious about the term and point to the complexity of the South-South relations. Alfred J. López makes it clear that the Global South is not geographical or even regional and as such the category can also describe subaltern peoples in countries that are affluent:

What defines the global South is the recognition by peoples across the planet that globalization's promised bounties have not materialized, that it has failed as a global master narrative. The global South also marks, even celebrates, the mutual recognition among the world's subalterns of their shared condition at the margins of the brave new neoliberal world of globalization. (López, 2007, p. 3)

Echoing this sentiment, Walter Mignolo describes the Global South as not a geographic location but, rather, "a metaphor that indicates regions of the world at the receiving end of globalization and suffering the consequences" (2011, pp.

184). Taking this into account, Phillip Penix-Tadsen, in his analysis of videogames in the South-South context, clarifies that “the global south is a movable and situational term referring to many areas with internal political and socio-economic divisions as well as previously colonized societies that still endure the effects of colonialism” (Penix-Tadsen, 2019, p. 7). The relevance of the term is, therefore, clear; however, the Global South exists as something very different from and much more than a geographical region. Therefore, speaking of the subaltern in videogames, one needs to go beyond the regional perspectives and to consider certain very important factors that have been left out in recent post-colonial critiques of videogames that (mostly) emerge from the Global North.

Taking the Indian Subcontinent as a case in point, Shantanu Chakrabarti (2017) argues, there is a further North-South divide in terms of the main languages that are spoken; there is the issue of the caste system, which has led to deep and widespread debates and critiques from Dalit Studies; further, there are deep diversities and problems with the ways in which class, gender and religion are addressed within the Global South countries themselves and also in who is rendered subaltern and under which context. It is no surprise that videogames also reflect such issues.

For example, *Unrest* (Pyrodactyl Games, 2014) is a videogame that directly addresses the caste-system prevalent in India: “you play as individuals straddling the social divide of India’s rigid caste system. [...] *Unrest* is not a game that provides easy answers to complicated issues. Instead, you are rewarded for your ability to intelligently weave your way through conversations, suppressing any penchant for a brazen response. Yielding to the social laws is hardly virtuous, but it could keep you breathing” (Woolsey, 2014).

Similarly, Padmini Ray Murray’s game *Darshan Diversion* (Padmini Ray Murray, Joel Johnson and KV Ketan, 2016), which was made during a Global Game Jam 2016, addressed the restrictions that prevented women from entering the temple in Sabarimala, Kerala. According to a commentator, the inspiration for the game was rather complex:

While attempting to conceptualise a game that would fit the theme, Ray Murray came across a news article describing the entry ban at the Sabarimala temple. “There was this amazing quote [...which] said that the only time they would consider allowing women into Sabarimala is when there is a scanner that checks if they are menstruating,” [...] She was also inspired by a woman activist who bragged that she would use helicopters to storm temples that banned female worshippers. (Kulkarni, 2018)

Taking two such hyperbolic positions as influences for the game mechanics, Ray Murray created a platform that revealed the deeper problems in such ritualistic constructions, particularly when gender-related issues are in the forefront. Incidentally, the game’s relevance was revealed when two years later a court ver-

dict (Jamal, 2020) to allow women to enter the temple was opposed massively by protestors, thus revealing the deeply entrenched patriarchy in the region.

Taking into account both gender and religion, despite the bans on *PUB-G* by some Islamic organizations (Batool, 2020), the videogame remains popular and as Umer Hussain et al. contend that Muslim women players of eSports in Pakistan “felt liberated and empowered through online video games, despite showing the white color inferiority complex” (Hussain et al., 2021). Summarizing their claims, the researchers state that “these complex behaviors illustrate the participants’ entrapment in the patriarchal system and the grave infringement of colonization. However, within the entrapment, we found that online competitive video games allow the participants to show their oppositional agency against the normative system” (Hussain et al., 2021). The findings of the survey are complicated and do not restrict themselves only to gender or to colonialism and religion but consider the interactions of all of these factors and the attempt to establish a sense of agency in a world where this is lacking.

These examples from the Indian Subcontinent are merely reflective of a larger set of examples that relate to the subaltern in the Global South. Consider the work by Rhett Loban and Thomas Apperley (2019) on the erasure of Indigenous cultures from Western games and how Loban used mods to rewrite the indigenous into videogames; similarly Vit Sisler’s description of how often Arab producers need to be “exploiting and reversing stereotypical depiction, narrative and gameplay known from European and American games” (Sisler, 2008) is also a case of how certain cultural differences are elided and therefore rendered subaltern. Games in the Global South are increasingly attempting to express their diverse cultures as *A Space for the Unbound* (Mojiken, 2022), a game based on Indonesian rural town life in the ‘nineties does: “It’s unafraid to just be Indonesian, and trusts you to either roll with it, or Google the words you might not understand” (Law, 2023). The game addresses problems such as depression and teenage anxiety, it combines the familiar of Indonesian street food, music and festivals with jarringly explicit paranormal events thus creating a sense of being unsettled.

These stories, however, rarely get told in Game Studies and unfortunately, already, the fledgling postcolonial analyses in the field have become lopsided as they tend to be more and more engaged with AAA titles from the Global North, leaving game creation and production in and from the Global South neglected in the history of game studies and therefore, missing the deep play involved in the diversity of issues, cultures and unsettlings that these games could bring to the field. One wonders if left unattended what this phenomenon would end up creating. Could this be a story that is not so different from the colonialist “non-histories” of the Santhals? A single game-story, really, of postcolonial game studies which have a mere, and yet often overlooked, smattering of videogames from actual postcolonial sites. It is almost as if postcolonialism is something that happens in the Global North while colonialism is something that *happened* to the Global South. This is not to say that one must abandon all

analyses of AAA games or games produced in the Global North. Nor does it mean that engagement with representations of the Other, the subaltern and the Global South can or should be stopped; the authors engage with such analysis (Mukherjee, 2017, 2018, 2022; Rizvi & Chowdhury, 2021) routinely, as it is a practice that is essential to game studies as well as game production, and we will continue to undertake it in this paper as well. Mukherjee (2017) writes about the hybrid subject and identification with the same, "In the videogame *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (*Freedom Cry* here onwards), the player finds himself or herself in the shoes of Adewale, former slave and now a pirate captain. *Freedom Cry*, an add-on to the piracy-adventures of *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, is probably one of the few games where the player takes on such an avatar" (p. 53) and comments on how "identity is a vexed question for the postcolonial subject" (p. 54). The mediation and mediatization of the subaltern in a field of constantly negotiated identity begs the question of not just constructed or construed identities and implementation of a certain idea of subalternity, but of how in reality videogames can reveal so much more about subaltern affinities across the intersections of life, experiences, histories, community, affiliations, and situatedness. This makes way for not just South-South affinities to come to the fore but also to complicate regional affiliations that are, in reality, fractured with differences. Such differences result from one's living amongst a meshwork of gender, class, race, caste, religion and sexuality. Therefore, whither does the subaltern go? Rizvi and Chowdhury (2021) in their double keynote for DiGRA India's inaugural conference in 2021 suggest that it is a compulsory spectrality that is worked upon the 'Other'. Chowdhury brings in autoethnography to talk about the experiences of a brown Bengali woman navigating videogames and online co-op spaces and chat rooms, diversity and female rep, as well as socioeconomic layers to gaming and gameplay in India (and the popularity of mobile games, for instance), while Rizvi discusses the terrains of religion, class and caste in India and its (mis)representation in popular videogames and the need for diverse game production teams, the importance of local consultants, and fandom power and politics by focalizing on the figure of the Indian Muslim in videogames and gaming communities. This challenging of the spectral is also the challenging of generalized notion of what has become a spectre and spectacle rooted in what Siddharta Chakraborti calls the creation of "a need, even desire for continued western intervention" (2015, p. 139) in his chapter on "From destination to nation and back: The hyper-real journey of incredible India". This desire is one that lurks in the subtext of AAA games set in India; Chakraborti studies *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012), *Tomb Raider III* (Eidos Interactive, 2010), *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* (IO Interactive, 2002), Cabela's *Dangerous Hunts 2009* (Fun Labs, 2008) and *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (Treyarch, 2012) but acknowledges that even this selection needs to be problematized.

What this paper is calling for is something not so different from existing postcolonial analyses in game studies but rather a sharper, more inclusive and

intersectional method of doing so. What is being proposed here is a reevaluation of game studies research in the same manner of reevaluations that are happening in studies of media and of the digital outside the arena of game studies. At Digital Diversity 2015, Indian Digital Humanist Padmini Ray Murray remarked that "Your DH is not my DH", stressing that this difference stemming from real, lived experiences in diversity "is a good thing" in that the field doesn't just have a want for it but also an intrinsic need if it has to continue to do the work of Digital Humanities. In 2016, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie famously said "[Beyoncé's] feminism is not mine" and while she respected Beyoncé's use of a sample from her "We should all be feminists" (2013) TED Talk in the album *Beyoncé* (2013), Adichie also describes the "resentment" she felt at Western media's attempt to appropriate her feminism and her work under Beyoncé's figure and brand (in Rogo, 2020). Just as there is a plurality of feminist thought, Adichie stresses that this plurality and its intersectionality is one that should not be subsumed under a singular label. In her 2009 TED talk "The danger of a single story", Adichie⁴ had already begun to articulate what Western media does to the psyche of those who engage in it from non-Western contexts but also to the form and content of the 'story' as a whole. Growing up, the majority of literature Adichie had read were about 'foreign' lands and 'foreign' people and as a young impressionable child, she began to believe that these were the people and places that were allowed to exist in book,

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to... (Adichie, 2009)

It was only when she was able to access literature by Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye that she began to imagine people like herself in her writing. For the South Asian, there is ample representation in videogames, especially when it comes to spatial depiction, however, not all representation is good representation. As an Indian gamer, one has often seen someone who is supposed to be "me" in a place that is supposed to be "my home" in the videogames one plays but more often than not such representation is caught between fantasy or backdrop. Between these twin poles, the Indian finds place as a stereotype or a playground where the player plays *on*. Mukherjee discusses a game popular in India, *Street Fighter II* (Capcom, 1991), and its Indian character, Dhalsim, "portrayed as kicking out in "yogic" posture and as wearing a torn saffron shorts and necklace of skulls so as to emphasize his oriental Indian mystique.

4. It is imperative to note that what Adichie is saying here is something that is symptomatic of a multifaceted position on representation.

He can spew fireballs, levitate and likes curry, and meditation. To add to his image of the oriental, he is very protective of his son Datta and his wife, who rather strangely is named Sari (after the dress worn by Indian women)!" (2016). One of the authors remember playing as Dhalsim with friends, laughing as his character stretched its limbs in superhuman fashion, or watching in awe as he breathed fireballs, wondering if any of them ever related to him or even thought of him as Indian. To the players, Dhalsim is a powerful yet exoticized caricature, a playable character who "loves curry" (in some origin stories, Dhalsim can breathe fire because of his consumption of spicy curry, apparently) and whose name is inspired by an Indian restaurant near Capcom's office in Osaka (*dhal* from lentils and *shim* from Hyacinth beans). Even the nomenclature is one that isn't automatically obvious to actual Indians – *Reddit* user Espada32 commented, "Wow I'm brown and I've never made that connection before lmaoo" (2020). Dhalsim's character went on to inspire Capcom's production and sale of "Dhalsim curry" in 2014. Extremely spicy and on the expensive side, Brian Ashcraft, via *Kotaku*, explains it as "But can you really put a price on Yoga Fire?" (Ashcraft, 2014). The summation of a prominent Indian character into "yoga fire" is a stereotype, a cybertype (Nakamura, 2002) that permeates digital interaction and gaming with singularization of narrative that is perpetuated by popular media, including videogames.

Adichie calls the reduction of the multiplicity of lives and narratives into one single idea of them as the creation and proliferation of "a single story". She shares an anecdote about visiting her family's domestic staff's village and being surprised to see beautiful art in the form of patterned baskets, "I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them" (2009). The dangers of a single-story are not just restricted to being represented as a stereotype but they also encompass the appropriation of creativity, skill, technological know-how and knowledge creation as a luxury not afforded to those from the Global South. Stories are powerful and awfully cruel when they become singular in that the "single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie, 2009). The truth about the Global South is that it is a multitude of stories, stories that represent the diversity of language and script, culture, religion and faith, gender, queerness, and community, and then some. Within the peoples, cultures and histories that live in the stories of the Global South, are more stories, all forced to exist under the same single story, the label of the 'subaltern' and all the elements of "single game-story" that come with it. Just as Adichie's "single story" represents the reduction of multiplicity and diversity of peoples and their lives as a singular 'type' in popular culture and media, this paper points to a derivative concept: the single game-story, the curtailment of different,

intersectional, multiplicitous stories of and about diverse peoples into a single type of narrative about them in and through videogames. This single game-story haunts game studies discourse as well where there continues to be wanting intersection with the stories of South Asia. In the purview of some of the most promising work in videogames, from representations of (Arab) Islam (Sisler 2008) to (Western) queer game studies (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017) and beyond, the single game-story still presents a conundrum where there is little to no intersection with South Asia – a lack that creates, produces, packages and reproduces a singular idea of the Subaltern. The most obvious consequence is the erasure and erosion of the diversity of identity when intersections with, for example, studies of minority religions representation (Rizvi, 2021) or gender and queerness in South Asia (Dasgupta, 2017) or the vibrant Dalit studies discipline (Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016), are not brought to the fore in global game studies. The codified, hyperperipheral, spectral and anti-locale Subaltern is both a remnant and a function of the traditional global power asymmetries that need to be challenged in the discipline. The absence of the plethora of South Asian stories means that at the heart of postcolonial discourse and subaltern studies in and of videogames, there is a lack that both upholds the current discourse and prevents the acknowledgement of game-stories that allow “minority histories” (Chakrabarty, 1997) to populate them, that give space South Asian “sexual subaltern subjects” (Chatterjee, 2018) to reconfigure themselves into, that take note of queer intimacies and belonging in digital cultures and media in India (Dasgupta, 2017), that understand the complexities of South Muslim rep (Rizvi, 2021) and gamer communities, Dalit rep, activism, and the cyberspace (Nayar, 2014), alternative feminist historiographies (Shafiq, 2017), and more.

These stories (and their respective game-stories) of South Asia struggle to make it to the surface as they're often codified into ideas and narratives of a space that exists in fantasies of the pristine past or fears of an irreparably violent present. One can choose from amongst many videogames and still reach the same end result—the single game-story. *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* (Naughty Dog, 2017) presents Belur and Halebidu, lived, real town and city, but in an Indian gameworld of lush green forests and exotic treasure and temples reminiscent of pop culture tropes of a pre-modern, pristine India-land of elephants and snake charmers, against the backdrop of a violent Civil War, imaginings that are constantly created, catalogued, programmatized, distributed and reproduced as the single game-story of India. This game-story is then magnified and made to co-opt the diversity of stories of South Asia and present South Asia as a subaltern monolith. This monolith is celebrated and advertised for housing the single game-story, just as *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy's* Playstation page lauds that the game is “an exotic mix of urban, jungle and ancient ruins environments” (Playstation.com, 2017). This is the South Asian single game-story in a nutshell and why it is imperative to puncture this narrative with the variety of game-stories about and, more importantly, from the subcontinent.

Indian videogames, themselves, have come a long way from the single game-story as described here. Rather than having India as a backdrop for the very interesting and important actions of protagonists who are usually not from the region or are non-resident expatriates (as Ajay Ghale in *Far Cry4* is), there is an increasing number of games made in the region where the focus is on a multitude of issues relevant to the region rather than on a protagonist with a white-saviour complex who is out to save the world with the superior knowledge, resources and culture that the West has to offer. Some of these games address problems that have never before been tackled in the videogame medium; for example, *Missing: A Game for a Cause* (Chakraborty & Kejriwal, 2019) is about women-trafficking and is set in one of the largest red-light areas in Kolkata, India: Sonagacchi. The protagonist is a trafficked woman trying to escape her life as a prostitute. Marcus Toftedahl et al note that "As stated by *Missing*'s lead game designer, the story based on interviews with trafficking victims was the starting point for the game production and then finding game mechanics to fit this narrative" (Toftedahl et al., 2018, p. 19). In itself, the game (also available in Bengali) is the product of a multiplicity of narratives and as a serious game, it can compare with other indie games that do not have a single game-story such as *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios, 2014) and *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013). Another example is Studio Oleomingus's game series that contains titles such as *Timruk* (2015), *In the Pause between the Ringing* (2019) and *The Indifferent Wonder of Edible Places* (2020). As the developers state:

With our games we attempt to study colonial power structures and the histories that they occlude and how interactive fiction might be used to pollute a single reductive record of the past or of a people. We are keenly interested in languages, translations and questions of authorship, of bodies and territories, and of transactions and movements across borders. But most of all we study stories or narratives or fragments of data that can be recorded in the form of hypertext. (Studio Oleomingus, 2014)

The focus, here, is evidently on fragments rather than a single story or reductive record. In one of the games by Studio Oleomingus, the people of the fictitious city of Kayamgadh cannot or do not speak because they fear that their interlocutors' voices and speech will alter their identity. In the narrative, ostensibly discovered by a colonial official, Charles Henry Connington, the people of Kayamgadh are rendered subaltern as their stories can never be known; however, it is not that they cannot speak but that they will not. This is because speech itself becomes an aporia here. Studio Oleomingus's games are open-ended and fragmentary and their critique of colonialism is interspersed with multiple other perspectives. Two other recent examples come to mind and they are both about memory and forgetting in many different ways. *Forgotten Fields*⁴ (Frostwood Interactive, 2020) literally addresses this in its title and is about the

protagonist trying to get over his writer's block by revisiting locations from his childhood. *Venba* (Visai Games, 2023) has a somewhat different way of approaching the question of remembering - an expatriate Indian family in Canada reconstructs their memories of home through a recipe book, parts of which are lost. Another example of a game about memory and identity-formation is Afrah Shafiq's *Nobody Knows for Certain* (2023) which is about the popularity of Soviet children's books in India from the 1960s to the 1980s and the way in which these books are remembered by generations of Indians whose childhood and identities they influenced. Such memories too are multiple and fuzzy and just like the beginning of many Russian folktales, the title of the game testifies against the single story: nobody knows for certain.

These game-stories are amorphous, loud and messy. They speak to take apart and repurpose language and memory. They poke fun at easy binaries and instead ask "whose subaltern is it anyway?". These game-stories puncture the domination of the single game-story and instead reveal the double marginalization of relegated subaltern and singular by hegemonic forces that underpin the power networks of academia and game development, making easy conclusions impossible. Subversive game-stories tell subversive histories, not clean, 'good' histories. This requires acknowledgment of the very unique intersectionalities that exist in regions across the Global South, of which South Asia has been mostly overlooked in the past decade of game studies. This paper is a call for an updated, more inclusive acknowledgement of these oversights and the required remedies.

Game practice, the practice of design, development, creation, production and dissemination of videogames and their game-stories, as well as gameplay and game criticism, must become intersectional and more self-reflexive. Game practice as intersectionality stems from a desire to imagine the technology and design of games beyond the centre-periphery binary, and instead to aspire to be approach what the Design Beku founders described as their "decolonial, local, and ethical" approach (Ray Murray et al, 2021). Bagalkot's manifesto for "Infrastructuring for Community Care" in India, is a reminder that the ideal is to "democratize the design of digital technological tools" and "locate it as part of communities and their everyday life" (in Ray Murray et al, 2021). Game practice which is able to (re)locate and situate itself in the everyday lives of people from diverse locales must also tap into a "Place-Based Network of "Care" (Srivatsa in Ray Murray et al, 2021) and champion collaboration with grassroots level creators. It is not enough to be postcolonial, game practice must embody decoloniality⁵, and game studies must actively highlight decolonial game practices from the Global South to combat the proliferation of the anti-locale Subaltern that haunts the postcolonial discourse in game studies presently.

5. Armaan Sandhu, on the development of *Forgotten Fields*, talks about Goa, India, as the main inspiration for the game, "It also hit me that I knew Goa and the vibes inside out, whereas I was relatively new to Mumbai. If I decided to make a game set in Goa, I knew I'd nail the atmosphere. At that moment I just knew I had to make a story based here, related to the situation of people moving on, and combined with the earlier idea of a creative block, it all eventually came together to form the seed for *Forgotten Fields*" (Doke, 2021).

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The many facets of culture in digital games policy: the EU dimension

ABSTRACT

State supports for digital games production within the European Union are subject to State aid rules, which are ostensibly justified on cultural grounds under the terms of the treaties of the European Union. So far, there are few decisions granting approval by the European Commission on aid regimes for video games (or digital games) in contrast to the extensive number of decisions for other audio-visual forms, such as film. The Commission's policies towards digital games, as can be gleaned from an analysis of the current corpus of decisions, illustrates a complex and pragmatic approach to the digital games sector, one that considers games to be cultural, but not quite as cultural as film. This article places the Commission decisions into a wider context of discourses on the cultural and creative industries and illustrates the significance of EU State aid policy to the digital games sector. The study also emphasises the importance of seeing State aid policy as a form of cultural policy and it highlights how culture as a concept may operate as an empty cipher to be filled with meaning.

1. INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL POLICIES AND THE DIGITAL GAMES INDUSTRY

The digital games industry is a relevant sector of the globalised media economy. Issues of scale, at the regional, the national, and the supranational scale, also continue to be important within this globalised digital games sector. This article focuses on state supports for the cultural production of digital games or videogames within a national/regional and supranational context, taking policy within the European Union ("EU") as its focus. Supports in the forms of tax credits/incentives are common within other creative industries, such as the film industries, with Olsberg SPI cultural consultants identifying over 90 such incentives (Olsberg SPI, 2022). They are less common in an EU context, with digital games incentives which have been approved by the European Commission (Commission) identified in a number of EU member states, including France, Italy, Denmark, Belgium, and certain regions of Germany and Ireland. In addition, schemes operate in other jurisdictions which have not come under the Commission's requirements for notification. These are not considered in

this article as they have not required approval by the Commission under the particular terms of EU law considered here.

As such incentives are considered a form of State aid, that is, they operate as an aid from the state to incentivise particular forms of industry within a national or regional boundary, they are deemed incompatible with the core tenets of the European treaties. Incentives may distort trade within the EU. Article 107 (1) (ex. Article 87 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (“TFEU”)), which holds that:

Save as otherwise provided in the Treaties, any aid granted by a Member State or through State resources in any form whatsoever which distorts or threatens to distort competition by favouring certain undertakings or the production of certain goods shall, in so far as it affects trade between Member States, be incompatible with the internal market.

Therefore, such aids require approval from the Commission, either under the general block exemption regime or under cultural or industrial grounds (on State aid, law see Craig & De Burca, 2020; Piernas López, 2015). This paper looks at EU policy for cultural incentives approved under Article 107(3)(d) TFEU, which allows for approval of “aid for a cultural rationale”. This study interrogates the complexity of the rationalisations for cultural policies that support regional/national production in the context of an industry that is understood as global, and upon cultural grounds for a sector that tends to be framed within a creative industries or industrial discourse. In this way, the understanding of the operation of the digital games industry as a form of culture unravels key assumptions around national culture, national policies, and the very understanding of the sector as part of the cultural fabric of society.

While there is extensive discourse on the significance of digital games as a representational part of the cultural and creative industries, an interrogation of how digital games may be understood as a cultural form is underexplored in policy discourse. This is significant because the policy decisions that serve to support digital games production operate to shape the form, nature, agents, and ecology of game making, distribution and engagement. This article interrogates how the consideration of games as a cultural artefact operates within funding policy discourses, particularly for the provision of tax incentives for production. Specifically, this study interrogates how this policy is instrumentalised within both national discourses and the policy discourses of the EU, to the extent that the conception of culture can be seen as an empty cipher that is subject to a cacophony of meanings.

Policy definitions of what constitutes a game need to be taken seriously. Much of the literature on videogames/digital games addresses the cultural and social significance of the games industry and takes seriously the structural contexts within which games are produced and played. Where this article identifies

a gap is in the analysis of policy understandings, at both national and EU level, of the cultural nature of digital games, more specifically within the rationalisations for state aids for cultural production. The distinctions identifiable in the development of tax incentives for film and video games shed light on the motivations and ideologies underpinning such tax incentive policies.

This article therefore explicitly considers the cultural aspect of games as identified and defined through policy rationales for State aids, as inherently part of the industrial understanding of games, rather than oppositional thereto. The cultural and industrial/economic justifications for the introduction of support measures for digital games development are not discrete but constitutive in a continuously evolving process. The games as culture debates in EU policy circles is an important discussion to unravel precisely because it acts as a way of thinking about the role of policy towards culture more broadly, and the uneasy and reductive industry/culture debates. Culture and economic rationales for policy must not be seen as distinct, but as co-constituted. Cultural goals are based on economic rationales: for example, goals that seem cultural or social are in fact driven by political goals. There is merit in identifying and unravelling these goals. However, putting such goals into distinct containers fails to understand their co-dependent nature.

To develop these key arguments, this article interrogates the body of Commission's decisions approving State aid regimes for games under a "cultural rationale". Before carrying out analysis of these decisions, it examines the literature in the context of understanding of games as both a form of culture and as a valuable global industrial sector. In particular, this study suggests that State aid decisions by the Commission are a form of cultural policy and should be examined in this light. In order to identify some of the key drivers of State aid policy development within the framework of State aid as a form of *cultural policy*, the study employs a critical discourse analysis methodology underpinned by law and political economy theories. This serves the aim of unravelling the key drivers of policy from a Commission perspective. In essence, the policy rationales driving the Commission's approval of digital games tax incentives or credits are multiple, including cultural, political, and economic drivers. The terms of the legal requirements of EU law as contained in Article 107(3)(d) TFEU require that aid be for a cultural rationale. However, pragmatically, the understanding of what might constitute cultural aid for the digital games sector is driven by wider policy considerations of a globalised industrialized sector. This pragmatic approach on the part of the Commission acknowledges that culture does not exist in a vacuum.

2. THE LITERATURE ON GAMES AS A FORM OF CULTURE

The academic literature on the cultural aspects of digital games addresses the concept of games as producer of symbolic meaning, and places that discussion within context of the political economy of production. However, the produc-

tion of symbolic meaning does not take place in a political or societal vacuum, and therefore it is important to consider the different contexts under which games have meaning. There is scope for more nuanced analysis of digital games as a cultural and political form in the policy discourse and particularly to interrogate the impact of state aid policies on digital games production.

There is undeniably a broad recognition of the social and cultural significance of games. For Nichols, games are “now recognised as a unique embodiment of culture worth of study” (2014, p.3). Muriel & Crawford’s intervention in the games as culture debate highlights how “video game culture is diverse, complex, and constantly evolving” (2018, p. 2) and considers that games provide a lens from which we can analyse wider social issues. For them, “video games are therefore understood as an expression of life and culture in late modernity” (ibid). For O’Donnell, “game development is not ‘just’ software development, video games are not just games and the video game industry is not the software industry”; as such, any attempts to collapse one into the other fails to heed the, cultural, social, technological and political-economic system within which game development is rooted (2012, p. 17).

However, while there is broad consensus that games are significant as a cultural form, this article goes further to interrogate what this stance means within the operation of EU state aid law and what the implications are of the particular meaning(s) associable with national games production industries. It is contended that the Commission, in their role of approver of state aid regimes, has developed a particular understanding of how a digital games production industry might fit within a particular understanding of what is sufficiently “cultural” to fall under the requirements of Article 107(3)(d): that is, that the state aid measures constitute a form of aid to promote culture. Therefore, the Commission’s understanding from a policy perspective of how and in what sense digital games might be understood as coming within and falling outside that understanding of the notion of “culture” is of enormous significance to the European games industries, given the increasingly important role of state aids (including tax credits, expenditures, incentives and direct grants) to production.

The complexity of the categorisations of video games and of culture are described by Navarro-Remesal as “two complex and messy concepts” at once “ubiquitous and deceitful”, in their familiarity and as holding multiple meanings (2021, p.1). Cultural policy as a field acknowledges the complexity and interdisciplinary inherent therein (Durrer/Miller/O’Brien, 2017; Gray, 2010). For this work, the definition of culture is important from a policy perspective as it affects what is to be funded. It is an explicit finding that taxation policy in the form of state aid policy is a form of policy with attendant consequences.

While it is acknowledged broadly that digital games are an important cultural form, within the particular state aid policy discussions the interrogation of games as representative of a national culture brings to the fore complex issues of national identity, national culture, and the artificiality of state-imposed

boundaries. Certainly, the study of national games cultures is important in the face of a problematic elision of the local, regional, or national in a reification of the globalised games economy. While games are taken as a part of a globalised economy, national borders are still important. Fung's intervention into the consideration of games in their global context acknowledges the importance of the national, holding that "when we talk about the industrial aspect of culture, we then directly refer to cultural production—which presumably has a wide distribution and consumption—and national policies that govern, restrict, or enhance creative industries early in the twenty-first century" (2016, p.2). An insider-analysis of EU policies in regard to specific forms of national/regional games production through the use of local incentives for production illustrates the continued importance of the identification of borders within both national production and EU policy. For Consalvo, "even as the culture of games is losing, or has lost, any claim to an 'originary' national culture, capital seeks to keep some boundaries in place to channel this flow" (2006, p.133). Taking this into account, such an interrogation of national taxation policies for the digital games industry, as shaped by the EU state aid regulation regime, illustrates the continued significance of the concept of the national, but in a way that is shaped by the forces of capitalism.

In the body of Commission decisions approving state aids for digital games, there is an identifiable rhetoric around protecting national/regional industries from the vagaries of the free market, on the understanding that such games are less likely to be consumed as they do not meet with the broad USA/Asian trends of the industry. In this way, approvals of national State aids for national games industries are framed as a culture-versus-industry dichotomy. Games are increasingly accepted as part of the cultural industries (Kerr, 2017). Muriel and Crawford develop this argument to illustrate how games are following in the path of other industries such as film to establish their cultural credentials, and as "a relevant cultural manifestation of contemporary society" (2018, p.47). However, like all cultural and creative industries, the games sector has become increasingly embedded in capitalism. For Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, "it is therefore hardly surprising that in several registers ... the emphasis is on the subsumption of gaming by capital" (2021, p. 373). It is not only that games are subsumed by capital, but games as a cultural form are subsumed by a politics of capital. Nichols states that it is imperative that games studies pay attention to "the institutional nature of the commodities and texts being studied" (2014, p.10) and points out that "video games are cultural commodities – the products of a cultural industry organised through the capitalist exchange of goods" with a potential for "considerable ideological influence" (p. 6). Therefore, we should take seriously the industrial conditions under which they are produced. This article emphasises however that we also need to take seriously the converse position, that is, the policymakers' understanding of what constitutes a cultural form and thus what is worthy of support through taxation policies.

3. METHODS: A LAW AND POLITICAL ECONOMY RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

This paper explicitly considers State aid policy as a form of cultural policy, taking on board Paquette & Beauregard's observation that "cultural policy is often contextualised as an element of another policy sector's strategy or as a piece of a much broader policy program" (2017, p.29). This analysis uses both critical discourse and policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009) to interrogate the policy decisions taken by the Commission towards the games sector. The use of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to interrogate Commission decisions on State aids is particularly suited to the analysis of regulatory decisions, as it identifies different rationales driving the framing of such regimes for games. At its heart, CDA interrogates the role of language and communication within society. Fairclough holds that "the operationalisation of discourses is always subject to conditions which are partly extra-discursive", 2013, p.20). In their interrogation of the relevance of critical discourse studies to law, Cheng and Machin (2023) hold that "the law shapes, legitimizes and naturalizes social practices" (p. 244). It is the aim of this article to identify those extra-discursive concepts that shape and legitimise cultural policy approaches to state aids.

The analysis of Commission policy is further shaped by Law and Political Economy (LPE) theory as a method (Blalock, 2022; Britton-Purdy *et al*, 2020; Harris & Varellas, 2020; Wilkinson & Lokdam, 2018). LPE is an emerging field of legal scholarship that seeks to advance scholarship on the intersection of law and political economy in a way that acknowledges the constitutive role of the state and market towards issues of power and democracy. In this way, it aligns with the CDA methodology outlined above, particularly in the recognition that law is constitutive of social practices and society. A critical examination of State aid policy from a national and EU perspective for cultural and creative production offers much to the LPE project in that it foregrounds the complexity of state/market relations and is intimately imbricated with questions of power and representation. This interrogation of the spatial dynamics of State aid policies looks at the commodification of space of nation space/region in policy considerations. For Soja, "we must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology" (1989, p. 6).

4. THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND STATE AID REGULATION

This section addresses the significance of framing State aid policy as a form of cultural policy within EU discourse. The framing of State aid policy as something "more" than administrative is seen in Ferri's observation that State aid has become politicised (Ferri, 2015, p. 129) and echoed in Piernas López's work (2015). This section briefly covers the development of EU policy towards the cultural and creative industries to further explore this framing in the context of State aid regulation. This paper looks at how State aid policy from an EU

perspective frames digital games as both cultural and industrial, but takes a step further to think about what those complex terms mean. It posits that the uneasy position of digital games within State aid policy as somewhat cultural is significant in the understanding both of the positioning of games as part of the cultural fabric of society and of the role of culture and the cultural industries (howsoever defined) to the integration process of the EU.

Tax incentives (or reliefs or credits: to offer alternative terms) are a form of State aid which may tend to distort or threaten to distort the fundamental freedoms of the EU, and thus challenge the EU project. As such, they are not allowed under the terms of the EU treaties, save under specific rules. For our purposes, Article 107(3)(d) TFEU provides for explicit exemption for cultural projects. State aid policy of the Commission has been increasingly regulated since the 2000s as part of the neoliberal consolidation of competition, with the Commission acquiring what Buch-Hansen & Wigger define as “an enhanced grip on the course of the member states’ national industrial policies” (2011, p. 80). However, while other forms of State aid might be increasingly regulated, the broad thrust of State aid for audio-visual industries is to allow expanded forms of aid for cultural rationales.

State aid policy is usually considered within the purview of competition policy and thus concerned with the issues around the internal market of the EU. It is contended here that State aid policy is, as a “living instrument” actively deployed in accordance with the main policy priorities of the Commission. It is thus more correctly thought of as a cultural policy as well as competition policy, given the significance of the EU State aid regime in the shaping of national cultural/industrial audio-visual policies in individual member states. This paper analyses the spatial dimension to policy development towards digital games from multiple perspectives, including the relationship with the space of the nation-state (thus bringing into play both the “value” of the nation-state, of the EU as a concept and raises issues around legitimacy). It also interrogates the cultural space that is brought into being through representation via media products produced within the EU – how are these shaped by policies at the EU level, particularly State aid policies. In this context, spatialization refers to the way states reconstruct the national space to include within the boundaries of the national territory, actors and activities which may, in fact, originate from outside.

State aids threaten the integrity of the European Union’s fundamental freedoms, by introducing restrictions along national grounds that destabilise the free movement of goods and services within the EU’s borders. In keeping with a change in approach towards regulation of State aid, there has been an identifiable shift in perception of the approach of the EU towards the cultural sector. This interrogation of State aid as pragmatic, in Pauwels (2014) terms, highlights the multiplicity of values underpinning State aid policy from both the perspective of the EU Commission as the institution of the EU with competence in

this sector and a nation-state perceptive. On cultural policy, certain observers have identified a “paradigmatic shift” (Littoz-Monnet, 2015, p.25) within the EU around issues of audio-visual cultural policy, with Craufurd Smith identifying a shift towards “an industrial policy for Europe’s cultural and creative sectors, rather than a cultural policy for the EU” (Craufurd Smith, 2015, p.22).

We can trace how policy framings of the role of culture within the EU has shifted from its earliest perception as “outside” the purview of the EU (or EEC) and solely the domain of the individual Member States to an instrumentalist view of culture as operating within a political context to assist in establishing and underpin a common European culture, and encapsulated in the EU motto “United in Diversity”; and to a current iteration of culture as having both economic and social potential, albeit within a knowledge or creativity framework that is increasingly subject to market forces. Psychogiopoulou acknowledges the dual role of culture, holding that “the fact that the EU cultural policy is simultaneously a cultural and an economic, social and political project remains the case nowadays, although admittedly the economic dimension has gained much weight” (2015, p.238).

From one perspective within EU discourse, culture is seen as a competence of the individual member states. However, as Mattocks describes, EU cultural policy governance is simultaneously peripheral and “symbolically powerful” (2017, p. 397). Culture in various manifestations is also simultaneously industrially, socially, and politically significant. It is the perception of culture as an empty cipher that allows for multiple instrumentalizations of the concept of culture, from an industrial and political perspective. Looking at games through this lens sheds light on mixed role of culture within the EU through analysis of the role of State aid actions by the Commission towards cultural forms. For Mattocks, the fragmentation of EU policy for culture is in part because of the political sensitivity of culture, at once paradoxically linked to furthering European integration but constrained by subsidiarity and national competence (p.407). Therefore, we see a continuing instrumentalization of games as a form of culture.

The political sensitivities of EU cultural policy have led to a complex understanding of the role of culture. A useful intervention is the identification of a pragmatic discourse by Pauwels. This discourse starts not from rhetorical question of what Europe can do for culture but rather from what culture can do for the economy (Pauwels, 2014, p. 118). The pragmatic discourse acknowledges the internal diversity of the EU and illustrates what Pantel describes as a “conscious legitimacy-building strategy on the part of the European Commission and the European Parliament” (2005, p. 60). Pauwels describes the pragmatic discourse in the following terms:

If the political-rhetorical discourse appears too utopian and the narrowly formalistic discourse too categorical, European intervention in the cultural sector, in this case the audio-visual sector, will then indeed actually be realized along pragmatic

lines. The pragmatic discourse is situated somewhere between the formalistic and the political-rhetorical discourse (Pauwels, 2015, p. 117).

Echoing what we can identify as instrumentalism of culture for political rationales, Calligaro holds that “culture therefore has a dual nature, oscillating between symbolic and material spheres and between intrinsic value and market value, thus raising a series of economic, social, and identity-based issues for those actors involved in its governance” (2017, pp. II-III).

The following sections trace the EU policy developments towards games as a cultural form as seen in State aid policy. It identifies key policy developments, most notably the exclusion of games from the 2013 Cinema Communication, the development of Commission decision on State aids “by analogy” of the Communication, and in particular traces trends in the decisions taken towards State aids within different individual member states. Crucially, there is evidence of a distinction between how film, and thus the film industry, is understood as a cultural form worthy of preservation, and how the games industry is required to identify a market failure for particular “nationally” inflected games that are less likely to succeed on the global market. From an ontological perspective, the definition of what is a game is complex (Stenros, 2017). But while Stenros provides a definition of what a game is from a ludological perspective, it is equally important to look at how policymakers define what constitutes a game that is worthy of funding via State aid regimes. From a policy perspective, the definition of what constitutes a game worthy of support through tax incentives is not driven by ontological complexity, but by alternative goals that we can think of as pragmatic (following Pauwels).

The Commission’s own soft power document, the 2013 Cinema Communication, applies to various audio-visual cultural formats including film, but, in the revision process from 2011 to 2013 culminating in the final form of the 2013 Cinema Communication, explicitly rejected inclusion of games. As it states:

Conversely, although games may represent one of the fastest-growing form of mass media in the coming years, not all games necessarily qualify as audio-visual works or cultural products. They have other characteristics regarding production, distribution, marketing, and consumption than films. Therefore, the rules designed for film production cannot apply automatically to games. [...] Consequently, this Communication does not cover aid granted to games (Commission, 2013, para 24).

5. ANALYSIS OF SELECT COMMISSION DECISIONS ON DIGITAL GAMES STATE AID REGIMES

Six member states in the EU (France, Denmark, Germany Bavaria/North Rhine Westphalia, Belgium, Italy, and Ireland) have introduced incentives or credits with approval from the Commission under the State aid regime. Other jurisdictions have introduced similar regimes either under *de minimis* rules or

by application of the General Block Exemption Relief process (GBER). These are not analysed in this article. In addition, the United Kingdom obtained approval for the Video Games Tax Relief in 2014. While post-Brexit UK is no longer part of the EU, the digital games tax initiative approved by the Commission in 2014 is analysed as part of the corpus of decisions as it is of particular interest in thinking through key concepts explored here around national policies towards the creative industries. Several additional decisions are extensions, prolongations, or amendments of previous approvals.

The following analysis takes the decisions in broadly chronological order, highlighting the shifting understanding of the cultural status of games within the decision-making process of the Commission. It is particularly interesting to note the shift in perception from viewing games as a lesser cultural form to a more nuanced understanding of games as a cultural form.

The Commission was faced with considering the cultural nature of games in 2006 with the notification by France of their proposed tax relief (C47/2006). The Commission notified the application in 2006 under Article 108 on several grounds to allow for submissions by the parties concerned. The Commission considered that while certain video games might constitute cultural products within the meaning of Article 87(3)(d) (now Article 107(3)(d)), concerns were raised that some of the examples provided to the Commission by the French authorities suggested that the criterion could be applied overly broadly. The Commission was also concerned that the requirement of eligibility based on strength and quality of concept and contribution to expressing European cultural diversity and creativity could be broadly interpreted. In a telling indictment on the Commission's then view of the role of games, the Commission were concerned that the conditions of the proposed aid were not restrictive enough as "the criterion of the quality and originality of the concept could, moreover, be used to select video games that are good fun rather than actually cultural" (para 2, 2006). The approval of the aid in 2007 followed submissions by interested parties (including TIGA, GAME, EGDF) to the Commission's emphasis on the cultural nature of games, as cited in para 36 of the 2007 approval. As highlighted by Kerr (2013), submissions by certain representative bodies argued that video games were not cultural in an attempt to avoid content and access regulations applicable to cultural industries in Europe (p.274).

The selective nature of the Commission's approach to games is seen in the assumption that games are primarily a form of software and only sometimes constitute cultural products. The decision states that "De même, le fait que les jeux vidéo puissent être considérés comme des logiciels plutôt que comme des produits audiovisuels n'affecte en rien le fait que certains d'entre eux puissent également être considérés comme des produits culturels au sens de l'article 8" ("Similarly, the fact that video games can be considered software rather than audio-visual products does not affect the fact that some of them may also be considered as cultural products within the meaning of Article 8") (para 64).¹

1. Translation by the Author.

Since then, various prolongations and extensions have amended the French games tax credit regime to make it more competitive, raising the rate to 30%, doubling the tax credit ceiling from €3M to €6M) and increasing European subcontracting expenses that can be taken into account (€1M to €2M).

Moving onto the Commission approach to the application of the UK, the proposal to introduce a video games tax relief (VGTR) was being lobbied for in the UK for some time. While the tax relief was finally approved in an amended format in 2014, upon the initial submission for approval the Commission again initiated the procedure under Article 108 (2) TFEU following notification of the UK of intention to introduce a tax relief for video games. By initiating this procedure, the Commission indicated that they doubted whether the measure respected the general legality principles, i.e., that it was necessary, proportionate, and well-designed, that the aid was directed towards a cultural product, and that it worked to balance this with the effects on trade and competition within the EU. In the Commission's stated opinion, as set out in the notification of initiation of investigation, it considered that the proposed aid may not be necessary (thus not complying with general legality) and that the proposed territorial conditions to be attached to the aid may not be necessary or proportionate given that "video games can (and often are) developed by people working on computers in different countries" (recital 20 notification). This opinion of the Commission failed to recognise the complexity of the video games industry, which is often based around creative clusters. The Commission questioned the necessity of implementing the tax relief, given that the video games sector was the fastest growing form of mass media; however, it accepted the UK statement that there was market failure for culturally specific British games and finally approved the aid subject to certain amended conditions. However, despite such an acknowledgement, the public press in the UK provided a different framing of the tax credit scheme. For Webber, the media rhetoric was seen as an opportunistic industrial framing of credit advantages, rather than being genuinely aimed at the development of culturally specifically British games (Webber, 2020).

In Denmark, measures implemented in 2017 illustrate a narrow understanding of the nature of digital games, arising at least in part because of the primarily social rather than industrial nature of the proposed Danish scheme. Granted in 2017, the objectives of the measure were "to promote Danish video games as a culture-bearing medium and to strengthen the cultural qualities of video games for play and learning" (SA.45735, para 2). The smaller market and higher economic risks within the Danish sector mean that "culturally significant games" (para 3) experience difficulties compared to games with more globalised content. The aid takes the form of a direct grant and thus does not operate as a tax incentive, like other schemes discussed here. However, it is relevant to consider from the perspective of the Commission's analysis of the scheme as a cultural State aid, that is, the consideration of the artistic and cultural nature of the game. To qualify for the Danish scheme, there a cultural assessment is

performed by an independent expert committee. The grant is subject to the condition that “the game production must contain a unique artistic or technical effort that contributes to the advancement of Danish game development as an art form and a culture” (para 17). For the project to benefit for the scheme, it must be released in a Danish version, and key creative and technical team members must either be resident or have a “substantial and significant connection to Danish gaming art or gaming culture” (para 17). In certain cases, the language requirement must be waived, but in a co-production, the Danish co-producer must hold distribution rights within Denmark. The project must be evaluated positively on cultural, originality, implementation, and responsibility criteria. The cultural value criterion means the game must be “outstanding” (para 20) on one of four criteria, which are aesthetic, educational, social, and of Danish relevance. Implementation relates to quality of craftsmanship and realisability of the project. Responsibility includes transparency in payments, responsible handling of personal information, social responsibility in handling chat function, and enhanced focus on responsibility if aimed at children. Again, we see an emphasis on cultural content, with the Commission’s assessment of the measure on cultural grounds believing that only games with “significant cultural or educational content” (para 46) can be supported by the scheme. The 2019 prolongation and amendment of the Danish scheme provides for a higher aid intensity, an overall budget increase and prolongation of the term, but does not provide for significant changes to the format of the scheme.

In 2017 (Commission Decision), Germany applied for the approval of a measure aimed at “the development of high-quality, culturally or pedagogically valuable digital games and innovative, interactive media projects with a games element” (para 2.1(2)). The selective criteria (or cultural test) proposed evaluating projects on criteria of cultural context and cultural content, and the effect on a cultural or creative hub in Bavaria, or artistic, creative, or technological innovation. Described by the Commission as an “extensive selection procedure” (para 42) to ensure alignment with cultural goals of the scheme, the Commission pointed out how the conditions of the scheme “puts emphasis on the cultural content of the game, its innovative character and its cultural affiliation with the Bavarian games and/or educational community” (para 43). While a loan scheme rather than a tax credit, the narrow considerations of what constitutes cultural digital games is of interest.

In 2019, the German authorities notified to the Commission a direct grant scheme for German games. The scheme was aimed at game production with a cultural link to Germany or the EU, with an assessment that small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany often focus on “culturally and pedagogically valuable games and thus become producers and interpreters of cultural assets and heritage” (para 2.1(4)). The selection criteria were similar to the other German schemes and thus the Commission held that the “selection process ensures that only digital games of high quality, which are culturally or educationally

valuable, can be supported under the scheme. It emphasises the cultural content of the game, its innovative character and its cultural affiliation with Germany or German culture” (para 35).

In Italy, a decision on the Italian tax credit for video games of cultural value was taken in 2021 (SA63373). The Italian Commission took a more nuanced approach to the sector. It acknowledged the cultural nature of the digital games industry and illustrated a pragmatic recognition of how to support national or local industries. The pragmatic recognition of the globalised nature of the games industry is shown by the Commission’s statement that “by increasing Italy’s international competitiveness in the sector, the Scheme contributes to the strengthening of Europe’s digital audiovisual sector” (para 2). There is an assumption by the Commission that video games with local (i.e., Italian) content are high-risk compared to “productions characterised by content in line with international market trends”, i.e., North American and Asian (para 3). Aid is subject to conditions of Italian nationality as assessed by a points-based approach based primarily on those working on the development team, with points for Italian or dialect language, and territorial base/location base in EEA (80%) and 20% in Italy and of cultural value. Cultural value is assessed by a points-based system based on the origin of content, narrative development, originality, innovation in software or technology, audio-visual experience, and production processes. The incentives also consider quality, originality, and technological and artistic innovation as requirements.

While there is a lot to unpack on the conditions, e.g., that cultural value is measured on contents, technological innovation and production location spend or spend on artistic matters, this is in fact a pragmatic way of thinking about how to establish cultural value rather than taking a quality based subjective approach. We might think of it as an objective evaluation of potential cultural value rather than a subjective identification of a particular manifestation of cultural value. The Commission is careful not to explicitly impute a singular view of what is culture. The Italy scheme conditions are to ensure that the aid is for a cultural purpose. We see in the Commission decision the development of slippage between production issues and the cultural nature of the games sector with the assumption that a lack of local production means a lack of local games. Therefore, it is believed in this approach that the aid will increase the diversity of supply, in what sounds like a potentially valid assumption.

In 2019, Belgium proposed to extend the existing tax shelters to artistic/educational video games (Decisions SA.55046: Walimage and SA49947: VAF Gamefonds). These initiatives were aimed at what were considered European video games, that is principally made with authors/creative collaborators resident in Belgium or other EU member states, or by producers/co-producers in the EU / European Economic Area. The justification offered by Belgium was that many of the games developers were small enterprises, that games were a

risky business, and that financial impediments represented an obstacle for development of local knowledge and development (para 17).

The Berlin-Brandenburg loans scheme was notified by the German authorities in April 2022. Again, the proposed scheme is relatively narrow, aiming to support “the development and production of high quality, cultural or pedagogical digital games and interactive media projects” (para 2.1(2)). The conditions broadly followed the earlier Bavarian scheme. While this 2002 scheme is a loan rather than a tax credit, it is considered as a State aid and thus is of interest to the overall discussion in this article.

In an interesting development in this area, in 2019 Belgium notified the Commission of a proposal to extend an existing tax shelter for the audio-visual production of video games (Decision SA.54817). In April 2020 the Commission informed Belgium of its intention to open initiate a procedure under Article 108(2) TFEU to interrogate the compatibility of the proposed scheme for games with the internal market. The Commission pointed out that the proposal to base the value of the tax shelter in a way that related values to the amount of Belgian territorial expenditure was likely to constitute an obstacle to freedom of movement within the internal market, and thus in conflict with the general Treaty provisions (para 31). The Commission made a distinction between film production, which was seen as mobile and relatively free in choice of location, in contrast with the industrial structures of video games, which were seen as produced primarily in a stable and continuous environment. Therefore, there is less justification for imposing territorial conditions in a games production environment. The amended scheme was finally approved in July 2022, with a change to the territorial conditions. The modified territorial provisions extended to an amount based on production and operation expenses in the EEA (European Economic Area) rather than just within Belgium. Thus, the scheme is no longer likely to constitute an obstacle to free movement of goods and provision of services within the internal market (2022, para 49). In this way, the Commission emphasises the importance of the role of the Commission as guardian of the EU Treaties.

The most recent Commission decision in this area was the approval of the Irish state aid regime for digital games. Under Decision SA102047 on 27th September 2022, the Commission authorities approved the introduction of a new tax credit, the Digital Games Tax Credit (DGTC). The conditions under which the approval is granted illustrate a deepening recognition of the pragmatic approach to the digital games sector. The credit is framed in a way that recognises the importance of developing a games industry rather than a games culture. The points-based cultural test, the passing of which is a prerequisite for claiming the credit, is based upon the establishment of a robust industry base rather than upon the content of the game itself. It provides for development of creative clusters, and it allows for points for key employees. The credit scheme represents a production context-oriented rather than a narrative content-driven approach to align-

ing with cultural requirements under Article 107(3)(d). Legislation enacting the Digital Games Tax Credit in Ireland was introduced in November 2022 by way of amendments to the Taxes Consolidation Act, in the form of Section 481A.

6. DISCUSSION: WHERE TO NOW?

This policy analysis is an important intervention into the debates on whether games constitute part of the software industries or part of the creative industries, with all the conceptual baggage that the term entails. It is a finding of this article that the approach taken by the Commission, as seen in the developing policies towards State aid regimes for games funding within the EU, considers that certain types of games are justified as worthy of funding for a cultural rationale. However, at times the justification for approving of specific State aid regimes is instead seen as supporting what might be considered indie creative industries, where the justifications for approval of conditions is based on supporting educational or cultural games rather than “games for fun”. It is acknowledged that the State aid sector towards digital games is a new field of competence for the Commission, with a developing policy towards the sector. The Commission’s rationalisations for approving aid regimes are based on a multitude of reasons which are primarily underpinned by the Commission’s role as serving the Treaties of the EU, and thus political reasoning comes into the Commission’s decisions.

The UK’s VGTR regime is a case in point. While the rhetoric around the approval suggested that the regime would support culturally British games that would otherwise not be made, in practice the VGTR was used to support big studios such as Rockstar. However, to assume that the regime should only support arthouse/art/educational games fails to understand the complexity of the cultural and creative industries sector. In practice, there are assumptions around spillover effects underpinning the Commission’s later decisions, e.g., the Italian and Belgium decisions, with the assumption that supporting local industries will lead to more representation of local content. However, relying on a tax credit to do the work of supporting industries is not enough. Instead, a tax credit must be seen as part of a broad swathe of policy interventions. Relying on a tax credit entails the assumption that market interventions will support multiple forms of production. However, theories of capitalism show us that the market is a fictional construct that serves not society but the market leaders and those that gain to benefit most are those that hold the power.

In a curious way, the analysis of the Commission’s perspective on cultural policies towards digital games illustrates an ostensibly contradictory position. On the one hand, there is a belief that games are somewhat less cultural than other audio-visual media forms, e.g., film. Thus, to qualify for the cultural state aid exemption, games must prove their worth as a cultural form. On the other hand, the Commission’s position *vis-à-vis* their function in the State aid process illustrates its pragmatic position that acknowledges the industrial element of games.

The Commission's current pragmatic approach to tax incentives is seen more as a hands-off, non-interventionist approach that leaves decisions around what might be worthy of support within individual member states, at least if it does not overtly interfere with the essential freedoms within the EU. The requirement that State aid regimes align with the conditions of Article 107(3)(d) in that they are required to be aids for a "cultural rationale" in no way imposes a narrow conceptualisation of culture on member states, in contrast to Messerlin and Parc's (2020) assertion on the role of cultural tests for the film industries. Rather, the current pragmatic approach by the Commission imposes certain rules on notified regimes around the requirement to not interfere with the careful balance of the internal market.

Overall, there is evidence of a relatively narrow framing of the justification for tax schemes for digital games. It is more difficult for the digital games industry to "prove" alignment with the cultural rationale contained in Article 107(3)(d) (i.e., to qualify as aiding culture) than it is for the film sector, which is already widely accepted as a cultural form. However, the analysis of the body of decisions by the Commission on applications for approval of State aid regimes concerning digital games does show the recent development of a more nuanced approach to the sector, as exemplified in the recent decision outlining the Irish scheme. There is also further evidence of such a shift in the wider EU policy. Some recent developments illustrate this. For example, the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education's draft report on E-sports and videogames from April 2022 "calls on the Commission to map and define the European video game industry, and to foster the creation of a 'European Video Game' label to improve the discoverability and encourage the dissemination of video games created in Europe" (clause 3). The explanatory statement highlights the value of games as a European ecosystem, with both cultural and economic value. In addition, the European Parliament project on value in games² is an important move in further interrogating the wider cultural and societal values of the sector and promises to add much to policy development in this area.

In the context of State aid policy, a particularly significant policy move is shown in a call by the European Council (2022) to review State aid rules to take into consideration other sectors including video games. The European Council's conclusions were used to identify specific issues of concern for the EU and to outline particular actions to take. As such guideline have the effect of influencing and guiding the EU policy agenda, developments in this area are expected in 2024.

7. CONCLUSION

It is a core argument of this article that State aid policy must be understood not only as a branch of competition policy, but as a form of cultural policy. Therefore, the impact of regulatory measures needs to be placed into a wider context of the political economy of national and supranational games production poli-

2. According to the project information on the Commission's website, the project "Understanding the value of a European Video Games Society" delivers insights on the many economic, cultural, financial, and social impacts that video games have on our society, and how this industry impacts a range of policy areas. Understanding the Value of a European Games Society <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/value-gaming>)

cies. This paper has primarily addressed policy considerations while underscoring the multiple, often unspoken understandings of what is considered cultural, of how games constitute a cultural form, and of how culture is instrumentalised under a pragmatic discourse within the EU that underpin such policies. There is scope for additional analysis to be carried out on individual member states implementation, evaluation and gathering of statistics on games industry.

While it would be tempting to claim a niche area and point to an under exploration of the sub-field of national games production policy studies, such work is in fact to be acknowledged as residing within a constellation of fields including EU policy, EU cultural policy, EU state aid policy, creative industries and more. Assuming that this represents a niche does a disservice to the significance of EU policy to production and to games' role in society more broadly. Instead, one should seek recognition of the significance of multiple disciplines (law, political economy, cultural studies and cultural policy / creative industries policies, EU policy) in a way that acknowledges the slippages between these and how law and policy operate in an overarching way to structure cultural production and engagement. From such a perspective, this paper takes on Chess & Consalvo's recent call to arms, where they point to the necessity of observing "why video games should matter in scholarship that goes beyond the material specificity of the media in question" (2002, p. 159). They point to industrial components, issues of inequality and misinformation, and how the games studies field holds resonance for wider media studies issues. To this, I would add the importance of interrogating games industry policies and framings of games that more or less explicitly deems such media forms of lesser or equal cultural value compared to other art forms. This would be significant not only for industrial, social, and media studies, but also for broader considerations of cultural policy and diverse interpretations of culture and its applications.

EU COMMISSION COMPETITION DECISIONS

European Commission:

2006. State Aid-France. State aid No C27/2006 (ex N648/2005)—Tax credit for the creation of video games. Invitation to submit comments pursuant to Article 88(2) of the EC Treaty. Official Journal of the European Union, 7/12/2006, C 297/19.

2008. Commission Decision of December 11, 2007, on State Aid C47/06 (ex N648/05) Tax credit introduced by France for the creation of video games. Official Journal of the European Union, May 6, 2008, L 118/16.

2013 State aid – United Kingdom. Commission Decision in Case SA.36139 – UK video games tax relief (OJ C 152, 30.5.2013, p. 24).

2014 Commission Decision of 27.03.2014 ON THE STATE AID SCHEME SA.36139 (2013/C) (ex 2013/N) which the United Kingdom is planning to implement for video games 2017 SA.45735 (2017/N) State Aid - Denmark (SA.45735 (2017/N) Scheme for the development, production and promotion of cultural and educational digital games)

- 2017 Commission Decision of 04.09.2017, C(2017) 6048, State Aid SA.46572 – Germany – Bavarian games support measure. OJ C 336, 6.10.2017, p. 1.
- 2018 State Aid – Belgium SA.49947 (2017/N), Belgique – Aide aux jeux vidéo (VAF Gamefonds) Aide d'Etat n° SA.49947 (2017/N) - Belgique Aide aux jeux vidéo (VAF Gamefonds) 25.08.2018.
- 2018 State Aid - Germany North-Rhine-Westphalia State Aid SA.51820 (2018/N) – Germany North Rhine-Westphalian games support measure, 10.12.2018
- 2019 SA. 52951 (2019/N) State Aid – Denmark Prolongation and amendment of scheme for the development, production and promotion of cultural and educational digital games
- 2020 State Aid – Belgium Aide d'État SA.55046 (2019/N) – Belgique Soutien aux jeux vidéo culturels, artistiques et éducatifs (Wallimage) 24.1.2020
- 2020 State Aid – Belgium Decision to initiate under Article 108/ Aide d'État SA.54817 (2019/N) – Belgique Régime d'aide Tax Shelter pour la production des jeux video, 30.04.2020
- 2021 State Aid SA.100581 (2021/N) – Germany Amendment and prolongation of the Bavarian game support measure SA.46572 (2017/N)
- 2021 State Aid – Italy State Aid Tax credit for the production of video games of 'Italian nationality' with cultural value SA.63372(2021/N) Italy 26.10. 2020
- 2022 State Aid - Belgium Approval DÉCISION DE LA COMMISSION du 25.7.2022 concernant le régime d'aides SA.54817 (2020/C) (ex 2019/N) que la Belgique envisage de mettre à exécution en faveur de la production des jeux video 25.7.2022
- 2022 State Aid – Belgium Décision C(2022) 490 de la Commission du 27 janvier 2022, aide d'État SA.101008 – Prolongation du VAF Gamefonds, JO C 106, 04.03.2022.
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Game Studies Meets Japanese Studies

Ten Years of Research

ABSTRACT

During the last ten years, there has been an increasing interest within Game Studies towards video games produced in Japan, deployed as culturally “Japanese” and circulated as such. This has produced an encounter-cum intersection between Game Studies and Japanese Studies, leading to emerging commonalities, gulfs, and frictions. What emerges are explorations into what the study of Japanese video games/video games from Japan might entail; the emergence of “Japan” as a distinct context of video game production, consumption, and circulation; how frameworks emerging out of Japanese Studies can contribute to Game Studies and vice-versa. This paper showcases a few of these developments, providing a first, tentative mapping of possible research directions, challenges, and potentialities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the broad scope of Game Studies, and in particular, the study of digital games, “Japan” is, and has been, a popular thread of research (Hutchinson, 2019b; Navarro-Remesal & Loriguillo, 2015; Picard, 2013; Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011). “Japan” here is intended as both a media landscape with distinct local conditions for digital game production (Nakamura & Tosca, 2021; Kobayashi & Koyama, 2020; Kohler, 2016; Consalvo, 2022; 2006; Aoyama & Izushi, 2004; 2003), the Japanese nation itself and the expanding global popularity of Japanese cultural industries (Galbraith, 2021a; Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018; Choo, 2013a; Picard, 2009; O’Hagan, 2007). In the last ten years (2012-2022), there also has been an emergence increasing encounters and intersections between the study of digital games within Game Studies and approaches to computer games within Japanese Studies (Roth, Yoshida, & Picard, 2021; Saito, 2021; Galbraith, 2021b; 2011; Bruno, 2019; Taylor, 2007). On the one hand, the field of Game Studies preoccupies itself with the study of digital games as a mean towards investigating their surrounding practices and the cultures. On the other hand, the field of Japanese Studies is chiefly concerned with the study of Japan as an “area” as the end of research. In this, the two fields offer both complementarity and tension. Approaches to Japanese digital games located within the field of Japanese Studies

provide important situated expertise. Approaches within Game Studies furnish theoretical perspectives allowing the questioning of the *how* of Japanese digital games, beyond *what* Japanese digital games may be.¹ At the same time, the different ends of the two fields expose fault lines, tensions, and gaps in the treatment of Japanese digital games as objects of research.

The overarching problematic of intersecting Japanese Studies and Game Studies is the lack of a shared terminology to ground the study of Japanese digital games. In other words, it is still not clear what makes a Japanese digital game “Japanese”. Is it, perhaps, its origin in creators and industries located within the Japanese landmass? Or is it by virtue of expressing a set of aesthetic and consumption practices that are perceived as ‘distinctly’ Japanese? This challenge deeply relates to the role that “Japan” plays in the definition of “Japanese” digital games. For example, terms such as *gēmu* (Picard, 2013) highlight “the crossing of electronics, computer, amusement and content industries *in Japan* in which some aspects were, subsequently or synchronously, established globally and under an increasingly transnational mode, all forming a particular media ecology or system” (Ibid.; emphasis by the author). Contributions such as Rachael Hutchinson’s *Japanese Culture Through Video Games* (2019b) define Japanese digital games as videogames “developed by studios incorporated in Japan, with their head offices located in Japan” (p. 2).

“Japan” as production context is also one of the axes, the other being “the convention and dynamics of the digital role-playing game”, around which knowledge of the JRPG genre is structured within *Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation, and Liminality in the Jrpg* (Hutchinson & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2022). These important contributions emphasize locality – the Japanese geo-socio-industrial context – as one, if not the defining factor in distinguishing Japanese digital games from a global (North American) milieu of software production (Picard, 2013). Connected with the challenge of defining what makes a Japanese video game “Japanese” is the necessity – or lack thereof – of emphasizing Japanese (or perceived as such) cultural and aesthetics practices within a video game’s assemblage of software mechanics and narrative content. With such emphasis, or lack thereof, comes the issue of access: while the lack of Japanese language proficiency should not disqualify a scholar from engaging with Japanese games, there is a significant issue in access to existing research in Japanese and Japanese games, for keywords and theoretical discourses distinct from Euro-American perspectives² may be unavailable in English.

At the same time, it is necessary to account that Japanese video games are not solely made within the Japanese mainland or connected to Japanese studios. The number of digital games which reproduce the mechanics and aesthetic milieus of video games developed in Japan increases each year, as are video games produced under the aesthetic milieu of anime-manga. It is not possible to reduce the entirety of Japanese video game production to a monolithic bloc obscuring the manifold cultures of digital play that exist in Japan and in contact

1. Jaqueline Berndt makes a similar exhortation in her examination of Anime within academic disciplines (2018), highlighting gaps between “area and discipline, context and text, media ecology and media specificity” (p. 11).

2. One excellent example lies in Tsugumi Okabe and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon’s examination of *Enzai - Falsely Accused* – (Langmaor, 2002) through the lens of *asobigokoro*, providing for the usage of “non-Eurocentric ideas of play and playfulness in game analysis” (2019, p. 37). Another example concerning Japanese video games is Hiroki Azuma’s *Gēmutekina Riarizumu no Tanjō – Dōbutsukasuru Posutomodan 2* [The Birth of Game-like Realism: Animalizing Postmodernity 2] the sequel to *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals* which remains unavailable in English to this day.

with Japan (Picard, 2021; Kawasaki, 2021; Levy, 2021). This further complicates answering the question of what makes a Japanese video game “Japanese” without resorting to problematic focuses on geographical or cultural provenance. In fact, Japanese video games might be increasingly difficult to define, resulting in a preference for emphasizing their cultural origin and software development practices (Consalvo, 2022, pp. 96–97), rather than interrogating how a game might become “Japanese” in the eyes of users and creators.

This, together with the different ends of Japanese Studies and Game Studies – studying the ‘what’ opposed to the ‘how’ – makes making sense of Japanese digital games increasingly challenging for scholars in both fields: perspectives located in Japanese Studies might question the lack of Japanese language sources or engagement with Japanese cultural discourses; approaches situated within the milieu of Game Studies or Media Studies might object to a preference towards generalizing singular case studies against a generalized Japanese audience as it may happen in studies of Japanese anime (Berndt, 2018, pp. 3–5). Nevertheless, there is much more than a semblance of discourse around Japanese video games, and it is emerging out of approaches rooted in both fields. These should not be pitted one against the other, but rather operationalized towards complementarity, despite the potential for area studies to alienate other disciplines (Berndt, 2018, p. 9; Choo, 2013b). A theoretical discourse, with a growing number of cross references and stable research foci is emerging, but it still lacks the completeness needed to stand on its own at the intersection of Game and Japanese Studies. This paper thus seeks to provide a first, tentative mapping effort of research approaches to Japanese digital games through the last ten years, from the perspective of both Game Studies and Japanese Studies

2. LOCAL, GLOBAL, AND IN-BETWEEN HYBRIDITIES

Mikhail Fiadotau (2021), in his examination of Japanese digital game history, highlights the tension existing between “local specificity and global embeddedness in media production” (p. 34). Fiadotau remarks that while this is certainly not unique to Japan, and that Game Studies has engaged with such complexity since its early days, its approaches have often focused on the global aspects of gaming (p. 35). A reflection of this focus on the global is the citation analysis performed on the *Game Studies* and *Games and Culture* journals by Paul Martin and Jonathan Frome (2019). Of the thirty-eight most cited digital games in absolute terms within the two publications above (2019, p. 6), six – *Metal Gear* (Konami 1987–2018), *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980), *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978), *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986–2022), *Final Fantasy* (Squaresoft 1987–2002; Square Enix 2006–2022), and *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985) – are Japanese-produced. Stratifying their analysis, the authors observe how, while the composition of most cited work changes over time, select games/game series such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and *Grand Theft Auto* (1997–2013) continue to be cited throughout the examined timeframe of 2003–2018 (p. 9).

However, there is no digital game produced in Japan that endures citation through the years like *World of Warcraft* or *Grand Theft Auto* (Frome & Martin, 2019, pp. 10-11). More interesting are the results obtained when citations are stratified by journal: within *Game Studies*, the Japanese-produced games ranking as the most cited are *Pac-Man* and *Super Mario Bros*; within *Games and Culture*, *Final Fantasy* is the lone entry. Within *Game Studies*, the two games therein represent Japanese digital game production reaching global notoriety. Within *Games and Culture*, the digital game (series) most cited through the years is the masthead genre of Japanese Role-Playing Games, one of the most, if not the most, culturally-connotated video game genres. And while the presence of these digital game series suggests their part in composing a global game canon of sort, both publications are testament to the focus on the global side of Japanese digital games. *Pac-Man*, *Super Mario Bros* and *Final Fantasy* are globally recognized digital game series, whose content creators are Japanese and recognized as such. However, there is not an equivalent attention towards more “local” video game series such as *Metal Gear Solid* (Johnson, 2020), *Soulcalibur* (Hutchinson, 2016), or Japanese visual novel games (Bruno, 2021; 2019). Mikhail Fiadotau, in this regard, recalls Liboriussen and Martin’s suggestion to pay more attention to regional game studies, and to engage more systematically with non-Anglophone scholarship and game histories, while also remarking that this is not exclusive to Japan. Despite this, Fiadotau makes three arguments for why Japan is still an interesting case (Fiadotau, 2021, p. 35):

1. Japan possesses the largest video game industry where there is both an exclusive focus towards the domestic market and an orientation towards worldwide competition.
2. Video games are a vital part of the Japanese nation-branding strategy along with the broader media-mix of Japanese pop culture.
3. The perceived uniqueness (at home and abroad) of Japanese culture, and its connections to ideologies of Japanese exceptionalism (*nihonjinron*).

Despite this distinction between local and global Japanese games, there is still limited consensus, as anticipated within the introduction, for what may make a Japanese digital game “Japanese”. As with the two axes around which the JRPG genre is structured (Hutchinson & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2022, p. 3), on the one hand, Japan is referenced in relation to the physical boundaries of the Japanese nation. On the other, as with anime and manga, “Japan” points to an identifiable, but blurry, ensemble of aesthetic and production sensibilities (Kacsuk, 2018, pp. 6-10; Brienza, 2016; Erik-Soussi, 2015; Cohn, 2013; Groensteen, 2013; 2010; Malone, 2010; Natsume, 2010) – tethered but not limited to the Japanese landmass. This resembles the tensions found in research on anime-manga and other products of Japanese cultural industries (Suan, 2021; 2018; 2017a; Kacsuk, 2018; Brienza, 2016; Berndt, 2008), where perceived connection with Japan

– nation and media landscape – oscillates against aesthetic conventions, their dynamics and actual global diffusion of media production (Kacsuk, 2018, p. 2).

The Japanese context of media production has certainly produced distinctive conditions (Picard, 2021; 2013; Kobayashi & Koyama, 2020; Koyama, 2020). At the same time, there is a growing number of digital games whose aesthetics and underlying conventions in software mechanical system which are in continuity with Japan. One example can be found in South Korean-produced interactive romance digital games such as *Mystic Messenger* (Cheritz, 2016), which subscribes to anime/manga aesthetics (Ganzon, 2022, pp. 97-100; 2019). Similar works include *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato 2017), *VA-11 Hall-A: Cyberpunk Bartender Action* (Sukeban Games 2016), and *Please Be Happy* (Studio Élan 2022). Non-visual novel works include *Neon White* (An-gel Matrix 2022) and *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo 2020). The works listed above, which are far from being an exhaustive sample, in showcasing the popularity of Japanese anime/manga aesthetics in non-Japanese developers, further highlighting the tensions between Japan as space-nation and as a set of conventional aesthetics and practices.

However, the global/local dichotomy cannot account for all the intermediate steps that may exist in-between the local – Japanese digital games oriented towards the domestic market and aesthetic sensibilities – and the global – Japanese digital games for global consumption. Glocalization “may not suffice as the sole term to account for Japanese videogaming maneuvering between different contexts and scales of cultural production” (Fiadotau, 2021, p. 36.) To this end, Fiadotau, taking after Anthropologist Carlo Cubero (2011, in Fiadotau, 2021, p. 36) proposing the concept of “transinsularity” for the study of Japanese digital games. Transinsularity proposes that the isolation and connectedness that are central to islands (cultural and geographical) are not an opposition to be resolved, but rather a “constant interplay between mobilities and insularities” (Cubero, 2011, p. 5, in Fiadotau, 2021, p. 36). For example, what is perceived as Japanese in JRPGs is not considered “Japanese” within Japan’s contexts, but rather a default feature of role-playing video games, while western-produced visual novel games seek to “produce a “Japaneseness” that is not rooted in geography or language (since they are mainly created in languages other than Japanese) but that instead stems from following aesthetic conventions and narrative tropes recognized by players as Japanese” (p. 39).

Scholars such as Martin Picard (2021; 2013), Victor Navarro Remesal and Antonio Loriguillo López (2015), Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon (2018) and Patrick Galbraith (2021a) emphasize the local dimension of Japanese video games, whenever it applies to production structures, aesthetic practices or reception. A complementary position offered by Mia Consalvo (2022 [2016]; 2006) and Joleen Blom (2020a) emphasizes that Japanese games are (or have become) part of a global video game culture, and while it is foolish to discount local conditions (Consalvo, 2022, pp. 2-5), it is also foolish to ascribe essential qualities to “Japanese” games (Consalvo, 2006, p. 127). Both perspectives, as it hap-

pens in discourses on anime-manga, emphasize different aspects of video game production within Japan, coming from Japan and/or subscribing to Japanese aesthetic practices. And, in the very same fashion, the existence of such tensions prompts a re-examination of the question of, as Mia Consalvo puts it, “Japaneseness in relation to popular culture” and the “conditions in which culture is made and remade” (2022, p. 5). Responding to Mia Consalvo, Rachael Hutchinson (2019a), in anchoring Japanese games to games whose creator’s main office is located in Japan (p. 2), discusses how the international standing of Japan and Japanese companies may obscure Japan’s colonialist past in East and Southeast Asia, along with the repackaging of nationalist narratives and the embedding of problematic, revisionist discourses about Japan’s role and conduct during the Second World War (pp. 233–251).

Returning to Fiadotau’s proposal for trans-insularity, his attempt to account for the non-isolatedness of islands – cultural and geographical – is symptomatic of the challenges faced by scholars in approaching Japanese digital games and their manifold facets. Japanese video games cannot be reduced to geographical provenance – commercial or creative as it might be – nor can be pinpointed to a definite set of features or aesthetics.³ These tendencies also leave the meaning of Japanese Game Studies in tension: should Japanese games be intended as digital games from Japan, or as digital games produced according to a – blurry and unstable as it might be – “Japanese” aesthetic continuum whose formalization may ultimately be impossible? Rather, it is vital that the manifold hybridities – geographical, cultural, commercial – are engaged from multiple angles, oscillating, rather than opposing, global and local conditions.

3. TRANSNATIONAL JAPANESE (ANIME-MANGA) DIGITAL GAMES?

Parallel to the study of Japanese digital games proper, are approaches looking at Japanese digital games in continuity with the context of production in which anime-manga are produced, circulated, and received. This facet of Japanese video game production is in broad continuity with what Akiko Sugawa-Shimada calls the ACG field – Anime, Manga Comics and Games (Sugawa-Shimada 2021b). In proposing the descriptor, Sugawa-Shimada, emphasizes the growing and strong interconnectedness of production of anime-manga media, interactive, static, embodied and dis-embodied. She also seeks to emphasize media production and scholarship therefor for and by female, against a strongly male-dominated field, especially in its use of the masculinist otaku descriptor⁴ in reference to users (Sugawa-Shimada 2021b). Originating in manga research (Kacsuk, 2018; Brienza, 2015; Berndt & Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2013; Berndt, 2011; Johnson-Woods, 2010; Itō, 2011), research on ACG encompasses *anime* animation and media, (Suan, 2021; 2020; 2018; 2017a; 2017b; Lamarre, 2018; 2013; 2009; Uno, 2018; 2009), content reception by select user niches such as otaku, *fujōshi* and *otome* (Galbraith, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; Santos, 2020a; 2020b; Andlauer, 2018; Lamarre, 2013; Azuma, 2009; 2007), social practices in physi-

3. It needs to be said that anime/manga aesthetics, as an integral part of the media-mix strategies of Japanese cultural industries, make an excellent case of “Japanese” aesthetics unmoored from geography of language (cf. Suan, 2021; 2018; 2017 for extended discussion of anime aesthetics).

4. *Otaku*, as a descriptor for superfans – presumed to be male – in the context of consumption of Japanese media, possesses its own problematic intellectual history, intersecting discriminating labeling, self-orientalization and pathologizing views. For vastly more articulated views of the matter, see Galbraith 2019 and Ōtsuka 2015. See Miho 2015 for a comprehensive view in English of discourse around otaku in Japan.

cal and virtual space (Sugawa-Shimada, 2021; 2020; 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; Dit Alban, 2020; 2016, Baffelli & Yamaki, 2018; Steinberg & Dit Alban, 2018; Steinberg, 2015a, Yamamura, 2015; Saitō, 2014; 2011; Sharp, 2014; 2011; Morikawa, 2012; 2008) and more recently, it has extended towards including video games (Bruno, 2021; 2019; Kacsuk, 2021). Japanese video games, albeit growing in importance (Hutchinson, 2019b), have historically played a secondary role, and have been historically subsumed into studies of media-mix industrial practices (Steinberg, 2015b; Allison, 2006) or considered in the role of adaptations/expansions of existing franchises (Greenwood, 2015; 2014).

More recent approaches, bridging research into the Japanese geo-social-technical context, have attempted to provide wide-ranging perspectives on Japanese video game industries (Picard, 2013), gaming culture (Picard, 2021) and facets of it such as adult computer games (Galbraith, 2021a; 2021b; Bruno, 2021; 2019) and Japanese role-playing games (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018). However, a significant number of studies dealing with Japanese video games fall prey to existing biases within Japanese studies, and area studies more generally (Berndt, 2018, p. 2; Bourdagh, 2018, p. 591). It is a reprise of the issues highlighted by Jaqueline Berndt in her examination of studies in anime works (2018). Japanese video games are (re)purposed as “an occasional tool for the exploration of societal issues concerning Japan and Japanese audiences”, with “the Japanese audience is first generalized and then short-circuited, i.e., immediately correlated, with individual media texts” (p. 3). Such approaches share a “modernist preference for leveraging discrete art objects against large social forces and power relations” (Berndt, 2018, p. 5; Lamarre, 2018, p. 29).

Interestingly, the criticism of generalization deployed by Jaqueline Berndt echoing Thomas Lamarre is similar to the critic deployed by Paolo Pedercini of Molleindustria: “You think [pop culture artifact] is cool and progressive but here’s how it reinforces [capitalism/sexism/militarism]” (2016, in Murray, 2018). Soraya Murray argues that “[t]his mock formula encapsulates a great deal of noise that surrounds the study of video games from a critical cultural perspective more generally, and a postcolonial perspective more specifically”. In the same vein, Berndt’s criticism could be rephrased as “you think [Japanese anime work] is cool and important, but here’s how you’ve generalized it to audiences who might have never watched it or watched it in totally different ways”. This can be then (re)applied to videogames, for example: Rachael Hutchinson argues that “the fears, anxieties, desires and dreams of the Japanese people are enacted and expressed through videogames, enabling the player to enter the world and experience the same emotions as the main character” (2019b, p. 254).

While the importance of the video games approached by Hutchinson – The *Yakuza* (2005–2023) series, *Persona 5* (Atlus 2016), the *Metal Gear* series amongst others – is clear by sales and popularity, the views expressed within games geared towards global distribution may not be the prevalent attitudes about towards race, ethnicity, gender, and sex in Japan. Such digital games still undergo

validation in light of global sensibilities, which might be different from those present in Japanese games destined for a domestic market. This argument is made not to argue that the games examined are not representative of cultures and sensibilities within Japan. Instead it argues that the sensibilities embedded in such games may still be part of a more systematic employment of Japanese-ness as a design and business strategy. Japanese content producers, while rooted in Japan and in its context of content production, circulation, and reception, also contend with global sensibilities. This may result in a hybrid sensibility that may not be as prevalent under local conditions. Important scholarship such as Christopher Patterson's (2020) and Tara Fickle's (2019) can be re-examined in light of Pedercini and Benrdt's discipline-wide criticisms.

Tara Fickle (2019) examines the ludo-orientalist logic structuring the act of game play itself, with a specific focus on how "the design, marketing, and rhetoric of games shape how Asians as well as East-West relations are imagined and where notions of foreignness and racial hierarchies get reinforced" (p. 3). This produces what is a racialized gaming even in the absence of racialized representations. At the same time, Fickle produces an important critique of how early game studies were rooted in Orientalism and Eurocentrism, where culture – and the culture of play especially – is implicitly correlated with European culture in an obfuscation of issues of structural inequality, especially in relation to race and ethnicity (pp. 123-124). Fickle highlights how the removal of markers of race and ethnicity in the localization of Pokémon games – with a focus on Pokémon Go (Niantic 2016) – produces a sense of familiarity in American audiences by obscuring the game's origins, "fostering the illusion of Pokémon being "local" and "familiar" despite being from Japan" (p. 160). Fickle subsequently highlights how this is the result of a "painstaking and deliberate removal effort: it is, in other words, no more natural or neutral than the seemingly unmarked, objective map of the world it seemingly reproduces" (pp. 166-167).

In *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Games* (2020), Christopher Patterson argues how the Japanese auteur discourse, including figures such as Sakaguchi Hironobu, Horii Yuji, Aonuma Eiji, Ono Yoshinori, Harada Katsuhiko, Kojima Hideo, Nishikado Tomohiro, Suda Goichi and Suzuki Yu as forefather figures of a number of global "Japanese" video game genres (p. 62). These creators, idealized as "renegades", first dependent on, then operating outside of big publishers, "struggle for the freedom to express their art amid the business interests of game companies and legal firms" (ibid.). Patterson further remarks about how the "tendency to aggrandize Japanese developers is informed by their foreign aura, which produces much of the text's cultural meanings as bizarre, layered, or arthouse" (ibid.). Like the "unknowability" of Space Invaders or the "mysterious origins" of Pac-Man, Suda's games are shrouded in the unknowable Asiatic, as most reviewers and gamers excuse his games' eccentricities as a form of Japanese otaku subculture" (p. 63). Further examination of otaku subculture(s) would reveal that such auteurs might

not be as close to otaku subculture as reviewers and gamers might claim (Picard, 2021; Galbraith, 2021b; 2019; Bruno, 2021; 2019).

The underlying challenge is that, as Fickle and Patterson's work show, is that reception of "Japaneseness" and "Japaneseness" in Japanese digital games may be rooted in local, Euro-American conditions. At the same time, such reception is aided by the employment of Japaneseness as a business strategy. This should be intended in a slightly different way that the cultural odorlessness posited by Iwabuchi Koichi (2002), but rather in the deliberate fostering of a culturally distinct "odor", different from its local counterparts that is palatable for worldwide consumption. The Japaneseness deployed therein might not be as reflective of local "Japanese" mores and attitudes. In the same vein as the global acclamation of select manga auteurs such as Taniguchi Jirō may not reflect at home in the same way, so the western-based Japanese video game auteur discourse may not reflect in the same way in local (Japanese) contexts. While no less deserving of consideration, an increased focus on how the two might be distinct is arguably necessary.

4. "JAPAN" AS A GEO-SOCIO-TECHNICAL CONTEXT FOR JAPANESE VIDEO GAME PRODUCTION

Interest in Japanese digital games has in turn generated an interest in Japan as the context of origin of Japanese video games. It is a media landscape where such games are expected to be first circulated and whose cultural milieus are hopefully referenced during video game production. This has been accompanied by a growing awareness of outstanding blind spots that may hinder exploration of such a territory. This, however, is less of a case of scholars being unable to access material, even when scholarly work necessitates a translator intermediary as it's the case of Nathan Altice's work (2015), than the material not existing in the first place. Despite recent initiatives aimed at preserving video game sources and artifacts by organizations such as the Game Preservation Society [*Gēmu Hozon Kyōkai*] and the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs-funded Media Arts Database, there is an outstanding lack of shared histories or otherwise texts that might serve to provide a more unified body of knowledge for research.

Texts providing insights into the development of Japan's game industry remain limited: in English, works such as John Szczepaniak's *The Untold History of Japanese Game Developers* (2014; 2015; 2018) or Nathan Altice's (2015) *I Am Error The Nintendo Family Computer / Entertainment System Platform* provide important information on select events and artifacts of Japanese video game industry. However, these books may be written with a journalistic register and aimed at non-academic audiences, providing only a very limited, and at times strongly anecdotal perspective on select segments of Japanese video game developers and the Japanese video game industry. For example, within *The Untold History of Japanese Game Developers vol.2*, the interview with Nanashi Hideo (in fact an amalgamation of multiple anonymous sources at serious risk of litigation) pro-

vides clues towards shared, negative cultural attitudes in Japan towards gaming in general, and the challenges faced by the video game industry in securing development capital (Szczepaniak, 2015).

The account being journalistic in nature is problematic, as that information remains difficult to verify for academic work. When it comes to research on the Japanese media landscape in Japanese, while there is a fertile background of fannish writers (see Miyamoto, 2013 for an example), with guides and histories being released as part of commercial circuits, there seems to be a more limited interest in producing perspectives by university researchers. Two such approaches are Koyama Yūsuke's *Nihongēmusangyōshi. Gēmusofuto no Kyojintachi* [The History of Japanese Game Industry: The Giants of Video Game Software] (2020) and Nakagawa Daichi's *Gendai Gēmu Zenshi: Bunmei no Yūgi Shikan Kara* [A Complete History of Modern Games: Civilization from the historical view of play] (2016).

Koyama makes a comprehensive examination of the evolution of Japan's video game industry, along with important contributions such as the identification of the “three co-evolving markets” for Japanese video games, each presenting a different paradigm for hardware-software development: arcade cabinet games, PC games and home consoles (pp. 17-18). Each market niche, catering to profoundly different audiences and use cases, led to progressively widening gulfs between play-focused hardware (home consoles and arcade cabinets) and multi-purpose, business-oriented personal computer machines. As with the presence of existing media conglomerates focusing video game development along specific lines, the top-down rather than bottom-up approach adopted by Japanese market players led to radically different development conditions.

Nakagawa Daichi (2016), on the other hand, structures his history of contemporary video games by going back to Johann Huizinga's concept of *Homo Ludens* (2014), and producing an examination of the cultural conditions that have led to the emergence of the landscape of contemporary digital games. He locates the foci of video game production in the United States and Japan as the leaders of the post-war economic order, where the video game has developed as an expressive form. While Nakagawa acknowledges the contributions of other contexts such as South Korea, Europe, and China, especially after the advent of the internet, his focus is on the interconnections and relations between Japan and the United States, while emphasizing the rise of Japanese video games as the global standard during the early days of video game development on both sides of the pacific (Nakagawa, 2016). Nakagawa locates the role of Nintendo and his Famicom/NES as pivotal in the emergence of a type of Japanese game that is then disseminated globally, resulting in what he calls a “Pax Famicana”. At the same time, he locates another point of rupture at the turn of the 21st century, which he metaphorizes as a “Cambrian Explosion” (Chapter 8), offering an almost paleontological historiography of Japanese video games.

Japan's distinct industrial conditions were first hinted at by Martin Picard's first explorations, emphasizing the differences in market, industrial focus, gov-

ernment intervention (or lack thereof) that characterized the Japanese video game industry. In particular, “The Japanese video game industry was not supported by the military-academic complex, or even initiated by start-ups, but rather developed from the outset by entertainment corporations and import/export businesses that were already well established in the consumptive post-war Japan” (Picard, 2013, p. 8). Never seeing the emergence of a university-centered culture of amateur and experimental programming (Uemura, Hosoi, & Nakamura, 2013), “subsidized by the military-space complex” (Picard, 2013; Kline et al., 2003, p. 86), the Japanese video game industry orbited around home consoles, pushing the personal computer as a platform to the margin, in the role of a “second fiddle” (Fiadotau, 2019, p. 220). As a niche, personal computers were characterized by a sense of stagnation and by its occupancy by niche interests such as *dōjin* [hobbyist] computer programming (Fiadotau, 2019; Hichibe & Tanaka, 2016) and pornographic entertainment software (Pelletier-Gagnon & Picard, 2015; Miyamoto, 2013). Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, there is an emerging picture of the development of the Japanese game industry and, more importantly, of the local conditions in Japan. What is more important is that these perspectives are not indissolubly tethered to anime-manga or their industries. More multifaceted, nuanced approaches are starting to appear (Picard, 2021).

One example is the work of Kawasaki Yasuo (2021) on Japanese Game Centers, emphasizing the roles of establishments dedicated to playing video games, along with the industry segment they represented, and the influence exerted on Japanese game industry. In particular, Kawasaki highlights the role of game centers as facilities that present “a variety of cultures based on coin-operated entertainment devices.” (p. 39), highlighting the role of place in game culture, and how this may influence local conditions. A connected vein of research is the research on Pachinko gambling machines and centers conducted by Gerey Rockwell and Amano Keiji (Amano and Rockwell, 2021a; 2021b; Rockwell and Amano, 2019; 2015; 2013), which requires its own particular methodologies in light of Pachinko’s gambling nature.

One last research niche is research conducted on visual novels and more broadly, intimacy-focused video games and pornographic adult computer games in Japan. Adult computer games circulate on the personal computer and are not intended for generalist consumption. These works of interactive software may feature pornography and/or intimacy with their characters as the fulcrum of gamic activity (Bruno, 2022; 2021; 2019; Galbraith, 2021a; 2021b; Ganzon, 2019; 2017a; 2017b). Distinctive in this are approaches by Saito (2021), Galbraith (2021b) and Bruno (2021; 2019) and Ganzon (2022; 2019), attempting to shed light on a genre whose focus has been generally a reluctant proposal for Game Studies (Blom, 2020b, p. 2). Adult computer games, within and without Japan, have historically been at the center of public concerns on the indiscriminate circulation of explicit content perceived as harmful for the public (Galbraith, 2021b, pp. 95-101; Koyama, 2020 [2016], pp. 137-140; Pelletier Gagnon Pic-

ard, 2015, pp. 33–34), and in particular, “sexual minorities” (Nakasatomi, 2013 [2009]). These concerns intersect and mobilize with wider debates regarding otaku culture and their media consumption habits (Galbraith, 2021b, pp. 46–59; Kamm, 2015; Morikawa, 2008 [2003], pp. 262–269).

As these games come under scrutiny in global diffusion, their ‘Japaneseness’ is emphasized as a source of danger and disruption coming from an external other, and as a symptom of wider social malaises in Japanese society (Galbraith, 2021a, pp. 75–76). Great emphasis has been given to the problematic aspects of male-oriented works, especially in depiction of sexual intercourse and anti-social behavior, with a global historical flashpoint in the accidental exposure of *Rapelay* (Illusionsoft 2003) by English-speaking media (Galbraith, 2021a; Pelletier-Gagnon & Picard, 2015; Nakasatomi, 2013 [2009]). Joleen Blom (2020b) further highlights that engaging with sex and sexuality in Japanese erotic games is a proposal that requires to address the labels that are put on acts depicted as sexual but labelled as romantic, for instance, along with avoiding the risk of falling into the depiction of an eroticized, oriental other (pp. 2–3). Nevertheless, “using Japanese pornographic games as cultural products allows us to say something about them as a form of the representation and engagement of sex and sexuality in games, in Japanese culture, and in its reception of a Western culture” (p. 3). Another outstanding issue lies in the distinction between restricted male-oriented adult games and non-restricted but nevertheless adult oriented games targeted towards female audiences. Such games present important distinctions that are challenging to correlate, with the former type featuring explicit anime-manga content implying an heterosexual audience (Bruno, 2022; Galbraith, 2021a; 2021b; Blom, 2020b; Taylor, 2007) and the latter type featuring stylized anime-manga homoerotic relationships implying a female, not necessarily heterosexual audience (Patterson, 2020, p. 36; Okabe & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2019; Bollman, 2010). On the other hand, a subset of women-oriented software, featuring heterosexual relationships, does not feature as much explicit content (Tosca & Klastrup, 2019, p. 138; Ganzon, 2017a; Clough, 2017), which retraces the asymmetry highlighted by Tamaki Saitō (2009) in his examination of anime-manga pornographic content. Addressing this divide within the Japanese media landscape and in Japanese-inspired games is an ongoing issue. On the one hand, both male-oriented games and female-oriented games center their experience on eliciting users to develop emotional and sexual responses towards game characters. On the other hand, the clear distinction – by market, by regulation – that emerges out of the presence of explicit content is at risk of severing research on adult (porn) games and other female-oriented games.

At the same time, such works open the potential for locating different modes of relating with sex, sexuality, and play, as it’s shown by Tsugumi Okabe and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon in their exploration of *asobigokoro* in *Enzai Falsely Accused* (Langmaor 2002). The term, beyond playfulness connotes a quality of “leisure (*yutori*), characterized by a sense of witticism, lighthearted-ness (*sharekke no aru*

kokoro) and even a degree of mischief (*itazura*)” (Okabe & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2019, p. 39). *Asobigokoro* is then used to produce an examination of explicit, deviant, and violent depictions of sexual conduct in *Enzai Falsely Accused*, an adult computer games aimed at women featuring androgynous characters engaging in homoerotic emotional and sexual relationships. They argue for the need to situate challenging subjects and games such as *Enzai* from “regional frameworks”, necessary for investigating “notions of ‘play,’ ‘entertainment,’ and ‘humor’ that are equally relevant and in fact necessary to widen the scope from which the production of games with ‘taboo’ content can be studied across cultures” (p. 50).

Finally, while further research into such games is necessary, it is also important to note that existing research has maintained male-centered bias, and as highlighted by Akiko Sugawa-Shimada (2021) a re-evaluation of existing scholarship and artefacts within the Japanese media landscape to open up possibilities for non-male, non-heteronormative, non-fetishized non-binary⁵ representations of sexuality is still strongly needed. The nature of the material requires a separate, dedicated approach, which is outside the scope of this paper.

5. GĒMU, MEDIA-MIX, LUDO-MIX: GLOBAL GAME STUDIES AND GLOBAL JAPANESE THEORY

The study of Japanese digital games is not merely the encounter of an area-centered discipline with a methodological-focused field with resulting in objects of study from the former being approached with the methodologies of the latter. Such encounter, instead, has been multifaceted, allowing for both a decoupling of Japanese digital games from Japan, or at least the potential to do so, and the development of Japanese-originating concepts within the global-oriented field of game studies. The first and most iconic of these concepts is the concept of *gēmu*⁶ (Picard, 2013).

Gēmu is the Japanese term for video game, which has found new employment in emphasizing the distinctiveness of Japanese video game production. These considerations are based on a recognition of the distinctive geo-socio-technical conditions that are part of the Japanese market, delimited by the Japanese landmass and its media landscape. Such different conditions lead to a distinct typology of video game software. Martin Picard (2013) further ascribes distinctiveness to Japanese *gēmu* due to their role in so-called media-mix [transmedial] industrial production strategies proper to Japan: due to significantly higher levels of integration between cultural industries, and consequent interrelation of content within, without and across interactive and static media, *gēmu* are distinct from western [mostly North American] video game production (ibid.). As a concept, *gēmu* responds to the need to examine the “the economic and material conditions of the video game industry on the Japanese territory in order to portray a comprehensive picture of the evolution of video games on a local, global and glocal level, as well as on any levels between these” (Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2015, p. 2).

5. The term is used in reference to the tropes and practices in connection with Yaoi/Boys Love. While the re-appropriation of such visual languages by non-binary persons has long taken place, its origins as a product by women for women should still be examined in relation to digital game production.

6. The term within Picard 2013 transliterates *gēmu* [japanese: ゲーム] as ‘*Geemu*’. This paper refers to all transliterations of ゲーム with *gēmu*, employing the macronized *ē* to signify the long e vowel.

Assessing the taxonomical viability of *gēmu*, Victor Navarro Remesal and Antonio Loriguillo López (2015) highlight the double necessity of avoiding an overemphasis of local dimensions and, at the same time, avoid assumptions of Japanese digital games being part of a universal culture diffused around the world (pp. 5–6). They also emphasize “common features and the intimate aesthetic connection” between anime/manga and *gēmu* (p. 6), along with distinct features such as a visual reliance on character mascots and distinct production features. These are influenced by and connected with local culture and references, genre framing, animation concepts and a “general notion of ‘Japanese-ness’” (pp. 8–10). Such features, in Navarro and López’s eyes, are the result of local conditions, which in turn require proper taxonomy. Importantly, Navarro–Remesal and López also argue that “Western perception of Japanese video games works in three different axes: character design, game design and animation in the cinematic sequences, with the possible addition of gender issues, identities and sexism” (2015, p. 8). While such perceptions can be attributed to both approaches subscribing to Japanese as “style” and Japanese as “made in Japan”, the latter three, “gender issues, identities and sexism”, are especially evident in approaches envisioning the usage of “Japanese” as a descriptor as “made in Japan”.

However, despite the taxonomical viability of *gēmu*, its usage has tended towards decline, and its usage has not been picked up within wider studies of Japanese video games. As it stands, amidst the distinction between games from Japan [made in] and Japanese [style] games, *gēmu* appears to be primarily referring to games from Japan, with a strong emphasis on Japan’s local conditions. At the same time, however, the local conditions of Japan are not some sort of essential quality ascribed to the Japanese nation; rather they are pinpointed towards specific industrial and economic conditions which have in turn allowed the emergence of *gēmu* as a distinct genealogy of video game production. This does not necessarily mean that Japanese video games should be conned to games produced in Japan. Rather, it is more apt to consider these aspects as being the object of reproduction within and without Japan, and ultimately constituting a way of looking at Japanese video game production as distinct. This is not because it comes from the national boundaries of the Japanese nation. Rather it is because *gēmu* constitute a typology of digital games where the role of Japan and the Anglosphere, as periphery and center are reversed and thus worthy of significant scholarly interest.

Beyond *gēmu*, another significant intersection of Game Studies and Japanese Studies lies in the emergence of concepts such as “ludomix” as a development of the media-mix descriptor employed in studies of anime-manga media. As per Marc Steinberg’s (2015a; 2015b; 2012) definition, the media-mix refers to processes of industrial and media convergence which privilege narrative content as an immaterial commodity regardless of host media and individual author intent. This includes strategies such as the so-called “Cool Japan” campaign and the production committee industrial framework

(Steinberg, 2019; 2015a; 2015b; 2012). If the media-mix is conceived as a commercial approach and/or strategy heavily reliant on character-based icons and mascots, linking multiple media products and services across technologies and platforms, the ludo-mix is a model where “games and play increasingly occupy the focal point of such a diversified distribution and consumption model”, which may include “several versions of the games or several different games together with other content thus resulting in novel media ecologies, business models and development of consumption cultures” (Digital Game Research Association, 2019). As the theme of the 2019 conference of the Digital Game Research Association, the ludo-mix concept represents an important development, a new framework born out of transactions between Japanese and Game Studies, integrating and inviting expertise and approaches from both sides. Also of extreme importance is the rise of yearly conferences such as Replaying Japan, which, in addition to co-hosting DiGRA 2019 at Ritsumeikan, allowing crosspollination between Japan-focused and non-Japan-focused scholars, has its focus on Japanese digital games and the culture around it. Its journal, the *Journal of Replaying Japan*, published by Ritsumeikan’s center for computer game studies (RCGS), hosts contributions in both English and Japanese, furthering the cross-pollination inside and outside Japan.

Echoing early approaches to the media-mix possessing gamic qualities, as well as the remediation of video games and “software” within static media (Steinberg, 2015a; 2015b), ludo-mix has given birth approaches spanning trans-media storytelling (Nakamura & Tosca, 2021); video game characters (Blom, 2021; 2020a); narrative design (Bjarnason, 2021; 2019); aesthetics (Chiappello, 2019) and musical design (Oliva, 2021), to name a few. Digital games and playing with narrative content become the anchor of transmedia industrial strategies. This, of course, produces its own array of challenges for content producers and content recipients. In a ludo mix, as games “become the anchor on which the strategy operates, the incoherency that games create, cannot be concealed” (Blom, 2021, pp. 108-109).

At the same time, however, the frictions exposed by approaching properties as ludo-mix, emphasizing the role of games, should not be reduced to the presence of games, especially given the presence of gamic elements already highlighted by Marc Steinberg (2015a, p. 10; 2015b, p. 47). Rather, emphasizing video games allows to further expose the role of content recipient, whenever they are engaging with static or interactive media, in producing and exerting creative agency over media. Games might create a sense of incoherency, as Blom (2021, pp. 108-109) argues, or lead to the outsourcing of narrative developments outside the ludic sphere, as argued by Bjarnason (2021, p. 71). However, the free circulation of content, which might not be necessarily devoid of a personal narrative or connection to a specific narrative context, may also create similar incoherencies, especially when, as showcased by Marc Steinberg in Madara’s case (2015b, p. 47) the means to produce alternative readings and what-ifs via factoids, and statis-

tics are provided to recipients of static media. On a different note, Nökkvi Jarl Bjarnason (2021; 2019), examining the *Final Fantasy XV* game universe as a case study, emphasizes the changing industrial conditions of video game development and its influences on the emergence of ludo-mix media ecologies. Bjarnason's comparative analysis of the *Final Fantasy XV* game universe concludes however that “the terms of the ludo mix are still being negotiated, and the *Final Fantasy XV* Universe only represents a certain point in its ongoing development” (p. 91).

Parallel to the study of digital games proper there are also strands of research preoccupied with the themes in Japanese digital games, and the influence of Japanese culture – religion, history, literature – on the global culture of digital games. In particular, the work of Lars De Wildt and Stef Aupers has helped break important new ground in how religious heritage, including Japan's, is re-purposed in digital games (2021; 2020; 2019). Japanese digital games are particularly important as they may present a re-purposing of Judeo-Christian religious heritage – amongst others – repurposed in gamic form. Just as global video game culture has appropriated non-Euro-American heritage, as it's the case with the concept of avatar (De Wilt et al., 2020), Japanese digital game products have done so in specular fashion. In approaching *the Final Fantasy* series as a case study, De Wilt and Aupers engage with the eclecticism that permeates its representation of religious heritage, arguing that by “remixing’ various religious tradition eclectically, (Japanese) videogames can confront us with the fictional and socially constructed nature of traditions – no matter how sacred” (2021, p. 27). Kathryn Hemmann (2021), adopting a more philological approach, examines the Buddhist cultural background of *The Legend of Zelda*, with particular attention towards the Japanese script of the game. In particular, the game's worldview, garnered through examining the Japanese idiolect of recurring antagonist Ganon, is revealed to be inspired by Japanese Buddhist traditions, which contribute to adding “cultural depth to the games, thus endowing the conflicts underlying their narratives with a greater sense of literary complexity” (p. 17). Furthermore, the application of “culturally informed literary analysis to video game scripts and extratextual material can contribute a great deal to our understanding of the stories that have already begun to influence and shape transnational digital mediascapes” (Hemmann, 2021).

Following in the examination of Japanese culture is the strand of research accounting for the approaches to Japanese history in Japanese digital games, with particular attention given to Japan's relation with the history of the Pacific War. Ryan Scheiding (2019) produces an important examination of the impact of atomic fears in Japanese digital games, linking Mikami Shinji with atomic and war memory in Japan. By examining digital games where Mikami has featured in an authorial/directorial role, Scheiding highlights recurring tropes and settings – physical and emotional traumas, destruction of cities, distrust, and misuse of power (pp. 9-11)– which “indicates a relationship and similarity between Mikami's games and the literary genre” (p. 11) of atomic and war mem-

ory. With this analysis, Scheiding argues how a “high-level employee within a corporate structure can be considered an author of video games and both engage with and create collective/cultural memory” (p. 12). A similar approach has been undertaken by Rachael Hutchinson (2019a) in linking game auteur Kojima Hideo with auteur filmmaker Fukasaku Kinji. In approaching *Kantai Collection* (Kadokawa Games 2013), Akiko Sugawa-Shimada examines how the anime-styled characters of *Kantai Collection* are employed to produce affective connections with war-related imagery (2019a; 2019b). Employing such images and characters, with their mannerisms and tropes, produces a detaching effect from actual history, connecting “young audiences to ‘soft’ nationalistic ideology by alleviating antipathy against extreme and obvious militarism” (2019b, p. 1). A similar attention to the body of female characters has been deployed by Rachael Hutchinson in her examination of *Kantai Collection* (2020).

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an examination of multiple strands of research on Japanese digital games. Across its explorations, the paper has highlighted underlying tensions in what constitutes the object of research. There is a shift from Japanese digital games as video games produced in Japan towards Japanese digital games as videogames referencing Japanese practices and modes of engagement. The encounter between the eld of Japanese studies and the discipline of Game Studies has produced an extension within the study of digital games in order to account for increased attention towards the contexts in which games are produced, circulated and consumed. At the same time, it has produced a kind of narrowing of the object of research in the case of Japanese Studies.

It has been a shift from “Japan” as a place of origin for digital games to a class of artifacts which, when view under the combined light of Game and Japanese studies, require additional, combined methodologies to properly be made sense of. Such an encounter has trodden new ground in research about Japan and in research about digital games, in a way that shows the continued potential and promise for the integration of regional-based foci and approaches with artifact-centered elds and methodologies. While the above approach is far from being exhaustive, it is telling of the multifaceted interaction between Japanese studies and game studies, and how the interactions between Japanese Studies and Game Studies may lead to new ground in digital game research. Flipping the perspective, this paper has also shown how the interaction between the two eld/disciplines has opened new windows in the study of Japan from outside current area-focused perspectives as well.

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Game(play) Archives: Quebec Video Games as Case Study

ABSTRACT

This article presents the philosophy behind our preservation protocol and archival packages in an attempt to stimulate the discussion surrounding game(play) preservation initiated more than a decade ago. These packages consist of audio-visual recordings of play sessions inspired by Longplay videos; game datasheets, which include contextual information on the game being preserved; and digital copies of meta and paratextual documents relating to the game. We also showcase our reflections on the process of assembling a corpus of video games developed in the province of Quebec, Canada for their preservation. These reflections stem from this project's origin as a pedagogical endeavour as it aimed to help both researchers and students develop good archival practices. To enter the next ten years of game studies, we ought to share our approaches to video game preservation. Without game(play) archives, there are no game(play) studies. The main objective of this project is to create guidelines for gameplay archives and preservation.

KEYWORDS: Video games; preservation; archives; gameplay; Quebec.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Video Game Observation and Documentation University Lab (LUDOV) of the Université de Montréal unites the various initiatives dedicated to the study of video games within our university's Art History and Film Studies department. Its ever-growing video game collection consists primarily of North American home consoles (from the Magnavox Odyssey to the Sony PlayStation 5 and Oculus Quest 2, and also the ColecoVision, TurboGrafx-16 and Atari Jaguar) and portable consoles (Game Boy, Atari Lynx, PlayStation Portable, Nintendo 3DS, etc.), as well as some Japanese consoles (Famicom and Super Famicom). Furthermore, LUDOV houses more than 6000 games, numerous accessories and peripherals (Nintendo Power Glove, Sega Activator and Intellivoice), and diverse forms of paratext (boxes, manuals, magazines, etc.). The foundation of this collection resides on the materiality of gaming artefacts and the main objective of the laboratory is to support the pedagogical activities of the department's

courses and seminars. Granting access to a playable collection is essential as it gives students first-hand experience of video gaming history. As a home to faculty research projects, the laboratory also aims to encourage rigorous historical inquiry, reflect on issues relating to hardware obsolescence, and collaborate with communities working towards creative solutions to these problems.

Montreal has been considered a “Mecca of video games” (Manenti, 2011) for many years and the province of Quebec is seen as an international leader in Triple-A and Indie game development, but little has been done to preserve Quebec’s video gaming history. Thus, we wish to kickstart such efforts and contribute to scholarship on local histories (see Swalwell, 2009; Švelch, 2018) by building the first archive of video games developed in the province and make it accessible to our students and scholars. Yet, like any museum or heritage institution, we soon realized that it was one thing to identify early works and another to locate and acquire them. For instance, if one of our collaborators had not personally known Anne Bergeron, the designer of *Mimi: Les aventures de Mimi la fourmi* (1984), we would not have gotten hold of one of its few surviving physical copies for the Commodore 64. We will obviously not always be so lucky. Still, even though we have that copy, we do not know how long it will remain readable or for how much time our Commodore 64s will remain operational.¹ What’s more, while many researchers have advocated for emulation as a mean to preserve videoludic history, such lesser-known games are sometimes only minimally documented online, let alone emulated. For example, there is no cracked or emulated copies nor video footage of *Têtards* (1982), a game published by Logidisque (the same as *Mimi*), even though it is possibly the first video game produced in Canada (Arsenault and Guay, 2021, p. 39–40; Côté, 2020; Della Rocca, 2013, p. 130). There is little information available about the game online apart from what is available on the website of the game’s developer, Vincent Côté (2020), but it is only accessible through the Wayback Machine. Since software and hardware inevitably degrade, information on some games can often be difficult to locate, and there is a need to preserve both the cultural aspect of video games as well as their gameplay, it becomes obvious that simply preserving paratextual documents or a game’s hardware and original housing medium is not enough. In the end, as Guay-Bélanger asserts, “to truly understand a game, to study”, and we might add to teach it, “one must also understand and preserve the emergent experience of gameplay. Therefore, video games are not either material or audio-visual and cultural heritage; they are both. There is need for an approach that unifies the two” (2022, p. 661).

Taking a step back from the research conducted at LUDOV, we realized we had been advocating for the importance of what James Newman called “game(play) preservation” for some time: “Videogames are disappearing and, by default, so too is gameplay (2012). The urgent aim of game(play) preservation must surely be to record as much as we possibly can about games, and the way they are made, played and played with, while they are still with us” (New-

1. As of now, all but one of our Commodore 64s are functional, but maintenance of old equipment is an ongoing process.

man, 2012, p. 160). Indeed, we have been recording game sessions since 2005 and tried to develop methodological approaches, first for interactive movies in “Methodological questions in ‘interactive film studies’” (Perron, Arsenault, Picard, & Therrien, 2008), and then for action, adventure, and real-time strategy games in “Addressing the Preservation of Gameplay: Archiving Actional Modalities (Execution, Resolution, and Strategy)” (Dor & Perron, 2014). Maybe it is because we come from film studies, but the audiovisual traces of gameplay are important to us, especially when analysing video games:

In front of the performative, transformative and evanescent nature of play, one has to get out of the flow of the game to ponder on it and the ways it’s designed. The recording of the actual gameplay thus becomes indispensable to the study, and it emerges both as a necessary and a great tool for analysis (Dor & Perron, 2014, p. 181).

But with the wealth of tools available nowadays to record play sessions and the widespread use of cloud storage, we concluded that using a simple DVD recorder and extracting sessions onto disks to archive and preserve them was no longer the right move. We wanted a more formalized procedure. To our surprise, even after two decades in games studies, and the publication of valuable scholarship on game preservation (Armstrong & al., 2009; Bettivia, 2016), there does not seem to have been much progress in terms of gameplay preservation and archiving. For instance, even after contacting several video game curators and historians, we were unable to find publicly accessible, established guidelines detailing which gameplay elements to record and how to take in consideration technological and audiovisual specificities of the games we sought to preserve. This work is still largely conducted by communities of collectors and player-archivists, such as World of Longplays’ YouTube channel (2006–present) and NintendoComplete (2013–present), who may not be transparent with the methodological, technical, and cultural foundations of their archiving practices. Additionally, the material they amass is vulnerable to copyright claims, as they extensively use audiovisual material from the games they seek to preserve.

Drawing inspiration from these fan initiatives, our protocol is the result of a pedagogical project aimed at training our students in video game archiving and creating an accessible archive of games for future research. Our initial efforts to identify games developed in the province of Quebec led to the creation of a first list of 30 games, many of which have not been preserved. This article offers tools and resources to guide video game archiving practices at large via our experience in starting to archive games made in Quebec. The first section of the article presents the theoretical underpinnings of our proposed approach to preserving video games through archival packages composed of an assemblage of gameplay recordings and paratextual material. It also discusses the rationale for the use of Longplay-inspired recordings rather than Let’s Plays (LP). The second part of the article showcases the various steps in the preparation of these packages through

cultural acclimation and technical preparation, the tools utilized to record gameplay sessions, video processing requirements, and challenges encountered throughout the conception of our archiving protocol. The primary objective of this project is to create guidelines for gameplay archives and preservation.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS OF GAMEPLAY ARCHIVES

The nature of video gaming is complex and, as such, so is the video game object. To properly conduct the preservation of this medium, archival collections need to keep and gather diverse aspects that compose video games. As Guay-Bélanger puts it, video games “are assemblages of many different origins and the combination of arts forms, culture, and technologies” (2022, p. 670). While they are digital, they also have significant materiality, such as the housing medium of game software, the platforms they are played on, and the peripherals permitting play (i.e., controllers) or enhancing player experience (e.g. the Power Glove). As mentioned earlier, the material aspect of video gaming is what forms the bulk of LUDOV’s collection. But preserving and maintaining this material is challenging in the short to medium-term and, as of yet, impossible in the long-term, due to the great instability and frailty of both software and hardware (Newman 2012). Despite our best efforts to maintain our collection in working order, when hardware or software falters, we must rely on emulation available online to let our students play the games they are researching.

Emulation is an interesting, though problematic avenue for the preservation of playable versions of video games. Although several scholars have argued it is the future of game preservation, emulating games and platforms is complex and falls in a legal grey zone (Murphy, 2013, p. 48; Newman, 2012, p. 138-139; Dor, 2014, p. 28). Even if rules and exceptions surrounding this practice were clear and stable, not every game has been emulated and our lab does not have the incredible resources necessary to create such reproductions. As a result, we depend on another form of gameplay preservation: video recordings.

The practice of recording gameplay has been around since the 1970s (Lavigne, 2017, p. 5), but not every approach is well-suited for the purpose of preserving play. When considering which type of gameplay recording best fit our particular needs for game analysis as well as teaching the formal aspects of video games and the sociocultural dimensions of gaming, we hesitated between two options: Let’s Plays and Longplays. The former focuses on players, as they are “a method by which videogame players record themselves commenting on gameplay for an online audience” (Hale 2013, p. 3) and the latter focuses uniquely on the experience on the screen, as it is devoid of commentary. Perhaps Simon Dor and Bernard Perron described it best when stating that:

there is a big difference between the longplays [as non-commented videos] and Let’s play videos [as commented videos]. [...] the maker of a longplay [...] is

concentrating her activity to the sole gameplaying. On the opposite, the LPer is not only playing the game, [they are] also acting for the microphone or the camera. [Their] role becomes similar to the early moving picture lecturer who, by describing, joking, dramatizing and interpreting the actions on screen, was as part of the show as the film itself (Dor & Perron, 2014, p. 190).

There has been some interesting research on the use of LP for preservation purposes by scholars such as Nylund (2015, p. 57) and Glas, Van Vught, & Zijlstra, 2017, p. 147-8). However, since our goal was to preserve gameplay itself and not player-archivist's commentary, it was not the correct fit. Additionally, the commentary inherent to the Let's Play model might have done some of the work we expect from our students by providing them with previous analysis, and therefore influencing their interpretations. The best way to avoid this was to produce recordings devoid of commentary.

As their name indicates, Longplays can be quite long depending on the game played. Even though it would have been possible to use a more focused and digestible recording format, for instance using what Espen Aarseth qualified as superficial play (2003, p. 6), this would have impaired the usefulness of our archive. Van Vught & Glas argue that, whilst superficial play can be used to get the feel of a game, it is only useful for researchers already well-versed in video gaming (2017, p. 5). The same logic applies to gameplay recordings. A researcher who is already knowledgeable about a certain type of game might be able to gain much information from a superficial recording, but one who is not would most likely not be able to gain a deep understanding of the game. Nonetheless, insofar as shorter videos do have advantages (smaller file size, watchability, etc.), it is still useful to create recordings that are less extensive than Longplays. Given that our project aims to be accessible to a vast audience, from researchers to citizen archivists, but particularly for our students, longer recordings which could later be edited into shorter, more targeted ones were preferable.

Recording as much of the game as possible is ideal, but the downsides of recording high quality video files, such as their great size and length, forced us to make choices. We aimed for plausible playthroughs instead of completionist or +100% runs of games. As van Vught & Glas explain in an article describing the different options of gameplay for students researching video games, exhaustive play even in simple games takes a tremendous amount of time, making it essentially impossible for open-world games (2017, p. 6). In a reasonably exhaustive playthrough, the player-archivist completes as much as the game as possible without necessarily trying to find every easter egg, trophy, or achievement. Of course, what is meant by a reasonably exhaustive playthrough will vary depending on the genre of the game being recorded. In the case of *Jersey Devil* (1998), a 3D platformer developed in Quebec, a playthrough of the game's entire narrative was realistic as the game is fairly linear.

Gameplay recordings only offer vicarious experiences to those watching them, but they can also offer advantages that playing the original game cannot. First-hand experiences with games have worth, but many games are quite difficult to play even for expert game players. Games such as *Battletoads* (1991), or more recently *Dark Souls* (2009), are good examples of games necessitating a high skill level. Should a student, researcher, or anyone interested in these games not have the necessary skills or time to complete them using original hardware and software, Longplays offer a great alternative. Additionally, Longplays of many games are available online, though most of these recordings are not necessarily intended or suited for academic research. Indeed, there are multiple resources dedicated to Longplays – such as *World of Longplays*, *C64 Longplays*, and *Recorded Amiga Games* – but they do not hold recordings of each and every game that has been produced and, even if they did, these recordings might vary in terms of quality and level of professionalism. More obscure games that are not part of the video game canon are also much less likely to make their way into these platforms, especially if they are from a highly localized game production scene. If Triple-A games developed in the Quebec such as *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007) or *Batman: Arkham Origins* (Warner Bros. Games Montréal, 2013) have their share of Longplays, this is not the case for indie productions like *Sang-Froid: Tales of Werewolves* (Artifice Studio, 2013) or *Mages of Mystralia* (Borealis Games, 2017). To be sure, preserving gameplay through alternative means, would it be emulation or recordings, has been criticized by scholars who put much emphasis on the use of original material, such as Andrew Reinhard. In *Archeaogaming*, he claimed that:

[a] game cannot be separated from the hardware on which it was played. [...] MAME emulators (software that ports arcade games to other platforms such as personal computers) can suffice to some extent, but there is no substitute for learning how to play a game using the original controllers (2018, p. 169).

Indeed, playing games on and with original technology – original platform, controller, and software – can prevent possible distortions created when combining technologies from different eras, like larger or higher resolution televisions, something James Newman describes quite aptly in *Best Before* (2012, p. 137-154). Yet, given the fact that original material is not eternal, there needs to be alternative methods for video game preservation, one of which is gameplay recordings.

Recordings are imperfect and result in the loss of some aspects inherent to the original experience, such as direct interaction with original hardware and peripherals, but there is still a way to mitigate some of these losses. For instance, when recording Let's Plays at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Glas, Van Vught, & Zijlstra (2017) advocated for the use of original technology. They argued that “capturing encounters with the original hardware and software creates a more authentic experience than having players engage with

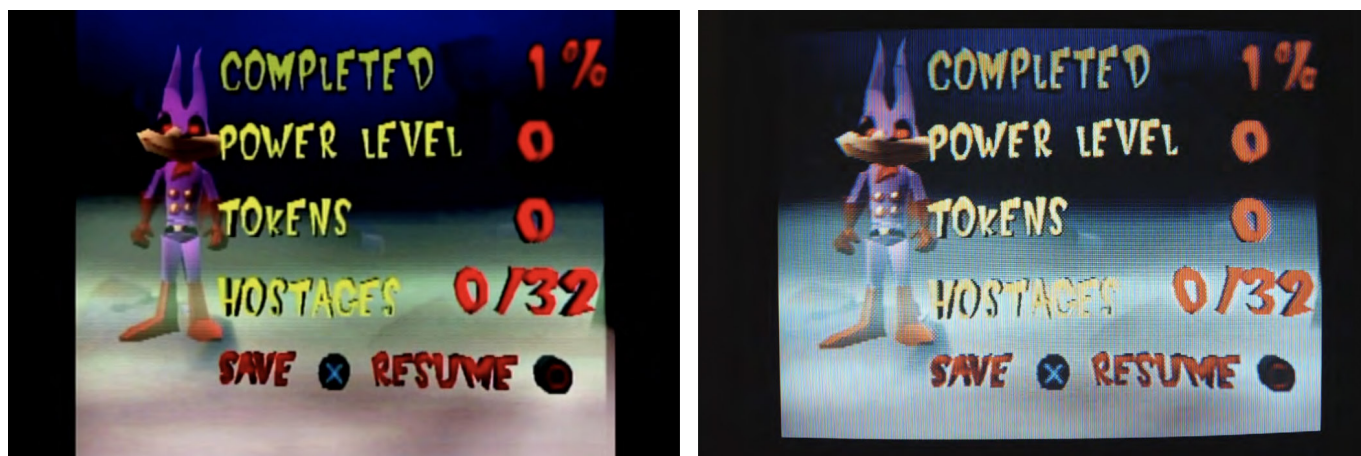


Figure 1: Jersey Devil as played on the PlayStation 1 and a CRT TV at LUDOV. Left image, recording with a video capture card. Right image, recording with a camera.

an emulator on a contemporary PC” (p. 141). As LUDOV already has such material in its collection, we employed it to its full potential in order to capture gameplay as authentically as was possible. In addition to utilising original hardware, software, and controllers, this also meant using original displays and recording play sessions with a camera instead of other capturing tools, when relevant. While it would have been possible to solely employ devices capturing video signal directly from the platform to record our Longplays, like the Elgato video capture card does for console games, they remove some of the specificities of older screens, such as the scan lines of CRT TVs, and flatten the image (Fig. 1). This is in line with our goal to produce archives whose audiovisual aspects are faithful to original output signals. However, when capturing play sessions of games developed for consoles with HDMI output and produced for high definition, 4k, or 8k displays, modern software and devices do not mask the specificities of the screen as much as it would for older displays. As a result, we opted to record such games with the Elgato Game Capture HD.

Preserving a certain level of authenticity is a laudable objective in any video game archiving project, but many scholars have emphasized that aiming to preserve the original experience of video gaming should not be the ultimate goal. When dealing with the past, and even despite our greatest efforts, it is impossible to fully capture the past as it was. Swalwell has argued that video game preservation should move on from the original experience and embrace alternatives, such as emulation and documentation, to ensure the long-term preservation of the medium (2017). Newman makes a similar claim when he states that perhaps we should let video games die and instead focus on other methods for preservation (2012, p. 154-158). This line of argumentation aligns with literature on media art preservation, of which video game preservation is a subset. When investigating digital preservation, Cosetta G. Saba describes how

digitalization undermines “the idealistic notion of uniqueness, originality and thus ‘artistic character’ as a quality belonging to the non-repeatability of the work”, due to the process of continuous encoding and re-(encoding) necessary when transferring digital files from one format to another (2013, p. 105). As a result, she asserts that “media art proves to be ‘archivable’ only from a documentary standpoint, given its multidimensionality and material, conceptual and progressive complexity” (2013, 103). It is through that documentation that a greater understanding of video games can be achieved.

Although video recordings, or any other method of gameplay preservation, have value on their own, it is their combination with other material, through documentation, that leads to the effective preservation of video games. The archive we are in the process of building therefore does not only contain Longplays of games, but also informational sheets containing contextual information on every game, such as details on their developers, press articles related to the games, reviews, encyclopedia entries, and paratextual material. All of this material is amassed in order to provide a wider context to the game, rather than simply what is in the video recording. In essence, the resulting archival packages espouse Guay-Bélanger’s view that video games are assemblages and that material relating to a game carries its aura (2022, p. 667-668) and Saba’s claim that:

the digital archive can be an ideal platform for the ‘cultural conservation’ of media artworks [...] as a process that not only documents and preserves the technological and material dimensions of these complex works, but also the cultural contexts in which they emerged and were seen (2013, p. 104).

By creating packages that include multiple aspects of a game, this provides those who consult the archive – should they be students, researchers, or the public – with cultural context about the game, something video recordings cannot provide in and of themselves. An archive which would only include gameplay recordings would solely emphasize what is happening on the screen rather than the “assemblage of human and non-human related components including the game and the player’s incorporeal enunciations and actions as well as their many socio-economic, cultural and historical linkages” (Karppi & Sotamaa, 2012. cited in van Vught & Glas, 2017). These packages therefore offer a wealth of material designed to provide people consulting them with the necessary documentation to understand a game in all its complexity.

The goal of this archiving method, and of this article, is to make scholars, heritage institutions, and even fan archivists reflect on their practices and to incorporate changes, turns, and critical rifts to avoid dead-end pathways. We ought to think more critically about video game and gameplay preservation for the next decades of game studies. The reflections we provide here stem from years of archiving games at LUDOV. What follows explores the intricate pro-

cess of selecting games for inclusion in our archive and the creation of archival packages through the *Game(play) Archives* protocol.²

3. METHODOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF ARCHIVING

As the collection of our video game laboratory grew, we became increasingly aware of the need to judiciously select our next acquisitions. Until recently, we had been acquiring games related to research projects (on interactive movies, horror, and other genre specific games) or classes (when professors required specific titles), when good opportunities arose (via Facebook Marketplace, word-of-mouth, etc.), when new platforms were released, or when older platforms would stop being supported by their developers. The whole acquisition process needed a new direction, a purpose. Due to Quebec's important role and interesting position in videogame history, we elected to build a sub-collection within our inventory focused on video games developed in the province Quebec and give precedence to our local history.

Doing local history very often requires locating material absent from mainstream (official) heritage institutions or, since the rise of the internet, from the web. LUDOV's goal of searching for titles developed in Quebec proved quite difficult, since we could not find relevant resources pertaining to a provincial corpus. While The Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec holds some relevant titles, most of them date from 2012, when Warner Bros, Electronic Arts, and Ubisoft donated a first batch of games. A website entitled *Games from Quebec* does exist,³ but it only lists contemporary mainstream titles, as this site is part of the promotional strategy of La Guilde du jeu video du Quebec, an association of both large and independent game developers in the province. *Games from Quebec's* lack of considerations for games made before the 2010s furthered our interest in building a platform that includes a wider variety of games, and as a result our lab team assembled an initial selection of 30 titles.⁴ Due to time constraints and limited resources, like any group or institution working towards the preservation of heritage, we faced some difficult choices when delineating our corpus. Most games were selected because they had been the subject of previous publications (Arsenault & Mauger 2012, Arsenault & Guay 2021, Lavigne 2021), while others made the list since they were popular at the time they were released, and their legacy seemed likely.

Our list of games tries to strike a balance between games developed by international companies, smaller studios, and individuals. It also attempts to account for the diversity of titles made in Quebec by including games emerging from across the long history of game development in the province, such as titles published before the arrival of Ubisoft in Montreal in 1997, and games developed for local platforms, such as Vidéotron's Vidéoway.⁵ Of course, the further we go back in time, the harder it becomes to locate information on games from a localized development scene and to find functional versions of these games. While challenging, conducting research on games for which there is no playable ver-

2. A link to the protocol in interactive guide format is available on the project's website: <https://www.ludov.ca/en/Documentation/the-gaming-sector-in-quebec>. Please note that it is hosted on the Université de Montréal's continuing education platform, StudiumFC, which is accessible to the public by logging in as a guest.

3. <https://www.gamesfromquebec.com/en/>

4. <https://www.ludov.ca/en/Documentation/the-gaming-sector-in-quebec>

5. Loto-Québec is a state-owned corporation conducting and regulating gambling and lottery in the province. The Vidéoway machine was a television decoder distributed for Vidéotron TV subscribers in Quebec between 1989 and 2006 (Lavigne 2021). Because all games on the Vidéoway appear to be lost forever, we thought it was important document their existence.

sion or for which little is known could stimulate interest in them. Furthermore, showcasing those titles on LUDOV's website might attract the attention of their designers, or even their acquaintances or relatives, and therefore help preserve "lost" games, as was the case for *Mimi*. We viewed this first selection as a good first step towards a larger-scale project on video games from Quebec.

Beyond facing the issue of locating games to assemble a corpus and retrieving basic information about them, it is also necessary to have a realistic scope for the selection of a corpus. In our case, we pinpointed two aspects related to the cultural impact of games made in Quebec. First, we wanted to understand the reception (provincially, nationally, and internationally) of the games included in our list. This led us to include game websites, reviews, awards and paratextual elements in the cultural preparation phase of building an archival package (described below). Second, we were interested in the dynamics between video games made in the province and the inclusion of Quebec cultural elements, or lack thereof. In existing international archives or Longplays on YouTube, cultural elements relating to Quebec depicted in games are rarely emphasized. For instance, *Kona's* (Parabole, 2017) environmental details, which include older snowmobile models (built in Valcourt, Quebec, by Bombardier, one of the most well-known corporations founded in the province), ice hockey cards featuring Montreal Canadiens players, and Expo 67 posters can be overlooked. This is also the case for the local folktales framing the action in *Sang-Froid: Tales of Werewolves*. But these in-game elements have great cultural significance and offer insights into Quebec's history and its representation in video games. *Kona* and *Sang-Froid*, and other games like them, are thus more interesting for our project than games that may be more popular, as they capture the culture from which they emanate. With these methodological and cultural dimensions of archiving in mind, we developed a thorough archiving protocol, *Game(play) Archives*, to document video games made in Quebec, from their reception to their use.

It should be noted that this is a project still in its infancy. What we present below emphasizes the method rather than its results. At the time of writing, we used the protocol to begin the process of archiving 5 of the 30 games we identified. Hence, there is still a lot of work to be done to obtain final results and the protocol itself is also susceptible to improvements.⁶

4. INTRODUCTION TO GAME(PLAY) ARCHIVES: A THOROUGH PROTOCOL

Game(play) Archives was developed to achieve two main goals. The first is to introduce students and game aficionados to archiving practices, to teach them how to conduct historical research relating to games and show them why it is important to proceed methodically. For this purpose, the protocol includes resources about how to gather cultural data about games, tools to organize said data, step-by-step instructions for recording gameplay, and general rules concerning the video game archiving process. It takes the form of an interactive

6. Obviously, we welcome feedback from archivists and testers, who may encounter issues we have not anticipated.

book containing branching scenarios, forms to fill in, hotspot images, interactive videos, and many illustrated examples to accompany novice archivists in their first steps. The second aim of this protocol is to establish archiving norms for game researchers and curators. As we have already mentioned, the process of archiving games is far from being formalized in game studies. Since our protocol offers rationales for our choices and is open to scrutiny, it ensures methodological transparency and may act as a starting point for other archiving projects. *Game(play) Archives* can be adapted to the specificities of a specific game or different cultural contexts and be appropriated by different communities of practice (universities, journalists, librarians, fans, etc.). Consequently, our protocol acts as a key tool to the effective preservation of game(play). In the following section, we outline four fundamental steps to the archiving process we have implemented in our protocol: cultural preparation, technical preparation, gameplay archiving, and visualization. We intend to share the lessons we have learned through experimentation and offer recommendations to improve the archiving process for video games.

4.1 CULTURAL PREPARATION

As described above, seeing games as assemblages requires an understanding that material, audiovisual, and cultural preservation are mutually supportive. The cultural preparation of our approach serves to inform the recording and visualization process. On the one hand, the archivist must be able to play a given game to produce a gameplay recording. Some games may cause problems in this regard because of their difficulty level, unclear objectives, or complicated interface, making the archivist unable to finish the game and resulting in an incomplete recording. To prevent these problems, the archivist must study the game before playing it, consulting its manual and any documentation that might assist them in their task. On the other hand, the viewer, who is not necessarily an expert on the game, must be able to make sense of the gameplay recording. Without some background information, the game recording is likely to be pedagogically sterile, as the viewer may not understand its relevance. For instance, without proper context, it would be harder to understand why a game such as *Jersey Devil* was included in our archive since it does not reflect the province's cultural specificities. To provide context about the games we record, we gather metatextual and paratextual information, such as news articles and box covers. This also contributes to the archivist's cultural preparation, as they must gain an understanding of the game's development context, historical reception, and more. This, in turn, informs their play and focuses their attention on interesting elements within the game, such as *Kona*'s environmental details which have high cultural significance. Not ensuring that archivists are aware of the cultural context of a game, both in terms of where it was developed but also of in-game content, could cause them to overlook cultural specificities and therefore obscure them from the historical record.

Our first attempts at gathering information on games made in Quebec, which focused on the games that were already in our laboratory's collection, were undertaken before the beginning of the *Game(play) Archives* project and relied on the help of two undergraduate students in our video gaming program. This forced us to develop a research template to help these two students locate and obtain information more effectively, and which now serves as the cultural preparation stage of our protocol. This work resulted in game datasheets consolidating diverse types of information about the games they researched: where the game was developed, on which platform(s) it was published, if it received awards, its availability at the laboratory, its links to Quebec's culture, etc. In addition, all the information included in these datasheets is supported by references and a bibliography. Each sheet is accompanied by scans, pictures, or screenshots of every item in the bibliography,⁷ which helps future inquiries. Our datasheet could serve as a template to other projects with similar aims, as they could (and should) adapt the sheets according to their needs by adding, modifying, or removing any of the categories we included. The lab's website contains examples of game datasheets created with it⁸

6.2 TECHNICAL PREPARATION

Before proceeding with gameplay recording, one needs to take into account several technological considerations. As mentioned earlier, gameplay archives should be usable by anybody, even non-players, and must reflect the limitations created by the intersection of original hardware, software, and display used to play the game. In a sense, our project strives to create an audiovisual archive which shows how the game was played around the time of its release. It would be possible to play games via emulators, since they often have shaders or filters to mimic the look of a cathode-ray tube screen, but they cannot fool someone with a trained eye. As stated earlier, recording audiovisual signal from old consoles with devices that capture video signal, such as the Elgato video capture card, also flattens the image. Most CRT TVs of the 1980s and 1990s had a curvature which cannot be recreated by modern emulators. Additionally, pixels on CRT and liquid-crystal display (LCD) screens do not interpret visual signals the same way. Alvy Ray Smith explains that pixels are interpretations of the points constituting an image (1995). Points interpreted on a CRT are fuzzy and sometimes colours bleed between them as the image is drawn by the photons on the tube. An LCD consists of a fixed set of pixels on a grid. Points drawn on the LCD are interpreted as tiny blocks, which alters radically the look of images once developed for CRT displays. Workarounds such as trying to directly record the audiovisual signal of old consoles and computers with capture cards or DVD recorder are, in our experience, not satisfying (and sometimes challenging). Recordings are often distorted, colours are altered, and real-time playing is made almost impossible. Direct recording of signals also often reveals parts of the image that were once masked, as Altice demonstrates in an analy-

7. To prevent being flagged for copyright violations, some of this paratextual material is only accessible in-person.

8. <https://www.ludov.ca/en/Documentation/the-gaming-sector-in-quebec>

sis of both pixels and masking for the Famicom (2015). Moreover, computers using video graphics arrays (VGA) need specific capturing devices that can transform the signal from analog to digital. Some computer games use different resolutions or refresh rates which can cause recording errors (Tech Tangents, 2019). While working on a project unrelated to this article,⁹ we tried to capture the first half-hour of *The 7th Guest* (Trilobyte, 1993) and *It Came from the Desert* (Cinemaware, 1989) on a CRT. We experienced our fair share of technical difficulties. First, our sound recorder did not detect the game audio. And once it did, it was heavily distorted. Afterward, the game screen was misaligned on the recording created by our capture card, being either decentered to the left or the right. Lastly, filming *The 7th Guest*'s launch menu also caused problems, as the display framerate of the computer's desktop was not identical to the one used by the game, therefore creating visual artifacts, an issue we discuss in greater depth below. It quickly became clear that we needed to devise solutions tailored to different technologies. This compelled us to develop recording scenarios that fit the diverse audiovisual technologies on which video games were played.

6.3 CRTS, CAMERAS, AND AUDIO RECORDER

Not every recording device is suited to capture gameplay footage from a given platform, meaning recording practices have to be adapted to the platform on which the game is played. As such, to capture quality game(play) footage when it is generated by older computers with VGA output, consoles with coaxial output (e.g., the Sega Genesis), or without audiovisual output (e.g., most mobile devices), we mount a camera on a tripod and film displays directly. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that most cameras do not have the necessary features for this task. One problem that stems from filming screens is the addition of visual artifacts produced by the desynchronization between the camera's shutter speed and the display's refresh rate. This kind of artifact appears as a wide, dark bar scanning the screen from the bottom to top. The scanning rate may be rapid, giving the impression that the screen is flickering, or slow, occurring once every couple seconds. Generally, cameras do not allow to adjust shutter speed with sufficient accuracy to remove this artifact. For example, common shutter speed settings jump from a speed of 1/30th to 1/60th of a second, which ends up mismatching the exact refresh rate (measured in hertz) of the monitor or TV screen. However, some cameras allow to select more precise shutter speed configurations, such as the Panasonic GH5 and its "synchro scan" setting, which we have used successfully.¹⁰

Concerning sound recording, two options are available to gameplay archivists: directly recording from a computer or television or using an external recorder. The first option entails using the 3.5 mm audio jack from a camera and connecting it to the computer or television and recording the sound while the camera is rolling. This is the ideal solution as it does not produce undesirable audio artifacts; the result is the same as using headphones. If the required output is

9. See the entry on the "Remediation of Cinema Images in Videogames" for the *Encyclopedia of Film Techniques and Technologies* (Aycock, Poremba, & Therrien, 2020).

10. That being said, the resulting image is not perfect. Our camera creates a moiré effect which does not originally appear on a CRT TV, probably due to its high native sharpness. We add a faint blur in post-production, using DaVinci Resolve, to cancel this effect and preserve the "aura" of the game image. Obviously, these kinds of manipulations should be done sparingly.

unavailable, for instance when working with older computers, the second option is to use a separate recorder, such as those from the Zoom handheld series, to capture the sound coming out of the speakers. This means, however, controlling the environment to prevent undesirable sounds, such as people talking or phones buzzing, as well as synchronizing audio and video in post-production. In any case, we advise conducting technical tests first and comparing the resulting recording with the console or computer audiovisual output and adjusting settings in order to maintain accuracy. As an illustration, if the footage looks too blue or yellow, the white balance may be off, and if louder noises in the game cause audible distortions, the level of sound recording may be too high. The archivist must remain vigilant for technical problems as it is a mistake to blindly rely on recording technologies to produce gameplay archives.

6.5 GAME CAPTURE DEVICES AND SOFTWARES

Even though the Elgato Game Capture HD we use enables to record a wide variety of audiovisual signals, we decided to limit its usage as a backup for CRT recording and as a singular method for recordings games on platforms with HD signals (720i and above)¹¹ and image ratio of 16:9. Thanks to extensive tests made with *Jersey Devil* on the Sony PlayStation 1, we were able to compare the results between the GH5 MII camera and the Elgato recordings to pinpoint distortions (see figure 1). Furthermore, the additional recording for older platforms captured with the Elgato Game Capture HD acts as insurance in case something goes wrong with either recording (a duplicate recording cannot be created with old computers such as Apple II or Commodore 64 at this moment, since we do not have compatible capture cards for those platforms). For modern consoles, we do not have to split the signal between the television (recorded by the camera) and the capture card, since the HDMI output on the Elgato acts as a passthrough, allowing us to play in real-time on televisions with HDMI inputs. The main limitation with HDMI and Elgato's capture cards is the High-Bandwidth Digital Content Protection (HDCP) protocol, a security layer which prevents capture cards from recording the full interaction with a console as some menus are protected by this protocol. Also, recordings are prone to compilation errors, since the Elgato software first records videos as MPEG Transport Stream (.ts) before enabling MPEG-4 exportations (.mp4, which can be modified in post-production if needed). This problem can be remediated by erasing corrupted frames within the MPEG Transport Stream video file. Thus, we have to manage two video formats (the uncompressed ts file and a compiled mp4) when we use the Elgato Game Capture HD, which also ensures we have two copies of every recording.

The Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) helps us archive modern computer games (available on Steam, GOG, Itch, Epic Games, emulators, browsers, etc.). In essence, this software enables the recording of video and audio content managed by a computer without much limitation. The main drawback of this

11. The Elgato Game Capture HD, as with all capture cards, does not enable any and every resolution to be recorded. When we tried to directly record some VGA signal via a HDMI adapter, we found it is not compatible with certain configurations for old games in 320x200 or in 640x480 (*Road to India: Between Hell and Nivarna* and *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* on Windows use the second resolution by default). Other capturing devices might be purchased at some point to increase the variety of audiovisual signals we could directly record.

method is the highly customizable interface of OBS; it is not plug-and-play. Settings working for a game might not be compatible with another. This means we must test configurations on a game-per-game basis, which makes the creation of a configuration protocol arduous and time consuming. Fortunately, it is fairly easy to find troubleshooting guides online. Basic screen and audio device recording work for most games and browser-based content.

Unfortunately, as selecting a video codec and file format is somewhat of a Pandora's box, we have not been able to finalize the post-production process of this protocol. Indeed, there is a wide variety of options – varying in quality, bitrate, widespread use, and stability – and there is no universal standard for audiovisual preservation. We therefore have not been able to decide on the codec and file format we will use to create the final, complete recordings of our Longplays. To ensure access and visibility of our gameplay archive, especially online, we will have to strike a balance between the size and the overall quality of our output. Our choice will have a direct impact on the type of analysis those consulting our archive will be able to conduct, since if video quality is too poor, frame by frame analysis might not always be optimal.

6.6 GAMEPLAY ARCHIVING EXPERIENCE

Once the cultural and technical preparation is completed, the archivist is ready to start recording gameplay. We have already discussed the value of the Let's Play and Longplay models, but both forms of gameplay recording provide incomplete understanding of a game. It goes without saying that watching someone play does not tell the full story of how they are interacting with the game, that some rules and mechanics may only reveal themselves by actually playing the game. Gameplay archives must take into account this downside, for example by providing viewers with an overview of the actional possibilities and menu configurations available. When previously addressing the relevancy of exhaustive playthroughs in archival projects, we also argued against attempting to complete all achievements and secondary objectives of a game, as it is a time-consuming and demanding task. Still, one should include as many elements as possible in the gameplay recording. This is all the more important given that these elements might be neglected in pre-existing gameplay footage available on the web. In the *Game(play) Archives* protocol, we identify several game elements that should be recorded: the game launcher, opening logos, credits, cut-scenes, “demo mode” and high scores list triggered by remaining idle in the start menu, start menu options (e.g. language settings, audio channels, etc.), pause menu options, tutorials, effects of pressing each button on the controller (e.g. in an avatar-based game), main objectives, and more. Even though many of these elements are easily accessible, they may be skipped in pre-existing gameplay footage for various reasons – the player might not have seen the relevance of showing the game launcher or might not have known there was a “demo mode”. Details that seem trivial at first glance are especially important

for game preservation since they are also the first to be forgotten. Moreover, what game elements archivists decide to record must also be adapted depending on the game's genre. For narrative games, completing the main story seems sufficient, but for some strategy or mobile games that do not feature a campaign or story mode, or where these modes are not as relevant, it is more appropriate to complete many matches to give a satisfying gameplay overview. Considering that games with emergent gameplay and repeatable content could be indefinitely recorded, it is often up to the judgment of the archivist to decide when the gameplay recording is sufficiently complete. There is, of course, always some degree of arbitrariness when archiving games.

6.7 VISUALIZATION

The visualization step relates to post-playing and post-recording workflow. At LUDOV, footage is reviewed to ensure proper playback, implement backup strategies, document each gameplay session, and plan accessibility as well as discoverability regarding the future online sharing of our gameplay recordings. We stumbled upon issues regarding nomenclature of video files. Naming conventions needed to reflect the fact that play sessions were recorded in hour long increments, therefore signaling which part of the recording each file represents and other meaningful information, such as the date of creation of the file, hardware/software used to record, pre/postproduction files, etc. Nomenclature also helps us organize uploads and descriptions on visualization platforms, such as YouTube. Online descriptions include the title of the game and a brief rundown of the content in each of them: levels, bosses, story, relevant facts linked to Quebec's culture. Our descriptions emulate those of game guides or walkthrough, since it is much friendlier to navigate videos if the language used is similar to what is already published by journalists or the player community.

7. CONCLUSION

We cannot enter the next decade of game studies without taking care of and giving great consideration to the objects and activities – the (game)play, to use Newman's words – at the center of our practices and reflections. The protocol we developed is a crucial part of successfully preserving games, both in terms of their cultural and technical aspects. By archiving games made in Quebec, we are building a collection of packages which could help raise awareness of our province's contribution to video game history and to initiate a conversation on historical methods in game studies. Both wittingly and unwittingly, video gaming communities have been working towards the preservation of video games for a significant amount of time. It was therefore only natural to borrow from their practices, in the form of Longplay recordings, in order to preserve the heritage of this medium. Nevertheless, video games are not solely about what is visible on the screen; their history and nature is also found in their meta and paratextual material. Indeed, when considering this medium in

all its complexity, it becomes quite clear that they are assemblages. As such, the archival package and protocol we developed (and are still developing) attempts to consider games not only as game or technology, but also as cultural artefact.

Preserving gameplay footage of video games is an extensive, complex, and daunting task. Issues of selecting recording device(s) or display(s), the various aspects within games themselves (menus, demo modes, side quests, etc.), and file format shows how much work still needs to be done before established protocols for game preservation are devised. Nevertheless, we attempted to create a thorough protocol to stimulate new and productive conversations within the field of video game preservation, both within academia but also amongst citizen archivists. It is our hope that *Game(play) Archives* will lead to greater discussion on this topic and eventually to the establishment of better informed and transparent archiving methods for the preservation of video games.

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Games and Cathode Rays

Discourses on a New Medium in the Italian Specialized Magazines (1981-1988)

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the discourses surrounding video games developed within the Italian context during the 1980s. More precisely, it investigates the specialized magazines context, which, in those days, was mainly made up of game-oriented, tinkering-oriented, and video-oriented publications. Through an analysis of the video game “dispositive”, this study observes the emergence of specific epistemic frameworks and discursive layers: these magazines are crucial for reconstructing the cultural context of a specific area while a new medium is taking over the Italian living rooms and game arcades. Through an analysis of such materials, the article pinpoints pivotal discourses around value that surrounded the emergence of video games in the Italian media landscape. It also reflects upon the kind of readers implied by those magazines. Therefore, this article reconstructs the epistemic framework in which video games emerged as a cultural phenomenon in Italy, observing both the discursive recurrences concerning the medium and how specialized magazines molded their audiences.

KEYWORDS: Game culture; Video Culture; Magazines; Discursive Production; Italian Context (1981-1988)

1. INTRODUCTION: VIDEO AND GAMES

Between 1984 and 1987, a relevant increase in consumer electronics consumption marked the mass media landscape in Italy (Gervasoni, 2010, pp. 97-114). Most of all, it concerned the circulation of hi-fi systems, television devices, videorecorders, video cameras, game consoles, and home computers. Their mass distribution was strictly intertwined with how affordable such devices were for audiences and users: for instance, the first videorecorder that costed less than 1.000.000 liras (1.800 euros ca.) was only on sale since 1982. Such devices were accompanied by the development of new artistic domains, such as video art, and the emergence of cultural practices such as telephilia, video communication,

and video gaming. Over the years, these topics became pivotal for many specialized magazines and journals: as a result, discourses on video and computer cultures (in all of their manifold forms and structures) took a leap forward.

Throughout this paper, I will analyse the discursive frameworks surrounding video games in Italy during a specific historical phase, which began with the first transition from arcade/coin op gaming to console and computer gaming (early 1980s) and ended with the commercialization of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) home console (December 1987). The development of the console and home computer market was mirrored by the evolution of discourses that defined it, as has already been investigated by Addeo, Barra, & Di Giuseppe (2020) who surveyed game journalism in Italy. The Authors provide both a quantitative and qualitative survey of specialized magazines in Italy, although they seem to overlook early years' publications such as *Video Magazine*, *Video*, *Sperimentare Computer*, and *Videogiochi*, focusing instead on top sellers like *Zzap!*, first printed in its Italian edition in 1986.

Conversely, my goal is to shed light on those magazines, columns, and articles that fostered the development of this discursive field in Italy; such a field was partly made up of reviewers that operated without an explicit cognizance of the complex social, cultural, and economic layers implied in the medium of video gaming (Bittanti, 2005a, p. 10). Other columnists were instead committed to legitimizing it as a fully-fledged cultural practice: on the one hand, video games needed to be culturally accepted; on the other, they were regarded as the core of potentially massive social networks. This is why the case studies chosen for this article broaden the scope of the research in video games, including video-oriented magazines as well as publications mainly referring to consoles and pc/home computers (Addeo, Barra, & Di Giuseppe, 2020, p. 111). The materials discussed herein all appeared before the best-selling and specialized *Zzap!*. Rather, one can find them in the early columns hosted by non-game specialized magazines, such as *Video Magazine* and *Video*, from 1981 to 1988. Likewise, a tinkering-oriented magazine such as *Sperimentare Computer* was printed from 1983 to 1986. *Videogiochi*, a game-oriented publication, released its first issue in January 1983¹ (Albini 1989, 20), and it was published until May 1987.

The connections between the material basis of the video game intended as a dispositive (Albera & Tortajada, 2011) and the discourse around it is at the core of my reflection: my main target is to stress how specialized magazines fostered the cultural acceptance and social pervasiveness of video gaming in Italy during the 1980s and how their issues and thematic columns fulfilled the compelling need for legitimization of this new media practice, accomplishing their mission at the end of the decade, when NES finally entered the market. We can fully observe these interactions from a specific methodological perspective, based on the epistemology of media by François Albera and Maria Tortajada. More precisely, I will focus on their notion of dispositive, which:

1. Although its first issue was dated January 1983, *Videogiochi* was already available at the end of 1982.

has not been simply borrowed from Foucault: it comes not only from the exchanges in the field of historiography of cinema, and particularly ‘early’ cinema, but also from the broadening of the discipline, which has freed itself from semiotic or aesthetic discourse on the one hand and a purely technical (i.e., historical or functionalist) discourse on the other. This is the background of our specific epistemological approach (Albera and Tortajada, 2011, p. 11).

The dispositive, then, does not configure itself as the mere technical device through which media communication takes place. On the contrary, it is a network formed by material, practical, and discursive elements, affecting how users, media representations, and media technologies engage in a dialogue: there are “concrete elements of the dispositive”, which constitute its material level; moreover, we have “the abstract notions associated with the dispositive or with the concrete elements constituting it” – for instance, the notions of “decomposition and synthesis of movement” related to film projection or tv signal transmission; finally, there are “key notions or types-notions, abstract or concrete, which at a given historical moment come to define a given dispositive: they are then instituted as references. They convey a certain idea of cinema or photography, the phonograph, television, the radio, and so forth” (Albera and Tortajada, 2015, p. 34).

Abstract notions and key notions constitute the discursive sphere of the dispositive: although they perform specific functions, they are intrinsically tied to their material apparatus. In other words, within a dispositive, materiality and discourse superimpose, generating a cultural form through which a media object becomes operative. During the Eighties, specialized magazines represented one of the cultural catalysts of the video game dispositive: among them, for instance, we can also find those non-traceable practices linked to retailing, where discourse took place alongside commercial practices, and documents such as trade catalogues, which are hard to retrieve today. These are mostly, if not all, lost to history, but we should not assume that they did not have a relevance in shaping the discourse around video games. That being stated, specialized magazines played a major role in it, helping consoles and home computers to penetrate the Italian domestic mediascape in the 1980s: they constantly referred to the technologies they dealt with; at the same time, consoles and computers cannot be investigated without taking into account their discursive framework.

Dispositive analysis, then, is the lens through which I aim to interpret the magazines’ discourses around video gaming. Although methodology is not addressed in a specific chapter, several epistemological knots are untied throughout the paper, shedding light on each case study: I will focus primarily on *Video Magazine* and *Video* and their video game columns; secondly, I will reflect upon *Sperimentare Computer* and the relationships between tinkering-oriented magazines and video games; thirdly, I will examine game-oriented magazines, such as *Videogiochi*.

2. GAMES AND THE VIDEO APPARATUS: VIDEO MAGAZINE AND VIDEO

As argued by Riccardo Fassone (2020), the history of video games in Italy began with companies producing electromechanical pinball machines and coin-op games, such as Bologna-based Zaccaria, officially founded in 1973. In this specific case, pinball machine production, which involved a complex network of electrical mechanics, designers, component providers, and glaziers (Fassone, 2020, p. 45), established a solid ground for the development of the arcade games section: at the turn of the 1980s, Zaccaria became an important developer in the arcade market worldwide, commercializing hit games such as *Money Money* (1983) and *Jack Rabbitt* (1984) (Carlà, 1984, pp. 66–68).

Pinball machines and coin-op games remained at the core of Zaccaria's production until 1984, when the company filed for bankruptcy (Fassone, 2020, p. 46). Throughout all these years, however, they completely missed the relevance of the console market, which started to be a mass phenomenon in Italy since the early 1980s. More precisely, Zaccaria's case represents a perfect example of how the Italian game industry, which was formed by gifted artisans and small companies, lacked the capacity to jump into the console/home computer market. This is the reason why console and coin-op manufacturers did not engage in dialogue, evolving separately and, sometimes, clashing against each other: as Fassone argues, a certain “tension between public consumption, in arcade rooms and pubs, and private consumption, referring to consoles and computers [...], was at work in the Italian media ecosystem as well” (Fassone, 2016, p. 95).

Discourses around video games constituted an integral part of this tension. At the beginnings of the Eighties, domestic consoles and computers transformed the cultural spaces in which video gaming was taking place. Specialized magazines played an important part in these changes at least since 1981, when several articles dedicated to the new phenomenon appeared in youth-oriented magazines – for instance, Francesco Carlà, who founded Simulmondo software house in 1987 (Carbone, 2020, pp. 53–81), was the head of the video game section of a rock music magazine named *Rockstar* (Addeo, Barra, and Di Giuseppe 2020, p. 107) – and video culture-oriented magazines such as *Video Magazine* e *Video* considered video games as a new medium to be legitimized. From this point of view, video games were not an ancillary *addendum* to the discourse around video; instead, they represented a key issue for figuring out how the electronic image works.

It was not by chance, then, that *Video Magazine* hosted a feature article about video games titled “Videogiochiamo con Atari” (“Let's Videoplay with Atari”) in its first issue of September 1981. Its core meaning is crystal clear: in 1981, the “arcade era” was over and consoles – especially those fabricated by Atari – could provide the user a more satisfying game experience. Readers interested in video culture could not ignore this phenomenon anymore: for this reason, *Video Magazine's* editorial board decided to dedicate an article to video games every two months, and, since April 1982, a monthly column.

At the same time, we can also find an article about this topic in the first issue of *Video Magazine*'s rival, *Video*. Written by Stefano Belli and titled “Guerre spaziali, corse della morte, computer & C.” (“Star Wars, Death Races, Computers, etc.”), it analyzes the dispositive transformations from coin-op to console games. In other words, Belli stresses the relevance of this transition: cassette games are better “programmed, more expensive, and constituted by a slot into which the user inserts the cassettes of their favorite game” (Belli, 1981, pp. 80–83). Furthermore, the author focuses on sixteen new Atari games – *Paracadutisti* (*Parachuters*), *Scacchi* (*Chess*), *Superman*, *Backgammon*, *Indy 500*, *Fuorilegge* (*Outlaw*), *Breakout*, *Matematica* (*Math*), *Basket*, *Battaglia aeronavale* (*Aeronaval Battle*), *Bowling*, *Corse d'auto* (*Car Races*), *Guerre spaziali* (*Space Wars*), *Golf*, *Concentration*, *Incastro* (*Interlock*): a sort of Atari canon is established, ranging from educational (*Matematica* [*Math*]) to sport games (*Indy 500*, *Basket*, etc.).

The structure of Belli's article, which does not dwell on specific issues concerning the gameplay experience of each cartridge and elaborates on the general matter of the transition from arcade to console games, highlights why a magazine like *Video* was interested in video games: its columnists thought that their implicit, i.e., intended readers,² mainly interested in videomaking and videorecording apparatuses, would be intrigued by the new gaming landscape, even if they were not necessarily to be considered as enthusiastic supporters of the emerging gaming medium. Moreover, being the implicit readers attentive technophiles, they would be keen on exploring the Atari world: a focus on video games, then, was an indispensable complement of a discourse on the innovations in the 1980s media landscape, when the electronic media became dominant.

In this regard, the two-year period 1982–1984 was crucial. During this time span, articles and columns dedicated to video games increased in number: more specifically, if we take *Video Magazine* as example, this was the main topic of a monthly column published from 1982 to 1988. Its success depended on “the punctuality of the game reviews: at least once every two months, a complete survey of new games was available for the reader, from Atari's *Warlords* to Philips' sport games (*Baseball*, *Soccer* and *Ice Hockey*), from Mattel's *Space Battle* to Intellivision's *Pac-man*” (Cavallotti, 2018, pp. 154–155).³

In May 1983, *Video Magazine*'s editorial board decided to double down on video game columns, creating “Notizie videogiochi” (Videogame News) and “Recensione videogiochi” (“Videogame Reviews”). The first column referred to the presentation of new cartridges. The second one featured in-depth analyses. The columns were merged into one in September 1984, after a general reconfiguration of the magazine's guidelines: it was decided that other practices and dispositive modules should be investigated, such as video art and informatics. From that moment, video game analysis and reviews found their space in a column dedicated to computers. This change was necessary, on the one hand, to keep up with the market evolutions – while the “console crash” was reaching Italy, computer gaming was becoming crucial –, and, on the other, to

2. With the notion of implicit reader, I refer to Wolfgang Iser's theories and to his essays *Der implizite Leser. Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett* (1972) and *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (1976). According to Iser, the implicit reader is the one who “includes all those predispositions necessary for the literary work to exert its effects – predispositions designed not by means of an external empirical reality, but by means of the text itself” (Iser 1976, 60).

3. Throughout the essay, non-English references have been translated into English by the paper's author.

present *Video Magazine* as a publication that dealt not only with video devices, but also with media culture in its broadest sense.

Media culture legitimization, then, was a distinctive function of specialized magazines like *Video Magazine* and *Video* in the 1980s, alongside canon elaboration. Although this topic seems to be critical even today, as argued by Federico Giordano (2017), video game reviews and top ten sales charts established a first step towards canon selection, assigning an order of importance to games and consoles/computers. On the one hand, then, there were video games the user could not do without; on the other, the most relevant consoles/home computers: during this period, in fact, a conflict arose between American (especially Atari and Mattel) and European (Philips) companies. Besides these companies, there were several console/computer producers, such as Commodore and ColecoVision, and game developers, such as Activision, which played an important role in the market: for instance, it is to highlight that ColecoVision's version of *Donkey Kong* was a great hit, remaining on *Video*'s top ten chart for almost a year in 1984; while Activision's *Pitfall* held the first place for three months between September and November 1983. These data are fundamental for mapping the development of the Italian market, which, in 1983 and early 1984, did not seem to be affected by the recession in the U.S. industry. On the contrary, console game distribution ramped up in Italy, while, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Atari's cartridges were buried in the Alamogordo dump.

That being stated, one has to acknowledge that these sales charts are not the only way to observe and analyze consumer behaviour. At the beginning of 1984, for instance, *Video*'s editorial board decided to start a new magazine section, called "Videogamers club", run by Francesco Carlà. This section was open to the reader's participation: they could send their comments, requests, and questions, which were then answered by Carlà himself. The importance of establishing a rapport with the readers is also witnessed by ads concerning club activities hosted by record shops and electronics stores: here users could "buy, rent or exchange videogames of all brands and nationalities", as in the case of the Megagames club. These clubs represented a grey zone for the game industry: their members could trade cracked games coming from Northern Europe (especially Great Britain and Germany), which constituted a relevant part of an underground market. As Tosoni, Tarantino, & Pachetti argue, this was a typical feature of the Italian context (2020, p. 84), which was characterized by "an evident deregulation of copyright, [and] the experimentation of alternative distribution channels, such as the newsstand" (Tarantino and Tosoni, 2017): in this legal and commercial framework, eluding copyright and circulating cracked videogames became common practice and fostered the establishment of parallel circuits in which collectors could operate. Cracking, then, took a specific meaning within the game community: it became a cultural claim, which was only hinted at on mainstream publications such as video magazines.

From a dispositive analysis perspective, I underscore how *Video Magazines* and *Video* covered a wide range of topics, each of them corresponding to a specific material/discursive interaction. More precisely, I have referred to dispositive and gameplay surveys, sales overview – which helps us to understand the social circulation of these media products –, and the emergence of underground practices such as the trade of cracked videogames in game clubs. Specific dispositive issues cross these matters, which relate, on the one hand, to the position held by videogames in the media environment, and, on the other hand, to the description of the video game infrastructures.

Concerning the first issue, I rely on those articles in which video games are presented as an emergent media and, at the same time, as an extension of the video set: between the Seventies and the Eighties, new media technologies were added to it, generating a complex technical network ranging from video-recorders to game consoles and home computers. Furthermore, we can observe significant differences in terms of media practices: in this multi-layered media environment, in which the magazine reader was not a mere couch potato, the video dispositive entailed a new subject, capable of engaging in several cultural activities, from cinephilia to video art, from videoamateurism to video gaming. From this point of view, *Video Magazines'* and *Video's* journalists seemed to have grasped the relevance of the transition from a “coin-op centered” to a “console/computer centered” industry. These changes did not concern only the video game dispositive, but also the whole video dispositive, its infrastructure, and the space (both material and symbolic) taken by these apparatuses in the houses of Italian families and consumers during the 1980s.

Concerning the description of the video game infrastructures, I mainly refer to console reviews. These articles focus on specific companies – e.g., Atari – and seem to be addressed to non-expert readers, becoming a kind of buyers' guide. Consoles are described in detail: the authors provide exhaustive information about the general configuration of the game dispositive and its components (joysticks, cartridges, wheels, keyboards, and knobs), also elaborating on their operability. For instance, in “Videogiociamo con Atari” (“Let's Videoplay with Atari”), published by *Video Magazine*, the game devices are thoroughly outlined: the article analyzes every step to be taken to start the console, from powering it on to connecting two joysticks, and describes every component function, concentrating on connection cables, selection buttons (through which it is possible to decide the game's difficulty level), etc. On *Video's* side, the same attention is paid to console operability. In “Guerre spaziali, corse della morte, computer & C.”, the author describes how an Atari cartridge works: it is a “complex technical unity” in which numerous microchips contain “enough data to process the game, its several levels, and variations” (Belli, 1981, p. 82). In other words, these magazines bridged the gap between industry and consumers: on the one hand, they provided a shop window for game developers

and companies; on the other, they introduced unaware readers, which were just getting used to the micro-practices of gaming, to new devices.

To sum it up, one could argue that magazines such as *Video Magazine* and *Video* played a major role in the material/discursive interactions, considering the video game dispositive as a part of the broader video dispositive, also on a concrete level – in fact, consoles and home computers could be connected to the video/tv set. Video games held a significant place in the household hierarchy. If the television was often described as the contemporary fireplace, the game console and the computer were the play corner: they were technical objects capable of transforming the electronic screen into an interactive interface. It was a leap forward in the development of consumer electronics and video, in which not only gaming enthusiasts were involved, but also technophiles intrigued by new media technologies.

3. FOR THE EXPERT'S EYES ONLY: SPERIMENTARE CON L'ELETTRONICA E IL COMPUTER

Tinkering-oriented magazines constituted an important part of discourse construction regarding consumer technology. They aimed to extend the expert's knowledge in the field, providing specific insights on the most relevant innovations. Unlike *Video Magazine* and *Video*, which were addressed to readers interested in video culture, but not necessarily to well informed techno-enthusiasts, tinkering-oriented magazines targeted a narrower audience, composed by self-taught computer scientists, who knew how to reverse-engineer an electronic device, code in Pascal or in Basic, and read wiring diagrams.

They were the implicit readers of *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer* (*Experimenting with Electronics and Computers*). This magazine had a complex history. Its roots dated back to 1967, when a journal called *Sperimentare* (*Experimenting*) was founded by Jacopo Castelfranchi Editore (J.C.E.). This publishing house belonged to the same owners of G.B.C., a Milan-based company specialized in the import of technical objects such as radio and television components, television sets, radio transmitters, video cameras and recorders, etc. At the end of 1970, *Sperimentare* merged with another J.C.E.'s magazine, *Selezione di tecnica radio-tv* (*Selection of Radio-Tv Technique*) (Cavallotti, 2022). This new publication rapidly became a key reference for technology experts: its issues were mainly composed by how-to articles and in-depth reviews about the technical novelties. However, despite the ambitious project behind the magazine, J.C.E. decided to restore the old formula: *Sperimentare*, which was targeted to technobricoleurs and advanced hobbyists, became available in newsstands across Italy once again. It was published until March 1983, when the editorial board changed its name into *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer*.

The name update entailed a general reconfiguration of the editorial guidelines: exclusive attention was paid to computer hardware and programming, ranging from a general overview on the most innovative devices to interface analysis, from peripherals testing to coding. Often, articles focused on video

games, both in terms of hardware and software: on the one hand, there were console ads and in depth-survey on joysticks, keyboards, and monitors; on the other, since July 1985, there was a column, titled “Software”, also dedicated to game review.

Console ads were recurrent in *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer*. More precisely, in 1983 and 1984, the magazine hosted several advertising pages in which cassettes and cartridges for ZX Spectrum, Atari, Commodore, ColecoVision, and Sega were listed. They contained games such as *Space Raiders*, *Gridrunner*, *Donkey Kong*, *Star Jacker*, and *Mario Bros.* – the last one was distributed through Atari’s network in Italy in 1983. The need to push these products was a signal that, as I have already shown, the Italian market was still flourishing, although a large-scale collapse – the so-called “Video game crash of 1983” (Ernkvist, 2008, pp. 181-188) – was hitting the U.S. industry. Consumers were still very interested in console games: the recession tide of the American market seemed to be far from the Italian shores.

Regarding the device peripherals, joysticks were widely investigated. For instance, the editorial board dedicated articles to a home-made joystick for Apple II (Cattaneo, 1984, pp. 127-129), a programmable interface that speeds up the latency of joystick controls (Anona, 1984, pp. 77-79), and a multiplexer device for Commodore VIC 20, which allows users to add a joystick port to the home computer (Anonb, 1984, pp. 62-65). In all these cases, a general hardware description is always accompanied by programming information or electrical diagrams, in which the technical object is thoroughly analyzed: the implicit readers of the magazine, then, appears to be a gamer and a techno-enthusiast, capable of understanding the language of hard science.

This subjective typology emerges in the report regarding the home-made joystick for Apple II. Its electric circuit is described both in a diagram and in the body text: we have two resistors, which “help to bring the logic ports to a low level; in this way, elements with a physical value ranging from 1000 and 4700 Ω – $\frac{1}{4}$ W are going to work” (Cattaneo, 1984, p. 127). Moreover, there is a filter condenser, whose “minimal value must not be less than 4,7 μ F, with a working voltage of 6 V”, and other two condensers, whose “capacities need to be chosen in order to obtain a time constant of 0,0033 seconds in combination with the 100 k Ω potentiometer resistance” (Cattaneo, 1984, p. 127). This system responds directly to the control stick, which can take 255 different positions: every position change entails a distinct activation of the condensers and the potentiometer. The article also shows how to practically assemble the home-made joystick. The reader, in fact, needs to weld each part, while the control stick is supposed to be bought separately. Finally, once the device is ready, the users are going to employ it as a tool for data input into CAD software and to play games such as “Pac Man”, ‘Space Raiders’, and ‘Defenders’” (Cattaneo, 1984, p. 129).

Another focus is on hardware enhancement, more specifically on a programmable joystick interface, commercialized by Tenkolek, which is compat-

ible with every software. This interface is composed by a printed circuit board with four integrated chips and it “is accessible through ten colored wires” connected to “sockets in different combinations” (Anona, 1984, p. 78). The article also explains how to program the interface using a specialized, although understandable, language. In other words, this report seems to be dedicated not only to computer engineers, but also to gamers keen on experimenting with hardware. Not by chance, then, the anonymous author affirms that this interface is indispensable for gaming, and it can be employed also for driving or flight simulators (Anona, 1984, p. 79).

Hardware enhancement is the key reference for another article, dedicated to a joystick multiplexer for Commodore VIC 20. This home computer has only one joystick port: if a game would envisage two users participating in it, it would actually be impossible to play. Concerning the general structure of the article and its implicit reader, we can observe that it is much more complex than the report on the programmable joystick interface and it is addressed to a more skilled technician. The editorial board, which is the collective author of this article, explains how the multiplexer works, referring to wiring diagrams, components lists, and a fragment of software code, also showing how to program its functions. In the body text, in fact, one can find more than a detailed study on a technical object: it is a complete practical guide to the multiplexer assemblage. Thus, the implicit reader configures itself as an advanced bricoleur, capable of building an electronic device from scratch and programming it.

These three examples make us aware of the importance of hardware analysis for tinkering-oriented magazines like *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer*. Each article refers to the multiple facets of an implicit reader that is not a mere electronic engineer: their profile, in which practical and theoretical skills meet up, is complex and multi-layered. Of course, they can elaborate a technical project; at the same time, they can weld wires, assemble a device, and connect it to a home computer, also coding its software part. Furthermore – and above all – they are video game players, interested in knowing more about computer hardware, in our case studies about joysticks.

The relevance of video games was mirrored by the increasing editorial space earned by this topic in the magazine. In fact, in July 1985 a regular column titled “Software” changed its format and target: before that date, it was dedicated to coding languages; afterwards, it became a key reference for game review. “Software” columnists focused on home computers such as ZX Spectrum, Apple Macintosh, and Commodore 64, and a wide range of game typologies, from sport to detection, from action-adventure platform to vertical scrolling shooter games, highlighting their production genealogies.

An interesting example is the review of *River Raid*, originally marketed by Activision in 1982: it is noted how patient users have been, waiting three years for Activision to port this game for Spectrum computers, alongside products like “*H.E.R.O.*, *Enduro*, *Zenji*, *Shuttle*, and *Pitfall II*” (Anona, 1985, p. 84).

Distribution issues intertwine with gameplay description, referring, on the one hand, to game content and storylines, and, on the other, to its apparatus. More specifically, *River Raid* is presented as a game in which the player flies a jet over a river, which is divided “into different sections, each of them delimited by a bridge built at their border” (Anona, 1985, p. 84). The tasks are twofold: they need to avoid colliding with the riverbanks and to engage and destroy as many enemy fighter jets, helicopters, warehouses, ships, tanks, and bridges as possible. The score depends on the object to be destroyed, ranging from a minimum of 30 points (ships) to a maximum of 750 points (bridges). Regarding the game infrastructure, the player can control the jet through keyboard or joysticks, also enabling multiplayer sessions: in *River Raid*, then, cybertext performance pertains to different user configurations, in which the “player 1 vs player 2” mode complements the “player vs computer” one.

Content and apparatus description constitutes the central part of the review, whose structure is completed by the magazine’s tips – the author suggests several game strategies to the reader/player, in order to maximize the score, as well as the general evaluation of the product, which, in this case, is not good. In fact, Activision’s *River Raid* appears to be old-fashioned compared to those new games designed and produced by companies such as Psion or Ultimate for home computers. In other words, porting *River Raid* for ZX Spectrum in 1985 was a late commercial operation, which did not take into account that the user’s taste had changed in a small amount of time.

As one can see, this review does not only provide a gameplay description, but also an accurate appraisal of marketing activities, revealing how multi-layered the circulation of video games was. Reviewers, then, should consider more than the game itself and elaborate a precise report about publishing and porting it within a complex media environment. In *River Raid*’s case, a key issue was the delay in the circulation of the game among ZX Spectrum’s owners, which represented a typical condition of the industry in the Eighties: after the market crash in the United States (1983), developers and publishers needed to adapt their games to a large number of home computers in order to extend their market reach, giving rise to a long-term value chain in which products risked to age very quickly. Thus, reviewers were supposed to be aware of this complex infrastructure, fine-tuning their evaluation criteria to its inherent dynamics.

Nevertheless, reviews in which gameplay analysis is crucial are recurrent in “Software”. For instance, the article about Ultimate’s *Underwulde* (1984) focuses on its content/textual features and its gameplay material configuration. In the first place, the review author pinpoints *Underwulde*’s genre coordinates: it is an action/platform/graphic adventure, referring to the same game patterns of *Sabre Wulf* (Ultimate, 1984). Compared to this game, *Underwulde* presents a far more sophisticated structure: the player controls the pith-helmeted main character, Sabreman, through 600 flip-screens composing an underground maze, while there are only 256 flip-screens in *Sabre Wulf*. Furthermore, the player’s

goal is to defeat the Lord of Darkness and to reach the surface, which is directly connected to the last and most dangerous level of this multifarious “electronic Inferno” (Anonb, 1985, p. 26): the design variety of each room represents an actual highlight of this game, especially in comparison to the homogeneity (and repetitiveness) of *Sabre Wulf*.

This general overview on *Underwulde* is complemented by strategy tips on how to progress in the game. The review author affirms that special attention should be paid to power ups and weapons: it is necessary to “pick up the catapult the player comes across at the beginning of the game; and it is quite difficult to sort out the maze without the magical dagger to be used against the hideous guardian of the dungeon [the Lord of Darkness]” (Anonb, 1985, p. 26). Moreover, the magical gems that are scattered all around the maze are fundamental power ups capable of making Sabreman invincible for a limited amount of time: collecting them, players move across the several platforms of *Underwulde* and increase their score. An innovative gameplay is then configured, in which graphic adventure tropes merge with platform game modalities.

Another issue considered by the magazine journalist is the material apparatus envisaged for this game. In fact, *Underwulde* was designed for ZX Spectrum, and Ultimate’s developers claimed that their products aimed to push the boundaries of this home computer, both in terms of graphics and hardware: not by chance, then, the player can control Sabreman using the keyboard or “a wide range of joysticks, from Kempston devices to Interface 2 peripherals” (Anonb, 1985, p. 26). In particular, joysticks are preferable because “key disposition [on the keyboard] seems to be illogical” (Anonb, 1985, p. 26) and makes it very difficult to control the character’s movement.

Drawing on these examples, one could state that video games played a relevant role in a tinkering-oriented magazine like *Sperimentare con l’elettronica e il computer*. Its columnists focused both on the material structure of computers and on game reviews, entailing specific implicit readers: they were advanced bricoleurs, capable of building electronic devices such as joysticks and to enhance their home computer station; at the same time, they also appeared to be interested in coding and software issues. More specifically, they were intrigued by video gaming, needing to be led in the exploration of this cultural practice. Game reviews performed this task, helping a non-expert reader to browse a variegated field, in which different typologies and genres emerged.

If one is to compare *Sperimentare*’s discursive strategies to those concerning magazines such as *Video Magazine* and *Video*, then they will realize that an important shift occurred because the ways in which the magazines entailed and outlined their implicit reader had remarkably changed. On the one hand, as we have already noted, *Video Magazine* and *Video* addressed someone who was interested in consumer electronics and video culture; on the other, *Sperimentare* targeted a different reader typology, who corresponded to the home computer owner and the technophile fascinated by computer culture and interactive

products such as video games. From this point of view, another layer was added to the subject negotiation imposed by the video game dispositive: if *Video Magazine* and *Video* focused on video games as an emergent media within a complex landscape, *Sperimentare* concentrated on video games as a part of the home computer infrastructure.

4. "FUNNY, FRESH, WITTY, HANDY" MAGAZINES: VIDEOGIOCHI

In the early Eighties, both the Italian specialized magazine and game industries reached one of their turning points. As we have already noted, publications concerning video culture widely spread all across the country (Cavallotti, 2018), while consoles and home computers finally breached a coin-op centered market (Fassone, 2016, p. 95). The combination of these trends fostered the foundation of a monthly magazine exclusively dedicated to video games, named *Videogiochi* (*Video Games*). This is considered to be the first Italian video game magazine: its publisher was Jackson Italiana Editore, which was founded in 1975 by Paolo Reina and Giampietro Zanga, two former editors from Jacopo Castelfranchi Editore – as we have already mentioned, J.C.E. printed and circulated *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer* at the beginnings of the Eighties. That being stated, *Videogiochi* was not a mere duplicate of *Sperimentare*: it was the Italian equivalent of *Electronic Games*, which was first published in the United States in 1981.

Videogiochi, then, configured itself as a precisely characterized magazine: founded by journalist Riccardo Albini and edited by Studio Vit, which, later on, was known to be the editorial team of seminal publications such as *Zzap!* (from May 1986 to April 1988), *K* (from December 1988 to January 1995), *Game Power* (from January 1991 to November 1997), and *Zeta* (from February 1995 to March 2001) (Addeo, Barra, and Di Giuseppe, 2020, pp. 103–123), it dealt with a wide range of topics and content typologies, from coin-op games to pinball machines, from portable games to consoles and home computers. Another relevant feature of *Videogiochi* was its international scope, which became evident in the recurrent updates from the most important electronics fairs (Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago and Las Vegas, for instance). In other words, Jackson Editore, Albini and Studio Vit did not aim to elaborate a collection of reviews or anecdotes about the game industry; on the contrary, their project was to create an editorial space in which video game culture could find a proper place. By this notion, we mean those multi-layered practices and symbolic values attached to video gaming, which involve both textual production and the creation of a consumption community (Shaw, 2010, pp. 403–424; Bittanti 2005b).

The first issue of *Videogiochi* (January 1983) mirrors these intentions and cultural needs. Its index, for instance, configures itself as an introduction to a multifarious world, in which we can find the most important news concerning video games – the column titled “Ready: fatti e notizie” (“Ready: Facts and News”); an in-depth analysis of Disney’s *Tron*, which represents one of the first cases of intermedia hybridization between cinema and video games; previews

of the most innovative games on the market, collected in the “A che gioco giochiamo” (“Which Game Are We Playing At”) column; an article dedicated to the most important coin-ops ever produced; hit parades from all over the world; a general overview on console and home computer games; a nostalgic column about pinball machines, titled “Pinball Wizard”; a report on the new portable LCD games; a whole section about home computers, in which the reader finds feature articles regarding the most useful functions of these devices, coding, and video games exclusively designed for Commodore VIC 20, Atari 400, and Tandy Color Computer.

In other words, since its first issue, *Videogiochi*'s editorial board was fully aware of the magazine's mission, which was to legitimize video game consumption and highlight the relationships between video games and the broader media landscape – see, for instance, the intermedia entanglements with cinema, the role played by home computers in the development of the game industry, etc. This two-fold mission is clearly addressed in the article about *Tron*: its anonymous author affirms that in the “ultra-futuristic world” portrayed by the film's director, Steven Lisberger, “the art of video gaming is raised to a matter of life and death” (Anona, 1983, p. 13). Video games became, in the first place, an aesthetic source for visual culture. *Tron* celebrated this phenomenon, configuring itself as “a real monument” for “the new image technologies” (Anona, 1983, p. 11).

Video games, then, were described as the most innovative effort in outlining the distinctive features of the contemporary moving image. Game culture was not a branch of the overarching video culture: it was neither a mere sub-culture, in which collectors, geeks, and technophiles joined together to share their objects of affection, nor a bunch of consumer practices tied to a useless – if not dangerous – hobby. On the contrary, it was a fundamental and autonomous part of the mediasphere, linking the most advanced technical objects to an expanding field of symbolic production.

At the same time, especially in Italy, video games were strictly intertwined to the arcade game industry, thus implying a dichotomy between highbrow symbolic production – see the already mentioned references to cinema, *Tron*, and the status of the moving image in contemporary culture – and lowbrow pastimes. For instance, although marketing hierarchies were very different compared to the late Sixties and Seventies, pinball machines and video games were still produced by the same companies, as in the case of Zaccaria, whose top-notch pinball game *Soccer Kings* (1982) was reviewed by “Pinball Wizard” columnists (Anonb, 1983, p. 45). In this case, one can observe how video games affected pinball gameplay, in which electronics became a fundamental component: in fact, pinball cabinets were composed by multi-level shuffleboards and relays that activated synthesized voices.

The constant reference to these devices, and to other arcade games, brings out a crucial issue at stake here: in the early Eighties, video games were at the crossroads of different practices, concerning which public and private spaces

overlapped and collided at once. In the broad field of game culture, then, the opposition between highbrow and lowbrow was complemented by the dialectics between the public and the private sphere. The first pole – the public sphere – referred to coin-op apparatuses, whose cabinets were placed in penny arcades, and constituted a specific dispositive configuration: the player stood in a public place, among other players and surrounded by several devices (pinball machines, shuffleboards, etc.), and the coin-op cabinet entailed specific ergonomics regulations. On the other side, the second pole – the private sphere – referred to the domestic room in which the player sat in front of a console or a computer screen alone. These structures were remarkably different to the point where one could state that, in those days, the video game dispositive was at least two-fold. Although the apparatuses were diverse and multifarious, *Videogiochi* provided the same and all-encompassing editorial space, in which video games were analyzed in all their complexity: the material and the discursive layers of the dispositive engaged here in a prolific dialogue regarding the cultural status of video games.

Not accidentally, the last section of its first issue, titled “Di fronte al fatto computer” (“Facing computer facts”),⁴ regards home computers. As it is reported in the main feature article, “Home sweet home” (Anonc, 1983, pp. 56–61), these electronic devices were going to play a pivotal role in our daily lives. Therefore, one should have learned how to deal with them, starting from their basic functions and components. This is the reason why a small dictionary appears in the last pages of the article: the author defines technical terms like RAM, ROM, peripherals, floppy disk, joystick, program, and mass storage, explaining also how they form a complex and coherent system (Anonc, 1983, p. 60).

This focus on home computers is supplemented by three reviews of video games designed for Commodore VIC-20 (*Road Race* [1981]), Atari 400 (*Caverns of Mars* [1981]), and Tandy Color Computer (*Chess*), which appear to be similar to those published by *Sperimentare* in the “Software” column. In fact, they share the same textual structure: there is a general introduction to the game’s production context, and, after that, an in-depth analysis of the gameplay, both in terms of material structure and textual features. Moreover, the review is enriched by tactical tips: for instance, in *Road Race* the player must preserve the car engine from overheating and losing power (Anonc, 1983, p. 62).

More broadly, feature articles and reviews about home computers and computer games pertained to a long-term editorial strategy. In fact, although the U.S. industry was crashing, consoles still represented the core of the Italian market: however, Albini and Studio Vit foresaw that, in a couple of years, it would have decreased as well, and home computers would have become the main device for video gaming. In other words, *Videogiochi* placed itself at the junction of the old, the present, and the new, considering pinball machines or coin-op cabinets (and their evolutions), game consoles, and home computers. From this perspective, the magazine elaborated a multi-layered genealogy of game systems and apparatuses, proving to be flexible enough to survive the downsizing of companies like Atari.

4. It is a pun stemming from Italian idiomatic expression “Di fronte al fatto compiuto”, which means “To deal with a fait accompli” in English.

Albeit the structure of *Videogiocchi* was kept rather constant throughout the years, in September 1985 the editorial board decided to change the magazine's name into *Videogiocchi & computer*. It had become clear that computer games were playing a pivotal role in the market, as Riccardo Albini and Paolo Reina, respectively the editorial director and the publisher, state in the opening note of the twenty-ninth issue:

“Welcome to *Videogiocchi & computer*! Why this new name? The answer is quite simple: 1) because *ViGi* [*Videogiocchi*] merges with *HC-Home computer magazine*, which had stemmed from *Videogiocchi* and was dedicated to home computers; 2) because the home and entertainment informatics market is now dominated by home computers. The name *Videogiocchi* seems to be too simplistic if we take into account the intentions and the contents of this magazine: the term “videogiocchi” [video games] hints at console games, but *Videogiocchi* was much more than that. [...] *ViGi & Co* – this could be the new nickname – will be two magazines in one to give you the best of electronics entertainment (Albini, Reina, 1985, p. 5).

In 1985, then, consoles progressively vanished from the scene, and a trending magazine like *Videogiocchi & computer* granted more editorial space to games designed for ZX Spectrum, Apple Macintosh, Commodore 64, MSX, etc., and, broadening the scope, to the analysis of those electronic devices that had become an integral part of our daily media environment – telex, computer components and software, etc. In this case, however, their implicit reader was slightly changing: the shift from consoles to home computers entailed an older audience, whose members were, for instance, young professionals who had enough money to afford the most innovative electronic devices.

However, within a year, *Videogiocchi & computer*'s publisher, Jackson Italia, decided that the important niche composed by teenagers and young adults should have been involved again: since the thirty-eighth issue, the magazine changed its format, editorial staff, and name, becoming *Videogiocchi news* (*Video Games News*); the new director was Diego Biasi, who took over for Riccardo Albini. As affirmed by Biasi, three years after its foundation, *Videogiocchi* “needed to be renovated, taking into account the reader's preferences and the publisher's requests, also paying attention to our brand image” (Biasi, 1986, p. 3). This project referred to a sort of “pop attitude”, which started to characterize *Videogiocchi news*'s layout and contents – for instance, the magazine hosted comic strips and interviews to young VIPs about their gaming preferences. Despite these efforts, *Videogiocchi news* did not break through, probably because other and more updated magazines like *Zzap!* held then a prominent position among gamers: its last issue was dated May 1987.

From a discursive perspective, *Videogiocchi* referred to several subjectivity negotiations. Firstly, between 1983 and 1985, the implicit readers were members of the broader game community interested in all the possible layers

of video game culture. Secondly, between 1985 and 1986, the implicit reader became the home computer owner, who was intrigued by new technologies; editors were fully aware of the fact that video games played a pivotal role in the emergent computer culture, and, vice versa, home computers were then the main gaming device. Thirdly, from 1986 to 1987, one sees the emergence of a youth-oriented magazine, which was intended by the publishers as having to be “funny, fresh, witty, handy”, so that it could attract new readers: video games became a product for young consumers, although the old consoles era was over.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper I have shown how, even before 1986 and the foundation of the Italian edition of *Zzap!*, video games were widely investigated by Italian magazines, whether as a topic linked to the emergent video culture, as technical objects that could be manipulated and reconfigured, or as an autonomous media domain that was going to be a fundamental field of symbolic production—and a significant element of people’s daily lives. More specifically, the discursive field developed by specialized magazines presented itself as a cultural space through which one may observe not only how products, devices, and the industry were changing, but also how social actors like readers came into play.

The overarching structure in which these evolutions and negotiations occurred was the video game dispositive, which, in those days, as we have already mentioned, was at least two-fold, including the arcade and the console/computer apparatuses. Their material and discursive elements engaged in a dialogue, constituting a conceptual space in which the whole game culture took shape. In other words, magazines such as *Video magazine*, *Video*, *Sperimentare con l’elettronica e il computer*, and *Videogiochi* were more than simple repositories of funny anecdotes and in-depth hardware analyses. Within their pages, in fact, one can observe the impact of video games on different social targets: video technology experts, techno-bricoleurs, and gaming enthusiasts. Through magazines, relationships between game communities, industry, practices, and social values were established and an order of symbolic production concerning video games was dynamically formed. The role of the dispositive in this process was crucial: the dispositive configured itself as a material and symbolic network in which the emergence of technical objects was linked to the emergence of new discourses. In turn, this entailed different subject profiles – the implicit readers.

By analyzing these magazines, one can notice that a process of cultural elaboration concerning video games was taking place in Italy since the early Eighties, several years before they became a widely spread phenomenon thanks to the distribution of NES by Nintendo at the end of 1987. During this time span, discursive production was entrusted to publications about video culture, tinkering oriented periodicals, and game-oriented magazines, each of which referred to specific implicit readers and subjects. Specifically, *Video magazine* and *Video* considered video games as an extension of the video dispositive, therefore

configuring an implicit reader who was intrigued by them as a media practice among others, such as cinephilia, videoamateurism, and video art. On the other side of the spectrum, one can notice how *Sperimentare con l'elettronica e il computer* entailed an implicit reader who was not only a bricoleur, whose interests did not mainly revolve around console/computer hardware, but also a technophile fascinated by computer culture. Game culture emerged at the intersection of two negotiations of subjectivity: *Videogiochi's* implicit reader was intended as someone keen to learn more about symbolic and textual production, while, at the same time, standing as an expert technophile. Thus, Italian gamers, even prior to gaming becoming a mass phenomenon at the end of the Eighties, were more than young geeks: on the contrary, they appeared to be pioneers of a complex media practice, through which a new era of the moving image – and of symbolic production – was rising.

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Sovversioni Videoludiche

Dalle avanguardie alle pratiche performative in-game

ABSTRACT

Il panorama mediale attuale è ricco di contaminazioni tra la cultura videoludica e le pratiche artistiche contemporanee. In questo contesto, il videogioco si presenta come un medium versatile con cui intraprendere un processo di sovversione e ri-funzionalizzazione delle norme ludico-culturali per creare spazi di riflessione politica e sociale. Ne scaturisce un complesso *milieu* culturale che si pone all'intersezione tra game studies e arte contemporanea, da cui emergono una serie di problematiche legate al concetto di sovversione videoludica, un ampio dibattito che indaga le modalità alternative di utilizzo del mezzo. Lo scopo di questo saggio è quello di stabilire un ponte tra game studies e critica d'arte contemporanea per evidenziare affinità e divergenze tra le diverse sfere della produzione culturale e suggerire un primo approccio all'analisi di interventi la cui matrice formale e politica risiede nelle pratiche videoludiche e nell'agenda operativa delle avanguardie del Novecento.

KEYWORDS: Countergaming; in-game performance; avanguardie; Internazionale Situazionista

1. INTRODUZIONE: OLTRE IL COUNTERGAMING

Nel capitolo finale della raccolta di saggi *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006), Alexander Galloway conclude evidenziando come il concetto di *countergaming* sia ancora un processo incompiuto. Se da un lato numerosi artisti hanno realizzato interventi di tipo visuale, andando ad interagire sull'aspetto estetico del videogioco, Galloway sostiene la necessità di sviluppare nuove "grammatiche dell'azione" (Galloway, 2006) per introdurre una critica concreta al *gameplay* e portare alla luce il "potenziale di avanguardia politica e culturale del videogioco" (Galloway, 2006). Secondo il pensiero dell'autore, è necessario sviluppare un tipo di avanguardia che non si concentri solamente sul dato visivo, ma che intervenga anche sull'azione di gioco, poiché le attuali pratiche sono "progressiste dal punto di vista visuale, ma reazionarie per quanto riguarda l'azione: non evolvono il *gameplay*, anzi lo intralciano; oscurano il videogioco

inteso come gioco e lo riscrivono come un'animazione primitiva senza game design” (Galloway, 2006). Difatti, per Galloway, il videogioco è un “oggetto culturale algoritmico in grado di rivelare con la partecipazione e l'atto le logiche informatiche della società in cui viviamo” (Arcagni, 2022).

Il saggio di Alexander Galloway è uscito nel 2006 e gli interventi a cui fa riferimento sono *mod d'artista* che modificano l'aspetto visivo del videogioco senza interagire sul gameplay. Galloway utilizza come esempi numerosi interventi. Fra essi si segnala *Adam Killer* (1999–2001), una modificazione del videogioco *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998) dell'artista Brody Condon, in cui si riflette sul concetto di ripetizione e il rapporto tra immagini e contesto di provenienza. Si analizza inoltre *Velvet Strike* (2002), mod del videogioco *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 1999) realizzata da Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre e Brody Condon, che aggiunge spray di protesta contro la guerra alla funzione graffiti già presente nel gioco, per creare un chiasmo visivo con il contesto bellico del videogioco. Infine l'autore si sofferma su *Super Mario Clouds* (2002), opera video realizzata dall'artista Cory Arcangel che ha modificato una vecchia cartuccia del videogioco *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo, 1983), cancellandone le caratteristiche distintive all'infuori dell'iconico cielo azzurro e le nuvole.

A sedici anni dall'uscita del saggio, il panorama mediale contemporaneo si è notevolmente arricchito di svariati tipi di interventi artistici di matrice videoludica, sia nell'ambito della produzione di *machinima*,¹ che nelle operazioni di fotografia *in-game*, che nascono da una costante contaminazione tra videogiochi e pratiche artistiche contemporanee. In questi contesti, il videogioco si è rivelato il mezzo adatto alla creazione di esperienze critico-visuali che mettono in discussione aspetti della cultura videoludica, oppure istanze inerenti alla società contemporanea, attraverso la lente di gioco. Questo genere di pratiche artistiche assume svariate forme poiché si innesta su molteplici linguaggi, tra cui la performance, il teatro, la fotografia, il cinema, andandone a complicare le modalità di analisi in virtù della doppia matrice che informa tali operazioni: da un lato quella videoludica, dall'altro quella artistica, legata nello specifico all'esperienza delle avanguardie artistiche del Novecento. Ne scaturisce un complesso *milieu culturale* che si pone all'intersezione tra game studies e arte contemporanea, da cui tuttavia emergono anche una serie di problematiche che si legano a concetti come quello di sovversione videoludica, di videogioco come sistema valoriale e *ri-funzionalizzazione* dello spazio di gioco.

Nell'ambito dei game studies esistono numerosi contributi che analizzano il videogioco in quanto struttura composta da regole e meccaniche (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), come spazio di relazione in cui le azioni della macchina si combinano con quelle del giocatore/operatore (Galloway, 2006), oppure in qualità di oggetto culturale (Murray, 2017). Altri ancora si soffermano sullo studio degli interventi di modificazione, *mod*, apportati al videogioco (Schrank, 2014), sui diversi sistemi sociali presenti nei contesti multigiocatore oltre alle forme oppostive e alternative di gioco che si realizzano in questo tipo di contesti (Meades,

1. L'origine del termine deriva dalla crasi delle parole *machine* e *cinema* (Hancock, 2000) e, nella sua accezione più tecnica formulata da Paul Marino (2004), il *machinima* indica “la produzione in tempo reale di film d'animazione all'interno di un ambiente virtuale 3D utilizzando i videogiochi”. A distanza di venticinque anni dalle prime sperimentazioni, il *machinima* si è affermato come vera e propria forma d'arte impiegata da numerosi artisti e collettivi per la realizzazione di performance, documentari, video saggi, ecc., all'interno del videogioco.

2015). Tuttavia, a fronte di una letteratura così estesa, gli studi che analizzano forme ibride di sovversione videoludica attraverso gli interventi delle avanguardie sono ancora esigui. Anne-Marie Schleiner individua nella carica provocatoria di DADA (1916-1924) e dell'Internazionale Situazionista (1957-1972) nei confronti del sistema artistico-culturale del loro tempo già un primo punto di contatto con quegli artisti che utilizzano il videogioco come mezzo di discussione politica e culturale. Con il concetto di *ludic mutation* (Schleiner, 2017), descrive un tipo di processo secondo il quale il potere del giocatore consiste nella sua capacità di modificare il gameplay, dato che o il videogioco non viene percepito come un ambiente fisso e immutabile, ma come *play material*, ovvero un insieme di elementi che possono essere modificati e ricombinati nei modi più diversi.

Ancor prima, Mary Flanagan sviluppa il concetto di *critical play* (2009), definendolo come la capacità di occupare o creare ambienti di gioco o attività che rappresentano una o più problematiche legate alla vita dell'uomo. In questo contesto, l'attenzione si pone sulle dinamiche sociali, politiche e culturali che emergono in determinati contesti di gioco. L'analisi fornita da Flanagan è uno strumento con cui osservare, ad esempio, interventi artistico-culturali all'interno dell'ambiente di gioco, giochi realizzati da artisti, *activist games*², ecc..., e propone modalità ulteriori per analizzare fenomeni all'intersezione tra arte e cultura videoludica. Tuttavia, entrambe le indagini esaminano il potenziale critico del videogioco e gli interventi in-game soprattutto in ottica o di game design, riflettendo su progetti sviluppati appositamente con un intento critico, o in relazione alle attività di *modding* e *hacking* (Scully-Blacker, 2019). Questo complesso ed eterogeneo quadro di studi sulle modalità alternative di utilizzo del mezzo videoludico analizza e non descrive appieno interventi artistici che circoscrivono spazi di indagine da cui emergono nuove forme di testualità. Tali operazioni adottano le regole e le meccaniche del sistema gioco, quindi del gameplay, e le riutilizzano a proprio vantaggio per innescare una serie di interruzioni funzionali durante lo svolgimento del gioco stesso, che vanno a minare le convenzioni formali e culturali del mezzo videoludico. Gli artisti che mettono in atto queste operazioni adottano una serie di comportamenti non in linea con le aspettative di gioco e, soprattutto nei contesti multigiocatore, si trasformano in elementi di disturbo per gli altri giocatori. Analizzando i videogiochi in quanto *playable representations* (Murray, 2017), ovvero forme di rappresentazione dinamiche in cui azione e immagine veicolano i concetti dominanti della cultura contemporanea (Murray, 2017), la creazione di queste *situazioni* ha dunque un obiettivo *trasformativo* attraverso una continua interruzione delle aspettative e delle norme videoludiche.

1.1 GAMEPLAY VS PERFORMANCE IN-GAME

L'artista americano Brent Watanabe ha realizzato nel 2020 una performance video dal titolo *Animal Crossing: All Mine*, in cui documenta l'accumulo compulsivo di oggetti e materiali all'interno del gioco *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) per indagare come le meccaniche agiscano in realtà come

2. Videogiochi sviluppati appositamente con un intento critico per riflettere su problematiche sociali e politiche, spesso realizzati da artisti o collettivi.

3. È possibile leggere l'intervista completa tra Brent Watanabe e Matteo Bittanti, in occasione della seconda edizione del programma di screening di machinima *VR.A.L*, al seguente indirizzo: <https://milanmachinimafestival.org/vral-9-brent-watanabe>.

4. Le meccaniche di gioco di *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* rafforzano l'attrazione verso un'estetica dell'accumulo che influenza le pratiche videoludiche dei giocatori, le quali sono dettate dalla necessità di realizzare isole che rispondono a precisi canoni estetici legati al concetto di *aesthetically pleasing*, fortemente promosso dal gioco. Associato all'utilizzo dei social media, in particolar modo di Instagram, e alle logiche di marketing, tale idea riguarda lo sviluppo e la promozione di una comunicazione visiva accuratamente pianificata in cui ogni immagine, trasformata in un ricettore di *like*, concorre alla creazione di un immaginario visivo uniforme e piacevole alla vista. All'interno della community di *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* cioè si traduce nello sviluppo di dinamiche produttive di tipo capitalistico incentivate dalla stessa economia del gioco: per produrre o acquistare oggetti è necessario *mettersi al lavoro* sfruttando le risorse naturali dell'isola e cimentarsi in operazioni di compravendita via via sempre più complesse in base al grado di customizzazione che si vuole raggiungere.

forma di propaganda che “normalizza il consumismo come obiettivo principale di vita” (Watanabe, 2020). L'unica mod utilizzata dall'artista è stata impiegata per avere un maggior controllo sulla camera di gioco per introdurre un punto di vista simile all'effetto *fish eye*, non previsto dalle impostazioni di default. Questa operazione ha il solo scopo di permettere la visualizzazione di una porzione maggiore dell'isola ed è quindi strettamente funzionale alla modalità di ripresa. L'intervento di Watanabe si è dunque focalizzato sull'accumulo della maggior quantità possibile di beni di consumo per poi esporre tutti gli oggetti sulla sua isola, documentando la performance con un machinima. Anziché stare al gioco di Tom Nook — leggi: indebitarsi in modo ciclico per sbloccare ulteriori possibilità di personalizzazione della propria isola — e costruire un paradiso idilliaco, Watanabe ha cercato di puntare l'attenzione sulla matrice capitalista che informa le meccaniche di *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, andando contro le aspettative del gioco, ovvero realizzare isole che rispondono a determinati canoni estetici,³ per riflettere sulla normalizzazione del consumismo e la mercificazione delle attività ludiche promossa dal gioco. Come afferma l'artista,

In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, la natura è una risorsa da sfruttare a scopo di lucro. L'oceano è pieno di pesci da esporre o rivendere. Gli insetti esistono allo stesso scopo. Anche gli abitanti del villaggio sono lì per ottenere una valutazione più alta delle stelle dell'isola o per il commercio. Bisogna rompere le rocce e abbattere gli alberi per venderli o trasformarli in prodotti. In questo gioco non ci sono rifiuti o sottoprodotti, ma solo oggetti da collezionare.⁴

Brent Watanabe agisce entro quelli che sono i confini stabiliti dal *gameplay* esasperando la ripetitività delle pratiche lavorative sponsorizzate dal titolo di Nintendo per portarne alla luce le logiche capitaliste: dietro alla patina di perfezione che caratterizza gli oggetti da collezione e le isole, si nascondono in realtà bellissime discariche a cielo aperto stracolme di oggetti, privi di un valore d'uso e contraddistinti solamente da un valore estetico. Se consideriamo il *gameplay* come “interazione strutturata che si verifica quando i giocatori seguono le regole di un gioco e sperimentano il suo sistema attraverso il suo svolgimento” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), è possibile analizzare l'operazione di Brent Watanabe come atto di ri-funzionalizzazione del *gameplay*: quest'ultimo diventa uno strumento di indagine per esaminare le logiche contemporanee alla base del sistema di gioco e, così facendo, Watanabe va contro a quelle che sono le aspettative nella relazione gioco-giocatrice.

Se questo tipo di intervento va contro il *sistema gioco*, è possibile riscontrare anche un'altra tipologia di performance che oltre a *giocare* con il *gameplay* si scontra con quelli che sono i codici di condotta che regolano le relazioni tra giocatori all'interno dei videogiochi multigiocatore. Il collettivo austriaco Total Refusal (Robin Klengel, Leonhard Müllner, Adrian Haim, Susanna Flock) ha realizzato nel 2018 una serie di performance online intitolate *Operation Jane*

Walk all'interno del videogioco soprattutto *Tom Clancy's: The Division* (Massive Entertainment, 2015), sotto forma di tour pacifisti che si riappropriano dello spazio di guerra digitale della Manhattan distopica rappresentata nel gioco. Come afferma il collettivo,⁵

Nel rispetto delle regole del software del gioco, l'ambiente militare viene riutilizzato per un tour pacifista della città. I flâneur urbani evitano i combattimenti ogni volta che è possibile e diventano pacifici turisti di un mondo digitale, che è una replica dettagliata di Midtown Manhattan. Mentre si cammina nella città post-apocalittica, si discutono temi come la storia dell'architettura e l'urbanistica.

Total Refusal non introduce alcun tipo di mod, né interviene per cambiare quelle che sono le regole del gioco. Il suo intervento sfrutta le possibilità offerte dal gameplay per creare uno spazio di riflessione critica sui simboli architettonici del potere economico, politico e culturale degli Stati Uniti, cercando di evitare lo scontro armato con gli altri giocatori, intenti invece a seguire gli obiettivi di gioco. Si crea così un interessante chiasmo che pone il collettivo in una situazione ibrida: i membri sono allo stesso tempo giocatori, poiché l'esplorazione dell'ambiente fa parte delle azioni previste dal gameplay, ma il loro comportamento li rende più simili a quello che Bernard Suits chiama *trifler* (Suits, 1978), ovvero “un quasi-giocatore che si attiene alle regole del gioco, ma le cui mosse, pur essendo tutte legali, non sono finalizzate a conseguire lo scacco matto”, dunque non sono indirizzate verso alcun obiettivo. Dal punto di vista del gioco come *sistema sociale*, le azioni del collettivo si avvicinano anche a quelle del cosiddetto *spoilsport* (Suits, 1978), che non riconosce né le regole né gli obiettivi di gioco, andando a minare così la qualità dell'esperienza ludica di coloro che lo incontrano. I giocatori che si imbattono nei Total Refusal sono completamente ignari della performance artistica e, in più occasioni, il collettivo e alcuni degli accompagnatori, che hanno preso parte alle diverse iterazioni degli interventi, sono stati messi sotto assedio dagli altri giocatori. *Animal Crossing: All Mine e Operation Jane Walk* sono due tipologie di interventi molto complessi ed entrambi condividono delle similitudini con le pratiche di decondizionamento culturale sviluppate dall'Internazionale Situazionista (da qui in poi IS), soprattutto con i concetti di *situazione* e *détournement*. La situazione agisce su due fronti, uno esterno e uno interno: il primo prevede il riutilizzo di elementi preesistenti, oggetti ed immagini strettamente connessi alla società borghese, sottrarli alla loro ordinaria destinazione d'uso e porli in un contesto qualitativamente diverso, in ottica rivoluzionaria; il secondo, sfrutta il caso come strumento per lasciarsi trascinare da accadimenti accidentali. Da questo complesso sistema nascono una serie di interventi, tra cui il *détournement* e la *deriva*, definiti rispettivamente come un rovesciamento dei significati, una “azione che scompiglia e travolge ogni ordine esistente” (Perniola, 2013) e una “tecnica del passaggio veloce attraverso svariati ambienti”, “l'affermazione di

5. Estratto dall'intervista tra l'artista e Matteo Bittanti.

6. Descrizione dell'intervento presente sul sito di Total Refusal.

un comportamento ludico-costruttivo, ciò che da tutti i punti di vista lo oppone alle nozioni classiche di viaggio e di passeggiata” (Debord, 2017 [1967]). Le attività dell’IS avevano come obiettivo la creazione di spazi di riappropriazione politica e culturale per minare la società gerarchica e le sue convenzioni, nonché la sovversione di pratiche istituzionalizzate, difatti i suoi interventi avevano un duplice scopo: giocare con le caratteristiche formali dei media utilizzati e successivamente ribaltare, deviare, dirottare contenuti familiari minandone i significati originari, posizionandoli in un nuovo contesto (Penner, 2015).

Su questo impianto di matrice artistica si innestano alcune delle caratteristiche proprie della cultura videoludica. *Operation Jane Walk* condivide anche alcune similarità con i cosiddetti *let’s play*,⁷ ma anziché commentare il gioco stesso, il collettivo si lancia in disquisizioni sullo sviluppo urbano della New York digitale e il significato simbolico di alcuni edifici, come ad esempio la Trump Tower. Nelle occasioni in cui la performance è stata riproposta in presenza del pubblico, gli artisti si sono disposti sopra un palco con quattro postazioni dotate di un computer ciascuna, come a simulare l’assetto tipico degli eventi Esports, ma eliminando l’aspetto competitivo dentro e fuori dal gioco.

Esaminare questa tipologia ibrida di interventi, specialmente quando sono realizzati nei contesti multigiocatore in cui all’analisi del rapporto tra artista e videogioco si unisce anche quella con gli altri giocatori, significa inserirsi in un ampio dibattito che indaga le forme di gioco oppositive (Meades, 2015) e le modalità alternative di utilizzo del mezzo videoludico. All’interno di questo esteso insieme di studi vi rientrano concetti come quello di *emergent gameplay* (Juul, 2002), di *transgressive play* (Aarseth, 2007), di *countergaming* (Galloway, 2006), che esaminano le forme di violazione delle regole di gioco, le alterazioni del codice, oppure comportamenti che violano i codici sociali condivisi nei contesti multigiocatore. Tuttavia, tali framework si rivelano meno efficaci nel fornire un quadro di analisi che aiuti a contestualizzare interventi che utilizzano il videogioco come strumento di creazione di esperienze critico-visuali per mettere in discussione aspetti della cultura videoludica oppure istanze inerenti alla società contemporanea, anziché produrre modalità alternative di gioco. Difatti, questo è un aspetto fondamentale. Le due tipologie di interventi precedentemente analizzati, seppur diversi nei rispettivi contesti di attuazione — un videogioco single player per quanto riguarda *Animal Crossing: All Mine* e un multiplayer online nel caso di *Operation Jane Walk* — non hanno lo scopo di sviluppare nuove variazioni rispetto agli obiettivi standard del gioco, né hanno come obiettivo sviluppo di nuove strategie. Entrambi si appropriano del mezzo videoludico lasciando invariato il gameplay per sfruttare le sue stesse caratteristiche in quanto il videogioco si pone come una *pratica di produzione di significato* (Murray, 2017), ovvero un “sistema che tende a sostenere i valori della cultura dominante, creando campi di possibilità circoscritti da particolari sistemi di riferimento e visioni del mondo” (Murray, 2017).

In questo complesso panorama caratterizzato da interventi che utilizzano il videogioco e il gameplay come spazio di negoziazione e ri-funzionalizzazione

7. Un *let’s play* è una partita, in diretta live o registrata, in cui il giocatore fa una cronaca degli eventi del gioco a cui sta giocando per intrattenere lo spettatore.

per finalità politico-critiche, si vuole sottolineare la necessità di rivedere e aggiornare le modalità di studio di quelle ibridazioni performative a cavallo tra *countergaming* e performance artistica come forma di resistenza. E si vuole soprattutto formulare nuovi quadri concettuali attraverso cui esaminare gli interventi di sovversione videoludica alla luce dell'esperienza delle avanguardie artistiche, le cui pratiche vengono continuamente aggiornate e riadattate ai linguaggi contemporanei. Il presente saggio ambisce, dunque, a stabilire un ponte tra *game studies* e critica d'arte contemporanea attraverso l'analisi di una serie di interventi artistici in-game. Vuole anche suggerire un quadro analitico alternativo al momento definito con il termine *situationist play*, attraverso il quale osservare quegli interventi la cui matrice formale e politica è da rintracciarsi non solo nelle pratiche videoludiche contemporanee, ma anche nell'agenda operativa dei movimenti d'avanguardia, in particolar modo nell'IS. Lo sviluppo di tale concetto fa parte di un progetto di tesi dottorale tutt'ora in corso attraverso il quale si cercano di evidenziare affinità e divergenze tra le diverse sfere della produzione culturale e delineare in un'ottica transmediale il potenziale di avanguardia politica e culturale del videogioco (Galloway, 2006).

8. Treccani lo definisce come «l'atto di *intervenire*, di partecipare cioè a una riunione, a una cerimonia, ecc., di prendere la parola in una discussione, in un convegno e sim., o di intromettersi, di ingerirsi in qualche faccenda o attività col fine di esercitare un'azione diretta sullo svolgimento di essa».

9. Claire Bishop attribuisce il concetto di tempismo politico, definito *political timing*, all'artista cubana Tania Bruguera. In un articolo scritto nel 2019 per Artforum, Bishop sottolinea come per l'artista sia importante considerare il gesto di attivismo artistico in relazione al contesto e al momento in cui esso viene esercitato nello spazio pubblico per coglierne appieno la dimensione politica. La critica di Tania Bruguera è rivolta a molti curatori e storici occidentali che si soffermano sull'analisi del gesto in quanto tale anziché considerarlo in una dimensione più ampia che tiene di conto della situazione politica e sociale di paesi come ad esempio Cuba.

10. La riflessione di Bishop è stata ripresa dal ciclo di incontri online dal titolo *The term "intervention" as a strategy of working in the public space*, programmato dall'Università IULM ad aprile 2021 per il Dottorato in Visual and Media Studies.

2. DALLE AVANGUARDIE AI VIDEOGIOCHI

Uno dei primi punti di contatto che è possibile individuare tra le pratiche sovversive delle avanguardie del Novecento e le forme oppositive di gioco risiede nella nozione di *intervento*, il cui significato può variare in base al contesto di attuazione. Nella sua accezione lessicale, il termine identifica un atto di partecipazione a qualcosa,⁸ a una discussione o a un convegno, ma può essere anche inteso come intromissione in qualche faccenda o attività al fine di esercitare un'azione diretta sul suo svolgimento o sul risultato finale. L'intervento presuppone dunque la messa in moto volontaria di un cambiamento per alterare lo stato corrente di un evento o una situazione. Il termine si lega a gesti che hanno una dimensione politica e che trovano il proprio input in contesti o attività che mettono in atto cambiamenti di natura culturale, politica e sociale. La storica dell'arte Claire Bishop (2019) analizza la dimensione politica della voce intervento, concependolo come una modalità attraverso cui il gesto artistico mette in relazione l'agire nello spazio pubblico, il tempismo politico,⁹ e la circolazione dell'azione attraverso i media.¹⁰ In tal senso, Bishop rintraccia uno dei suoi primi utilizzi nei movimenti artistici degli anni Settanta in America Latina, quando l'indebolimento delle dittature permise agli artisti di sfruttare e mobilitare lo spazio pubblico e i media in un momento di incertezza politica. L'intervento artistico si lega dunque anche al concetto di trasgressione e sovversione dell'ordine sociale e politico, dando vita a svariate forme di attivismo artistico sviluppatesi in diverse parti del mondo. Tuttavia, Bishop ritiene che negli anni l'utilizzo del termine abbia progressivamente perso la sua iniziale carica sovversiva poiché sempre più utilizzato per descrivere azioni realizzate (e preventivamente concordate) all'interno di gallerie e musei, spazi *ad hoc* dedicati all'arte e al gesto artistico. È diventato sempre più una pratica

comune tra i critici occidentali soffermarsi sul gesto in quanto tale anziché valutarlo all'interno del quadro socio-politico in cui ha origine.

L'intervento inteso come tattica sovversiva autogenerativa ha mantenuto però il suo originario significato all'interno del panorama dei media digitali. L'analisi di Mary Flanagan in *Critical Play. Radical Game Design* (2009) parte da presupposti simili a quelli di Claire Bishop ma trasferisce le nozioni di sovversione e intervento in ambito videoludico. Come afferma l'artista e designer, “una sovversione è un'azione, volta a minare un'istituzione, un evento o un oggetto” (Flanagan, 2009) e, quando se ne parla, “è necessario conoscere il sistema o il fenomeno contro cui si sta lavorando, sia esso politico, sociale, legale o culturale” (Flanagan, 2009). Il suo ragionamento si rifà al significato che Antonio Negri (Hardt & Negri, 2001) attribuisce al termine, identificandolo come una serie di pratiche che possono ancora avere il potere di innescare cambiamenti di tipo sociale e politico, se usate nella giusta misura e con gli strumenti appropriati. Come sottolinea Flanagan, l'accezione di sovversione utilizzata da Negri indica un atto creativo anziché distruttivo in quanto mira alla costruzione di spazi di negoziazione e questa stessa logica può essere applicata allo spazio videoludico in quanto i giochi “esistono prima di tutto come sistemi di regole, e proprio per questo sono particolarmente suscettibili all'attuazione di pratiche sovversive” (Flanagan, 2009). Con l'eccezione di movimenti puramente estetici come ad esempio l'espressionismo astratto, molti movimenti del Novecento, specialmente quelli d'avanguardia, hanno utilizzato diverse strategie ed interventi di natura creativa per sovvertire le norme culturali del proprio tempo o per dar vita a delle contro narrazioni che sfidassero convenzioni sociali e politiche. In modo analogo, “i giocatori possono trarre grande piacere dal sovvertire le norme stabilite, sia negli ambienti di gioco più semplici che in quelli più complessi” ed “esplorare ciò che è lecito e ciò che si spinge al limite delle regole e delle aspettative all'interno di un determinato ambiente di gioco” (Flanagan, 2009).

2.1 DÉTOURNEMENT E FORME OPPOSITIVE DI GIOCO

Nella raccolta di saggi *From Diversion to Subversion. Games, Play, and Twentieth-Century Art* (2011) curata da David J. Getsy, Anne Marie Schleiner individua nella concezione di società, spazio e gioco dell'IS numerose similitudini con il concetto di *gamespace* proposto da McKenzie Wark, secondo cui “i giochi rappresentano la versione utopica del mondo in cui viviamo realmente, a cavallo tra la quasi perfezione dei giochi contemporanei e lo spazio di gioco altamente imperfetto della vita quotidiana, e in cui il giocatore si trova a ricoprire il duplice ruolo di cittadino e soggetto performativo” (Wark, 2007). Le diverse avanguardie del Novecento hanno incorporato l'elemento del gioco nelle proprie pratiche, inteso come “un modello, un metodo creativo che integra e potenzialmente sostituisce i modi convenzionali di fare arte” (Zimna, 2010), ognuna a livelli diversi. Come sostiene Zimna, gli artisti si servirono del gioco “come serbatoio di nuovi mezzi espressivi” per “ridefinire la funzione propria dell'artista, dell'opera d'arte, dello

spettatore e della galleria”. Dal Futurismo con l’organizzazione delle cosiddette serate futuriste, a Fluxus con il ruolo del caso e la commistione tra i vari elementi della cultura, passando per il Cabaret Voltaire, Dada, il Surrealismo, le provocazioni ironiche di Duchamp, le varie esperienze artistiche che si sono succedute nel corso del Novecento “hanno esplorato le potenzialità del gioco come fonte di creatività e di soluzioni inaspettate, [...] come attività che trasgredisce le dicotomie tradizionali di lavoro e tempo libero, serio e non serio, utile e inutile, centrale e marginale” (Zimna, 2010). Anche l’IS ha messo al centro della propria agenda performativa la nozione di gioco., Traendo ispirazione dal saggio *Homo Ludens* (1938) di Johan Huizinga, Guy Debord,¹¹ fondatore del gruppo, ha sviluppato pratiche ludico-artistiche per scardinare le norme oppressive della società capitalista. Nella sua accezione situazionista il gioco è “*l’ethos* politico di fondo della situazione, la base di una politica democratica radicale” (Penner, 2014). Per Debord il gioco non è sinonimo di creatività, ma è la capacità di *cambiare le regole*, di mettere in discussione lo status quo, è un esempio di pratica di autonomia ed è fondamentale nella costruzione della situazione. Come afferma Penner (2014),

Il compito di una situazione è quello di interrompere i ruoli fissi dello spettacolo: per favorire il ‘gioco’, occorre accentuare l’idea che le regole che stabiliscono i vari ‘ruoli’ – compreso quello fondamentale di ‘spettatore’ – sono costruite e quindi modificabili collettivamente. Per dirla con Vaneigem, l’autorità assoluta e “magica” del capitalismo deve essere rimossa.

Per l’IS, il gioco ha le potenzialità per creare “momenti di liberazione e di trasformazione, in cui i ruoli e le regole normali di una comunità o di una società vengono attenuate” (Schleiner, 2011), la sua non è un’azione creativa, ma un intervento politico-culturale di tipo trasformativo. L’IS ha cercato di mettere in atto queste operazioni attraverso numerosi interventi, tra cui la già citata situazione, la *psicogeografia*,¹² la deriva, ma è attraverso il *détournement* che si può operare un ribaltamento dei significati. Attraverso di esso si arriva ad un tipo di decondizionamento culturale che consiste nell’utilizzare oggetti ed immagini strettamente connessi alla società borghese, sottrarli alla loro ordinaria destinazione d’uso e porli in un contesto qualitativamente diverso, in ottica rivoluzionaria. La storica dell’arte Rosalind Krauss lo definisce come “una doppia azione che espone la natura ideologica di un’immagine mass-mediale o lo statuto non funzionale di una forma artistica per rifunzionalizzarla ad uso politico-critico” (Krauss, 2006). Attraverso di esso, dunque, l’IS interviene direttamente nel sistema culturale del tempo e utilizza i suoi stessi codici per mettere in atto tattiche sovversive per raggiungere l’auspicato decondizionamento culturale. Caratteristica di tale intervento, inoltre, è la scelta di agire insinuandosi tra le maglie che compongono il sistema politico-culturale vigente, cercando di corromperlo dall’interno.

Le nozioni di contro-gioco che informano le diverse pratiche oppositive di gioco condividono alcune similitudini con l’intento sovversivo di movimenti

11. Guy Debord (1932-1994) è stato una delle figure più importanti dell’avanguardia del Novecento e il fondatore dell’Internazionale Situazionista. Tra le numerose opere realizzate, nel 1967 pubblica il seminale saggio di ispirazione marxista, *La società dello spettacolo*, in cui critica aspramente le storture della società capitalista e la spettacolarizzazione del consumismo.

12. La psicogeografia è una metodologia di indagine dello spazio urbano risalente agli anni Cinquanta del Novecento.

come l'IS, prima tra tutte la volontà di mettere in atto interventi che si pongono in contrasto non solo con le regole del sistema entro cui vanno ad operare, ovvero quello di gioco, ma anche con i codici di condotta solitamente condivisi dai giocatori, specialmente nei contesti multigiocatore. Attività come quelle del *trolling*, *cheating*, *griefing*,¹³ per citarne alcune, vengono riunite da Meades (2015) all'interno del concetto di *counterplay*, che descrive pratiche ostili e antisociali che disturbano intenzionalmente gli altri giocatori per rovinare la sessione di gioco. Se il *counterplay* identifica la dimensione sociale degli interventi che vanno contro alle aspettative che i giocatori hanno verso il gioco e gli altri, con la formula *transgressive play* Aarseth (2007) individua i gesti di ribellione simbolici nei confronti del gioco, che permettono ai giocatori di compiere azioni inaspettate che, tuttavia, non sono esplicitamente vietate, “in altre parole, non fanno parte del repertorio previsto dal gioco e nella maggior parte dei casi sarebbero state rese impossibili se i game designer avessero potuto prevederle” (Aarseth, 2007). Con *transgressive play*, si descrivono quindi quegli interventi che vanno a testare i limiti del gioco. Con il concetto di *bad play*, invece, Myers (2010) analizza quelle forme di violazione delle regole, rappresentate dal codice del gioco, che hanno lo scopo di ottenere una loro comprensione più completa per accedere a forme di gioco più libere, mentre Juul definisce con *emergent gameplay* (2002) l'utilizzo di un gioco nelle modalità non previste dal game designer e la creazione spontanea di un nuovo set di regole e pratiche da parte dei giocatori.

Già in questa breve selezione delle modalità di analisi delle operazioni che mirano a destrutturare i sistemi di gioco e il rapporto gameplay-giocatore è possibile individuare dei punti di contatto con le avanguardie e le operazioni dell'IS sopra citate. Nello specifico, la volontà di andare a testare i limiti e le possibilità dei sistemi in cui abitiamo, digitali o fisici che siano. Alla base c'è quindi una spinta sovversiva che dalle avanguardie viene traslata anche nei sistemi di gioco. Tuttavia, per ampliare lo studio degli interventi *in-game* anche alle pratiche che utilizzano il videogioco come mezzo di indagine politico-critica nell'ottica delineata da autori come McKenzie Wark e Soraya Murray, è necessario affiancare allo studio del gameplay in quanto sistema-gioco un quadro concettuale di più ampio respiro, in cui osservarlo come spazio di contestazione, allo stesso modo in cui le avanguardie del Novecento vedevano nell'arte, nella politica e nella cultura del proprio tempo spazi di ri-funzionalizzazione per sovvertire i codici normativi. Come afferma Soraya Murray (2016) i giochi “sono contingenti, riflettono la realtà sociale del loro tempo e le sue interpretazioni; persino le manifestazioni testuali possono essere rimodellate dalla loro produzione/consumo attraverso il gioco. Sono forme estremamente avvincenti di cultura visuale in grado di generare mondi ulteriori”.

3. SITUATIONIST PLAY: RIFUNZIONALIZZAZIONE DEGLI SPAZI DI GIOCO

Con il concetto di *situationist play* si vuole cercare di sviluppare un nuovo framework di riferimento con cui analizzare pratiche performative simili a

13. In ambito videoludico, il termine *cheating* si riferisce a tutte quelle azioni che esulano dal progredire facendo esclusivamente affidamento sulle proprie abilità di giocatore ed è un tipo di attività *goal-oriented*. Con *grief-play* si indicano interventi non interessati al risultato ma effettuati per il puro divertimento nel disturbare e rovinare la partita altrui. Il *troll* è simile al precedente, ma opera individualmente all'interno del videogioco e non è interessato ad esercitare un tipo di dominanza fisica nei confronti degli altri giocatori, bensì tenta di innescare dispute verbali più o meno violente.

quelle precedentemente descritte, la cui matrice formale ed estetico-politica, è da rintracciarsi non solo nelle forme oppositive di gioco, quindi nell'ambito videoludico e dei game studies, ma anche nel campo dell'arte, e più precisamente nell'agenda operativa delle avanguardie, soprattutto in quella dell'IS. Tale quadro analitico riflette sul mezzo videoludico scomponendolo in due tipologie di sistemi che, a gradi diversi, influenzano simultaneamente gli interventi performativi *in-game*: il sistema gioco, composto da regole e meccaniche che ruotano attorno al *gameplay*, e il sistema visivo-culturale, che permette al videogioco di operare come forma di rappresentazione dinamica, ovvero come spazio di negoziazione in cui si possono individuare frizioni culturali, sociali o politiche irrisolte (Murray, 2017). Il concetto è tuttora in via di sviluppo poiché sviluppato in una ricerca dottorale ancora in atto, ma è possibile definirlo a questo stadio come un tipo di *insurrezione invisibile* (Trocchi, 1963) che agisce internamente al sistema videoludico, senza andare a modificare né il *gameplay* né il codice. È un'operazione di tipo trasformativo che, in modo simile alle operazioni dell'IS, gioca con le caratteristiche formali del mezzo videoludico e ne devia le convenzioni: si appropria dei principi del *détournement* situazionista per innescare un processo di ri-funzionalizzazione dello spazio di gioco con lo scopo di intraprendere una riorganizzazione delle sue unità discrete e dei suoi significati poiché “i videogiochi sono delle pratiche di *image-making* che rispecchiano una serie di situazioni riscontrabili nella società odierna calati all'interno di un preciso momento storico” (Murray, 2017).

Gli interventi ludico-artistici che rientrano in questo quadro di riferimento agiscono all'interno delle regole del *gameplay* per testare limiti e convenzioni del sistema di gioco di riferimento. Difatti, il loro scopo è quello di “rivelare l'apparato politico al di là delle trame patinate e iperreali di questi media” (Total Refusal). Generalmente questo tipo di performance non impiega alcuna mod poiché lo spazio di gioco e le sue regole svolgono il ruolo di costrutti in cui azione e immagini dipingono un complesso sistema di valori che descrive il sistema politico-culturale contemporaneo (Murray, 2017). Nel caso di un loro eventuale utilizzo, queste sono solamente tecnicamente funzionali a scopi ben precisi. Ad esempio, nella performance *Dark Tourism* (2021) organizzata all'interno del videogioco *DayZ* (Bohemia Interactive, 2013), Total Refusal ha usufruito di alcune mod per utilizzare diversi tipi di veicoli con cui spostarsi nell'isola di gioco di Namalsk. Al di là di questo, il collettivo e i partecipanti alla performance hanno lasciato invariato lo spazio di gioco esaminandolo in qualità di simulacro per riflettere sull'attuale realtà post-sovietica “attraverso gli occhi di cicloturisti che percorrono strade vuote e osservano l'architettura” (Total Refusal, 2021).¹⁴ L'approccio videoludico di tipo situazionista, insinuandosi nelle maglie del sistema entro cui opera, condivide alcune somiglianze anche con le pratiche di resistenza che Anna Watkins-Fisher definisce *parasitic resistance* (2020), prendendo a modello il comportamento che il parassita ha nei confronti del suo *host*. Il parassita lo attacca camuffandosi da elemento innocuo che segue quelle che sono le regole di comportamento del sistema che ha

intenzione di danneggiare. In questa prima fase, l'host non percepisce il parassita come minaccia e perciò lo lascia agire fintanto che le sue vere intenzioni non risultano evidenti rendendosi necessaria la sua eliminazione. Ciò si evince maggiormente nei contesti multigiocatore. Ad esempio, nell'intervento *Dead in Iraq* (2006-2011) realizzato nel videogioco sparattutto *America's Army*,¹⁵ Joseph DeLappe ha organizzato un intervento performativo scrivendo nella chat di gioco i nomi dei soldati caduti nel conflitto senza intraprendere alcun tipo di combattimento, azione ammessa dal gameplay. Tuttavia, il suo comportamento ha introdotto un elemento di disturbo per gli altri giocatori che, vedendo il suo avatar non comportarsi secondo le aspettative, hanno iniziato ripetutamente ad ucciderlo per impedirgli di proseguire la sessione di gioco/performance.

L'artista segue quelle che sono le regole di gioco, non vi apporta alcuna modifica, ma non appena si incontra e scontra con gli altri giocatori, le sue azioni vengono esposte e, come è accaduto in *Dead in Iraq*, l'avatar viene eliminato. Il giocatore si trova quindi a navigare due sistemi dotati di due codici di lettura diversi ma complementari, poiché le azioni e le aspettative dei giocatori sono influenzate dalle regole inscritte nel *gameplay*.

Di seguito si procederà all'analisi di un'operazione molto complessa realizzata dall'attore Sam Crane all'interno di *GTA Online* (Rockstar, 2013), in cui ha cercato di portare sulla scena di Los Santos l'intera produzione dell'*Amleto* (1603) di Shakespeare, dopo numerosi tentativi in cui gli altri giocatori hanno ripetutamente ucciso il suo avatar. Tale analisi permetterà di dimostrare come operazioni così articolate dal punto di vista formale ed estetico abbiano bisogno di nuovi strumenti di analisi che si interfaccino con altrettanti ambiti di ricerca.

3.1 SHAKESPEARE IN GTA ONLINE

Nei panni del suo alter ego digitale, l'attore inglese Sam Crane — online con lo pseudonimo di *Rustic Mascara* — ha iniziato nel 2021 una serie di performance all'interno di *GTA Online* con l'intento di recitare Shakespeare nello spazio di gioco. Prima di riuscire a portare a termine l'*Amleto*, Crane ha fatto diverse prove in svariati server pubblici del gioco, recitando alcuni estratti delle opere più celebri del drammaturgo inglese. Durante una di queste prove sul litorale di Los Santos, in compagnia di altri giocatori, Crane ha tentato di recitare uno dei vari monologhi di Amleto, *What a piece of work is a man*, ma dopo pochi istanti il suo avatar è stato spazzato via da un razzo. L'attore non si è scomposto e ha ripreso subito il monologo da dove è stato interrotto: attorno a lui i giocatori continuavano ad uccidersi tra di loro; l'avatar di Sam Crane si muoveva sulla spiaggia come se fosse su un palcoscenico schivando i proiettili vaganti, quasi facessero parte dell'azione teatrale. Uno dei giocatori sembrava incuriosito da quello strambo comportamento, rimanendo ad osservarlo fino alla fine del monologo. Quando l'attore gli ha chiesto se per caso gli fosse piaciuta la performance, il giocatore se ne è andato canticchiando. In un'altra occasione insieme all'attore Mark Oosterveen, Crane prova a recitare nuovamente un estratto

14. Statement del collettivo che in realtà ben descrive il tipo di approccio di numerosi interventi artistici in ambito videoludico.

15. Il governo americano ha chiuso definitivamente i server del gioco a maggio nel 2022.

dall'*Amleto*, il dialogo tra Francisco e Bernardo, al Vinewood Bowl, scherzando sul fatto che fosse la prima volta che Shakespeare venisse portato su un palco simile. Anche in questo caso la performance teatrale viene interrotta svariate volte da un giocatore che inizia a sparare a Crane e a Oosterveen. Per una serie fortuita di eventi, performance teatrale e azione videoludica si allineano perfettamente dando vita ad un surreale momento metanarrativo e meta-performativo colmo di ironia, tratto dalla scena I dell'atto I dell'opera shakespeariana:

BERNARDO

Tutto quieto?

FRANCISCO

Non s'è mosso un topo.

BERNARDO

Bene, buonanotte.

Se incontri

i miei compagni di guardia

Orazio e Marcello, fagli fretta.

FRANCISCO

Li sento arrivare, credo.

16. Con il termine happening si fa riferimento ad una serie di eventi teatrali sviluppati tra gli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta del Novecento. Sono stati i capostipiti dell'arte performativa e traggono ispirazione dalle diverse esperienze delle avanguardie, in particolare il Futurismo, DADA e il Surrealismo. Gli happening combinavano svariati elementi, tra cui la pittura, la poesia, la musica, la danza, il teatro, ma anche l'elemento del caso e la presenza del pubblico, e la loro natura è stata così variegata che il loro intento poteva variare dallo scopo politico a quello puramente performativo.

17. Sulla sua pagina Instagram e su quella del suo alter ego digitale, Sam Crane ha annunciato l'apertura dei casting per la selezione degli attori che avrebbero preso parte alla produzione dell'*Amleto* in *GTA Online* e ha dato la possibilità agli utenti di condividere il proprio PSN ID per essere aggiunti al server di gioco ed entrare a far parte del pubblico in-game.

18. La performance è disponibile sul canale YouTube di Sam Crane, *Rustic Mascara*, al seguente indirizzo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Lut5leeOr0&t=107s>. La live è divisa inoltre in atti e scene come una vera e propria pièce teatrale, navigabili attraverso la funzione *capitoli*.

Ma anziché fare la loro comparsa Orazio e Marcello, irrompono sulla scena i poliziotti che esplodono colpi di pistola verso i due attori i quali, tra una sparatoria e l'altra, e ridendo per l'assurdità della scena e il tempismo degli NPC, cercano di continuare il loro monologo fino a che non vengono uccisi in un rocambolesco inseguimento sul palco del Vinewood Bowl. Questo tipo di incursioni avvicina la performance di Crane, ma anche quella precedente di Total Refusal, all'*happening*,¹⁶ per il ruolo svolto dallo spettatore e dal caso nella creazione di esperienze meta-teatrali. Esse, da un lato rompono la cosiddetta quarta parete, dall'altro eliminano qualsiasi barriera tra pubblico e performer/giocatore, andando a ridefinire così la stessa natura dell'ambiente di gioco senza però modificarlo nelle sue unità discrete. Entrambe le performance scardinano dunque nozioni come quella di intervento teatrale, giocatore, gameplay ed esperienza di gioco.

Dopo numerose prove in *GTA Online*, Sam Crane e Mark Oosterveen riescono finalmente a portare l'*Amleto* a Los Santos con una produzione davvero notevole, formata da 16 attori e un pubblico in-game composto da 6 spettatori,¹⁷ distribuita su svariati luoghi sparpagliati per tutta la città. La performance¹⁸ ha avuto luogo su un server dedicato, questa volta senza l'incursione di un pubblico esterno, ed è stata trasmessa in diretta sul canale YouTube di Sam Crane il 4 luglio del 2022. Il pubblico ha avuto la possibilità di interagire con la stage director Pinny Grylls, incaricata di gestire anche la camera di gioco per seguire gli attori sulla scena. In questa produzione del tutto fuori dagli schemi, performance artistica, gameplay ed interfaccia di gioco si amalgamano perfettamente in un tipo di intervento che mette insieme due ambiti all'apparenza

diametralmente opposti: la performance di gioco e la performance teatrale. Gli spazi della Los Santos di *GTA Online* vengono ri-funzionalizzati e trasformati in un palco teatrale itinerante che permea tutta la città. Pinny Grylls si muove sulla scena riprendendo gli attori da diverse angolazioni e utilizza l'applicazione *Snapmatic* sul telefono di gioco per ottenere delle inquadrature più ravvicinate dei vari personaggi, senza dover invadere la scena. Grazie alla fotocamera in-game riesce a seguire gli attori creando delle riprese che conferiscono drammaticità all'azione e fanno passare in secondo piano i saltuari *glitch* e le movenze a volte macchinose degli avatar. Il menù delle opzioni dell'interfaccia della camera, infine, simula quasi un canovaccio sul quale sono indicate le istruzioni di scena. Sam Crane interpreta con pathos Amleto muovendosi con disinvoltura, quasi il suo avatar fosse in qualche modo connesso con il suo corpo reale. Il pubblico in-game segue attentamente gli spostamenti degli attori tra le diverse scene, stando attento a non comparire accidentalmente in camera, mentre sullo schermo appaiono in sovrapposizione i consueti avvisi di gioco. Sul normale svolgimento del gioco si innesta dunque la performance teatrale che, essendo in diretta live, mette in scena anche ciò che normalmente a teatro accade al di là del sipario: il passaggio da un atto all'altro, gli attori che si affrettano a prendere il proprio posto, le indicazioni di scena. Infine, come ogni prima che si rispetti, gli attori hanno organizzato anche un *after party* in-game per celebrare la buona riuscita del progetto. *L'Amleto* di Sam Crane invita anche a riflettere sulla nozione stessa del pubblico/giocatore: da un lato quello in-game che segue gli attori non solo con gli occhi, ma anche fisicamente attraverso il proprio avatar; dall'altro, quello fuori dal gioco che interagisce attraverso la chat pubblica messa a disposizione durante la live. Allo stesso tempo, dunque, compaiono sullo schermo diversi elementi che vanno in scena simultaneamente: gli attori intenti a recitare l'Amleto, il gioco stesso, il pubblico in-game che è sia giocatore che spettatore, e quello che guarda l'intervento in diretta su YouTube.

Le attività di *role playing* in *GTA Online* non sono di per sé una novità e negli ultimi mesi hanno acquistato un grande seguito grazie anche all'attività di numerosi streamer di Twitch. *GTA RP (Grand Theft Auto Role Play)* è una mod¹⁹ multigiocatore per la versione PC di *GTA V* che permette ai giocatori di personalizzare ancora di più la propria esperienza di gioco vestendo i panni di normali NPC all'interno di svariate tipologie di server. L'accesso a questi ultimi non è automatico, in quanto alcuni sono sottoposti ad invito, mentre altri richiedono di mettere alla prova il talento del giocatore — nei confronti degli streamer più popolari si chiude solitamente un occhio — attraverso delle prove che dovrebbero indicare quanto si riesce a rimanere nei panni del proprio personaggio senza sgarrare e senza rovinare il divertimento agli altri.

Sebbene la versione finale dell'*Amleto* di Sam Crane abbia degli elementi di contatto con queste dinamiche — la creazione di un server apposito su invito e l'interpretazione in-game di una serie di personaggi —, i server di *role playing* di *GTA Online* sono delle estensioni delle possibilità di gioco che catturano

19. Esistono diversi tipi di mod in base ai server disponibili, ma una delle più usate è FiveM. Alcuni server sono aperti a tutti i giocatori ma quelli che vanno per la maggiore sono quelli ad invito o tramite *application*, come quello di NoPixel, uno dei più gettonati. Le richieste erano così tante che il server è attualmente chiuso e non accetta ulteriori giocatori.

il giocatore all'interno dell'universo di Rockstar. Al contrario, l'intervento di Crane si serve del gameplay e dell'assetto di *GTA Online* per mettere a punto una produzione teatrale in un ambiente digitale che di norma non gli apparterebbe. Le sue incursioni nei server pubblici del gioco sono ancora più drammatiche poiché in questi casi l'attore si scontra con quelle che sono le aspettative degli altri giocatori, ai quali non interessa ascoltare Shakespeare, come spesso accade guardando i numerosi tentativi pubblicati online sul suo canale YouTube, ma anzi, preferiscono prendere parte a scontri rocamboleschi. Come nel caso di *Operation Jane Walk*, anche in queste situazioni il ruolo di Sam Crane è un ibrido, uno spoilsport, e le sue azioni influiscono sulla percezione più o meno positiva che gli altri giocatori hanno dell'esperienza di gioco. L'attore agisce entro quelle che sono le regole funzionali del gameplay, ma non risponde ai codici normativi socialmente condivisi.

4. CONCLUSIONI

Il presente saggio vuole porre l'attenzione su una duplice necessità nell'ambito dei game studies: da un lato, rivedere e aggiornare le modalità di studio di quelle ibridazioni performative a cavallo tra countergaming e performance artistica come forma di resistenza; dall'altro, formulare nuovi framework di riferimento per studiare il concetto di sovversione videoludica alla luce dell'esperienza delle avanguardie, le cui pratiche vengono continuamente aggiornate e riadattate ai linguaggi contemporanei. Il concetto di *situationist play* descritto in questa sede, sia pure ancora acerbo nella definizione delle sue caratteristiche formali, fa parte di uno studio di più ampio, tuttora in corso, il cui scopo è quello di valutare se ancora oggi il processo di *countergaming* descritto da Galloway (2006) sia rimasto incompiuto, o se sia possibile rintracciare una nuova grammatica dell'azione (Galloway, 2006) tra gli artisti contemporanei che utilizzano il mezzo videoludico come spazio di resistenza e negoziazione a fine politico-critici.

Gli interventi descritti in questa sede e realizzati all'interno di tipologie diverse di videogiochi, dai multiplayer ai single player, si pongono a cavallo tra performance videoludica e performance artistica, e dimostrano come entrambi gli ambiti di ricerca siano necessari per intercettare nuove modalità di utilizzo del mezzo ed esaminare il suo ruolo nel panorama mediale contemporaneo. Probabilmente, la critica concreta al gameplay come Galloway l'ha originariamente concepita non si è ancora verificata, ma gli interventi qui esaminati portano alla luce il "potenziale di avanguardia politica e culturale del videogioco" (Galloway, 2006), nella misura in cui ri-funzionalizzando lo spazio di gioco senza intervenire sull'aspetto visuale, né tantomeno sul gameplay. Evidenziano come il gamespace agisca come palinsesto culturale (Murray, 2017) che "modella i sistemi di valori e le considerazioni etiche, non solo a livello di azione all'interno del luogo, ma anche nel luogo stesso" (Murray, 2017). Queste performance possono portare alla luce modalità alternative di utilizzo

20. Traduzione di Matteo Bittanti tratta dalla raccolta di saggi *Game over. Critica della ragione videoludica* (2020). L'affermazione di T.L. Taylor è tratta da un'intervista online con B. R. Cohen dal titolo *Public Thinker: T. L. Taylor On Gamergate, Live-Streaming, And Esports*, pubblicata nel 2019 per Public Books e accessibile al seguente indirizzo: <https://www.publicbooks.org/public-thinker-t-l-taylor-on-gamergate-live-streaming-and-esports/>

del mezzo videoludico in un'ottica d'avanguardia, suggerire nuove possibilità di interazione tra videogioco e giocatori e, infine, la nascita di nuove forme di interazione sociale nello spazio videoludico.

Come ricorda T.L. Taylor (2019), “il videogioco è, da sempre, il proverbiale canarino nella miniera: se vuoi intravedere lo sviluppo sociale e scorgere i possibili futuri che ci attendono, presta attenzione ai videogiochi e ai videogiocatori”.²⁰

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